

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: *The Clerk's Tale: Literal Monstrosities and Allegorical Problems*

Abstract approved:

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My thesis, entitled “*The Clerk's Tale: Literal Monstrosities and Allegorical Problems*,” argues that Chaucer’s Clerk is engaging both sides of a binary system. The Clerk has situated himself in a precarious position between two major schools of thought in the medieval culture, Franciscan and Dominican; the former promotes the will or action while the latter emphasizes contemplation and introspection. Through his description in the *General Prologue*, Chaucer presents the Clerk symbolically as an adherent of the school of Aristotle, who was the philosophical forbearer of Dominic. This initial association is confounded when the Clerk uses his tale as an opportunity to deliver an allegorical message through a narrative with an ethically monstrous literal level, aligning him with the other half of the binary. I demonstrate that these literal monstrosities are accompanied by fundamental problems in the allegory and suggest that this struggle between the literal and the allegorical is the result of the Clerk’s inability to incorporate both schools of thought successfully. Chaucer sets up the Wife of Bath as a foil for the Clerk on these points; this is a part of a pattern in the *Canterbury Tales* in which each pilgrim represents a different set of beliefs and narrative strategies and Chaucer invites the reader to see the problems inherent in

each of these possibilities. I conclude by considering how the complications plaguing the allegorical and literal levels of the *Clerk's Tale* are further problematized in his "Envoy," which attempts to reconcile the two levels and thus the two schools of thought.

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The *Clerk's Tale*:
Literal Monstrosities and Allegorical Problems

by
Christopher James Brock

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Christopher James Brock, Author

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PREFACE

The first time I ever read Chaucer on my own was while I was working the Summer of '05 at Mammoth Hot Springs, Yellowstone WY. I worked graveyard at the hotel in Mammoth and had time enough to read. Among the books I read that summer was the *Canterbury Tales* and D.W. Robertson's *Preface to Chaucer*. Chaucer was fun; Robertson was amazing. These two books, more than anything I read that summer, helped encourage my love and admiration for medieval literature.

The first time I read the *Clerk's Tale* I was unimpressed, but the tale left an impression on me, especially in light of what Robertson taught me. Though I haven't grown to love the tale, I can at least say I appreciate Chaucer's genius a great deal more. The *Clerk's Tale* is not the first tale I think of reading when opening up Chaucer, that place is reserved for the Miller, the Reeve, the Friar, and the Summoner. The Clerk is up there though. I couldn't imagine writing a thesis on ribaldry or fart jokes, so I chose that one tale that most impressed my imagination, the *Clerk's Tale*.

The Clerk's Tale: Literal Monstrosities and Allegorical Problems

Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is one of the most influential works to come out of the Middle Ages. The work introduces a varied group of pilgrims on their way to Canterbury Cathedral to visit the resting place of Thomas Becket, and along the way they tell stories. Chaucer's use of the pilgrimage frame helps create a functional unity between the tales and the tellers, as well as a discursive atmosphere between the pilgrims. Many of the tales can be seen as an ongoing dialogue between pilgrims through the use of stories. The well-known Chaucerian critic, George Lyman Kittredge, went so far as to group the tales together thematically and to view them as dramatic speeches. Critically, his ideas were very influential, but in the last couple of decades critics have begun to approach the *Tales* differently. I find the most convincing current interpretations to be those that pay close attention to the way Chaucer's characters can be read as representations of different philosophies and narrative styles inherent to the section of society from which they come. Among the various allegories of society travels a meek Clerk. He keeps a low profile, and only speaks when called upon. His interaction with the group is through his tale. His tale demonstrates his beliefs, which seem to center on the significance of symbols and allegories and to value the sign of the literal less than the symbolic meanings ascribed to the sign. I will argue that his tale is an attempt to unpack his philosophical wares through an allegory that purposefully requires his audience to submit to intellectual interpretations while disregarding the ethically problematic literal level of the tale.

The Clerk is not alone in creating and exemplifying artistic style and purpose. He enters into a dialogue already taking place. The Knight opens the *Tales* and in many ways is the source of the major themes that progress through Chaucer's great work. The Clerk's tale is a response to the Wife of Bath in particular. These two characters are foils for each other, both in character and in artistic goals. Their juxtaposition is most easily understood through the critic Lois Roney's description of two philosophic schools at issue within the *Canterbury Tales*. In her book, *Chaucer's "Knight's Tale" and Theories of Scholastic Psychology*, she details two different belief systems and how Chaucer organizes them in his initial tale. The major schools of thought in the Middle Ages are the Franciscan and Dominican fraternities and their approach to the world. The dichotomy can be formulated from a large list of contrasting pairs, such as: active and passive, solas and sentence, and Plato and Aristotle. These are only a few of the binary themes that are prominent in many texts from the Middle Ages.

Roney argues that Chaucer uses his pilgrims to debate and exemplify the binary medieval worldview through their tales. S. H. Rigby describes the theory of a dialogic *Canterbury Tales* as, "A collection of particular world-views, each of which reveals a dissatisfaction with the preceding tales but none of which is presented as a definitive or final answer."¹ Roney's approach is similar to the earlier theorists like Robertson, who placed an emphasis on the allegorical qualities of the *Tales*. At the same time she is exploring the dialogic connections shared by the individual tales and her interpretations differ from the earlier critics in that she does not associate the dialogic quality of the *Tales* as subversive of the contemporary world.² When Roney defines the overall motif of the work, she is giving it a place showing Chaucer's orthodox approach to his religion

and the art of the medieval culture. What Chaucer is attempting to do with his *Tales*, according to Roney, is to show and encourage participation in the shades of grey between the two extremes of the spectrum, and this grey area is within the orthodoxy of his time. The Wife of Bath and the Clerk may not be true extremes, but they are far enough apart to create a visible contrast for the audience. Roney sees the *Knight's Tale* as an exemplum of Chaucer's revision and approach to constructing a scholastic psychology that incorporates the Franciscan and Dominican worldviews. And it is through the dialogic nature of the frame story that Chaucer explores the various shades of grey in art and philosophy.

Roney's unifying theme of a scholastic psychology critically restores Chaucer as orthodox, which many proponents of the dialogic theory tended to take away from him. Earlier critics like Kittredge argued that the *Tales* are broken into groups; the dialogue is left without one defining voice, and this seeming lack of definitive quality in the *Tales* has resulted in a great variety of complaints against some of the tales, especially the *Clerk's Tale*. Many of the arguments formulated are based upon the literal level of the tale, something on which D.W. Robertson warned readers not to solely focus their attentions. The medieval writer wrote on several levels, with the literal representing the least significant level. The Clerk seems to emphasize the insignificance of the literal level, for his literal level is seething with moral ambiguities and ethical monstrosities, which are easily picked up by modern critics. John P. McCall describes the thoughts of other critics and how they "indicate that [the tale] is a complete failure."³ This is a common sentiment with which I cannot wholly agree, and yet I cannot entirely dismiss it because of the nature of the *Clerk's Tale*. Part of the problem here is the Clerk's refusal

as a character to fit neatly into either school of thought. Other critics seriously criticize the motives and actions of the characters in the tale, and for good reason. The literal of the tale is in a sense, monstrous. But at the same time, an allegorical reading that isn't too detailed is extremely beautiful. These two levels are irreconcilable; even the Clerk will revise the literal level in his "Envoy."

I will argue that the Clerk has his own artistic agenda that is influenced by the belief that the literal part of the narrative is not needed. He tries to tell a tale where the reader is meant to grasp the allegorical/moral/anagogical meanings and discard the fictional husk, so to speak. His agenda, and therefore the tale, is problematized when the literal and allegorical levels fail to connect morally. This failure encourages a different approach to literature and reading that focuses not on the surface, but on the allegorical signification of literal actions.



The School of Athens – Raphael (Figure 1)

Binary Systems

The Middle Ages is often perceived as a period with an almost zealous desire for order and hierarchy. The medieval philosophers inherited a binary system of thought from their philosophical forbears, and continued to work and further add to the binary systems of thought. Their culture and beliefs reflected the binary systems contained in their philosophy and religion. Lois Roney argues that Chaucer is trying to find a middle ground between one of the major binaries, which he will complicate and violate with his

frame tale. Chaucer uses the character of the Clerk to transgress both sides of the binary system, frequently creating a place where the binary struggles against itself. Before attending to the violations, it is prudent to take a look at some of the significant binaries, their importance, and how they have been used to better understand the *Canterbury Tales*.

One of the more dominant contrasts was in the thirteenth century, when two influential friars lived and taught in two different methods for the same ultimate end. St. Dominic spent his time in study and learning, while St. Francis emphasized the spirit of man without the erudite learning of a scholar. They were both bringing religion to the people in two very different ways, but their ultimate destination was the same.

According to their theological understanding of the world around us, we are trapped in a prison of flesh looking out upon creation, and the way we perceive the world is peculiar to each person. The two friars are philosophical children of Aristotle and Plato, who represent one of the major binaries at play within the Western tradition. Their association with the friars is one that is easily depicted in art and literature. In the Renaissance, Raphael characterized this distinction of philosophies by painting Plato and Aristotle walking together in “The School of Athens” (Figure 1). Plato symbolically points to Heaven with his finger, showing the pinpoint and eternal Truth of his philosophy. Aristotle answers Plato by holding his palm over the ground, as though to say the ultimate Truth lies in everything and not just one point.⁴ These two great philosophers were the foundation for the schools of the two friars.

These binaries appear throughout the medieval culture in literature, art, the court, and philosophical treatise. Roney persuasively demonstrated the differences of the two

schools represented by Plato and Aristotle and how Chaucer was able to define them in the *Knight's Tale* through the characters of Palamon and Arcite. Though Roney does not explicitly address the *Clerk's Tale*, her theories concerning the two schools are a theme that can be found throughout the *Canterbury Tales*. We can easily detect her theories within the character of the Clerk, and also in how his story is informed with a dynamic binary that is of a more complex nature than the one found in the *Knight's Tale*. Furthermore, the Clerk and his tale tend to complicate the neatly organized theory that Roney identifies in the *Knight's Tale*.

The *Knight's Tale* was a tale of two knights that became obsessed with the same woman. The knights were known as Palamon and Arcite and the object they so desired was Emelye, the fair sister of the queen. At the time of their infatuation they were imprisoned together, but from the narrow prison window they could spy the beautiful Emelye and from their sight they were able to develop and encourage their love for her. Palamon was the first to set eyes on her, and her very beauty caused him to admit that, "I noot wher she be woman or goddesse."⁵ Having heard such a beauty praised, the slightly more rational Arcite looked upon Emelye and said, "The fresshe beautee sleeth me sodeynly" (I.1118). From this moment onwards the two knights become sworn enemies, for they each claim to love and serve Emelye exclusively. They who were once kin are now bitter enemies vying for the love of Emily from inside a very real prison. The situation has a touch of the absurd to it: two cousins become enemies because they are both enamored of a woman with whom they cannot even converse.

Eventually these two knights find themselves removed from the prison, one by ransom and the other by escape, and continue their duel outdoors. They turn to swords

but before the fight becomes fatal, the wise Theseus, Duke of Athens, halts the two. He arranges a battle to the death between the two knights and allows each to select his companions. Theseus later changes his mind and oversees a less harsh competition of bruising and submission. The knights pray to their respective gods, Palamon to Venus and Arcite to Mars. Mars, who is more suited to battles, grants the wish of Arcite, and he wins the tournament, but accidentally falls off his horse and dies before he can have his prize of Emelye. Palamon is awarded Emelye; he prayed to Venus, goddess of love, and she delivered just as Mars had provided Arcite with a martial victory.

This story is often received as an unsatisfactory tale. The winner of the tournament dies by chance, and the loser is awarded the prize. This tale is among the lengthiest in the *Canterbury Tales* and has the honor of being the first tale. The placement and the length have led many critics to discuss both its meaning and why it was placed at the very beginning of what was meant to be 120 tales. Among the theories and interpretations, I find Roney's the most useful; she presents a viable approach to the *Canterbury Tales* that unifies the entire work through the tales and the storytellers. Her explanation of the tale helps to make the tale more palatable for the reader. Her book helps a reader see beneath the surface that is sometimes troublesome. She delicately portrays the contrast between the literal and the allegorical in the *Knight's Tale*, and how the two levels create relatively few complications. But when we extend her approach to the Clerk and his tale we find that Chaucer has broken down the smooth partnership of the literal and allegorical found in the *Knight's Tale*, and replaced that structure with one full of complications.

I begin with the *Knight's Tale* for a couple of reasons: its placement within the work and its symmetrical narrative style. In this first tale, Chaucer is beginning to define his themes that will be at play throughout the work. The tale represents the ideal partnership between the literal and the allegorical, which is in contrast to the lack of unity found within the Clerk and his tale. Roney breaks down the tale allegorically, showing Palamon to be equivalent to the Franciscan and Platonic school of thought, while Arcite closely conforms to the Dominican and Aristotelian schools.⁶ She demonstrates their philosophical affinities in how they view Emelye: Palamon cannot decide if she is real or a goddess, while Arcite sees her very physical beauty. Each approach is borderline excessive, and can lead to danger and conflict. Palamon comes close to idolatry; his love is not of the physical but of the spiritual. Arcite sees her body, but disregards her spiritual nature, which Palamon allows her to the full. Between these two extremes is Theseus, who devises a way for them to settle their differences. He is the only one of the three who seems capable of changing his mind based upon the realities before him. Theseus can learn from experience because he can learn from either school of thought. His first instinct was for the two knights to battle to the death for the love of Emelye. This is the most logical conclusion, for then one knight will be dead and, the other can enjoy her love unhindered. But Theseus later reconsiders his decision. His change seems to show some compassion for life, and that it shouldn't be thrown out so cheaply.

The *Tale* offers the reader the framework for the argument, which Chaucer is going to test throughout his *Tales*. It is a theory of psychology that Roney traces through the work, through the tales, and through the characters. But Chaucer's argument makes "his reader's mind do the work."⁷ He will not say his plan, he can only leave little clues

for the reader to gather and piece together. This method becomes difficult for the reader, but to seek continually that answer which requires hard thought is to learn from our experiences.⁸ Our learning becomes the middle ground of the two schools. Chaucer's literature becomes the great staging ground for theoretical frameworks to be practiced and then hopefully understood by the readers. The work is neither a philosophical treatise of the plainest style, nor fiction for fiction's sake; it is a work that fuses culture and thought by reorganizing them into a unified worldview. But with this comes responsibilities for the reader. If the work is taken lightly and enjoyed for purposes other than those meant by the artist, then the work becomes an object of inordinate pleasure, and to see only pleasure in the work would be how Arcite would approach literature. Augustine warns readers, "But many and varied obscurities and ambiguities deceive those who read casually, understanding one thing instead of another."⁹ On the other hand, to find only the logical within the text and sever that which should bring some pleasure from that which teaches would reach to the other extreme that Palamoun represented. What Chaucer most strives for is that the reader can find "best sentence and most solas" (I.798) within his works. The Clerk realizes both extremes; in his *Tale* he approaches art as a medium that conveys logic and reason through allegory, and his "Envoy" tries to restore the literal and pleasurable level.

Order, Hierarchy, and Allegory in the Middle Ages

Chaucer, as Roney describes it, was able to create a theoretical framework for scholastic psychology, the science that seeks to understand the soul and its relation to life,

through the use of allegory. Allegory allowed writers to couch ideas that remained beyond human comprehension as well as uniting secular writings with religious thought. I will argue that the Clerk subscribes wholly to the teachings of Platonic thought, and promotes allegory as a means to communicate his beliefs without the impediments of pleasure. Allegory brings about order, which brings life closer to unity; and unity, as I will discuss later, can bring one nearer to the perfection of God. The trouble with the Clerk's use of allegory is that he attempts to divide his literal level of reading from his allegorical. Between the two levels there is a paradoxical relationship. Allegory is meant to create unity, but in the *Clerk's Tale* it creates a rift. The rift is a result of the contradictory beliefs that the Clerk holds. He is using allegory, a device most associated with Augustine and the mystics, to undermine any authority the literal should have. And the literal is that area of experience associated with the senses, which are the key tools for the Aristotelian scientist. This complicates the nature of the Clerk, who is described in the terms of an Aristotelian.

Chaucer's Clerk gives precedence to the allegorical level, which was only one of several levels of interpretation. D.W. Robertson, though now a somewhat dated source, is one of the most influential critics on medieval allegory. He frequently refers to allegory in his 1962 work, *Preface to Chaucer*. In it he discusses the tradition of allegory according to medieval writers. There were generally four levels of reading during the Middle Ages: literal, moral, allegorical, and anagogical.¹⁰ In some instances only three levels were mentioned, with the anagogical level being excluded. Robertson recounts Hugh St. Victor's beliefs as expressed in the *Didascalicon*: "The exposition of a text involves the examination of three things: the *letter*, the *sense*, and the *sentence*."¹¹

Origen described the three levels as: historical, moral, and allegory,¹² which is another way to talk about the letter, sense, and sentence. Dante understood these three levels and included the fourth level of anagogical.¹³ These levels were applied to texts as varied as the Old Testament and Virgil. The application of the four levels of reading redeemed many secular works for the Christian religion.

Following the four levels of reading was a natural process for a medieval writer and exegete. Of the four levels, allegory is the most important for the Clerk. Writing in his *Preface*, Robertson commented on this very habit, that the medieval readers had a “pervasive tendency to think in allegorical terms.”¹⁴ Robertson’s thesis immediately incensed the medieval scholarly establishment for not considering the average reader. Robertson focused on the ideal reader of medieval literature, whom he claims has a special focus on allegory. This special emphasis on allegory tends to devalue the other three levels, which had their own important role in literature and art. To relate the individual importance of each level, I will illustrate the four levels and their application. Here is a common reading of the Exodus story in the Middle Ages. Literally, the Exodus is about the tribes of Israel leaving Egypt. The moral is that the children of God will be saved and protected. One allegorical reading has the exodus as a baptism. The Red Sea is of course the baptismal waters cleansing away the sins, which are appropriately represented by the Egyptians. After the cleansing the baptized are reborn into a new life, here being taken as the Promised Land. And the anagogical represents the spiritual allegory. The crossing of the Red Sea is the passing from life to death. The Egyptians are purged, and entrance into the Promised Land is synonymous with the entrance into Heaven.

The sacred texts take on multiple meanings that were meant to inspire devotion, but also had the beneficial effect of making the text more acceptable within the medieval man's religious atmosphere. Umberto Eco, in a discussion of the medieval theologian's view of scripture, writes: "The Old Testament was the signifier, or the letter, of which the New Testament was the signified, or the spirit. But at the same time, the New Testament also was a letter, whose spirit had to do with salvation and moral duty."¹⁵ This approach, described by Eco, reveals an approach that strives to include outside texts through various interpretations. Theologians could look back at the stories and find signs and symbols that prefigured Christ, and read into the text Christian allegory. One example of this approach is in Augustine's *City of God*. In one section of the book he suggests the possibility that the Trinity can be found almost from the beginning of Genesis: "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. God saw that the light was good."¹⁶ Augustine asks three questions, and each answer corresponds to one aspect of the Trinity. Who created the light? God. How did He create the light? Through the Word, and the Word of God is understood to be the Son. And why did He create the light? Because it was good, and that which is good, according to Augustine's reading, pertains to the Spirit.¹⁷ Here is an instance of a verse that appeared to be quite innocent of allegory, but was found to contain the core of Christian belief.

Medieval readers also actively sought allegory in secular texts. Similar to the sacred texts they allegorized, medieval thinkers also vigorously allegorized classical texts. Their belief was that the Truth of God was a natural drive for all men, therefore whatever man wrote was a testament to their God-given nature. When Aristotle was writing his metaphysics, he did not know the Judeo Christian God, but his spirit was

forever searching for Him, unbeknownst to Aristotle or his colleagues. This belief that all men were looking for the one Truth allowed medieval scholars to approach pagan literature with an eye for allegory. They used allegory to complete the classical writer's spiritual desire to be with the Christian God. For example, Virgil's fourth eclogue was not about Christ, but later Christian readers could see nothing but the Son of God within Virgil's poetry. Virgil's influence can be seen within Dante's *Purgatorio*; the character of Statius speaks about his conversion and Virgil's poetry: "You were as one who leads through a dark track/ holding the light behind—useless to you,/ precious to those who followed at your back."¹⁸ For Statius, Virgil's poems were filled with morals and truths that have found safety within the Christian religion. And there is nothing directly from Christianity in Ovid, a contemporary of Virgil, but he proved to be a highly successful author within the Middle Ages. His stories from the *Metamorphosis* have found their way into Chaucer, Gower, and Dante based upon their allegorical readings of his works. Even the Classical myths were translated into allegories that served Christianity. For example, when reading of Aesclepius raising Hippolytus from the dead, it is easy to see how he was allegorized as the false prophet warned of in Revelation. Aesclepius served as a nice counterpoint to Jesus and Lazarus. The Greek Pantheon became a rich source to express Christian beliefs in an allegorical way. Venus served as a metaphor for the love that procreates, while her son became the herald of lust. The gods remained, only belief in their existence disappeared.

Most medieval people believed that division and mutability, which is a trait directly relevant to divisible substance, was of a negative nature. They were moved to work out systems of thought to help unify what divisions they could. In the arts, one of

their tools to unify and systematize was allegory. Theologians that the Clerk must have been aware of frequently commented on the indissoluble nature of God.¹⁹ God was perfect in every way, and his perfection was a result of having no composition. He could not be divided, adulterated, or corrupted. He needed nothing, and nothing could be taken away. If perfection is being of one simple substance, then it would seem to follow that imperfection arises from being composed of multiple substances capable of division. The belief then is that man is composed of divisible substances, and this potential for division, or corruption, becomes the basis for our imperfection. That which is composed is subject to division, mutability, and decline. This is the state of living beings: bodies decline over time and have a finite beginning and end. The model of composition was not just used to explain the physical nature of man, but many of the writers in the Middle Ages often had the tendency to show division as a process leading towards destruction. Langland embodies this sentiment perfectly when he warns, “The mooste mischief on molde is mountynge up faste.”²⁰ Just as the body of man declined over time, so too did mankind. The belief in the decline of mankind is nothing new; Hesiod wrote of five races that began with gold and ended with his own race, that of iron. One can imagine he was somewhat pessimistic when he said, “I wish I were not of this race.”²¹ For the Greeks, the further from the original, or God, the more the race becomes corrupted and degraded through penury. The Middle Ages had little that was different in this aspect. Chaucer’s Clerk would have a similar understanding, and view the world through metaphors and similes as a means to understand better the perfection of God.

John Gower, a contemporary and sometime friend of Chaucer, wrote that, “Division aboven alle/ Is thing which makth the world to fall.”²² Unity represents the

medieval ideal, while that which is divided of itself is further from perfection, and therefore needs to be systematized and ordered until it is in accordance with the prevailing way of thinking. There was a widespread desire to eliminate discord within philosophy, nations, and religion. Medieval thinkers were content to look to the Greek philosophers and incorporate their system in their own. Chesterton once said of Aquinas that he helped baptize Aristotle²³ by bringing the philosopher's works to the faith, and not the other way around. Writing in the early 1960s, C. S. Lewis makes the point that, "[Medieval readers] are bookish. They are indeed very credulous of books. They find it hard to believe that anything an old *auctour* has said is simply untrue... Obviously their *auctours* will contradict one another... If, under these conditions, one has also a great reluctance flatly to disbelieve anything in a book, then here there is obviously both an urgent need and a glorious opportunity for sorting out and tidying up. All the apparent contradictions must be harmonized."²⁴ These harmonized contradictions take shape in the character of the Clerk; his attempt at harmony creates difficulties for the serious reader. This can be placed within a wider discussion of allegory as a means in order to incorporate secular works within a religious context. Ann R. Meyer, in a general discussion of the legacy of allegory, showed how the "Medieval west embraced the pagan Virgil as a prophet in the Hebrew tradition, setting him in company with David and Isaiah."²⁵

The motivation for the medieval writer to incorporate pagan and secular works within their theology is based on the concept that unity brings an idea closer to perfection. Meyer described how allegory was meant to "defend [secular] poetry against its own pagan roots, medieval Christians applied to it the same interpretive methods they

used to read the Hebrew Bible.”²⁶ But not everyone agreed with this approach; in his book *Thomas Aquinas*, G.K. Chesterton writes of a church official contemporary with St. Aquinas, Siger of Brabant, and how he basically told Aquinas that the “Church must be right theologically, but she can be wrong scientifically.”²⁷ His message was of a separation of the spirit and the physical world, where the spirit must live in blind isolation from the realities of the sensual world. He was corrupting the very work that Aquinas had spent years working on. He was also looking upon the world literally, and declined to see the allegories of life and the metaphors of faith at work in his daily life. The Clerk’s use of allegory seems to follow the same divisive qualities that Siger of Brabant values. Division is acceptable for Siger, and is practiced by the Clerk in his tale.

The Clerk’s scientific approach to life informs the aesthetics of his narrative. His tale is composed of the levels of reading and he directs the attention to that level of reading most akin to the ultimate Truth, allegory. His tale is not about composition and unity, but is symptomatic of the prevailing scientific and theological notions of the period, such as the writings of Aquinas and Augustine. Looking too allegorically at life may pose some problems. The problems of reading in a strictly symbolic manner positions the Clerk on the other extreme with Siger of Brabant, who refused to see life literally. Siger had no difficulty in separating church and science, at the expense of science. The Clerk could not divide the two as easily, especially since Chaucer’s character is of the belief that the “truth that the human reason is naturally endowed to know cannot be opposed to the truth of the Christian Faith.”²⁸ Church doctrine and science are not mutually exclusive, but quite the opposite. Allegory and the theology most associated with Aquinas sought what Siger was quick to dismiss, a religion that was

scientifically inclusive and progressive. The Clerk, an avid reader of Aristotle, has inadvertently used allegory in a manner that is in agreement with Siger and not with Aristotle and Aquinas. Robert Grant and David Tracy write of the levels of reading, “Many Franciscans considered all four senses of scripture to be of equal importance. Such Dominicans as Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, however, insisted that the literal meaning should be the basis of the other three.”²⁹ In neither of these schools does the Clerk seem to fit perfectly, but he is leaning towards the Franciscans.

Enter the Clerk

Allegory was a technique used to interpret religious and secular texts, and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* includes highly religious tales as well as tales that seem purely secular. The *Knight’s Tale* is one of his longer secular works that is set within a non-Christian landscape, but the morals and virtues upheld within the tale find a comfortable Christian understanding based on the allegorical interpretation. The pilgrimage frame of the *Tales* lends itself to further allegorical renderings based on the connection between the pilgrim and his/her tale. Chaucer creates a context for his tales so energized with vitality that C. David Benson makes the statement that “No other medieval story-collection has a frame that is so lively and dynamic.”³⁰ In the *General Prologue*, there is a parade of the characters, which sets up their allegorical analogue through descriptive symbolism. They are also imbued with a life all their own, which is the basis of Kittredge’s idea that Benson paraphrases, “the Canterbury pilgrims have complex, believable personalities that intimately inform their individual tales.”³¹ This

helps the reader to expect the nature of the character's tale, which can be estimated from the descriptions in the *General Prologue*, as well as each individual tale's prologue.

Chaucer began his pilgrimage with characters and then moved onto the tales. I will examine the character of the Clerk and the binaries found within his description and then show how the Clerk's description creates expectations for his tale.

Of the thirty-one pilgrims, the Clerk seems best to embody the aesthetic of logic over the senses. We can begin to see the Clerk's domination of reason over the body from his description in the *General Prologue*. I have quoted the description in full because each descriptive detail lends itself to defining the Clerk as a character and also as an allegorical representation.

A Clerk ther was of Oxenford also
 That unto logic hadde longe y-go.
 As leene was his hors as is a rake,
 And he nas nat right fat, I undertake,
 But loked holwe, and thereto soberly.
 Ful thredbar was his overest courtepy,
 For he hadde geten him yet no benefyce,
 Ne was so worldly for to have offyce;
 For him was levere have at his beddes heed
 Twenty bokes, clad in blak or reed,
 Of Aristotle and his philosophye,
 Than robes riche, or fithele, or gay sautrye.
 But al be that he was a philosopher,
 Yet hadde he but litel gold in cofre;
 But al that he mighte of his freendes hente,
 On bokes and on lerninge he it spente,
 And bisily gan for the soules preye
 Of hem that yaf him wherewith to scoleye.
 Of studie took he most cure and most hede,
 Noght o word spak he more than was nede,
 And that was seyde in forme and reverence,
 And short and quik, and ful of hy sentence.
 Souninge in moral vertu was his speche,
 And gladly wolde he lerne, and gladly teche.

-*General Prologue* I.285-308

The Clerk appears to be malnourished, and his horse is equally “leene.” He is a scholar with his greatest love being for books; he is sparse with language and he would gladly teach as well as learn. The Clerk’s characteristics are common enough traits; their very mundane aspect lends a sense of realism to the character of the Clerk. In a reading more in tune with the educated medieval readers, Robertson warns the modern reader to avoid this kind of reading, arguing that Chaucer was not seeking to create realistically or psychologically viable representations and that the “implications are not psychological but moral.”³² In Robertson’s reading then, the Clerk is only realistic *accidentally*; his *quiddity*, or *essence*, lies in his function as an exemplum. The critical concern over Robertson’s assertion is that his energy was focused on allegory. Robertson replaced the psychological realism a modern reader readily finds in the Chaucerian characters with allegory-based morals. Though Robertson’s views are somewhat outdated, and were even resisted in his own day, his understanding of medieval allegory is useful for our present discourse on the Clerk and his tale. The point for Robertson is not that the image came first, but that the symbol came first with the image as a function of the symbol. This works well with bestiaries, where the idea is to show various creatures or characters based upon the academically accepted metaphor. Chaucer had the frame of a pilgrimage and used a wide slice of his society to represent the various thoughts and philosophies of his day.

The Clerk, it would seem, represents reason or logic with an absence of the sensual appetites. This creates a huge philosophical dilemma. Under Aristotelian science the senses are the foundation of knowledge. For the medieval culture there were two

distinctions of man, Spirit and Flesh.³³ The medieval exegetes would often use the story of Adam and Eve as reason succumbing to flesh.³⁴ Adam was the analogue of reason/spirit, while Eve was the flesh. As the story goes, Adam was tempted by Eve and ate of the fruit and then they were both exiled from the Garden, and distanced from God. In the creation story, reason succumbed to the flesh and this was the beginning of sin, which in turn distanced the soul from God. The Clerk represents an idealized version of reason, a reason that is not tempted by the flesh; but at the same time he also seems more than just an idealization. His fascination with the spirit is a likely contrast to the Wife of Bath's description or representation of flesh, which follows about 150 lines later. The Clerk's outer appearance is one of malnutrition, and Chaucer seems determined to make this point known when he uses such words and phrases as "nat right fat" and "loked holwe." The Clerk is lacking the vitality of the other characters, and seems to be a foil for the Wife of Bath, who is full-bodied. Extrapolating from Kittredge's theory of the "Marriage Group," their stories serve as foils, much like their descriptions do in the *Prologue*. With the story of Adam and Eve in mind, it appears the Clerk is winning the battle over the flesh. His fleshly appetites can be summed up in the phrase, "loked holwe." "Holwe" has the connotation of an empty vessel, devoid of matter. The vacuous nature of the Clerk's body is the symbolic representation of the fleshly appetites, which in this instance are thoroughly subdued, or possibly non-existent.

The Clerk does not seem to care for earthly rewards, either. His dress is "ful thredbar" (I.290), and he would rather have books of logic than "robes riche, or fithele, or gay sautrye" (I.296). The Clerk's learning is not motivated by cupidity but by "logic" or reason. His satisfaction comes from "Aristotle and his philosophye" (I.295), which is a

discourse in the logical and rational of this world. The Clerk, for the most part, conforms to the theories developed by Lois Roney. In his reading and life he is like Arcite, always looking at the external world for answers. But when telling his tale he becomes more like Palamon, seeing the underlying message—the meaning behind the signifier. But from his description, the reader is expecting a person who has denied flesh's nutrition in favor of buying more books, for in "studie took he most cure" (I.303).

The dual system of active and contemplative seem more relevant to the Clerk than the philosophical binaries that Roney used to interpret the *Knight's Tale*. From the description given by Chaucer, the Clerk exemplifies the contemplative life, which is that passive existence of using knowledge and synthesizing it into understanding of truth. The contemplative life, as Aquinas says, "is concerned with the incorruptible and immobile."³⁵ The incorruptible means that the Clerk is striving for that truth that is everlasting, that life that will be "perfected in the heavenly fatherland,"³⁶ which is the ultimate good. Perfection is the realization of truth, and this can only be obtained through death. The obsession of the Clerk with learning is an admirable trait, in that he is daily striving for Truth, which is that inward observation. In his studies he is working for his future existence, but at the expense of the active life, which is ordered to the present life. Aquinas also mentions that "truth does not depend on our knowledge, but on the existence of things."³⁷ Therefore it is through the active life that we can have the contemplative, for our hands must supply the sustenance to maintain the mind and the body, and exterior objects supply us with the knowledge requisite for contemplation. By turning inward, the Clerk is synthesizing existing knowledge without using active experience to validate and increase upon the world's knowledge. Aquinas mentions that

we are a mixture of both types of life and “as in any mixture, one of the components predominates.”³⁸

The Clerk is an excess of the logical. The character of the Clerk represents intellectual stagnation, where he contemplates only that which has been written, and any conclusions he has will be a synthesis of existing knowledge. He cannot supply the world with any novel thought without first addressing the active portion of life, namely natural experience. In the final line of the description it says that, “gladly wolde he lerne, and gladly teche” (I.308). Learning and teaching are aspects of the active life, but teaching is an act of passing on knowledge already known to the teacher.³⁹ There are two ways one can acquire knowledge: through natural discovery via the senses and by being taught by another who already has the knowledge.⁴⁰ The learning of the Clerk seems only to be the learning from other clerks, and not from his natural reason. He even admits that his story was taught to him by “Fraunceys Petrark” (IV.31). Very little of the Clerk seems to show him engaging the exterior world. Even the narrator says of him, he looks “soberly,” and we can only assume this is a constant look and frame of mind for him. The inward devotion of his mind creates a metaphorical parallel to his views on art; that the inward, or allegorical, is more important than the external, or literal.

It can be further inferred that the Clerk is excessively contemplative through his speech. The narrator says of the Clerk that “Noght o word spak he more than was nede/...And that was seyde/...ful of hy sentence” (I.304-6). His sparse amount of language can be attributed to his excessive relationship with reason, and possibly from a simple humility. St. James says of this, “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.”⁴¹ For the Clerk, his few words serve as a function of

communicating thoughts and not as a way to amuse himself or his audience. By keeping his words to a minimum and restraining any urges for rhetorical flourishes, he shows his distaste for idle pleasures or idle words. Everything he does must be for Truth, and must have reasonable significance. That which serves the purpose of the active or fleshly life has no place in his life. All that he says falls in “hy sentence,” and this includes his tale. The Clerk, as will be shown, uses his tale as an exemplum of his beliefs. This means that, for the Clerk, the tale does not represent anything exterior and has no solas, therefore it should not be taken literally. There is one difficulty in his approach, and that is from the only book in the Bible he directly mentions, the Epistle of St. James. He paraphrases the biblical text in his speech just before his “Envoy.” His brief words touch many of the themes in the Epistle: “For greet skile is he preve that he wroghte,. But he ne tempteth no man that he boghte—/ As seith Seint Jame” (IV.1152-4). The use of this reference immediately introduces works and deeds, one of the more prominent teachings in the Epistle, and one that contrasts with the Clerk’s contemplative life. The reference to James also unites the morals of his tale to sacred texts. James writes rather despairingly of the contemplative approach, “Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.”⁴² The Clerk’s emphasis on the contemplative lacks deeds, and he tends to push towards a spiritually dangerous extreme. He desires to read life, like his art, allegorically, but this can focus on the meaning of the signs, without making any signs of his own. Aquinas says that, “Faith is our guide in the present life,”⁴³ and no doubt the Clerk is knowledgeable about the faith. As Chaucer describes and presents the Clerk, he appears to know how to lead a good life, but we do not actually see him living an actively good life.

The Clerk's Tale: Critics, Allegories, and Difficulties

The Clerk is one of the characters that can be easily forgotten while reading through the *Tales*. Chaucer briefly describes him in the *General Prologue*, but he is quickly overshadowed by the more colorful characters on the pilgrimage. He never speaks unless spoken to, and the Host is observant enough to point this out: "This day ne herde I of your tonge a word" (IV.4). Immediately after saying this, the Host invites the Clerk into the forefront of the frame and asks of him "som mery tale" (IV.9). This aesthetic prescription becomes important in that the tale told is only merry allegorically, while literally it is pathetic, in the sense that it is full of pathos. The tale that follows is one that will complicate the description that Chaucer gave in the *Prologue* by making it difficult to understand where the Clerk's philosophical beliefs lie.

The Clerk tells a tale concerning Walter, a marquis, and his wife Griselda. The story had previously been told by Petrarch, who is Chaucer's acknowledged source. It had also previously appeared as the last tale in Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*. The Clerk's telling is very similar to Petrarch's version, but in all versions the plot is the same. In the land of Saluzzo there was a Marquis who was unmarried, and was quite happy with this arrangement. Eventually the people of his realm became concerned that he had no heir and urged him to marry, so he made them agree to let him marry any woman of his choosing. He married the beautiful Griselda, the daughter of a man who

was the poorest of the poor (IV.205). He also made a pact with her that she must consent to all his “lust” (IV.352) and never grumble, whatever he decides to do; she must always be in accord with his will, and she gave assent to this marriage contract.

They married and eventually had a daughter. Walter pretended to have their daughter killed as an attempt to test Griselda’s “sadness for to know” (IV.452). He had his sergeant take the newborn from the mother’s arm and pretended to take the child away to be executed. But he really sent his daughter to be raised in Bologna. Griselda said nothing, but stoically accepted the decree of her husband. Sometime later she had a son. Walter, apparently not satisfied with his earlier test, had his sergeant take this child as well. Once again Griselda offered no resistance, but only asked that the child be buried properly. Several years passed and the two children matured into young adults in Bologna and Walter decided to bring them back. First, however he said that he could no longer stay married to Griselda on account of her lineage but must take a noble wife. He told Griselda that his bride was coming from Bologna, so Walter brought back his children and feigned a marital engagement with his daughter. Griselda assented to his decision to remarry and went back to her father to help him with his work, only taking her original garments she wore before she was married. Walter invited her back to his castle to help with the marriage arrangements and during the process asked her whether or not she liked his new wife. After she answered without grumble, he revealed to her the truth of the two children, and that his bride was really their daughter. There were tears all around and here the story ends. Griselda at no point showed anger at Walter for putting her through his tests.

The tale of Griselda presents a problem of ethics. In the ongoing debate over the tale, critics seem divided as to how to understand the characters of Griselda and Walter. One critic looked at Walter's ability as a ruler and said, "Walter's tyranny ultimately serves as a negative exemplum for rulers."⁴⁴ Robert Emmett Finnegan titled one of his essays, "She Should Have Said No to Walter."⁴⁵ Finnegan later accuses Griselda of being "an accomplice to homicide."⁴⁶ The theme of ethics has caused several critics to feel the need to serve as apologists for the tale. J. Allan Mitchell attempts to justify the tale to those who feel it is cruel and ethically monstrous, which on one level it is. He surveys all of the critics that wrote negatively of the literal aspect of the *Clerk's Tale*. Mitchell attempts to come to an understanding of the basis of such criticism, writing, "The question could be put in terms of whether to take the letter or the spirit of the tale, but in any event it is difficult to tell whether Chaucer hasn't finally impeached the Clerk's morality."⁴⁷ Based upon the literal aspect of the story it is also easy to view both Griselda and Walter as neglectful and cruel, while it is within reason to praise the steadfast spirit of Griselda. There is a division in criticism, and yet the tale supports these contrary arguments.

None of these reactions are wrong; the *Tale* is clearly pathetic and very moral. From what is inferred about the character of the Clerk, the tale is not to be read literally, but allegorically. The *Clerk's Tale* can be explained in the context of the medieval culture through St. Augustine's teaching in his famous work, *On Christian Doctrine*: "Whatever appears in the divine Word that does not literally pertain to virtuous behavior or to the truth of faith you must take to be figurative."⁴⁸ The underlying message from Augustine is that when something seems to promote sin or cupidity, then beneath the

surface lies virtue. Augustine is advising readers always to search for charity beyond the occasional cupidity of the literal. Though Augustine was writing with Scripture in mind, his poetics works by extension on secular works. The interpretive model Augustine applied to Holy Scripture was used in similar fashion on secular texts by medieval exegetes. The detractors of the *Tale* focus on the cupidity, while those that read figuratively enjoy the charity.

On a literal level the *Tale* is unsatisfying: Walter is a tyrant and Griselda is too patient with the afflictions caused by her husband. There is little in the letter of the tale that can't be labeled as troublesome or unreasonable. The literal level leaves much to be desired, whereas the allegorical level has an abundance of meaning and morals. What the basic sentence of the tale offers is a doctrine of faith and charity in relation to God. Walter, as the one authority figure in the tale, easily takes the place of God. No one openly opposed his decisions, even though the execution of his will was a literal abuse of power. No one rejected him, but the people of the country questioned his motives and rules by grumbling. It is through the intercession of his advisors that he took Griselda as his wife. It is through the engagement process that Walter makes the two covenants, one with the people and the other with Griselda.

The medieval scholar Lynn Staley Johnson suggests the two contracts Walter makes are an allegorical representation of the Old Testament and the New Testament Laws.⁴⁹ The people are fickle and easily swayed by a little adversity. When they see their ruler as a bachelor and without an heir, they begin to grumble for him to marry. After some convincing, Walter agrees to their desire but asks them to agree to his terms, which are as follows:

Lat me alone in chesinge of my wyf—
 That charge upon my bak I wol endure;
 But I yow preye, and charge upon youre lyf,
 That what wyf that I take, ye me assure
 To worshipe hire whyl that hir lyf may dure,
 In word and werk, bothe here and everywhere,
 As she an empoures doghter were.

And furthermore this shal ye swere, that ye
 Agayn my choys shul meither gruche ne stryve;
 For sith I shal forgoon my libertee
 At your requeste, as ever moot I thryve,
 Ther as myn herte is set, ther wol I wyve.
 And but ye wole assente in swich manere,
 I prey yow, speketh namore of this matere.

--IV.162-175

This covenant between the ruler and his people is a reasonable proposal. They get the one thing they desired, an heir for their ruler, and Walter obeys his people on his own terms. The demands are simple; he chooses his own wife and they must accept his decision without “gruche ne stryve.” This is the old letter of the law: “obey the precepts and you shall have what it is you desire.” When the children of Isreal grumbled in the desert, God gave them manna; when the people of Saluzzo cried for an heir, Walter gave them two children.

The people agreed to his demands and he chose for himself the daughter of the poorest man in the country (IV.205), but one of the “faireste under sonne” (IV.212). The covenant with the people looks forward to the new law, but only when the new law is written. This is the same spirit in which St. Augustine viewed the Old Testament as a promise fulfilled through the New Testament. The teachings of Jesus lifted the veil of mystery from the Old Testament. The old became known through the new. In the new

law there is still authority on the part of Walter, but is more intimate than the original contract with his people. The difference between the authority of a ruler and the authority of the husband formulates the difference between the two contracts.

I seye this, be ye redy with good herte
 To al my lust, and that I freely may,
 As me best thinketh, do yow laughe or smerte,
 And never ye to grucche it, night ne day?
 And eek whan I sey 'ye,' ne say nat 'nay,'
 Neither by word ne frowning contenance?
 Swere this, and here I swere our alliance.

--IV.351-7

Johnson's allegorical interpretation of the contracts is persuasive, but an allegorical reading of Walter's actions following these contracts shows how they become problematic. At this point she cannot possibly know the trials to which she will be subjected, and she assents to his demands. Walter will test the "sadnesse" (IV.452) of Griselda by taking away her children, and give only specious reasons for his acts. The trials that she suffers virtuously are a model for the reader. Her marriage is in a sense a marriage to Christ, and like a good Christian she takes her vows seriously. When her children are taken from her, rather than curse God/Walter, she asks that they be buried with dignity. She does not mourn excessively for a loss that was beyond her control. She represents the virtuous model of relating to God, and she is able to do this because of the covenant she made. Her life is an allegory for two different relations to God. Before marriage she was in poverty, and the clothes she wore were tattered rags representing her remove from the magnificence of God. When she marries, "nothing of hir olde gere/ She sholde bringe into his hous" (IV.373-4). She becomes baptized in luxury and her innate

beauty was “increased in swich excellence” (IV.408). When she becomes a Christian, she takes on the role of virtue and stoic steadfastness. The contract she makes is with Walter, and symbolically it is the contract made with God. Her marriage is an allegory of the life of a Christian, through good times as well as bad.

The conclusion of the tale is the return of her two children, which is one of the most pathetic moments in the *Canterbury Tales*. Like Job, her losses are returned to her and all is made right. When she is reunited with her children she weeps. “Her story,” states Robert Worth Frank, “dramatized for [the audience] the teaching that God tests his people.”⁵⁰ To help pass the various tests she must embody the virtues of humility, obedience, and patience with a great abundance.⁵¹ Frank’s analysis stops short of Griselda successfully passing her trials and when she is reunited with her once lost children. The reunion is somewhat difficult to define clearly. Symbolically the reunion is unity found in Heaven, so that after she is reconciled to God she crosses into the afterlife and finds her family. She was tested and passed. The other interpretation is that she is an analogue of Job, who after passing his earthly trials is rewarded with all that he lost. However the ending is read, the tale as a whole delivers a powerful message symbolically, and an unreasonable plot literally. The morals are not those to be garnished from the letter, but the sense.

The problems with the literal level of the tale are easily documented by surveying the critics of the tale, but the allegorical level also poses some difficulties. The major allegorical difficulties concern Walter as a figure for God. Griselda, like Job, suffered the tests allowed by God, and in both accounts the protagonist is a “blameless and upright [person].”⁵² Griselda and Job both suffer at the hands of a greater power and still

maintain their “sadness” (IV.452). Beyond these obvious similarities, the allegorical model of the tale begins to break down slightly. It is very easy to view Walter as God, and as God he tests Griselda. It is not God who tests Job, though --it is Satan. God allows the tests to happen, but Satan is the intermediary and antagonist. If we were to maintain the Job comparison, we would find that Walter occupies the same place in the story as Satan. I would be far from the mark to compare Walter to Satan, for their motivations are different in one fundamental way. Satan said to God: “But now, stretch out Your hand and touch all that he has, and he will surely curse You to Your face.”⁵³ Satan’s remark, or thesis, reveals a very pessimistic view of man, that when temporal life degrades to a point, then man will turn on God. Satan is hoping to turn Job against God, whereas Walter is hoping for Griselda to be steadfast in her suffering. What Chaucer’s tale lacks is the Biblical intermediary, which was Satan. The impetus for Walter is his own insecurity, and this may owe to his fallibility as a mortal. God was completely secure in the knowledge of Job’s faith. And Satan was sure that Job would turn on God at the first hint of trouble.

The comparison to Job is a fair comparison, but this leaves the character of Walter in a precarious position allegorically. He assumes the role of God within the allegory of Chaucer’s tale, but this representation is brought into question by a myriad of obstacles. The obstacles highlight the somewhat inhumane trials that Walter puts Griselda through. The moral ground that Walter occupies is an ambiguous place. He is testing the quality of his wife, which shows a complete disregard for the emotions of another human being. Walter’s association with Satan complicates the allegorical reading, and reaffirms the views of the critics that call Walter monstrous. The confusion of good and evil actions is

something never entirely satisfied in the tale. Walter is free to perform morally ambiguous tests on his innocent wife, and because he is the Marquis, there are no laws to halt him. This tale leaves the reader frustrated on the literal level, and somewhat confused on the deeper allegorical sense of the tale.

The people of Saluzzo reacted to the literal actions of Walter much like the readers of the tale have, but it is important to note that the reader has more information than the people. The narrator describes the people's reaction to Walter: "The sclaudre of Walter ofte and wyde spradde/ That of a cruel herte he wickedly,/ For he a povre womman wedded hadde,/ Hath mordred bothe his children prively" (IV.722-5). When the news of Walter's actions reached the populace, they slandered him and talked of his wicked heart. They have a clear disapproval of his actions. And it is significant to define the limitations of their slander. They only have the information that Griselda has; they do not know that the children are alive and being raised in Bologna. Their lack of knowledge leads them to misunderstand Walter. He does not have a wicked heart; his purpose is unknown to both Griselda and the populace. The allegorical understanding of this misunderstanding can be summed up with a common maxim: The Lord works in mysterious ways. This saying can only work for the inhabitants of the tale and not the reader, who is given the full details of Walter's motives and how he carried out his actions. The difference begins to represent the moral lesson for the outsider. The actions of Walter make sense to the reader because the details are given, but they cannot make sense to Griselda or the Saluzzans because all they have are rumors of murder without explanation. What the reader witnesses is fundamentally different than what the populace witnesses. The reader watches a virtuous woman tested, while the people see

murder and wickedness. The moral becomes clear for the reader because of the differences in viewpoints. As observers of the Marquis and his actions, we are able to make the connection to God and then to Job. In the Epistle of St. James, the only direct Biblical reference by the Clerk, there is a passage that can be used to sum up the moral of the story: “We consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job’s perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.”⁵⁴ The moral for Griselda or Job, is not in the tests, or who is giving the tests, but in their personal perseverance. This is something that the people of the realm do not fully understand.

Throughout the tale, the descriptions of the people show a fickle race easily swayed and opinionated. Throughout much of the tale they approve and love Griselda, and frequently feel pity for her suffering at the hands of Walter. But when he reveals his new bride, the people say, “That Walter was no fool thogh that him leste/ To chaunge his wyf, for it was for the beste” (IV.986-7). The once venerated figure of Griselda was overlooked when another of younger age and greater lineage came to replace her. They are a mob “unsad and evere untrewre” (IV.995). Part of the reason for the changing people was because they were “Delytinge evere in rumble that is newe” (IV.997). Their source of information is dubious being based on rumor that, as Virgil famously describes it, “holds fast to falsehood and distortion/ as often as to messages of truth.”⁵⁵ This reinforces the idea that the people were misinformed, which led to their inability to understand the Marquis. Rumor is a dissembler of information, a mixture of truth with error, and to rely upon it as fact can lead one astray and make a good people fickle in their public opinions.

The incomplete knowledge of the people is very similar to the approximations of God made by theologians, of which any clerk would have had some knowledge. The people have only their senses to rely upon, and by observing the world around them they reach certain conclusions. What sets Griselda apart from the rest of the people is her faith in Walter. At no point does she turn on him or curse what he has done. Her steadfastness is one of the main morals of the tale. This is all the more amazing and virtuous because she is working with the same knowledge as the people. Her faith is what makes her trials bearable, and her ability to rise above the sensual world and accept her fate is what really sets her apart from the citizens. The people, like the three friends of Job, embody the part of man that grumbles and curses God's will when things go bad. The people must then represent some negative aspect of faithlessness that can only see what is in front of their eyes. Without faith it is easy to identify a less charitable attitude to Griselda and their Marquis; the former by their easy acceptance of Griselda's replacement and the latter in their spreading of vicious rumors.

Walter is no God; he is subject to God, and yet the tale creates of him as an allegorical representation of God. By seeing Walter as God, this also lends unheard of powers to him, and places him above the earthly laws, which he of course is not. He is fallible as man, and prone to jealousies and mistakes, and therefore subject to nature. It would be blasphemous to allow the powers of God to be given to a man. Walter is not without fault, and to be given complete freedom is dangerous. With these powers, he made his wife suffer for his own doubts and insecurity. For Walter, the trials, were to prove his wife's virtue. The test would have been superfluous had he the foreknowledge of God. Part of the reason that the allegorical connection between Walter and God breaks

down is because Walter is imperfect. If Walter were given the freedom to pass judgement on others and do as he pleased, his faults and failings would inevitably cause harm to others. He cannot know for certain the outcomes, and forever would act on his own limited knowledge.

The allegorical character of Walter is the most ambiguous and difficult problem of the story in both Chaucer's and Petrarch's versions. With only a casual survey of the character, Walter can be seen as embodying the allegorical roles of Satan and God, and also literally acting as a matrimonial tyrant and a jealous man. These four representations are too varied and opposed to find an adequate explanation within the context of the story, which is why the answer to the troublesome nature of the tale must be found outside of the tale in the frame story. Within the belief system of the Clerk, which relies upon the Catholic medieval faith, lies the key to explaining Walter and his actions. The reaction to the tale would be entirely different if the Knight were telling it, or even the Wife of Bath. And then again, the tale would be dramatically different if someone else were to tell it. But the Clerk is a very rationally orientated character, and the interpretation depends just as much on the story as on the frame. The matching of tale with characters is no random accident, but a precise calculation and thesis being presented by Chaucer. This, in essence, is the argument by Roney as she describes the function and importance of Aristotelian and Platonic philosophy within the *Knight's Tale*. The Clerk is a small piece to the overall argument that Roney sees as taking place in the *Canterbury Tales*.

The tale is one of the more polarizing tales in the collection, and not without good reason. A quick glance at modern literary critics is enough to show the divisiveness of

the tale. As discussed above, many of the critics found ethical faults with the literal, and several of the critics that did appreciate the tale felt they needed to justify their positive attitude. Even the Host thought the tale a marvelous one that he wished his wife could hear. These are all perfectly viable arguments, and this is precisely the tale's peculiarity. This partly owes to the allegorical nature of the tale, which invites several levels of meaning. But this is also because of the intent of the Clerk. The Clerk did not tell his tale with the purpose of entertainment in mind, but to inspire a contemplative reaction from his audience.

The Clerk has nourished for himself a very contemplative life, and the use of fiction has different meanings for him than his fellow pilgrims. The tale presents a straightforward allegory of patience and faith in God, and for him this is the satisfying morsel of the piece. The complications in the literal sense of the story pose an obstacle for the casual and pleasure-seeking reader. An inability to go deeper than the literal will make this story an uncomfortable experience, and can create misunderstandings between the audience and the speaker. The Host famously quips that the tale would be nice for his wife to know. The implication is that his wife is argumentative and lacking in the patience that Griselda exemplifies.

The divisiveness of the reactions is also reflected in the Clerk, who cannot even settle on the correct interpretation of his tale, as I shall discuss in more detail below. The Clerk's explicit moral is that "every wight.../ Sholde be constant in adversitee" (IV.1145-6). This is a moral from the literal aspect of the tale. The Clerk's comment does not seem to include the allegorical nature, and severely limits the audience's potential of delving deeper. A couple of lines later he comments that since Griselda was married

“Unto a mortal man, wel more us oghte/ Receyven al in gree that God us sent” (IV.1150-1). The connection to God is explained through connection to the moral and not the allegorical sense of the tale.

We can see the complications of the literal part of the tale, but the allegorical is not without its obstacles. If, as I argue, the Clerk places a high value on the allegorical sense, then the allegorical should be the most refined and attractive piece of literature for him. But when dealing with such a mysterious subject like God, the allegory is not going to work properly. The Clerk tries to make it work, and the more he tries the more difficult the literal sense of the tale is to digest. To make Walter fit the model of God, he makes him into a sort of matrimonial monster. The allegorical comes at a cost to the literal. Even with the compromises between the senses, the allegorical still has faults, and this I believe is because the Clerk’s emphasis on meaning and rationality is flawed. To offer moral and theological lessons within art, while neglecting the artistic part, is a flawed plan to begin with. One of the underlying themes of the *Canterbury Tales* is the construction and synthesis of the Platonic and Aristotelian ideas. If the Clerk was correct in his assertion of pure rationality, then Chaucer’s arguments would be impaired. The Clerk’s purpose must be impeded, which it is. The premise of a mortal as a metaphorical representation of God cannot be a perfect allegory. The Clerk’s focus is naturally misguided. This in turn may influence the pilgrims to interpret the tale other than what the Clerk meant it to mean.

The Medieval *Translator* and Sources of the *Clerk's Tale*

The Clerk's Tale is itself an interpretation of earlier versions of the Griselda story. Through a comparison of the versions we can determine the allegorical alterations Chaucer has made to the story, and where he has remained constant with other versions. The liberal use of sources is an example of how the medieval notion of artistic ownership differs from our own. During the Middle Ages, the approach to literature and the notion of artistic ownership was slightly different from our own. There were no artistic rights to ownership. The concept of translating and reshaping existing literature was the general practice during the time. The medieval writer's idea of translation transcended the simple notion of changing the words from Latin to the vulgar, but also pertained to ideas as well. Medieval writers would frequently appropriate other writer's fictions and use them for their own purpose, sometimes reshaping the story until it was clearly distinguishable from the original and sometimes remaining true to the text and only making subtle changes. John Gower rewrote several Ovidian tales in his *Confessio* changing the material to suit his Christian allegory. Some of Gower's tales also appeared in the works of contemporary writers like Chaucer. The Clerk remains fairly consistent with his main source of Petrarch, but there is evidence that the *Clerk's Tale* was borrowed in some minor part from Boccaccio's version. Like other medieval writers, Chaucer translated the language of the tale along with his own idea of what message the tale should contain. Chaucer's translation of the version by Petrarch is not nearly as drastic a translation as was Petrarch's of Boccaccio's version.

The narrative structure of the *Clerk's Tale* was not created by Chaucer, but borrowed from other clerks. Chaucer borrowed the existing narrative models and reshaped the tale into his own, telling it in the voice particular to his Clerk character, and embedding within the story the beliefs of the Clerk. Almost all of the narratives in the *Canterbury Tales* can be found in earlier sources. The *Clerk's Tale*, as the Clerk admits, was mainly borrowed from Petrarch's version. There is very little that is different between Chaucer and Petrarch's handling of the narrative. Petrarch, the Italian clerk, got his version from the final tale of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. As the final tale, Boccaccio had Dioneo to tell the story. Up until this point in the frame story, Dioneo consistently told bawdy tales and fabliaux. For Boccaccio, the tale becomes a call for patience and for more seriousness in a life troubled with plagues and disasters. Many of the earlier tales tended to entertain as a means to pass the time during the plague. C.S. Lewis, an influential critic whose relatively dated writings are still important to medieval studies, commented on the style as compared to Chaucer, "Boccaccio's standard of relevance is purely artistic: Chaucer's, so far as he has one, is historical or legendary. In style, Chaucer obeys the precepts of medieval rhetoric, as interpreted and modified by his own genius."⁵⁶ The different style of Chaucer is easily detected by looking at his version of the tale, and then by looking at Boccaccio's. Chaucer's allegory is more developed and consistent.

There are some arguments that Chaucer was aware of Boccaccio's version, and may have borrowed from his telling. John Finlayson answers those critics who claim Chaucer never used, or even knew, of Boccaccio's version or the French translation of the tale, arguing that "Chaucer's originality...would seem to consist of selecting an

element of Boccaccio's treatment, omitted in Petrarch and the French translator."⁵⁷

Finlayson goes on to enumerate several passages that appear to have their origin in Boccaccio and not Petrarch. The bulk of the story is from Petrarch, though, as he is nearest to Chaucer in literary style and composition. C.S. Lewis places Boccaccio's style in the Renaissance because of his freer approach to art. This is interesting because we can see how Petrarch and then Chaucer translate the story in their own medieval approaches. We can see the two poets developing the allegory as the core of their tales, and their literal level lacks some of the more realistic elements that Boccaccio includes. Several times Boccaccio sacrifices the consistency of his allegory in order to ground his tale in a more realistic realm. Finlayson comments upon the genius of Chaucer in translating: "[He] is not just translating sentence by sentence, but creatively enlarges and alters his principle source."⁵⁸ Chaucer borrowed what was necessary to arrive at his own themes and purposes. And as in Boccaccio's version, the storyteller influences the reader's reaction to the tale.

The worthy Italian clerk, Petrarch, translated Boccaccio's tale into a solid moral allegory. There are a few key changes and omissions that reveal the purpose of Petrarch's retelling. First, Boccaccio has Dioneo become very critical of Gualtieri (Walter) and his actions: "I want to tell you of a marquis, whose actions...were remarkable...for their senseless brutality."⁵⁹ Chaucer and Petrarch, by contrast, are careful not to condemn Walter overly much for his actions. In one of the few times the Clerk inserts his voice into the tale, he questions the lengths to which Walter goes to test Griselda: "Now of wommen wold I axen fayn,/ If thise assayes mighte nat suffyse" (IV.696-7). He does not make a judgement condemning the actions of Walter, but only

questions how far Walter goes. This may be because allegorically Walter is God, and the Clerk limited his remarks on Walter as an act of humility and caution when dealing with a symbol pertaining in some respect to the divine mystery. Another critical omission in Petrarch's version is the lack of verbal abuse; this is something that Chaucer leaves out of his version as well. A couple of times Gualtieri "lashed [Griselda] with his tongue."⁶⁰ Allegorically this is difficult to align with God, who is incapable of abuse and slander. Other portions the two translators left out include Gualtieri's several lies and deceits with which he uses to abuse Griselda directly. Chaucer and Petrarch allow Walter/Gualtieri to deceive Griselda primarily as to the reason her children are being taken from her. Boccaccio's tale is more problematic allegorically than his renowned translators. Petrarch's telling of the tale removed many of the rough edges of Boccaccio's allegory, while maintaining Boccaccio's original allegorical message. Petrarch's changes had the added benefit of softening the original literal harshness of the tale. Chaucer's version is fairly consistent with Petrarch's version, with one notable omission. Before the tale begins, the Clerk speaks of the proem Petrarch uses before his version of the tale: "as to my judgement,/ Me thinketh it a thing impertinent" (IV.53-4). The Clerk directly says he is leaving out a description that he deems irrelevant. This is a clue as to the nature of the tale that follows, in that what is kept is somehow relevant. It also shows a heightened interest in the consistency of the allegory. By leaving out unimportant proems and rhetorical flourishes, this allows the teller to remain committed to conveying a message. Choosing Petrarch's version as the primary source allows Chaucer to highlight the allegorical message, while at the same time complicating the allegory.

The Wife of Bath's Debate on Marriage

The choice of the Clerk to retell Petrarch's tale is a choice that was influenced by the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, which was told earlier in the *Canterbury Tales*. The Clerk and the Wife are foils for one another. She is described as "somedel deef" (I.446), seductive and lusty (I.468-76), and full bodied (I.470-2). This is in contrast with the description of the Clerk in the *General Prologue*, who listens to auctours, limits his own desires, and is gaunt. Their character descriptions represent contrasts consistent with the contrasts seen in their tales. The Wife tells her tale after a long preamble of a prologue, which is actually longer than her tale. She describes her five marriages, an instance of violence against a book, and her outspoken attitude to the hierarchy. There are also several instances of her doing violence to Biblical interpretations; this, among her other social transgressions, would have caught the attention of a character like the Clerk, who takes his turn as an opportunity to debate the finer points of her character, her prologue, and then her tale. He does this in a twofold manner, in his tale and in his "Envoy," which brings to the foreground his argument while undermining his tale. The literal aspect in his tale addresses the Wife's tale by tackling the issue of matriarchy versus patriarchy; and his "Envoy" seems to vindicate her beliefs. But before we can reach that point, it is necessary to see the Wife and what is in the Wife's story that can influence a soft-spoken Clerk to engage actively another person in honest debate.

The Wife begins her *Prologue* with this couplet, "Experience, though noon auctoritee/ Were in this world" (III.1-2). Her background is in experience and not the authority of auctours and clerks. Her *Prologue* serves as an exploratory argument for

experience over an authority for which she feels suspicion. In his detailed study of the Wife of Bath's *Prologue*, Robert Longworth summed up her beliefs: "Authority, for all its power, is susceptible to treachery."⁶¹ She finds this treachery within St. Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum*, which she cites several times, and spins Jerome's words to suit her own pleasures. Her use of Jerome is similar to Jerome's use of Pauline writings.⁶² She uses auctours to discredit their authority as treacherous, and in the process she makes her own experiential arguments about marriage and marital control. Her experiential understanding is based on a literal rendering of the text. Her understanding of literature and authority is described by Longworth, in his study of the Wife's *Prologue*: "Figuralizing the letter of the text and distorting the context of the letter are powerful implements of Authority; but Experience has taught this one listener a thing or two about using those same implements to subvert Authority."⁶³ Robertson viewed the Wife as trying her "best to subvert the traditional hierarchy of husband over wife as it reflects the hierarchy of Christ over the Church and parallels the hierarchy of the spirit over the flesh."⁶⁴ She is already setting herself up as a follower of the letter and is willing to subvert meaning, which is in contrast to the allegorical orientation of the Clerk that will later answer her tale. She also prefers experience to his more authoritative background; the contrast here is between the fleshly (active) and spiritual (contemplative) lives of the two characters. The Wife's *Prologue* endorses the flesh over the spirit; Robertson states bluntly, "he who allows the flesh to dominate the spirit will find it a tyrant like the wife."⁶⁵ The *Tale* will help to undermine this slightly through the knight's answer to the Loathly Lady.

The Wife's story centers on a knight who rapes a woman and is given a strange punishment. The queen, Guinevere, tells the knight he has one year to answer her question: "What thing is it that wommen most desyren" (III.905). If he fails in his task then he will be executed. For nearly a year the knight travels looking for the answer to what women most desire. He hears many answers, some of which are contradictory. Feeling dejected, he meets "a fouler wight ther may no man devyse" (III.999). This Loathly Lady offers to tell him what women most desire if he promises to give her what she wants. She tells the knight that, "Wommen desyren to have sovereyntee" (III.1038). This answer satisfied the queen, and at this point in the narrative the Loathly Lady asks the knight to keep his promise with her, and he assents. She then asks him to marry her, and after some reluctance he agrees. On their nuptial night the Loathly Lady makes a proposition. She claims that she could change into a beautiful woman, but if she did she might be an unfaithful wife. Or she could remain the same and be a faithful wife to the knight. The knight lets his new wife have governance of the choice. The Loathly Lady surprises him by giving him both fidelity and beauty.

The tale ends well for the knight, though the audience is left wondering what happened to the poor girl who was raped. She may have been a casualty of narrative purpose or the rape might represent the will of the knight, and his domination of women. By tale's end, he has made a complete reversal from dominating to submitting to the Loathly Lady's request for marriage by allowing her to make the final decision. The social and marital roles have been reversed according to the desires of the Wife of Bath, who very much likes to have control. Like the *Clerk's Tale*, the Wife's can be read allegorically. Her allegory can also be read as taking up some of the dualities found with

the *Clerk's Tale*, and the binaries that Roney describes in the *Knight's Tale*.

Allegorically, the choice was between the contemplative (Loathly Lady stays the same) and the active (Loathly Lady becomes physically beautiful). The active is through the beauty of the physical attributes of the body of the new wife. And the contemplative is the less sensual choice of keeping the Loathly Lady in the same form, but maintaining an inward fidelity to the Truth of their marriage. The relationship wouldn't be reliant on sense, but would rest on the shoulders of dialogue and intellectual pursuits formed within a discourse. The knight, having spent the previous year suffering from the causes of his actions does not choose the active choice, having understood where action and concupiscence led him. But then again he is not entirely excited about the other option. So he resigns himself to the mercy of his new wife, having no desire for either choice. His resignation is a symbolic shift of his acquired understanding of the active and contemplative and how man should situate himself within both spheres of life. The Loathly Lady gives him a chance to choose between the two, and the Knight answers with both. He gives the choice (active) to some other auctoritee (contemplative). Then the Loathly Lady gets the choice (active) and decision over how the marriage will proceed from that moment.

The story by the Wife of Bath and her pronouncement of experience over authority creates a more defined contrast between the characters of the Wife and the Clerk. Chaucer waits for several tales to be told and then has the Host bring the Clerk into the foreground and gives him a forum. The *Clerk's Tale* was carefully selected to counter the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and her sect. The tale he recites reflects the beliefs and philosophies concerning life and art that a Clerk may have held in the Middle Ages. His

tale makes an attempt to refute the active or experiential focus in favor of a more inward existence. His allegory is at times problematic, and his themes are further complicated when he decides to rehearse his “Envoy.” His short speech is directed at the Wife of Bath specifically, and the pilgrims generally.

This Clerk’s Closing Remarks

When we discuss the Clerk and his tale, we are at once provided a problem with his “Envoy.” I have repeatedly made the argument that the Clerk is interested in the allegorical reading of fiction, and somewhat dismissive of the literal aspects of art. This interpretation is brought into question because of the material found in the final moment of his tale, in which he directly addresses his audience, and goes so far as to single out the Wife of Bath. The essence of his “Envoy” contradicts much of the allegory and sentence of his tale. Even the literal aspects are found to be wanting in his “Envoy.” This section has the same unsettling effect as Boccaccio’s placement of his Griselda story: the placement and the speaker undermine their own story. In Boccaccio, the undermining is by Dioneo, a character most known for telling bawdy tales. For Chaucer, the Clerk’s “Envoy” seems to endorse the Wife of Bath’s sect, even though the Clerk and the Wife are foils and opposed on many beliefs. Another way to view this is that the *Decameron*’s final story subverts the function of art as pleasure by introducing an element of serious art, something that was lacking for much of the work. The *Clerk’s Tale*, as was shown, emphasized an art full of meaning and reason, but the Clerk argues for pleasure and entertainment in his “Envoy.” This difference can be ascribed to the writers. Chaucer

was wholly conscious of his material and the arguments he was making about art in a highly religious society, and he utilizes the character of the Clerk to examine the conflicts between meaning and entertainment. Boccaccio, in no less a religious society in medieval Italy, used art as a means to entertain the pilgrims and the readers, but at the same time many of his tales carried with them a moral lesson. Boccaccio, as C.S. Lewis mentioned, belonged with the Renaissance more properly than his own time, whereas Chaucer was comfortable as a writer in medieval England.

There is some debate as to the purpose of the “Envoy.” J. Burke Severs, whose early research into the “Envoy” is still frequently cited, offers several suggestions as to the purpose, ranging from placement of the “Envoy” in relation to the text around it and also the arrangement of the stanzas within the “Envoy.” For Severs, the “Envoy” can be a transition to the *Merchant’s Tale*, where some of the ideals of an outspoken wife are developed. Other arguments are that the Clerk is referencing the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* as a way to remind the Pilgrims of her tale and how his differs.⁶⁶ There is even some doubt as to whether Chaucer ever wrote the “Envoy,” or if he did, in what order he placed the stanzas. Even with the doubt surrounding this passage, I would argue that what is spoken is not so great a problem to understanding the Clerk and his *Tale*. What the Clerk advises his audience is to read and learn from what they have received. He is being ironic up to a point, but at the same time he is offering a more subtle criticism on his own art and the intended messages of his tale. His “Envoy” ties in all of his intentions and ideals and translates them to into a message that a character who values the experiential, like the Wife of Bath, will understand. When he has the feeling that he has not communicated his allegorical message, he tries to give the pilgrims the literal reading. One major reason for

the critical problems the “Envoy” creates is its apparently pessimistic and sardonic tone; in my interpretation, however, this tone is symptomatic of the Clerk’s attempt at addressing the literal level of his tale.

The “Envoy” is a complex and important portion of the Clerk’s presence in the *Tales*. I have transcribed the entire passage to allow the Clerk to keep his voice intact.

The “Envoy”

Griselde is deed, and eek hire pacience,
 And bothe atones buried in Itaille.
 For which I crye in open audience:
 No wedded man so hardy be t’assaille
 His wyves pacience, in hope to finde
 Griseldes, for in certain he shall faille!

O noble wyves, ful of heigh prudence,
 Lat noon humilitee your tonge naille,
 Ne lat no clerk have cause or diligence
 To wryte of yow a storie of swich mervaille
 As of Grisildis, pacient and kinde,
 Lest Chichevache yow swelwe in hir entraille!

Folweth Ekko, that holdeth no silence,
 But evere answereth at the countretaille;
 Beth nat bidaffed for your innocence,
 But sharply tak on yow the governaille.
 Emprinteth wel this lesson in youre minde
 For commune profit, sith it may availle.

Ye archewyves, stondeth at defence-
 Sin ye be stronge as is a greet camaille-
 Ne suffreth nat that men yow doon offence.
 And sclendre wyves, feeble as in bataille,
 Beth egre as is a tygre yond in Inde;
 Ay clappetth as a mille, I yow consaille.

Ned reed hem nat, doth hem no reverence;
 For though thyn housbonde armed be in maille,

The arwes of thy crabbed eloquence
 Shal perce his brest, and eek his aventaille.
 In jalousye I rede eek thou him binde,
 And thou shalt make him couche as dooth a quaille.

If thou be fair, ther folk ben in presence
 Shew thou thy visage and thyn apparaille;
 If thou be foul, be free of thy dispence;
 To gete thee freendes ay do thy travaille.
 Be ay of chere as light as leef on linde,
 And lat him care, and wepe, and wringe, and waille!

--IV.1177-212

The Clerk is here advising women how they should react to their husbands.

When Griselda died, so too did her patience. He tells husbands not to tempt their wives as Walter had, because they will certainly fail. His next advice comes to the women, and he asks them to not be as Griselda, but to take on the governance, and to offer a counter-reply to their husbands. His advice to both women and men deals with the literal level of the tale. Nothing in what he advises is derived from his tale's allegory; it is all narrative in source. He is rephrasing to them what they understood, and he is telling them that what they received is incorrect. A man should not behave as Walter literally; nor should a woman have great patience when her husband torments and tempts her *sadnesse*.

The Clerk's belief that at least some of the pilgrims were more fascinated by the literal than the allegorical of his tale is made clear by the Host's reaction. In a moment of great humor, after the envoy is finished the Host immediately replies, "By Goddes bones,/ Me were lever than a barel ale/ My wyf at hoom had herd this legende ones" (IV.1213-5). The barrel of ale is worth more than the prize of having the best story! It is difficult to imagine that the Host wanted his wife to hear the tale because of the charitable message from the allegory. It is as though the Host had failed to listen to the Clerk, and

there has been some debate on this moment. In an article by Severs, he demonstrates that the placement of the stanza with the Host's reply has, in some manuscripts, appeared before the "Envoy," and that the different placements owe to different scribes.⁶⁷ I am using the Ellesmere Manuscript, widely accepted as the most authoritative manuscript of the *Canterbury Tales*, which places the Host's response after the "Envoy." This interpretation offers the reader a humorous instance of the Host neglecting both the tale and the literal moral given by the teller. And it also reveals the Host as not a very credible judge and critic of the tales. The Host is most interested in tales that amuse him; he even asked for a comedy from the Clerk. Throughout the frame, the reader is subtly reminded of the Host's poor qualification to be the judge of art. We can only imagine the degree of his ineptitude since Chaucer had not finished the *Tales* and allowed him to choose the winner of the tale-telling contest. From what we have, we can only view his reactions to the tales and his prompts for stories, which seem to serve his own personal amusement more than anything else.

One can hardly place sole blame on the Host for his peculiar understanding of the tale he was given. The Clerk and the Host were both working from different approaches to art. The only difference is that the Clerk allowed for various understandings of his moral: the first was the tale and the second was his envoy. The Host remains constant in his interpretation, even after the Clerk's advisory warning about the literal content. The envoy is what redeems the Clerk's single-sided approach to art and creates a multifaceted approach to literature. He presented a tale that was encased in his agenda of allegory and contemplation, and it did not have the desired effect. The Host asked for "som mery thing" (IV.15) and, allegorically speaking, the tale is meant to be quite merry. As we

have seen, the allegory presents its own difficulties. But literally, the tale fails to meet the restrictions the Host had placed on it. After telling his tale, the Clerk uses the moment to change and reorganize his message, and he did so by addressing the literal level. He does this in order that the audience may 1) receive the intended moral and 2) realize that Griselda was meant to be an exemplum of *Pacience*, and therefore not an average wife and woman.

Chaucer portrays the Clerk as a figure whose learning had taken him from the experiential and sensible reality of the world in which he was living. This slight disconnect was the very cause and source of his philosophy of art. He learned to read the world allegorically and attempted to transfer this to art. For him, the cold literal level was not cherished as entertainment, as it can distract the audience. For a similar reason, Augustine once debated for the removal of musical instruments during the singing of hymns: the music distracted the parishioners from the spiritual message. This happens when the audience begins to enjoy singing not as praise, but as a pleasure of the senses. What the Clerk accomplishes in the “Envoy” is to acknowledge indirectly the literal as an important aspect of art, and this shows a progress in his views. Of course a cynic could read the “Envoy” as a sarcastic and condescending reply to his audience and their failure to view the tale as he meant. It is difficult to determine whether the Clerk has progressed in his beliefs because this is his only tale. It seems more probable that the character of the Clerk learns based upon the message and advice contained within his “Envoy.” The messages offer a clear distinction from his tale to his speech afterwards. The portrayal of the Clerk as a character capable of learning from experience stands in contrast to the Host who remains constant in his *solas*.

There are many themes that Chaucer is constructing between the frame story and the tales. He uses the Clerk as a symbol of reason, and shows how his philosophy attempts to create an ideal tale; unfortunately the audience doesn't share the same beliefs. The audience wasn't ideal for an allegorical narrative, yet he told the story nonetheless. A similar criticism has been leveled against D.W. Robertson, whose theories on medieval literature emphasized the importance of allegorical readings even though the majority of medieval audiences lacked the training and education in that kind of interpretation. He envisioned, like the Clerk and Augustine, medieval texts that could be read allegorically and understood for their moral message. Robertson was working from his knowledge that the medieval universities trained their pupils so they could read a text prescribed allegorically; but unfortunately the vast majority of people were untrained to read a text exegetically. Chaucer is aware of his audience and how they would realistically react to his tales. A careful exegete reading the *Clerk's Tale* would find they couldn't fully organize the tale into a cohesive allegory. And even if a reader successfully found the perfect allegory, the "Envoy" would frustrate their efforts by contradicting their own allegorical reading. Chaucer is using the "Envoy" to criticize carefully the training of the educated by showing their own folly for desiring to remove the literal pleasure of art. The Clerk serves as a stand-in for thinkers like Augustine, who wished to limit the enjoyment of art. The frame structure creates a forum for Chaucer to subtly criticize art, as seen by various points of view through his eclectic group of pilgrims. For example, an in-depth analysis of the Wife of Bath and her *Tale* would bear similar results as the *Clerk's Tale*, only the reader would find pleasure in her tale instead of reason. I do not believe that Chaucer gives the perfect and ideal setting for a tale within his *Tales*; he only

presents possibilities. The Clerk is one possibility that doesn't work, the Wife another, and the Knight another. And maybe the Host is a judge who represents the average audience member; maybe we can judge a successful tale on the accuracy of his reaction according to the allegorical intentions of the tale and the teller. Because of the unfinished state of the *Canterbury Tales*, the multiple possibilities are never definitively resolved or addressed.

¹ S.H. Rigby, *Chaucer in Context: Society, Allegory and Gender* (New York, Manchester University Press, 1996) 45.

² Rigby 43.

³ John P. McCall, "The *Clerk's Tale* and the Theme of Obedience," *Modern Language Quarterly* 27.3:260-9 (1966), 260.

⁴ I am indebted to Richmond Barbour for bringing this painting to my attention.

⁵ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. V.A. Kolve and Glending Olson (New York:

Norton, 2005) I.1101. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

⁶ Lois Roney, *Chaucer's Knight's Tale and Theories of Scholastic Psychology* (Tampa, FL:

University of South Florida Press, 1990) 52.

⁷ Roney 268.

⁸ Roney 268.

⁹ Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson (Upper Saddle River, NJ:

Prentice Hall, 1997) 37.

¹⁰ Robertson, *Preface* 349.

¹¹ D.W. Robertson, *Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962) 315.

¹² Robertson, *Preface* 350.

¹³ Robertson, *Preface* 349.

¹⁴ Robertson, *Preface* 286.

¹⁵ Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Hugh Bredin (Cambridge, MA:

Harvard UP, 1988) 144.

¹⁶ *New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), Gen. 1:3-4.

¹⁷ Saint Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 2003) 456.

¹⁸ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: New American Library, 2003) 474.

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles: Book One: God*, trans. Anton C. Pegis, F.R.S.C.

(Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003) 103.

²⁰ William Langland, *The Vision of Piers the Plowman* (London: Everyman, 1995) 4.

²¹ Hesiod, "Works and Days," *Hesiod and Theognis*, trans. Dorothea Wender 59-86 (London: Penguin, 1973) 64.

²² John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. Russell A. Peck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997) 28.

²³ G.K. Chesterton, *Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956) 87.

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- ²⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1964) 11.
- ²⁵ Ann R. Meyer, *Medieval Allegory and the Building of the New Jerusalem* (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2003) 13.
- ²⁶ Meyer 13.
- ²⁷ Chesterton 92.
- ²⁸ Aquinas, *Gentiles* 74.
- ²⁹ Robert M. Grant, David Tracy, *A Short History of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 86.
- ³⁰ C. David Benson, "The Canterbury Tales: personal drama or experiments in poetic variety?" *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann 127-142 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 127.
- ³¹ Benson 128.
- ³² Robertson, *Preface* 36.
- ³³ The distinction of Spirit and Flesh have a great many other nominations such as: sense/letter, contemplative/active, allegorical/literal, reason/flesh, fruit/chaff, logic/experience, and sentence/solas. Between these "symmetrical patterns" (Robertson, *Preface* 6) I will use interchangeably depending upon the context, but in most instances the meaning can be traced back to Spirit and flesh.
- ³⁴ Robertson 72.
- ³⁵ Thomas Aquinas, "The Active and Contemplative Lives," *Selected Writings*, trans. Ralph McInerny 682-709 (London: Penguin, 1998) 702.
- ³⁶ Aquinas, "Active" 702.
- ³⁷ Thomas Aquinas, "On the Teacher," *Selected Writings*, trans. Ralph McInerny 193-216 (London: Penguin 1998) 212.
- ³⁸ Aquinas, "Active" 686.
- ³⁹ Aquinas, "Teacher" 205.
- ⁴⁰ Aquinas, "Teacher" 205.
- ⁴¹ James 1:19.
- ⁴² James 2:18.
- ⁴³ Thomas Aquinas, *The Aquinas Catechism*, trans. Ralph McInerny (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2000) 6.
- ⁴⁴ Michael Hanrahan, "'A strange succesour sholde take youre heritage:' The Clerk's Tale and the Crisis of Ricardian Rule," *The Chaucer Review*, 35.4: 335-51 (2001) 339.
- ⁴⁵ Robert Emmett Finnegan, "'She Should Have Said No to Walter': Griselda's Promise in the Clerk's Tale," *English Studies* 4: 303-21 (1994) 303.
- ⁴⁶ Finnegan 303.

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- ⁴⁷ J. Allan Mitchell, "Chaucer's Clerk's Tale and the Question of Ethical Monstrosity," *Studies in Philology* 102.1: 1-26 (2005), 1.
- ⁴⁸ Augustine, *Doctrine* 88.
- ⁴⁹ Lynn Staley Johnson, "The Prince and his People: A Study of the Two Covenants in the Clerk's Tale," *The Chaucer Review*, 10.1: 17-29 (1975), 17-29.
- ⁵⁰ Robert Worth Frank, Jr., "*The Canterbury Tales* III: pathos," *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann 178-194 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 191.
- ⁵¹ Frank 190.
- ⁵² Job 1:8.
- ⁵³ Job 1:11.
- ⁵⁴ James 5:11.
- ⁵⁵ Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam, 1981) 87.
- ⁵⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953) 178.
- ⁵⁷ John Finlayson, "Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*," *Studies in Philology*, 97.3: 255-75(2000) 268.
- ⁵⁸ Finlayson 257.
- ⁵⁹ Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. G.H. McWilliam (London: Penguin, 1995) 784.
- ⁶⁰ Boccaccio 788.
- ⁶¹ Robert Longworth, "The Wife of Bath and the Samaritan Woman," ed. Robert W. Frank, Jr., *The Chaucer Review*, 34.4: 373-89 (The Penn State UP, 2000) 375.
- ⁶² Longworth 383.
- ⁶³ Longworth 381.
- ⁶⁴ Robertson, *Preface* 330.
- ⁶⁵ Robertson, *Preface* 330.
- ⁶⁶ J. Burke Severs, "Did Chaucer Rearrange the Clerk's Envoy," *Modern Language Notes*, 69.7: 472-8 (1954), 473.
- ⁶⁷ Severs 474.