The Victim's Side: Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* and Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*

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> Why is it the gods do not feel indignation
> And come down in fury to end exploitation
> Defeat all defeat and forbid desperation
> Refusing to tolerate such toleration?
> [BERTOLT BRECHT, *The Good Woman of Setzuan*]

> All I maintain is that on this earth there are pestilences
> and there are victims, and it's up to us, so far as possible,
> not to join forces with the pestilences.
> [ALBERT CAMUS, *The Plague*]

Those examples of poetic justice which occur in medieval and Elizabethan literature, and which seem so satisfying, have encouraged a whole school of twentieth-century scholars to find other examples and to force characters who do not yield to their attempts into some moral framework whereby the injustices inflicted upon them are, somehow or other, justified. Libraries are full of discussions of Elizabethan drama which "go so far as virtually to deny that any of the sufferers in a tragedy is innocent," and which blame "the errors and misdoings of major and minor characters alike" for their tragic fates.[1] Any weakness or peccadillo is enough to subject a character to critical cords and whips. There are long essays about the misdemeanors of the Duchess of Malfi and the

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1. Helen Gardner, *Religion and Literature* (London: Faber & Faber, 1971), p. 27. See also William Empson, "Mine Eyes Dazzle," a review of Clifford Leech's *Webster: "The Duchess of Malfi,"* reprinted in *John Webster,* ed. G. K. Hunter and S. K. Hunter (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 297.

indiscretions of Desdemona. To give just one example of this critical method,[2] H. A. Mason deplores

> the silence of the guilty pair [Othello and Desdemona] about their failure to try the honourable means of getting married. It is damaging to both—though much more damning against Desdemona —that they never speak as if it had cost them anything to elope. It is a minor matter that we get no light on the nature of the ceremony. What Christian priest or if not a priest what authority could make the marriage irrevocable? . . . [With Desdemona] as with Juliet . . . we must allow for the weight given by Shakespeare to the sin of disobedience to parents and add to it our own uneasiness over the degree of deliberate deception inevitably involved.[3]

And so it goes, on and on, in essay after essay, book after book. Desdemona and Juliet disobey their fathers—off with their heads! The Duchess of Malfi defies her brothers—off with hers. Yet modern critics who rail against the "sin" of disobedience to parents and other authorities conveniently overlook the obvious fact that, in his comedies, Shakespeare gives such "sins" no weight whatsoever. To give only a few examples: Hermia and Celia both disobey their fathers; Orlando disobeys his brother; Florizel elopes with Perdita; and all of them live happily ever after, while we ourselves feel not the slightest uneasiness over the "degree of deliberate deception inevitably involved." But whatever happens in comedy, so far as tragedy is concerned, it is, as Helen Gardner has observed, "an eccentric form of justice that metes out the same punishment to errors and crimes alike and odd that it should be thought consoling to conceive of the universe as ruled by the Queen of Hearts."[4]

For that matter, Matteo Bandello, the Renaissance writer who first wrote down the story of the Duchess of Malfi, makes a powerful protest against the *injustice* of the severe penalties issued to women for acts of disobedience which men could, and did, commit with virtual impunity:

> Would that we were not daily forced to hear that one man has murdered his wife because he suspected her of infidelity; that another has killed his daughter on account of a secret marriage; that a third has caused his sister to be murdered because she would not marry as he wished! It is great cruelty that we claim the right to do whatever we list and will not suffer women to do the same. If they do anything which does not please us there we are at once with cords and daggers and poison.[5]

2. I have discussed other examples in a different context, in *Likenesses of Truth in Elizabethan and Restoration Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

3. H. A. Mason, *Shakespeare's Tragedies of Love* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), pp. 79–84.

4. Gardner, p. 27.

5. Bandello is quoted by Jacob Burckhardt in *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*

Poets like Shakespeare, Webster, and Chaucer can, if they wish, enlist us on the side of their victims by confronting us with cosmic and social injustices so cruel, so extreme, that we cannot but join in the protest against them. Therefore, to assert that Webster's Duchess deserved torture and death because she chose to marry the man she loved and to bear his children is, in effect, to join forces with her tyrannical brothers, and so to confuse the operation of some poetic justice, of which we should approve, with precisely those examples of social injustice which Webster does everything in his powers to make us condemn. Similarly, efforts to supply historical and theological rationalizations for Walter's persecutions of Griselda in *The Clerk's Tale* tend to turn Chaucer's fable upside down, to deny its most obvious effect. Or so it will be argued here.

On a first reading, Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* seems clear and simple in outline, characterization, and effect. A beautiful, helpless, compliant heroine suffers at the hands of her husband, whom she continues to love with all her heart and soul in spite of his cruel treatment to her. Most readers will pity Griselda's sad plight until the end, when they can rejoice with her as her losses are restored and sorrows end. The individual reader might either relish or find distasteful some of the more obviously sadomasochistic reverberations of the situation; or one might, in the words of a student of mine, find Griselda's patience "damned irritating." Nevertheless, our natural sympathies would clearly lie with Griselda, and we would, equally naturally, condemn Walter's irrationally cruel treatment of his wife. This, I believe, is a fair account of the obvious responses evoked by the tale.

Its position in *The Canterbury Tales* enriches *The Clerk's Tale* with some interesting complications. The Clerk tells the story of Griselda in response to the Wife of Bath and thus places his tale within a larger dialectical context. The tale may have been explicitly intended to tease the wife. Or it may represent a mild little Clerk's preposterous dream of male domination, acted out by an incredibly demanding husband and an impossibly docile wife. Certainly his tale enacts what may be a common masculine fantasy: to have the beautiful, faithful, and perfectly obedient wife, yet remain free to get rid of her and her children and to replace her with a younger bride without worrying about any claims or recriminations on her part. But, significantly, even as he presents this fantasy, Chaucer's Clerk criticizes it—as if the very imagination which had conceived of such a situation also, and simultaneously, condemned it as a fundamentally evil one. Furthermore, throughout the tale, the situation is presented not in terms of the pleasure which it gives to Walter but in terms of the pain it causes Griselda. Then, after having shown the poten-

(New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958), p. 435. Though he elsewhere deplores the follies and frailties of women, Bandello's points about the double standard still stand. The obvious injustice of the double standard of sexual morality is also pointed out by Adriana in *The Comedy of Errors* (2. 2. 132–46) and by Emilia in *Othello* (4. 3. 87–104).

tial suffering inherent in this particular fantasy, lest it be acted out in real life, the Clerk himself reminds his audience that the tale was only a fiction, while the various husbands on the pilgrimage agree that ideally compliant women like Griselda seem to have vanished from the earth in the iron age of Dame Alice of Bath.

Yet none of these or other perspectives provided by its position in *The Canterbury Tales* can fully or finally explain why Chaucer deliberately emphasizes the human suffering implicit in the situation he inherited from Petrarch. Furthermore, *The Clerk's Tale* appears to be an exemplary parable. Yet critical and scholarly efforts to explain precisely what it provides examples *of,* and to determine what the proper responses to those examples ought to be, themselves create serious difficulties for the modern reader.

Ideally, a full interpretation of a work written hundreds of years ago may reconcile historical, critical, and subjective interpretations of it in some fruitful and illuminating way, so that the work can be read on its own terms as well as (though not instead of) our own. For instance, a modern interpretation of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* might be based upon the critic's personal response to it, be influenced by twentieth-century ideas about the absurdities inherent in the ways of the world, and also be enhanced, supplemented, or corrected by pertinent information concerning the philosophy of Boethius, the conventions of medieval poetry, and the code of courtly love. Thus it would be possible to interpret *The Knight's Tale* in terms of the literary, historical, and philosophical context in which it was written and still read it, in Professor Leavis's words, "as we read the living."[6] But what happens if historical or theological interpretations of a comparable work do not complement but rather conflict with subjective responses to it? If various levels of scholarly interpretation do contradict each other, which should finally take precedence over the others? Having taught Chaucer's version of the story of Griselda for some years now, I find it increasingly difficult to reconcile a modern and, admittedly, emotional response to its characters and situations with those theological and historical interpretations which, it has sometimes been argued, ought to govern any final responses to the tale.

If, for example, one considers Chaucer a staunch upholder of, and an uncritical apologist for, the medieval hierarchy, then the order of things in *The Clerk's Tale* must be seen to represent what is ultimately a right and proper one. The noble Marquis Walter wields absolute power over his subjects, who obey him in all things and, for the most part, accept even his most arbitrary decisions without question or criticism. Likewise, the man, Walter, holds total dominion over the woman, Griselda, who yields to his will in an ideally uncritical way—"ideally,"

6. For an account of the way these issues arise in teaching, see the debate between Roma Gill and F. W. Bateson, "As We Read the Living? An Argument," *Essays in Criticism* 23 (April 1973): 167–78.

since, according to medieval orthodoxy, and in the words of the tale itself,

> A wyf, as of hirself, nothing ne sholde
> Wille in effect, but as hir housbonde wolde.
> [Lines 720–21][7]

In the end, all turns out well. For the various powers exercised by Walter were supported by holy decree—"the powers that be" were said to have been ordained by God; and the tests which the Lord Walter imposed upon his wife are, finally, compared to the trials imposed upon the human soul by the Lord of Heaven. Thus the patient and obedient Griselda serves as an admirable example of how the human soul should endure adversity. Moralized in these terms, as it is by D. W. Robertson, Jr., *The Clerk's Tale* calls attention specifically to "the duties of the Christian soul as it is tested by its Spouse," and it also "systematically restores" the proper matrimonial "order" which was "inverted" by the Wife of Bath.[8]

Yet how can Robertson's interpretation be reconciled with the primary responses elicited by the tale itself? Given modern standards, how can one be expected to accept, even temporarily, theological and historical assumptions about the place of women (or, for that matter, of subjects) in an "order" that was once held to be divinely sanctioned but now seems simply the product of a given set of cultural and social conditions? As William Empson observes, though we have recently "heard much jeering at the idea of progress, it is clearly a moral help in dealing with ancient sacred texts, which are always liable to give divine authority to some barbarous habit which was merely normal when they were written."[9] Thus, while it would obviously be mistakenly parochial to read *The Clerk's Tale* from an exclusively modern point of view, it also seems mistaken to read it solely in terms of the allegorical interpretation which appears at the end. For that interpretation tends to beg, rather than to answer, certain serious questions about the exploitation and misuse of explicitly temporal powers which are raised, on a literal and human level, throughout the tale itself.

While it obviously remains our responsibility to find out as much as possible about the literary, historical, and philosophical contexts in

7. Quotations are from F. N. Robinson's edition of *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer,* rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), and from *The Duchess of Malfi,* ed. John Russell Brown (London: Methuen & Co., 1964).

8. D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 376. If Robertson's interpretation is the right one, then further discussion of the tale is effectively inhibited. So far as the twentieth-century reader is concerned, its power and significance are diminished; its disturbing problems are easily solved; it becomes a matter of historical interest only.

9. William Empson, *Milton's God* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), pp. 198–99.

which a classic work was written, it also remains up to us, after doing so, to ask whether the work itself upholds or challenges contemporary assumptions and to decide for ourselves how we, personally, think and feel about it. If, for example, new evidence turned up which conclusively proved that Chaucer, in this tale, was deliberately challenging certain assumptions on which the medieval hierarchy was based, then the tale itself would necessarily take on a set of meanings other than the orthodox ones assigned to it by Robertson. In fact, for all we know, Chaucer might have set out, within the framework of the Petrarchan fable, to criticize contemporary orthodoxies.[10] For all we know: we cannot know for sure. We can only turn to the text itself. While it would be dangerous to take it for granted that Chaucer critically questioned contemporary assumptions, it seems equally dangerous to take it for granted, as Elizabeth Salter does, that he uncritically accepted them, that "acquiescence, the act of conformity to whatever is traditional and established, was an essential . . . part of Chaucer's make-up" and that therefore we "must . . . above all" avoid the temptation "to place Chaucer 'out of his age,' as a revolutionary, a malcontent."[11]

Why "must"? Why "above all"? Obviously no one is responsible for the norms which he finds in society when he enters it; yet anyone as analytically intelligent as the mature Chaucer is surely capable of criticizing those social assumptions which he finds, upon reflection, that he is not prepared to support. For instance, one may counter interpretations of *The Clerk's Tale* whereby Chaucer condones tyranny in marriage, so long as the tyrant belongs to the right "degree" or sex, with the counterargument that, throughout his works, Chaucer continually challenges, criticizes, and sometimes overtly attacks the notion that any human being, of whatsoever sex, age, or "degree," should have total power over another one.[12]

10. Obviously, no artist can start from scratch, but he can criticize his forerunners. For full discussion, see E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (London: Phaidon Press, 1968), and A. C. Spearing, *Criticism and Medieval Poetry* (London: Edward Arnold, 1972).

11. Quotations are from Salter's *Chaucer: "The Knight's Tale" and "The Clerk's Tale"* (London: Edward Arnold, 1969), p. 70.

12. Furthermore, the notion of "true gentilesse," so pervasive in Chaucer's works, was also subversive of the claims of social degree. See, for instance, *The Wife of Bath's Tale* (lines 1150–58):

> For, God it woot, men may wel often fynde
> A lordes sone do shame and vileynye;
> And he that wole han pris of his gentrye,
> For he was boren of a gentil hous,
> And hadde his eldres noble and vertuous,
> And nel hymselven do not gentil dedis,
> Ne folwen his gentil auncestre that deed is,

Throughout this particular tale, Chaucer may be criticizing those social assumptions which enable Walter to demand that Griselda render unto him the service due only to a deity. For Griselda's situation is, from the beginning, described in explicitly social, economic, and political terms, as well as in the obvious sexual and allegorical ones. Herein may lie one source of the tale's peculiar power: it deals with forms of tyranny and of submission to tyrannical authority, which are not only of great historical importance but which still confront us, here, now, in the second half of the twentieth century.

Thus it might be argued that, whereas, from an allegorical point of view—which gains support from the moral at the end of the text, and from medieval theology and social theory as well—the forms of tyranny portrayed in *The Clerk's Tale* are finally rationalized, from the dialectically opposite point of view—which may also claim support from both the text and Christian doctrine—they are criticized in a brilliantly subversive way. This second interpretation would explain, as the allegorical interpretation does not, why Chaucer consistently alters his sources, on the one hand, to make Walter's behavior toward Griselda infuriating and reprehensible and, on the other hand, to make Griselda's uncritical acceptance of unnecessary suffering painful and pitiable. It would also explain why Chaucer inserts the theological interpretation of the situation which he inherited from Petrarch, and which supplies his audience with an alternative frame of reference, only after having criticized Walter far more powerfully, frequently, and severely than did his predecessor.[13] For certainly, before he leaves us free to choose for ourselves between alternative literal and allegorical interpretations of the characters and situations, Chaucer deliberately encourages us to adopt a

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He nys nat gentil, be he duc or erl;
For vileyns synful dedes make a cherl.

Like his father, Walter's son was fortunate in marriage, but he did not put his wife "in gret assay" (*The Clerk's Tale,* lines 1135–38).

13. The theological interpretation comes, I think, too late to qualify effectively what was, and what remains, Chaucer's original emphasis on the literal human problems involved. Indeed, the allegorical interpretation was itself superimposed on Boccaccio's version of the story by Petrarch. In his criticism of Walter, Chaucer—since there is no evidence that he knew *The Decameron*—would seem to have arrived independently at conclusions similar to Boccaccio's: "Can it not then be said here that even in the houses of the poor the divine spirits rain down from the heavens, wheras in royal houses there are those who are more worthy of watching over pigs than having rule over men." For Chaucer's use of Petrarch, and of the French translation of the story of Griselda, see J. Burke Severs, *The Literary Relationships of Chaucer's "Clerkes Tale"* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1942); W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster, *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales"* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958); J. Sledd, *"The Clerk's Tale:* The Monsters and the Critics," *Modern Philology* 51 (1953): 73–82; and B. H. Bronson, *In Search of Chaucer* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), pp. 104–7.

highly critical attitude toward the "powers that be" as they manifest themselves in Griselda's Lord Walter.

"Taxation without representation is tyranny"—and until the very end of *The Clerk's Tale,* the gentle and virtuous Griselda is mercilessly taxed by tyrannical authority. Denied any control over her own fate, denied any voice in the decisions that most affect her life, Griselda suffers intolerable anguish, humiliation, and dread. Significantly, her supreme suffering has very little to do with Griselda as a unique individual, or even with her personal behavior. Indeed, throughout this tale, Chaucer makes it glaringly evident that Griselda's suffering resulted from her having been born into social and sexual categories that made her vulnerable to tyranny, and from a tyrant's ruthless exploitation of her vulnerability.

When the noble Lord Walter proposes marriage to the humbly born Griselda, he makes the conditions of her future subjection clear enough:

> "I seye this, be ye redy with good herte
> To al my lust, and that I frely may,
> As me best thynketh, do yow laughe or smerte,
> And nevere ye to grucche it, nyght ne day?
> And eek when I sey 'ye,' ne say nat 'nay,'
> Neither by word ne frownyng contenance?
> Swere this, and heere I swere our alliance."
> [Lines 351–57]

Walter is to retain absolute freedom, absolute power, while Griselda is to renounce all freedom, all autonomy. She must never act independently of Walter's will. Whatever Walter may decide to do to her, Griselda must not criticize him; she must never express her own thoughts or feelings about his actions.

Griselda's social class is, of course, one source of Walter's power over her. Himself secure in birth and wealth through "favour of Fortune" (line 69), Walter continually reminds his wife that she is a being of a lower order who owes everything she has, everything she is in life, to him:

> "Grisilde," quod he, "that day
> That I yow took out of youre povere array,
> And putte yow in estaat of heigh noblesse,
> Ye have nat that forgeten, as I gesse?
> "I seye, Grisilde, this present dignitee,
> In which that I have put yow, as I trowe,
> Maketh yow nat foryetful for to be
> That I yow took in povre estaat ful lowe,
> For any wele ye moot youreselven knowe,"
> [Lines 466–74]

Fixed by birth in an inferior category, and psychologically locked into that category by Walter's attitude toward her, Griselda always considers herself unworthy of her husband's favor:

> "My lord," quod she, "I woot, and wiste alway,
> How that bitwixen youre magnificence
> And my poverte no wight kan ne may
> Maken comparison; it is no nay.
> I ne heeld me nevere digne in no manere
> To be youre wyf, no, ne youre chamberere."
> [Lines 814–19]

Utterly convinced of her own unworthiness, and constantly reminded of it by Walter, Griselda never challenges his right to give or to take away. Walter is her Lord; he is her Fortune. She is his "thing":

> "Ye been our lord, dooth with your owene thyng
> Right as yow liste; axeth no reed at me.
> For, as I lefte at hoom al my clothyng,
> When I first cam to yow, right so," quod shee.
> "Left I my wyl and al my libertee."
> [Lines 652–56]

Griselda's humble birth also allows Walter to plead "the tyrant's plea," necessity, when he falsely claims that because the people resent her low origins, he must have her children done away with, divorce her, and take a new, young, aristocratic bride:

> "And though to me that ye be lief and deere,
> Unto my gentils ye be no thyng so.
> They seyn, to hem it is greet shame and wo
> For to be subgetz and been in servage
> To thee, that born art of a smal village."
> [Lines 479–83]

Thus Griselda's actual accomplishments as a governor —accomplishments admired by the very "gentils" who Walter says resented her low birth—are dismissed. Here is the Clerk's account of the true public response to Griselda's performance as an administrator:

> Though that hire housbonde absent were anon,
> If gentil men or othere of hire contree
> Were wrothe, she wolde bryngen hem aton;
> So wise and rype wordes hadde she,
> And juggements of so greet equitee,
> That she from hevene sent was, as men wende,
> Peple to save and every wrong t'amende.
> [Lines 435–41]

Chaucer makes it clear that Walter can annihilate Griselda's personal accomplishments simply by waving the wand of class distinction over them. The Marquis repeatedly insists that, while he is extremely sorry to do so, he must divorce Griselda because "the people" resent her lowly origins: "Nat as I wolde, but as my peple leste" (line 490).

> "My peple me constreyneth for to take
> Another wyf, and crien day by day;
> And eek the pope, rancour for to slake,
> Consenteth it, that dar I undertake;
> And trewely thus muche I wol you seye,
> My newe wyf is comynge by the weye."
> [Lines 800–805]

He passes the responsibility for his own free actions to the people beneath him and to the pope above him. Walter's sergeant, in turn, must pass the responsibility for *his* actions back to the Lord Walter:

> "Madame," he seyde, "ye moote foryeve it me,
> Though I do thyng to which I am constreyned.
> Ye been so wys that ful wel knowe ye
> That lordes heestes mowe nat been yfeyned;
> They mowe wel been biwailled or compleyned,
> But men moote nede unto hire lust obeye,
> And so wol I; ther is namoore to seye.
> "This child I am comanded for to take."
> [Lines 526–33]

Where can Griselda turn? She cannot ask Walter to disobey the will of his people, and she cannot ask the sergeant to disobey the orders of his lord and hers. Griselda is trapped within a vicious circle of injustice, and, worse still, she is forced to assent to that injustice. She must "forgive" the sergeant. She must "consent" to let him take her baby daughter away:

> Grisildis moot al suffre and al consente;
> And as a lamb she sitteth meke and stille,
> And leet this crueel sergeant doon his wille.
> [Lines 537–39]

Obviously there are times when we all, within reason, have to obey the orders of those in authority. Indeed, Chaucer's Clerk reminded his audience of this fact before he began his tale:

> "Hoost," quod he, "I am under youre yerde;
> Yen han of us as now the governance,

And therfore wol I do yow obeisance,
As fer as resoun axeth, hardily."
[Lines 22–25]

When subjects to some absolute authority are ordered to act *against* reason and conscience they can do one of two things. They can, by deeds, by words, or at least by their thoughts, assert their own convictions: "I am right and you are wrong. You have the power to do as you wish, but you will have to do it against my will." Alternatively, one can choose to conform to the will of the authority by making the will of the authority one's own. Meek, gentle, helpless, hapless Griselda thus conforms to her Lord's will:

Allas! hir doghter that she loved so,
She wende he wolde han slawen it right tho.
But natheless she neither weep ne syked,
Conformynge hire to that the markys lyked.
[Lines 543–46]

Of course Griselda's humble obedience to his commandment that she give up her daughter does not satisfy Walter's irrational desire to test her for very long. He subsequently subjects her to other torments, for

. . . wedded men ne knowe no mesure,
Whan that they fynde a pacient creature.
[Lines 622–23]

It is significant that these lines do not appear in Chaucer's sources.

As A. C. Spearing has argued, the effect of this particular generalization, "married men don't know when to stop when they find a wife who will put up with anything," is "to relate the events of the story to our own experience of life, and to encourage us to judge them in the light of that experience, rather than to keep them in a separate compartment labeled 'Literature Only.' "[14] Furthermore, the Clerk's sad generalization makes one wonder whether some show of resistance from Griselda might not have forestalled Walter's further persecutions. For, obviously, her perfect obedience in the first test does her no good at all. On the contrary: Walter's persecutions continue, step by slow step, as if he were trying to see how much degradation his wife can tolerate without

14. Spearing, p. 83. In addition to works cited above, my discussion of *The Clerk's Tale* is indebted to, though frequently in disagreement with, J. Mitchell Morse, "The Philosophy of the Clerk of Oxenford," *Modern Language Quarterly* 19 (1958): 3–20; Norman Lavers, "Freud, *The Clerkes Tale,* and Literary Criticism," *College English* 26 (1965): 180–87; and Alfred L. Kellogg, "The Evolution of *The Clerk's Tale:* A Study in Connotation," in his *Chaucer, Langland, Arthur: Essays in Middle English Literature* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1972), pp. 276–329.

fighting back. Thus, given the way the story develops, Spearing concludes that "what is surprising about it is not so much that Walter treats Grisilde as he does, as that, having started, he ever stops."[15]

Chaucer apparently knew as well as any modern psychologist that giving "a neurotic power-seeker all the power he wants does not make him less neurotic, nor is it possible to satiate his neurotic need for power. However much he is fed he still remains hungry."[16] Indeed, Chaucer's readers are left to wonder whether, like Walter, they themselves might be capable of exploiting the vulnerability of those over whom they have too much power, and also to wonder whether, like Griselda, they might be capable of prostrating themselves before some tyrannical human deity.

By dramatically showing the suffering inherent in the hateful doctrine that human beings should either dominate others or prostrate themselves, *The Clerk's Tale* leaves the reader to wonder whether anyone ought ever to be someone else's pebble or someone else's clod, and whether the question, Who should rule? (a question which demands an authoritarian answer), ought not to be replaced by the question, "How can we keep anyone from having too much power over others?" For Lord Acton's law about the corrupting nature of absolute power will swing into effect whoever rules; whatever class, sex, or race one may have been born into, whenever one begins to rule one becomes, by definition, a member of the ruling class.[17] Moreover, we have the "Envoy" to *The Clerk's Tale* to remind us that wives, like subjects, who insist upon rights of their own tend to get better treatment from their lords and masters than Griselda gets from Walter. For that matter, one lesson to be derived from *The Clerk's Tale* may be that in marriage, as in most human relationships, tyranny can be avoided only when all parties agree to observe the terms of a treaty that reads "You be good to me, and I'll be good to you."

Griselda's marriage, as we have seen, was based on a treaty which defined the husband in terms of his absolute freedom, autonomy, and power and which, therefore, created the "paradox of freedom" whereby

15. Spearing, p. 97. One thinks of the conversation between the heroine of Anne Brontë's *Tenant of Wildfall Hall* (Helen Huntingdon) and the dissolute Ralph Hattersley, who is married to a perfect Griselda—the good and virtuous Milicent: "Is she not exactly the wife you wanted? Did you not tell Mr. Huntingdon you must have one that would submit to anything without a murmur, and never blame you, whatever you did?" "True, but we shouldn't always have what we want: it spoils the best of us, doesn't it? How can I help playing the deuce when I see it's all one to her whether I behave like a Christian or like a scoundrel such as nature made me? . . . when she's so invitingly meek and mim —when she lies down like a spaniel at my feet and never so much as squeaks to tell me that's enough?" (see *The Novels of the Sisters Brontë*, ed. Temple Scott [Edinburgh: John Grant, 1911], 2:49).

16. A. H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1954), p. 346.

17. For further discussion, see K. R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 345.

any individual who claims *absolute* freedom can logically claim the freedom to deprive others of all *their* liberty. Thus a marriage contract which maintains the unconditional freedom and power of a husband must necessarily define the wife in terms of her unconditional surrender to his will. The ultimate basis for Griselda's subjection to Walter is her contractual, social, and sexual status as his wife. In the end, Walter justifies his persecution of Griselda and, in his own view, forestalls all criticism of it with the following argument:

> "And folk that ootherweys han seyd of me,
> I warne hem wel that I have doon this deede
> For no malice, ne for no crueltee,
> But for t'assaye in thee thy wommanheede."
> [Lines 1072–75]

According to Walter, his tests of Griselda's "womanhood"—tests which seemed deliberately designed to outrage that very womanhood—involved no cruelty, no malice toward Griselda as an individual. The Clerk makes it obvious that there was, after all, nothing *personal* in Walter's tests of his wife. The Marquis always knew that Griselda was virtuous, patient, loving, obedient, and true. Certainly her behavior, even by his own most exacting standards, proved exemplary throughout. Therefore she suffered all that pain simply because Walter wanted to perform experimental tests of her "womanhood."

There is, of course, an obvious reason why Griselda, who issued judgments of great equity to others, never defies Walter: her love for him. *The Clerk's Tale* may, in fact, be read as yet another medieval "allegory of love"—or, rather, as an allegory of tyrannic love in any age. Here is Griselda's original version (it does not appear in the sources) of an old, old story:

> "O goode God! how gentil and how kynde
> Ye semed by youre speche and youre visage
> The day that maked was our mariage!
> But sooth is seyd—algate I fynde it trewe,
> For in effect it preeved is on me—
> Love is noght oold as when that it is newe."
> [Lines 852–57]

Simone de Beauvoir's description of the situation of the woman in love provides an accurate gloss on Griselda's predicament. "There are," she says, "few crimes that entail worse punishment than the generous fault of putting oneself entirely in another's hands."[18] Griselda provides a

18. *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 399. Speaking of "love" in *The Clerk's Tale*, one can speak only of Griselda. There is no evidence that Walter loved his wife, since he does everything possible to make her suffer,

classic example of the "loving woman whom man has not only revealed but created." Her "salvation" depends on the "despotic free being that has made her and can instantly destroy her," and thus she "lives in fear and trembling before this man who holds her destiny in his hands." Nevertheless, she will choose "to desire her enslavement so ardently that it will seem to her the expression of her liberty." Through "her flesh, her feelings, her behavior" she will enthrone her beloved as her supreme value and reality. She will humble herself to nothingness before him."[19] As Griselda says:

> "Ther may no thyng, God so my soule save,
> Liken to yow that may displese me;
> Ne I desire no thyng for to have,
> Ne drede for to leese, save oonly yee."
> [Lines 505–08]

> "For wiste I that my deeth wolde do yow ese,
> Right gladly wolde I dyen, yow to plese."
> [Lines 664–65 (not in the sources)]

In what amounts to a total amalgamation of her will with his, and over and over again, Griselda prays that her Lord's will, not her will, be done on earth:

> She seyde, "Lord, al lyth in your plesaunce.
> My child and I, with hertely obeisaunce,
> Ben youres al, and ye mowe save or spille
> Youre owene thyng; werketh after youre wille."
> [Lines 501–4]

For Griselda, her beloved is the Lord whose name is blessed whether he gives or takes away.

All this is surely disturbing. Indeed, one could argue that through the exaggerations of *The Clerk's Tale,* Chaucer is making his own "modest proposal" about the potential suffering inherent in the assumption that one human being should have godlike power over another. For, after all, the relationship between Walter and Griselda simply carries to its logical conclusion the orthodox medieval assumption that a wife should have no will apart from that of her husband. Yet by any humane standard, whether pagan or Christian, medieval or modern, the Clerk's story of the relationship between Walter and Griselda is a horror story.

The very first test that Walter puts her to requires Griselda to con-

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whereas loving a person means wishing to make him (or her) happy. This, by the way, was Thomas Aquinas's definition of love.

19. de Beauvoir, pp. 400, 375.

sent to an ultimate form of injustice: to assent to the death of an innocent child. When she is commanded by her living god to sacrifice her own child, Griselda behaves like Abraham.[20] In fact, the particular form of injustice embodied in such a command is so monstrous that the only assent possible is some form of "religious" assent. A striking modern literary analogue to Griselda's situation occurs when the priest, Father Paneloux, gives his assent to the suffering and death of an innocent child in Camus's *The Plague:*

> [Paneloux] was not thinking of mere resignation or even of that harder virtue, humility. It involved humiliation, but a humiliation to which the person humiliated gave full assent. True, the agony of a child was humiliating to the heart and to the mind. But that was why we had to come to terms with it. And that, too, was why—and here Paneloux assured those present that it was not easy to say what he was about to say—since it was God's will, we, too, should will it. . . . "My brothers,"—the preacher's tone showed he was nearing the conclusion of his sermon—"the love of God is a hard love. It demands total self-surrender, disdain of our human personality. And yet it alone can reconcile us to suffering and the deaths of children,

20. An excellent medieval gloss on Griselda's situation appears in the Brome *Sacrifice of Isaac* (in *Chief Pre-Shakespearean Dramas,* ed. J. Q. Adams [Cambridge, Mass.; Houghton Mifflin, 1924]): "Wel myghte a modder thanne han cryd 'allas! " writes Chaucer, as the sergeant takes Griselda's baby away; and Isaac tells Abraham,

> But, fader, I preye yow euermore,
> Tell ye my moder no dell;
> Yffe sche wost yt, sche wold wepe full sore,
> For i-wysse, fader, sche lovyt me full wyll.
> [Lines 257–58]

Abraham, who loves his child as his life, yet will not spare "for chyld nor wyffe, / But don after my Lordes lore." "A! Lord God," he prays,

> "My conseons ys stronly steryd!
> And yit, my dere Lord, I am sore a-ferd
> To groche ony thyng a-gens yowre wyll."
> [Lines 78–80]

Writing about Stanley Milgrim's *Obedience to Authority* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), Dachine Rainer argues that it may be imagination—the ability to feel the wounds of others as though they were your own—that results in the refusal to sacrifice others to some higher authority: "One must be able to imagine what it is like to be wounded or deprived of life before one is prepared to refuse (despite *any* ideological persuasion) to inflict such injuries upon others" (*Sunday Times,* June 2, 1974, p. 12). It seems to me that the sympathetic imaginations of Chaucer and the author of *The Sacrifice of Isaac* must have compelled them to emphasize the inhumanity of ideological assumptions that parents should, upon demand, sacrifice their own children to the arbitrary will of some ultimate authority. Like Chaucer, the playwright stresses the human suffering inherent in the assumptions that lie behind his source story.

> it alone can justify them, since we cannot understand them, and we can only make God's will ours."[21]

This disdain of the "human personality," this "total self-surrender," and this masochistic willing of one's own humiliation have long been considered praiseworthy forms of human virtue. Absolute, unquestioning obedience to the commandments of a superior authority has traditionally been praised in priests (and, for that matter, in soldiers) as well as in wives. In an essay about "*The Clerk's Tale* and the Theme of Obedience," John McCall concludes that "the whole tradition of obedience declares that the free submission of one's will to a human superior is the normal means by which one submits to the will of God" and that "the essence of true obedience is to acquiesce in judgment as well as will—to make the desires of the superior one's own desires." He also concludes that "*ideally,* as with Griselda, *the more irrational and irksome the command, the more ready and glad should be its acceptance*" (emphasis mine):[22] "Naught greveth me at all," says Griselda to Walter, "Though that my daughter and my sone be slain / At your comandement" (lines 647–49).

Both Chaucer and Camus raise serious moral questions for their readers when they confront their characters, Griselda and Paneloux, with the same terrible choice: Will they assent to and, by giving their assent, condone ultimate acts of injustice? Or will they deny the gods they love? Both Griselda and Paneloux, in obedience to their gods and for the love of their gods, assent to injustice. Yet we need not add our assent to theirs. Indeed, one need never uncritically accept the commandments of any authority as the basis for one's individual moral judgments. Kant boldly concluded that, even if the Deity should reveal himself to us, we should still have to decide for ourselves whether or not to believe in him and worship him.[23]

21. *The Plague,* trans. Stuart Gilbert (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), pp. 184, 186.

22. John McCall, "*The Clerk's Tale* and the Theme of Obedience," *Modern Language Quarterly* 27 (1966): 260–69. Given the tale, and the "Envoy," McCall concludes that "the alternatives are clear enough. One either sacrifices others to torment and death, or oneself—as Griselde did—to joy and life" (p. 269). I cannot see how these arguments make any sense at all, given the context. McCall seems to believe that one must either dominate others or prostrate oneself and that to prostrate oneself is better. But in submitting to Walter, Griselda was forced to "sacrifice others"—her own children—ostensibly to death. An allegorical interpretation, whereby (as in the epilogue to the *Sacrifice of Isaac*) children will be restored to their mothers by the Lord in some afterlife, does not solve the moral problems which are posed, on a human level, in *The Clerk's Tale.*

23. For full discussion see Popper (n. 17 above), p. 26. Empson, following George Orwell, makes essentially the same point: "Our own consciences are . . . the final judges even of truths vouchsafed to us by Revelation." "George Orwell very positively thought it the ultimate shame for a man to yield his conscience to an authority which craves to torture him and can only be restrained by a renunciation of thought, whether the authority is Stalin or God the Father" (*Milton's God* [n. 9 above], pp. 257, 261).

Perhaps poor Griselda might have done better to decide not to believe in or to worship Walter. Throughout his tale, Chaucer deliberately departs from his own authorities, that is, his sources, in order to direct a series of devastating criticisms at Griselda's live idol. In line after line of passionate invective, the Clerk insists that Walter was no god at all, that he was not even a good human being:

> 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.
> [Lines 460–62 (not in the sources)]

In Chaucer's version, Walter's plans concerning the fake papal bulls are motivated by his "crueel purpos" (line 740), an expression not found in the Latin or French source; later on, Petrarch's "solito . . . ingenio" (5. 1) is rendered as "after his *wikke* usage" (line 785).[24] Furthermore, Chaucer alters his sources to insist that the suffering which Walter inflicted upon Griselda over all those years was pointless—essentially absurd:

> What neded it
> Hire for to tempte, and alwey moore and moore . . .
> [Lines 457–58]
> O, nedeless was she tempted in assay!
> [Line 621]

Given Chaucer's departures from his sources, it may be argued that, in writing his *Clerk's Tale,* he acted in the cause of freedom of thought, of freedom to criticize established authority; that he acted for the sake of precisely those freedoms that Walter denied Griselda. Certainly, he requires his own readers to exercise those freedoms in the reading of his story, since he constantly encourages us to speculate critically about the human problems which he so powerfully exhibits before us. Even as Camus incites his readers to rebel against the tyranny and injustice embodied in the plague, Chaucer deliberately incites his audience to protest against the forms of tyranny and injustice embodied in Griselda's less than divine marquis. Dr. Bernard Rieux, the narrator in *The Plague,* tells us that "summoned to give evidence regarding what was a sort of crime," and "following the dictates of his heart," he has "deliberately taken the victims' side."[25] Similarly, in *The Clerk's Tale,* the narrator takes the victim's side. Neither the Clerk nor his creator will permit us to argue that Griselda in any way deserved what happened to her, and there is no point in suggesting that, because Griselda was persecuted, she really

24. See Severs (n. 13 above), p. 231. I have used Severs's discussion of "Chaucer's Originality" (pp. 229–38) and his texts of the sources throughout this essay.

25. Camus, p. 246.

wanted to be persecuted or that, because she submitted to her fate, she really liked it. There is a tyrant in *The Clerk's Tale,* and there is a victim, and Chaucer does everything he can to make certain that we do not join forces with the tyrant. Moreover, if the ways of man to woman in *The Clerk's Tale* are explicitly designed to be symbolic of the ways of God to man, then we remain free to criticize those ways as well.

Looked at from this angle, modern discussions of the tale which attempt to explain away or even to moralize Walter's persecution of Griselda seem almost as disturbing as the tale itself. So do those which preclude us from critically examining its literary and historical problems from our own point of view. We need hardly submit to authorities on the Middle Ages, or, for that matter, to medieval authorities, in the same uncritical way that Griselda submitted to Walter. For instance, in his discussion of "*The Clerk's Tale* and the Theme of Obedience," cited earlier, McCall himself would seem to have submitted to the authorities on the subject of obedience and uncritically accepted their arguments that "the more irrational and irksome the command, the more ready and glad should be its acceptance."

But should it? In recent examinations of political tyranny, Bruno Bettelheim and John Passmore have argued that when people submit without question to authority, when they uncritically obey irrational orders, and when they physically or psychologically prostrate themselves before their "superiors," they voluntarily submit to the same dehumanizing mechanisms which the totalitarian state uses to impose its will upon its subjects. Writing about his own experience in Dachau and Buchenwald, Bettelheim concluded that the attitude of self-effacement adopted by many prisoners "more than any other, helped to produce the kind of childishly submissive, easily manipulated person the SS wanted,"[26] who (like the kind of wife that Walter wanted) was characterized by "resignation, dependency, submission and passivity" (p. 149). Bettelheim goes on to observe that if the totalitarian state is also a class state, then it will wish "to insure that each person will be fixed in his class as permanently as possible, so that he will not threaten the ruling elite by trying to advance in status." Thus "the SS would have liked to classify each prisoner for eternity" (p. 222), while Walter liked to keep Griselda constantly reminded of her base origins. Discussing the problem of tyrannical authority in a different context, Passmore cites traditional arguments that the mystic must strip naked in order to be united with God, and then reminds us that the Nazis effectively used compulsory nakedness as a powerful weapon of humiliation.[27] Walter, of course, threatens Griselda with precisely this form of humiliation. Even as she maintains her status as a symbol of patience by echoing Job ("Naked out of my fadres hous . . . I cam, and naked moot I turne agayn" [lines 371–72]), Griselda

26. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart* (London: Paladin Books, 1970), p. 191.
27. John Passmore, *The Perfectibility of Man* (London: Duckworth, 1970), p. 314.

manifests a profoundly human terror, and an explicitly sexual embarrassment, in what are some of the most painfully literal lines in *The Clerk's Tale:*

> "Ye koude nat doon so dishonest a thyng,
> That thilke wombe in which your children leye
> Shoulde biforn the peple, in my walkyng,
> Be seyn al bare: wherfore I yow preye,
> Let me nat lyk a worm go by the weye."
> [Lines 876–82]

The sheer nastiness of this particular situation demonstrates, on a literal level, that whether or not the scourges of adversity sent to us by God may finally turn out to be for our own good, Walter's governance over her was never for Griselda's own good. Nor was his governance "for the best" so far as Griselda's father, Janicula, was concerned. As a result of the cruel treatment of his daughter, Janicula cursed the day and time that nature shaped him to be a living creature (lines 902–3—again, not in the sources).

It is true that even the most terrible scourges of adversity may, after all, prove of benefit to an individual: God "preeveth folk al day, it is no drede,"

> And suffreth us, as for oure exercise,
> With sharpe scourges of adversitee
> Ful ofte to be bete in sondry wise; . . .
> And for oure beste is al his governaunce.
> [Lines 1155–61]

Painful experiences can indeed prove "for the best" when something important is learned from them. In this connection, several of the similarities and differences between *The Clerk's Tale* and *Gawain and the Green Knight* are illuminating. The Green Knight—as powerful within his poem as Walter in *The Clerk's Tale*—tests the virtuous Gawain, just as Walter tests his virtuous wife. And, like Griselda, Gawain does not know, at the time of certain tests, that he is in fact being tested. Thus, Gawain and Griselda are both surprised when the end of their tests is announced and their performance is evaluated.

But Gawain learns something from his ordeals in the domain of the Green Knight. He returns to Arthur's court with a knowledge of himself and of the world that he did not have when he set forth. However painful his knowledge is to him, it is still knowledge; compared to the chastened Gawain, the courtiers who remained safe in Camelot seem like cardboard cutouts. Furthermore, the poet encourages his readers to share Gawain's experiences with him, to feel that they themselves might have been seduced by the lady or might have taken that magic girdle. We

thus may share Gawain's painful new understanding of himself, as well as his astonishment at the Green Knight's revelations and final judgments. Like Gawain, many people, in real life, have had dangerous adventures that turned out to be miraculously instructive, if also humbling, tests of their moral integrity or their physical courage. But on other occasions, most people have had to live through episodes of needless, pointless, unnecessary suffering that teach them nothing whatsoever, yet must somehow be endured, somehow survived, before, at best, getting back to the place where they were when all the trouble began.

Chaucer makes it apparent that neither Walter nor Griselda learns anything from Walter's series of tests. Walter never acknowledges, much less apologizes for, his infliction of pointless suffering upon an innocent person. Instead, the oppressor praises his obedient victim for passing unnecessary tests of her obedience, while the victim feels obliged to thank the "benygne" tyrant for returning to her the children that he never should have taken away in the first place.

As opposed to his characters, Chaucer's readers may learn something from the tests, since they may examine them critically, and reach their own conclusions about the final results. One might, for instance, conclude from the dubious reparations made to Griselda, who gets nothing back which was not wrongfully taken from her, that the exploited may remain exploited while they believe they are receiving benefits from their exploiters. For even though she wins back all she had thought lost, Griselda haunts the memory as one of literature's most pitiable losers.

If Griselda is a heroine, her heroism amounts to the passive endurance of unnecessary, senseless suffering. For Griselda, the loss of her children, her own sorrow and humiliation, all had to be borne; they could not be helped. But Chaucer himself insists that her suffering was "needless," that it could have been helped. And while Griselda is described as a "humble creature" who was disposed to endure the "adversitee of Fortune" (line 756), we ourselves know that the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune which she had to suffer came, every one of them, from Walter himself. As Chaucer constantly reminds his readers, the responsibility for the suffering in *The Clerk's Tale* rests at the door of the human being who deliberately inflicted pain upon others. This is, however, an insight shared by Chaucer with his audience; it is withheld from Griselda herself.

By contrast, Webster's Duchess of Malfi clearly recognizes the sources of her suffering, the injustice of her fate. She retains, quite independently of the other characters, and, indeed, of the audience at her tragedy, the right to judge her oppressors. Thus, even though she loses everything—life, children, husband—the Duchess goes down a victor as well as a victim, a tragic heroine whose integrity enables her to defy tyrannical oppression. "The moral of this play, driven home as with

the sledge-hammer of Dickens," writes Empson, "is not that the Duchess was wanton, but that her brothers were sinfully proud."[28]

Even a quick look at the text reveals which side Webster is on. His "noble" Duchess of Malfi is radiant, intelligent, brave, witty, warm, and loving. In contrast to her brothers, she does nothing cruel or unnatural, nothing that would have subjected her to any serious criticism had she been a man: "Why might not I marry?" she asks, "I have not gone about in this to create / Any new world or custom." Indeed, throughout her tragedy, Webster insists that she acts in accordance with a finer and fairer morality than the one which persecutes and condemns her. By contrast, the tyranny of her brothers is consistently shown to be cruel, unnatural, and always unjust. Discussing the confiscation of the Duchess's property, one pilgrim asks "by what justice" the dukedom was seized; the other answers, "Sure, I think by none." Finally appeased by her death, her brother Ferdinand acknowledges the outrageous injustice of his own behavior toward her. What an "excellent honest man mightst thou have been," he tells Bosola,

> If thou hadst borne her to some sanctuary!
> Or, bold in a good cause, oppos'd thyself,
> With thy advanced sword above thy head,
> Between her innocence and my revenge!
> [4. 2. 275–78]

"What was the meanness of her match to me?" he goes on to ask.

> Was I her judge?
> Did any ceremonial form of law
> Doom her to not-being? Did a complete jury
> Deliver her conviction up i' th' court?
> Where shalt thou find this judgment register'd
> Unless in hell?
> [4. 2. 299–304]

Bosola, likewise, proclaims the "sacred innocence" of the dead Duchess.

Webster's heroine does not "account it praise to suffer tyranny." From the beginning, she insists on the freedom to criticize established assumptions and so to reject intrusions upon her liberty to do what she, personally, considers right. Unlike poor Griselda, who was defined as a dutiful daughter, then as a dutiful wife, the mature Duchess has certain obvious advantages of birth and status which permit her to define herself: to behave in terms of her own conscience and will rather than submit to an artificial code of conduct imposed upon her by others. She

28. Empson, "Mine Eyes Dazzle" (n. 1 above), p. 297.

is a widow, a comparatively independent woman, the governor of her own household, a great aristocrat, the very model of Castiglione's ideal court lady. In further contrast to Griselda, who was chosen by Walter, the Duchess does her own choosing. Like the Lord Walter himself, she claims the freedom to choose a partner in terms of virtue rather than rank. So great is her individual integrity, her aristocratic pride, that whatever happens to her, however others may defame her, she can justly proclaim herself "Duchess of Malfi still."

Her superb contempt for her persecutors seems comparable to that of certain "upper-upper class" prisoners whose behavior in the concentration camps so profoundly impressed Bruno Bettelheim. According to Bettelheim, the formerly "anointed" prisoners "seemed to develop such a feeling of superiority" that nothing done to them in the camps could damage them psychologically: "How well they stood up was quite remarkable." For they retained "the last freedom" that not even the concentration camp could take away—the psychological and intellectual freedom to decide for themselves how to think and feel about the conditions of life. If we can do that, Bettelheim concludes, "then if we cannot live, at least we die as men."[29] "Whether I am doom'd to live or die," says the Duchess, "I can do both like a prince" (3. 2. 70–71).

Whereas comedy tends to commend conformity, tragedy often glorifies rebellion, resistance, freedom, independence, and individuality. It is her brave resistance to tyranny that gives the Duchess a tragic stature which, however, pathetic her predicament, Griselda cannot and does not claim. The noble Duchess gives "majesty to adversity"; even her melancholy seems to be "fortified" with "a strange disdain." These descriptions of her behavior come from her persecutors, just before Ferdinand is driven mad by the sight of her dead body, and Bosola is inspired by her heroism to take up the sword of justice and avenge her death. Like submission to tyranny, resistance seems to be contagious, and so Bosola, who began, like Walter's sergeant, by simply obeying orders, is converted to the cause of the Duchess.

Taken together, these works imply that in real life, the only way to behave toward a tyrannical authority which refuses to accept any rational criticism is to resist it. As *The Duchess of Malfi* reminds us, a tyrant may destroy any individual who dares to defy his power; yet sustained resistance may finally overthrow the tyrant. If the Duchess, because she dies, can be considered defeated by her tyrannical brothers, they, in turn, are ultimately defeated by her influence. Moreover, the Duchess dies well—on her knees before only God—while her brothers go down howling: Ferdinand on all fours, the Cardinal on his knees before Bosola. Like the domain of the great Calabrian Duke Ferdinand, the domain of the Lord Walter is a realm of unreason. Neither tyrant heeds

29. Bettelheim, pp. 173, 240.

criticism of any kind. Walter acts out his most wildly irrational whims, and Griselda uncritically yields to his most perverse demands. Nothing whatsoever is done to correct an insane situation until Walter miraculously comes to his senses and stops the tests. In the absence of rational criticism, in the absence of any resistance from Griselda or anyone else, nothing short of a miracle could have stopped Walter's cruel experiments from continuing. In Webster's tragedy, the emotionally healthy and natural Duchess is tortured and killed by the combined power of church and state, as embodied in the heartless Cardinal and the unnatural, obsessive Ferdinand. Yet though she is surrounded by madmen, she herself does not go mad:

> Th' heaven o'er my head seems made of molten brass,
> The earth of flaming sulphur, yet I am not mad.
> [4. 2. 25–26]

To the end, the Duchess challenges the validity of her brother's right to govern her life and stands against the madness of the society that persecutes her.

The differences between *The Clerk's Tale* and *The Duchess of Malfi* suggest alternative methods which poets may use to elicit an audience's protests against injustice. By presenting his readers with a meek, gentle, passive victim who cannot criticize, much less rebel against, her all-powerful persecutor, Chaucer—by way of his Clerk—incites his audience to espouse the cause of Griselda against Walter's oppression. Webster has his heroine so heroically lead the resistance to tyranny that she may inspire members of the audience, even as she inspires Bosola, to join forces with her against the cruelty and hypocritical morality of her brothers. Thus Chaucer and Webster, in their different ways, attack injustice, argue on behalf of their victims, and prosecute their own persecutors. Their readers serve them as a court of appeal that remains free to rule, as the evidence requires, and as common humanity requires, in favor of the innocent and injured parties. For—to paraphrase Dr. Johnson—after all the refinements of subtlety and the dogmatism of learning, it is by the common sense (and sensibility) of readers who are uncorrupted with scholarly prejudices that the characters and situations in medieval and Elizabethan literature, like those in any other literature, must finally be judged.

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