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Rachel Lea Combs

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**BREAKING EXPECTATIONS:
DEVIATIONS FROM GENRE, GENDER, AND SOCIAL ORDER IN THE
CLERK'S AND THE MERCHANT'S TALES**

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Rachel Lea Combs

May 2017

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English

Missouri State University, May 2017

Master of Arts

Rachel Lea Combs

ABSTRACT

Breaking Expectations: Deviations from Genre, Gender, and Social Order in the Clerk's and Merchant's Tales seeks to reconcile deviations in traditional form and representations of marital authority in both tales by understanding Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* as existing in and responding to a shifting social hierarchy. After establishing that the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and John Wyclif's heretical tracts signified drastic challenges to received systems of social, political, and religious authority, I assert that the disruption of genre and medieval models of wifehood in the Clerk's Tale and the Merchant's Tale is a recognition—celebratory for the Clerk and bitter for the Merchant—that the social hierarchy and the medieval marriage are transforming. Both pilgrims choose a typical medieval genre—the exemplum in the Clerk's Tale and the fabliau in the Merchant's—yet both narrators manipulate the traditional conventions of the form. Like the drastic and ongoing fourteenth-century challenges to traditional power structures, both Tales overturn traditional conventions in form, therefore revealing their dramatic authors' expectations for household authority.

KEYWORDS: Peasants' Revolt of 1381, Great Schism, John Wyclif, form, medieval wifehood, social commentary, livelihood, Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*

This abstract is approved as to form and content

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HISTORICAL PROLOGUE

Ungracious Peasants and Anxious Authors: Contemporary Criticisms of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381

The Peasants' Revolt of 1381 occurred amid chaotic events: war, disease, devalued goods, inflated wages, increased taxes, and aggressive new labor laws. Perhaps more incredible than the frenzied social, economic, and political environment of the Peasants' Revolt was the staggering amount of documentation on the event, spanning from statutes, petitions, letters, and chronicles to verse poetry in Latin and English. All this information allows scholars to pinpoint the causes of the uprising and to chart the spread of the rebellion across England. There is little question as to *why* the Peasants' Revolt occurred; however, there is much to say about contemporary reaction to the rebellion, not just from figures of political and legal authority, but also from intellectual and religious authorities. Many of these accounts do not just denounce the revolt—they villainize the participants, denigrate their demands, and whole-heartedly deny all justifications for rebellion. While some criticism certainly seems justified—the revolt, after all, did result in death and destruction—the verbal attacks against the rebels may have found a wider purpose in some cause outside the revolt. Rather, these critics were affected by the tense social, political, and economic climate in which they wrote, critiquing the rebels as much for their actions as for what their actions represented. If the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 is understood as not just a violent event but undeniable evidence of the ongoing social upheaval in the fourteenth century, then the criticisms of the revolt by contemporary chroniclers reveal an anxiety towards the evolution or

dissolution of the supposedly divine medieval social hierarchy; as gatekeepers invested in the status quo, contemporary authors reveal their anxiety both in vehement condemnation of the revolt and in recognition that the revolt posed a very real threat to the traditional social order.

The years preceding the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 were particularly disordered in comparison to the relative peace of Edward III's reign. In *1381: The Year of the Peasants' Revolt*, Juliet Barker labels this period a "golden age," in which relative peace was preserved in England and major victories were won against France. It was upon Edward III's death in 1377, however, that France reignited the Hundred Years' War, raiding and burning the undefended south coast. These renewed invasions signaled a shift in victory from the English triumphs of Edward III's reign to a reinvigorated French military under Charles V.¹

Even before Edward III's death, French success in the Hundred Years' War, and the ascension of boy king Richard II to the throne, England was plagued by a natural disaster far worse than any political upheaval.² The first outbreak of the Black Death plagued England in the summer of 1348. The disease struck every level of society, and without a cure, the plague quickly decimated communities. The particular loss of parish priests, abbesses, and monks left medieval society in a state of apocalyptic dread, many fearing that the plague was a God-sent punishment for society's sins; pilgrimage and penitence flourished as a result. Where England's population had been near five million in the first half of the fourteenth century, the outbreaks reduced it to somewhere between

¹ Juliet Barker, *1381: The Year of the Peasants' Revolt* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 6-9.

² *Ibid.*, 16.

two and three million from the mid-fourteenth century to the late fifteenth.³ Subsequent outbreaks of the plague affected children in particular, lowering the replacement birth rate and increasing the infant mortality rate.⁴

Though the plague affected social classes indiscriminately, for the most part, the improved economic conditions following the outbreaks most dramatically benefitted the laboring class. Thanks to a reduced labor force, laborers were able to negotiate their wages and terms of employment. The need for agricultural manpower and the improved leverage of laborers was so great that Edward III issued the Statute of Laborers, which attempted to return wage-rates to their pre-plague levels in 1346; the elaborate descriptions of punishment for disobeying the labor laws is evidence of both the improved position of laborers and the ineffectual Statute.⁵ Henry Knighton, canon of St. Mary's Abbey in Leicester, suggests that, following the plague, "the labourers were so arrogant and hostile that they took no notice of the king's mandate; and if anyone wanted to employ them he was obliged to give them whatever they asked, and either to lose his fruits and crops, or satisfy at will the labourers' greed and arrogance."⁶ In addition to the peasant exploitation of conditions following the Black Death, laborers were able to acquire land and improve their living conditions.⁷ Both the records of the time—usually written by and representative of those with landed interests—and the events of 1381 signified an undercurrent of antagonism towards laborers and the their exploitation of conditions following the Black Death. The tension between increasingly powerful

³ Ibid., 24-26.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ R.B. Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (London: Macmillan Press, 1970), 63-64.

⁶ Henry Knighton, *Chronicon Henrici Knighton*, quoted in Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, 62. The information about Henry Knighton is found in Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, 59.

⁷ Barker, *1381: The Year of the Peasants' Revolt*, 26-27.

laborers and the literature written about them is nowhere more evident than in the documentation of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

Literature concerning the Peasants' Revolt exists in incredible quantity and variety. According to Andrew Prescott, the uprising is the most recorded rebellion of the Middle Ages.⁸ Documentation of the rebellion exists in many forms, from legal records, historical chronicles, and verse poetry to the writing of the rebels themselves. Of these, R. B. Dobson argues that "the indispensable four gospels of the Peasants' Revolt" are from Thomas Walsingham, Henry Knighton, Jean Froissart and the *Anonimale Chronicle*. He adds, however, that the many shorter accounts of the revolt should not be ignored.⁹ While historians have tended to emphasize the objectivity or factuality of legal records of the account, Prescott holds that no one type of source is more informative or more reliable than another. Rather, he suggests that, "it is by establishing the limitations of the texts relating to particular events that we start to realize the limitations of our own understanding of these events and begin to see them in a new light."¹⁰ The task, then, is not to establish the one most accurate report of the rebellion, but to understand what the chronicles, taken together, disclose about the culture surrounding the Peasants' Revolt. The accounts of the *Anonimal* chronicler, Walsingham, Knighton, and Froissart are cultural artifacts that can reveal much more than just a timeline of events for the Peasants' Revolt. Instead, the response to the rebels can offer insight into the changing social environment in which the Peasants' Revolt took place and the effects of that social upheaval on the chroniclers themselves.

⁸ Andrew Prescott, "Writing about Rebellion: Using Records of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 45 (1988): 5.

⁹ Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, xxxi.

¹⁰ Prescott, "Writing About Rebellion," 8.

The death of Edward III, the ascension of Richard II, the English losses in the Hundred Years' War, the Black Death, and the increasing social mobility of the lower classes are all indirect causes of the Peasants' Revolt. The more immediate events precipitating the revolt came in the form of three poll taxes instituted by the English government from 1377 to 1381. Thomas Walsingham, Benedictine monk of the abbey of St. Albans, describes the establishment of all three poll taxes in his *Chronica Maiora*.¹¹ Instituted in 1377, the first poll tax, which Walsingham labels "unprecedented", levied one groat or four pennies on all adults above fourteen, twelve pence on all those in religious orders, and one groat on those who were not beneficed churchmen except for brothers of the mendicant orders.¹² The second poll tax, imposed by parliament in 1379, required archbishops and the dukes of Lancaster and Brittany to pay ten marks each, while earls, bishops, and abbots paid six marks. "The framers," Walsingham proclaims, "lacked any sense of justice" in imposing both the first and second poll taxes.¹³ The third poll tax, which Walsingham deems "the cause of unheard-of trouble in the land," was agreed upon by parliament in 1380 and required a half mark of each male priest, female religious, and secular priests, as well as a twelve pence of all men and women.¹⁴ With the institution of the third poll tax came widespread tax evasion and government attempts to enforce payment.¹⁵

¹¹ James G. Clark, Introduction to *The Chronica Maiora of Thomas Walsingham 1376-1422*, trans. David Preest (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005), 1.

¹² Thomas Walsingham, *The Chronica Maiora of Thomas Walsingham 1376-1422*, trans. David Preest (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005), 29.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁵ Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, 119.

One of the measures taken by the government was the appointment of commissions, an act which ultimately began the Peasants' Revolt.¹⁶ The inciting incident of the Peasants' Revolt is incredibly well-described by the *Anonimal Chronicle*, which appears to be the work of a contemporary or eyewitness of the revolt and contains more detail about the uprising than any other single chronicle.¹⁷ One of the government-appointed tax commissions, according to the *Anonimal Chronicle*, was sent to Essex in order to assess how the poll taxes had been levied. The commission, headed by Thomas Bampton, held court at Brentwood in Essex and demanded the taxpayers pay their due. Of those in attendance, the people of Fobbing "made answer that they would not pay a penny more, because they already had a receipt from [Thomas Bampton] for the said subsidy." The residents of Fobbing gathered with those of Corringham and Stanford, and all "roundly gave [Thomas Bampton] answer that they would have no traffic with him, nor give him a penny." Upon Thomas Bampton's threats of arrest, "the commons made insurrection against him, and would not be arrested," beginning the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.¹⁸

The outbreak of the rebellion is mentioned in all four of Dobson's "gospels of the Peasants' Revolt."¹⁹ In the account recorded in the *Anonimal Chronicle*, the rebels' violence receives great emphasis as they burn the manors and towns of those that would not join their cause. The *Chronicle* states not only that they "captured the three clerks of Thomas Bampton, and cut off their heads, and carried the heads about with them for several days stuck on poles as an example to others," but also that their purpose was to

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Charles Oman, *The Great Revolt of 1381* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), 186.

¹⁸ "The 'Anonimal Chronicle,'" in *The Great Revolt of 1381* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), 187.

¹⁹ See note 9.

“slay all lawyers, and all jurors, and all servants of the King whom they could find.”

After the rebels gained support from the people of Kent, Suffolk, and Norfolk, they conducted “great mischief in all the countryside,” while claiming their actions were in reverence of King Richard.²⁰ After the rebels’ repeated demands to speak with the King and his repeated refusals, the group destroyed the Marshalsea, a notorious debtors’ prison in Southwark, freeing all those imprisoned for debt and felony, and attacked the manor of the Archbishop of Canterbury, destroying the possessions therein. On the day of Corpus Christi, the rebels, now aided by the commons of Southwark, entered London, released the prisoners of the Fleet, burned shops and homes, ravaged the Temple, drank wine at the house of the Bishop of Chester, burned the Savoy, and laid siege to the Tower after being refused conference with the King.²¹

Where the *Anonimal* chronicler depicts the rebels’ actions as senselessly violent, Thomas Walsingham casts the outbreak of rebellion in divine terms, interpreting the revolt as divine “punishment for [England’s] sins,” and calling its defeat the result of God’s “goodness.”²² The rebels hoped, he asserts, to subject “all things to their stupidity,” that stupidity being “becoming equal with their masters and never again being bound in servitude to any man at all.” Supporters of the “evil” rebellion were coerced through threats and lies in Essex and Kent alike.²³ While Walsingham places the majority of the burden on the rebels—whom he calls “bare-legged rascals” and “wastrels”—for “ignoring any claims of what was right,” he also criticizes their masters for “sleeping and

²⁰ “The ‘Anonimal Chronicle,’” in *The Great Revolt of 1381*, 188.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 193-196.

²² Walsingham, *The Chronica Maiora*, 120.

²³ *Ibid.*, 121.

snoring” through the revolt, “unwilling to wake up and deal with this wickedness.”²⁴

Upon reaching the Tower, the rebels forced their “wicked wills” on the King, who “could not in safety refuse any of their requests.”²⁵ Yet again, Walsingham heartily condemns the rebels for daring to “force a way into the bedroom of the king or his mother, scaring all the nobles with their threats and even touching and stroking with their rough, filthy hands the beards of some of the most eminent of them.” He too admonishes the King’s soldiers for losing all their military boldness in the face of mere peasants. Both the rebels - or peasants as Walsingham sees them-- and the knights have not upheld their traditional duties. Walsingham even moralizes the lesson of such disobedience to estate, saying, “All this, I believe, was because God wanted to show the English that a man will not be strong because of his own strength, putting his hopes in bow or sword, but because of Him who saves us from those who trouble us and who in his mercy and goodness ever confounds those who imprison us.”²⁶ By equating the rebellion’s failure with God’s goodness, Walsingham deems all threats to the social order as immoral and against God, ultimately preaching adherence to the existing, divinely ordained social order.

Though Henry Knighton’s account is undeniably less moralizing than Thomas Walsingham’s, the two chroniclers are equally disappointed in the lost respect for traditional social roles. When the king leaves the Tower and agrees to rebel demands, the knights, according to Knighton, “who should have gone with the king completely lost their courage and showed, sad to say, no spirit whatsoever; they seemed to be struck by womanly fears and dared not leave but stayed within the Tower.”²⁷ Knighton’s disdain

²⁴ Ibid., 122.

²⁵ Ibid., 123.

²⁶ Ibid., 125.

²⁷ Henry Knighton, *Chronicon Henrici Knighton*, quoted in Dobson, *The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381*, 182.

here is obvious. Not only have the knights failed to protect their lord, but they have not even fulfilled their role as men in the social order. Instead, they were paralyzed by womanish fear. Though Knighton reserves judgement on the peasants' demands, which he defines merely as freeing all peasants and their heirs from servitude, he claims that the king acquiesced "for the sake of peace and because of the circumstances at the time."²⁸ He does, however, call the rebels "wretched sons," "servants of the devil," "criminals," "rats," followers of a "malign spirit," and "slaughtered pigs" that killed Englishmen for hate.²⁹ Ultimately, Knighton says, "This charter [between Richard II and the rebels] was quashed, annulled and adjudged worthless by the king and magnates of the realm."³⁰

Knighon simplifies the rebels' demands and Richard II's brief acceptance of them, emphasizing instead the restoration of order following the end of the revolt. Yet eighteen days passed between Richard II's acceptance of the rebels' demands on June 14th and his renunciation of them on July 2nd.³¹ Richard and his councilors first tried pardoning the rebels, but the rebels refused to leave London until, as Barker explains, "they had captured the traitors in the Tower, received a full account from the chancellor of all the taxes that had been raised over the past five years and had been given charters freeing them 'from all manner of serfdom.'"³² The royal party then plotted to attack the rebels in their sleep but decided against the attack for the safety of Londoners.³³ Finally, it was agreed that Richard II should meet the rebels at Mile End on June 14th.³⁴ In what Barker calls "a seminal moment in the revolt and an extraordinary one in the course of

²⁸ Ibid., 183.

²⁹ Ibid., 183-185.

³⁰ Ibid., 183.

³¹ Barker, *1381: The Year of the Peasants' Revolt*, 373.

³² Ibid., 245.

³³ Ibid., 245-6.

³⁴ Ibid., 246-7.

English history,” Richard II acquiesced to the rebels’ demands, allowing them to capture and kill traitors and freeing them from serfdom—“concessions,” Barker posits, “which would have radically altered the very fabric of English society.”³⁵

For all the significance Barker bestows on the Mile End conference, the event receives little attention in contemporary chronicles. Walsingham neglects to mention the meeting at all, while Knighton only vaguely refers to Richard II’s accession as described above. Only the *Anonimal Chronicle* describes the peasants’ request to “take and deal with all the traitors against him and the law” and to end serfdom. The chronicler writes, “And they required that for the future no man should be in serfdom, nor make any manner of homage or suit to any lord, but should give a rent of 4d. an acre for his land. They asked also that no one should serve any man except by his own good will, and on terms of regular covenant.”³⁶ If the peasants’ demands had not been revoked a mere eighteen days later, Richard II would have effectively ended villeinage and villein tenure throughout England.³⁷ The end of personal bondage and regulations on purchasing or holding land would have radically upset the traditional social order and the social obligations accompanying it, allowing for previously unheard-of social mobility.

The last of the “gospels,” Jean Froissart’s *Chroniques* offers an account of the Mile End conference similar to those of Walsingham and Knighton, focusing largely on the suppression of rebellion and ignoring the significance of the peasants’ demands. Seeing himself as a historian tasked with the enlargement and explanation of events, Froissart assigns fictitious speeches to historical characters for the sake of entertainment,

³⁵ Ibid., 248-9.

³⁶ “The ‘Anonimal Chronicle,’” in *The Great Revolt of 1381*, 198.

³⁷ Barker, *1381: The Year of the Peasants’ Revolt*, 251-2.

not posterity.³⁸ Like Walsingham, Froissart emphasizes the violence of the rebels, recounting their many slaughters. He characterizes the rebels as “these ungracious people,” saying they “demeaned themselves like people enraged and wood.”³⁹ The cause of the uprising, he claims, stems from “the great envy of them that were rich and such as were noble.”⁴⁰ Here, Froissart clearly disdains social mobility, much as Walsingham does when he describes the grotesque and unnatural behavior of rebels when they touched their aristocratic superiors. He likens the rebels to “flies” and “gluttons,” full of “great venom.”⁴¹ Depicting the rebels as animals, Froissart says that they “could not tell what to ask or demand, but followed each other like beasts” and that they “made such a cry, as though all the devils of hell had been among them.”⁴² The rebels’ assertions and actions are so unnatural within the given social order that they are judged animalistic and inhuman. Froissart juxtaposes two images—the king humbly making his orisons at mass before the image of the Virgin Mary and the free-loading and drunken merry-making of the rebels at Smithfield—reinforcing the dichotomy between man and beast, holy and unholy. Moreover, he presents the defeat of the rebels as divinely ordained.⁴³ Richard II enters London a victorious and celebrated king, having executed the leaders of the revolt and fulfilled his divine role as protector of England, demanding, “I have this day recovered mine heritage and the realm of England.”⁴⁴

Of all these varying accounts of the Peasants’ Revolt, one thing is certain: neither the *Anonimal* chronicler, Thomas Walsingham, Henry Knighton, nor Jean Froissart align

³⁸ Dobson, *The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381*, 187, 137.

³⁹ Jean Froissart, *Chroniques*, quoted in Dobson, *The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381*, 189.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 189, 191, 192.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 138, 144.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 198.

themselves with the rebels. All accounts present the rebellion as upsetting the natural and divine order through atrocious and purposeless violence. Walsingham and Knighton specifically mourn the disregard for traditional social obligations, from the peasants, their masters, and the knights. Froissart presents the rebels as so antagonistic to the divine order that they become wild, demonic beasts. This unanimously unsympathetic representation of the rebels is purposeful, according to Paul Strohm. “The chronicles,” he asserts, “employ a broad range of strategies designed to discredit the social standing, judgement, and objectives of the rebels at every level of representation.”⁴⁵ The chroniclers paint the rebels’ actions as variously stupid, purposeless, and abhorrent. Even Thomas Walsingham, who criticized the overbearing poll taxes which led to the revolt, finds no justification for revolution. Strohm is correct that the chroniclers denigrate and deny the validity of the rebels’ demands at every turn, but the contemporary criticism launched at the rebellion may reveal a greater, unspoken cultural anxiety. After all, the Peasants’ Revolt and accounts of it belong to a radically fluctuating world in which the Black Death and Hundred Years’ War are recent memories. Furthermore, the Peasants’ Revolt epitomizes the drastically changing social hierarchy, which means that the chroniclers are reacting not just to one event, but that event’s significance for the received system of authority and social status.

The chroniclers rely on a God-ordained view of the social hierarchy when they present the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 as a rejection of divine will and traditional social roles. David Aers explains the three-estate system—the social order threatened by the uprising—served to protect a static social hierarchy. This received understanding of

⁴⁵ Paul Strohm, *Hochon’s Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 34.

social roles was believed to be a divinely-fixed division of society into the clergy, the knights, and the laborers; in the three-estate system, social order, and consequently social stasis, depended on fulfillment of estate.⁴⁶ The obligation to social role is best represented by the image of the body politic, in which the king, the authoritative head, commanded the hands, the protecting knights, and required the tireless toil of the feet, the laborers.⁴⁷ According to Barker, the body politic could also appear with those who governed, both in Church and state offices, as head, their officials as the body, and the governed as the feet.⁴⁸ In any case, the image of the body politic reveals the importance of social responsibility in maintaining the traditional social hierarchy and the existing status quo.

The obligation to estate—necessary for preserving the traditional distribution of power and authority—was as much social as it was religious. The rebels’ demand to end serfdom would have irreparably handicapped the body politic, denying the required bondage of the bottom-most tier of the three estate system. The rebels’ violence, depicted by the *Anonimal* chronicler, was a refusal of social function, damaging the English countryside as well as the entire society. Moreover, the social hierarchy, including the system of villeinage, was supposedly a reflection of divine will, and threatening the traditional social order was tantamount to threatening God’s proper division of mankind. When Henry Knighton decries laborers’ increased demands for wages as “arrogant and hostile,” he implies that the peasants have overstepped their social bounds, defying their placement in the god-ordained hierarchy and disobeying God’s authority.⁴⁹ Though both

⁴⁶ David Aers, *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 2.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

⁴⁸ Barker, *1381: The Year of the Peasants’ Revolt*, 42.

⁴⁹ See page 3, note 6.

chroniclers place greatest blame on the rebels, Thomas Walsingham and Henry Knighton indict the nobility as much as the peasants since both estates fail to maintain the divine order. The revolt's conclusion is a restoration of God's will—hence, Froissart's emphasis on the holy righteousness of Richard II. As the chroniclers make clear, the rebels challenged the traditional social hierarchy, consequently questioning God's ordering of the universe.

Coupled with a turbulent succession, the Hundred Years' War, the Plague, and new-found social mobility, the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 epitomizes the drastic changes happening to England in the Middle Ages. Where peasants used to be the well-trodden feet of the body politic, they were now demanding the same freedom as the nobility. The rebels' petitions to end servitude for themselves and their future heirs, if successful, would have overthrown traditional social boundaries. The *Anonimal* chronicler, Thomas Walsingham, Henry Knighton, and Jean Froissart, far from sympathizing with the rebels or sharing their views, clearly felt anxiety at the threat being posed to the social order. Only through discrediting and denigrating the rebels, Strohm suggests, could the chroniclers affirm the traditional social hierarchy that afforded them relative power. By characterizing the rebels as unnatural, animalistic, and devilish, the chroniclers condemn the social change that the Peasants' Revolt represented, instead praising the righting of proper social roles and restoration of divine will in the rebellion's defeat. However, in condemning the rebels' actions, the chroniclers inadvertently recognize the very real threat posed to the traditional social order. For them, the physical violence of the revolt came second to the much more frightening symbolic violence to God's will and the divinely-ordained social hierarchy posed by the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

A “Profound Crisis of Credibility:” Wyclif, Schism, and the Peasants’ Revolt

The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 represented the rejection of a dominant ideology: the three-estate system. By rebelling against increasing taxation and demanding conference with King Richard II, the rebels brought an emerging ideology into light. The Peasants’ Revolt, though an exceptionally visible and violent event, is not alone in revealing a larger movement away from received systems of authority. The Church was experiencing its own crisis of authority during the Avignon papacy, the subsequent Great Schism, and the growing radicalism of John Wyclif. At the same time that the peasants were burning the Savoy and beheading members of the nobility, John Wyclif was openly criticizing Canon Law. The Peasants’ Revolt and John Wyclif’s heretical teachings represented parallel challenges to received authority in the social and ecclesiastical hierarchy. More importantly, both Wyclif and the rebels reacted to destabilized institutional authority, clearly present in the Avignon papacy and Great Schism. Despite much scholarly skepticism of any connection between Wyclif’s writing and the uprising, the rebels and Wyclif reject traditional distribution of property—both the Church’s untaxed ownership of and villeins’ personal bondage to land—while upholding the dispossession of ecclesiastical and lay authorities that fail their God-ordained obligations. While Wyclif may not have directly inspired the revolt and the rebels may not have been devout followers of Wyclif’s beliefs, his heretical beliefs and the peasants’ uprising are evidence of a larger challenge to long-standing institutions of knowledge and authority that impacted all members of fourteenth-century society, as can be seen in Geoffrey Chaucer’s pilgrims.

Wyclif's teachings and the Peasants' Revolt appeared in a period of increasing doubt towards received systems of authority. The backdrop of both Wyclif and the rebels is one of evident dissension in the Catholic Church. As a result of the Gregorian reform and the crusading movement, papal authority had expanded to encompass all aspects of Christian life, both common and royal, from the eleventh to twelfth centuries.⁵⁰ By 1302, however, Pope Boniface VIII's bull that "Every human creature is subject to the Roman pontiff" was meaningless, as the Church's authority waned in the face of royal power.⁵¹ The already weakened authority of the Church became all the more perceptible during the Avignon papacy, which inadvertently began with the election of Clement V.

Instead of residing in the traditional seat of papal authority in Rome, Clement remained in France after his election in 1305 to ease tensions between Philip the Fair and Edward I over Aquitaine.⁵² Due to a variety of problems, Clement stayed in southern France, eventually taking residence in Avignon in 1309 in preparation for the Council of Vienne.⁵³ Clement's actions marked the beginning of the Avignon papacy, which extended from 1309 to 1376, "the only period," Yves Renouard explains, "in which the popes have regularly lived in one stable residence outside Rome and away from the tomb of St. Peter."⁵⁴ After Clement's death in 1314, John XXII became pontiff in 1316 and, thanks to his love of the palace at Avignon, took the papacy back to the town.⁵⁵ Pope

⁵⁰ Yves Renouard, *The Avignon Papacy 1305 – 1403*, trans. Denis Bethell (Hamden: Archon Books, 1970), 14.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 15, 13.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 20-4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 24-5.

John XXII never returned to the disordered Rome, dying in 1334 after an eighteen-year stay in France.⁵⁶

John's prolonged visit to Avignon was ample time for the curia to recognize how beneficial Avignon was as a center of Church government. Avignon was more peaceful than the unruly Roman populace, held a central position in Christendom, and offered itself as a convenient location for trade, communication, and travel—all attributes which contributed to Avignon's becoming the normal residence of the papacy.⁵⁷ The subsequent popes, Benedict XII, Clement VI, Innocent VI, and Urban V, were well aware of these benefits. Unlike Clement V and John XXII, both of whom had hoped to return to Italy, the remaining popes of the Avignon papacy (except Gregory XI) recognized return to Rome was impossible.

Elected in 1334, Pope Benedict XII's reign witnessed the beginning of the Hundred Years' War in 1337.⁵⁸ While France and England battled, Benedict XII reconstructed the bishop's palace at Avignon into the permanent papal residence, which accommodated pope and curia.⁵⁹ The following pope, Clement VI, similarly witnessed the "physical and moral catastrophe" of the Black Death but also what Renouard terms "an economic, military, and political crisis" during Clement's reign from 1342 to 1352.⁶⁰ As Clement VI built a luxurious second palace and bought the city of Avignon, European social and political strife grew. Instead of assuaging public fear, the Avignon papacy exacerbated tensions. While the Black Death ravaged Europe and France and England

⁵⁶ Ibid., 31.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 31-35.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 38-9.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 41.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 42, 44.

fought a costly war, the papacy was far removed from the traditional seat of authority and public concerns. The Papal court remained in Avignon, removed from public strife and its traditional location of authority, until 1377.

Gregory XI, elected in 1371, commanded a return to Rome, believing that the papacy could only govern from its traditional seat. However, an empty treasury, unwilling French cardinals, negotiations with France and England, and a rebellious Florence prevented Gregory's return until 1377.⁶¹ Though Gregory XI finally returned the Papal State to Rome, his death in 1378 was, according to Renouard, "a major tragedy for the whole Church."⁶² Renouard's comments are fitting, for Gregory XI's death, though it marked the return of the pope to Rome, also began the Great Schism. The existence of three separate yet concurrent papal courts—all of which would inevitably be called illegitimate—undermined the supposedly divine election of the pope, and consequently the God-ordained authority of the Catholic Church. Where the Avignon papacy propagated doubts in the Church's divine authority and made visible the weakening power of the pope, the Great Schism saw those doubts become fault lines, dividing the Church and Europe into at first two, then three factions. Moreover, these enduring cracks in Church government were caused by the Church itself.

Walter Ullman labels the Schism "an ideological crisis within the ecclesiastical hierarchy" of the Church.⁶³ As large an impact as the Schism had on the Church, fractured papal authority inspired John Wyclif's criticism of the Church and allowed his heretical philosophy to go temporarily unnoticed. In pursuit of a relatively high office in

⁶¹ Ibid., 63-6.

⁶² Ibid., 66.

⁶³ Walter Ullman, *The Origins of the Great Schism* (United States of America: Archon Books, 1967), 4.

Church or State government, Wyclif obtained his doctorate of theology from Oxford in 1372.⁶⁴ Though Wyclif adhered to philosophical realism, which Richard Rex defines as the view that “things existed because they shared or ‘participated’ in some underlying and ultimate reality (an ‘idea’ or ‘universal’), an ideal model of a thing to which all particular examples of that thing were mere approximations,” his beliefs were not so controversial as to provoke reaction outside Oxford.⁶⁵ However, after Wyclif’s failed attempts to climb the ecclesiastical ladder, he returned to Oxford, where his beliefs turned from merely controversial to radical.

Wyclif’s theory of dominion or lordship in grace first appeared in *De civili dominio*, the manuscript form of his lectures from 1375 to 1376.⁶⁶ “Every right to a thing,” Wyclif proposed, “was a right through which God ordained that the thing should be held or possessed.” Since sinners are opposed to God’s ordained will, God would not reward the sinful with possessions; all sinners’ property was essentially stolen, and all sinners were thieves. The theory of lordship in grace directly criticized Church doctrine. Wyclif believed that ecclesiastical abuse of possessions or undue attention paid to Church ownership justified the State in taxing or removing ecclesiastical property.⁶⁷ Expropriation or taxation of the clergy is forbidden by canon law, making Wyclif’s lordship in grace a direct challenge to Church policy. Regardless of the extreme nature of Wyclif’s claims, he was merely summoned in 1377 before an episcopal hearing, of which nothing came thanks to John of Gaunt’s royal intervention.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Richard Rex, *The Lollards* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 26.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 33, 26.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁶⁸ Michael Wilks, *Wyclif Political Ideas and Practice: Papers by Michael Wilks* (Exeter: Oxbow Books, 2000), 2.

It was not until May 1377 that Pope Gregory XI, the same Gregory who returned the papacy to its traditional seat in Rome, issued a papal condemnation of nineteen propositions from *De civili dominio* and subjected Wyclif to house arrest.⁶⁹ After a second and equally unsuccessful trial before the bishops, the Church's prosecution of Wyclif was interrupted by Gregory's death and the impending Great Schism. Besides shifting ecclesiastical scrutiny away from Wyclif, the onset of the Great Schism radicalized Wyclif's views on Church ownership. Pope Gregory's death (untimely for the Church but quite convenient for Wyclif) appeared to Wyclif as God's will—what Rex calls “a providential vindication.”⁷⁰ Wyclif saw the following dissension within the Church as an opportune time to advance his now divinely-supported ideology.⁷¹ The visible weakness in ecclesiastic authority enabled and inspired Wyclif's radical views, allowing him the time and brief freedom from reproof to attack the Church.

Nine days after Gregory's death in March of 1378, the cardinals met to elect a new pope. After much debate among factious cardinals—generally divided by nationality—the Archbishop of Bari was elected and became Urban VI on Easter Sunday.⁷² Urban was elected under undeniable social pressure; an unruly Roman population was anxious to see the election of a Roman or Italian pope. Though Urban declared the election legitimate in his *Factum Urbani*, thirteen French cardinals claimed Urban's election was void because it had not been made freely.⁷³ The French cardinals

⁶⁹ Wilks, *Wyclif Political Ideas and Practice*, 2; Rex, *The Lollards*, 29.

⁷⁰ Rex, *The Lollards*, 32.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Ullman, *The Origins of the Great Schism*, 9-11.

⁷³ Ullman, *The Origins of the Great Schism*, 11; Renouard, *The Avignon Papacy*, 69.

elected and crowned a new pope, Clement VII, by November 1378, beginning the rift in papal authority that would not be resolved for thirty-nine years.⁷⁴

Wyclif threw support behind Urban, perhaps because the English government also supported him, but more likely because of Urban's stringent measures to reform the clergy. As Wyclif states, "Blessed be the Bridegroom of the Church who has slain Gregory XI and scattered his accomplices, whose crimes have been exposed to the Church by Urban VI."⁷⁵ Pope Urban VI attacked what he saw as the luxuriance and corruption of the cardinals and prelates. He restricted meals to one course, prohibited gifts to the clergy, and verbally lashed the upper echelon of the Church for its greed.⁷⁶ Urban's outbursts were greeted with a collective resentment of the pope's authority, given to him by the very cardinals he now insulted. When the cardinals asked Urban to return the papal curia to Avignon, he refused and turned underlying discontent to rebellion. "To the cardinals," Ullman explains, "this refusal meant, first, that the pope was bent upon asserting his superiority over them, and secondly, that steps must be taken to ensure that Urban should have no further opportunity to appear as their taskmaster."⁷⁷ The Great Schism, perhaps caused by an illegitimate election, an unyielding new pope or even the relocation to Rome, was largely the result of a struggle for authority between pontiff and cardinals. Even Wyclif's attacks on Church authority could not match the struggle for power occurring within the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

While the Church's authority was split between two papal courts, Wyclif was strengthening his original claims against clerical property in his *De ecclesia*, which was

⁷⁴ Renouard, *The Avignon Papacy*, 69.

⁷⁵ Quoted in Rex, *The Lollards*, 32.

⁷⁶ Ullman, *The Origins of the Great Schism*, 45-6.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

circulated in 1379.⁷⁸ With scripture as his evidence, Wyclif condemned endowment of the Church and the worldly possessions of the clergy. Richard Rex explains that Wyclif traced “all the evils of the contemporary Church to worldliness” but more importantly saw “the renunciation of worldly wealth and power by the Church as the condition of healing the Schism.”⁷⁹ In Wyclif’s view, corruption and greed had split the Church; only through implementation of his reforms could the Church be whole once again. The Great Schism would not be mended in Wyclif’s lifetime, and its resolution would not come from the Church’s renunciation of wealth or property. In fact, the perceived moral corruption of the Church by material wealth would leave a stain on clergy members long after the Schism ended.

Though Ullman agrees that the Church’s “immorality, luxury, and lasciviousness” drove the Schism, the two and later three factions of the Church would only become unified under cardinal usurpation of papal authority.⁸⁰ The Great Schism was essentially a conflict of governance. The Pope traditionally held the position of monarch, disseminating authority to the body of cardinals who elected him. After the passionate and overzealous demonstrations of that authority by Pope Urban VI, the cardinals questioned the traditional Church hierarchy, instead implementing a constitutional monarchy in the Council of Constance—what Ullman calls “a body illegally convened, but legally disposing of three popes.”⁸¹ The Council of Constance established a weakened papal authority and an emboldened ecclesiastical hierarchy. However, the Great Schism’s effects were not limited to Church government; European nations divided themselves by

⁷⁸ Rex, *The Lollards*, 37.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Ullman, *The Origins of the Great Schism*, 6.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

allegiance to the two heads of the Church—a division that affected all levels of lay and clerical society. Ullman does not exaggerate when he claims, “The Church, the reality of whose power and the actuality of whose existence remained an unshakable axiom with all, constituting a determinative factor in the moral and political life of nation and individual, now provided a repulsive spectacle of unworthiness and dishonor.” Doubt towards ecclesiastical government, papal power, and spiritual authority shook the laboring and the devout alike.⁸²

In the midst of papal decline and factious infighting within the Church, a peasant uprising swept across England. Though a reaction against lay government, the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 and its challenge to the received system of authority was set against a backdrop of Church destabilization. Wyclif’s increasingly heretical writing, too, was undoubtedly affected by both ecclesiastical and secular unrest. Though his pronouncements become more radical and the Church’s response much more aggressive following the Peasants’ Revolt, critics have spent much time deemphasizing the relationship between Wyclif and the rebellion. As far back as 1906, Charles Oman vehemently denied any affiliation between Wyclif, or even the Great Schism, and the uprising. He asserts that “It does not seem that Wycliffe’s recent attack on the Pope, the Friars, and the ‘Caesarean Clergy’ had any appreciable influence on the origin or the course of the rebellion,” adding that “There were no attacks on the clergy *quâ* clergy (though plenty of assaults on them in their capacity as landlords), no religious outrages, no setting forth of doctrinal grievances, no iconoclasm, singularly little church-breaking.”⁸³ While Richard Rex more recently recognized an anticlerical vein in the

⁸² Ibid., 98-99.

⁸³ Charles Oman, *The Great Revolt of 1381* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), 19.

Peasants' Revolt, he denies that Wyclif's teachings had any impact on the uprising, arguing "None of the surviving accounts of the peasants' grievances and demands betrays any dissatisfaction with the religious services offered by the Catholic Church."⁸⁴

Oman and Rex may be correct in denying Wyclif's or any of his followers' direct involvement with the Peasants' Revolt. Implicitly, though, the peasants and Wyclif critique the obligations accompanying land and its distribution. Wyclif asserted that possessions, including land, were God-given. His theory of lordship in grace, while directed specifically at the Church, also entailed the belief that no group should have exclusive or unrestricted ownership.⁸⁵ Far from destroying all property rights or advocating for a communist state, Wilks observes that Wyclif actually supported "the lay ideal of theocratic monarchy and a proprietary church."⁸⁶ The prince was divinely empowered to distribute land in spite of the Church's self-claimed immunity from lay authority. Moreover, Wyclif supported the dispossession of rulers, both lay and ecclesiastical, for breaking the law, or for "a failure to carry out his divinely ordained function."⁸⁷ Despite Wyclif's purpose to free the clergy from distracting or perhaps demoralizing temporal possessions, Rex admits that his theory "might seem to undermine all human property rights."⁸⁸ More importantly, Wyclif inadvertently justified rebellion by supporting the dispossession of law-breaking rulers. He may have criticized the Peasants' Revolt in writing, but Wyclif's earlier ideas on property and lawful distribution undeniably mirror the peasants' demands.

⁸⁴ Rex, *The Lollards*, 52.

⁸⁵ Rex, *The Lollards*, 36.

⁸⁶ Wilks, *Wyclif Political Ideas and Practice*, 31.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁸⁸ Rex, *The Lollards*, 36.

Wyclif's unwavering belief in a divinely-empowered prince is shared by the peasants' anti-villeinage propositions and their devotion to Richard II. The peasants' declaration against personal bondage, if successful, would have undermined the entire system of villeinage and the manorial system's distribution of property rights. Though their concerns are divided along clerical and lay lines, Wyclif and the peasants share an underlying belief that no group—divine or noble—should have special access to land. Both parties agree that land currently has obligations that negatively impact its possessors—whether those obligations corrupt members of the Church or place an unfair burden on villeins. Even more remarkable, though, is the peasants' reverence for Richard II despite their criticisms towards the system of villeinage. The peasants despised other representations of secular authority, including John of Gaunt, but claimed their actions were for the sake of Richard II. Despite their many criticisms of traditional systems of authority, both lay and ecclesiastic, the rebels and Wyclif maintained belief in the monarch's God-given power to rule. As R. B. Dobson suggests, Wyclif and the peasants are linked not only by their beliefs, but by a “profound crisis of credibility” in trusted institutions.⁸⁹

Doubt in traditionally stable hierarchies, clerical or lay, is the largest factor underlying both Wyclif's and the peasants' challenges to authority, and such opposition to existing systems did not go unignored by intellectual or religious authorities. As Aston suggests, “If property could be removed from a delinquent church in time of necessity, might not the same argument be equally applied to secular owners?” And more threatening yet, she poses, “If lay lords could and should correct churchmen, might not

⁸⁹ Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, xxxvii.

others in turn claim the power to correct them?”⁹⁰ The same questions were asked by contemporary chroniclers of the revolt, namely Thomas Walsingham and Henry Knighton. Wyclif’s ideology became a danger to all systems of received governance, despite Wyclif’s singular intentions. Knighton labels Wyclif “the real breaker of the unity of the church, the author of discord between the laity and clergy, the indefatigable sower of illicit doctrines and the disturber of the Christian church.”⁹¹ Walsingham, like many others, determined the leaders of the Peasants’ Revolt, including John Ball, were followers of Wyclif’s “perverse doctrines and opinions and crazy heresies.”⁹² Regardless of whether Wyclif inspired the revolt or the rebels consciously adapted his teaching to their ends, “contemporary opinion,” Aston claims, “apparently believed, and acted on the belief, that there was such a connection.”⁹³ That unsavory connection was not severed by Wyclif; in his *Triologus* of 1382 to 1383, Wyclif strengthened his argument that the Church should refrain from all representations of temporal power; the endowment of the church was a grave sin and expropriation of clerical property was the only solution.⁹⁴ By May of 1382, the London Blackfriars condemned Wyclif’s doctrines as heretical. Wyclif still wrote in his retirement, but died in two short years.⁹⁵

The dramatic destabilization of a long-trusted institution, like the Catholic Church, or an ideology, like the three-estate system, influenced every level of society. The Avignon papacy, the Great Schism, and the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 are visible

⁹⁰ Aston, *Lollards and Reformers*, 3.

⁹¹ Henry Knighton, *Chronicon Henrici Knighton*, quoted in Dobson, *The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381*, 62. The information about Henry Knighton is found in Dobson, *The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381*, 376.

⁹² Thomas Walsingham, *The Chronica Maiora of Thomas Walsingham 1376-1422*, trans. David Preest (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005), 162. R. B. Dobson concurs with Aston that John Ball was believed to be an adherent of Wyclif’s teachings, *The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381*, 373.

⁹³ Aston, *Lollards and Reformers*, 7.

⁹⁴ Rex, *The Lollards*, 37-8.

⁹⁵ Wilks, *Wyclif Political Ideas and Practice*, 3.

evidence of a larger crisis of authority occurring in the Late Middle Ages. Threats to seemingly unrelated institutions were all part of Dobson's "profound crisis of credibility."⁹⁶ Wyclif's theories on property were inexorably intertwined with the peasants' demands because both parties challenged existing systems of received authority. Though the peasants may not have voiced criticism of church government as Wyclif did, they were still influenced by the visible greed and schism within a foundational institution. Wyclif and the rebels are only two voices responding to social and ecclesiastic unrest. The pilgrims of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* live in the same chaotic history, meaning that each of their Tales is colored and perhaps inspired by the significant crisis in credibility revealed the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and the Great Schism.

⁹⁶ See note 89.

THE TALES

An Exemplum ‘for the Wyves love of Bathe:’ Disrupting Form and Distributing Authority in the Clerk’s Tale

In the series of tales termed the Marriage Group by George L. Kittredge, the Clerk’s Tale comes fourth and responds, like the others, to the Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale.⁹⁷ The Wife of Bath, the Friar, the Summoner, the Clerk, the Merchant, the Squire and the Franklin are concerned with marriage, “the most important problem in organized society.”⁹⁸ Fittingly, the Wife of Bath and the Clerk choose the exemplum form—an exemplary narrative told to demonstrate a moral lesson—to instruct the other pilgrims of their answers to the marriage problem. The Wife’s lesson, says Kittredge, is “What Women most Desire,” and that desire is sovereignty in marriage.⁹⁹ The subsequent tales respond to the Wife of Bath’s lesson, but only the Clerk, Kittredge claims, is the true “antithesis to the Wife of Bath.”¹⁰⁰ The Clerk borrows Petrarch’s Griselda story, which preaches “wifely fidelity and woman’s fortitude under affliction,” in order to rebuke the Wife of Bath; the Clerk ironically sympathizes with the Wife of Bath, satirical mocking her unorthodox view of wifehood through feigned compassion, at least according to Kittredge.¹⁰¹ Yet, the Clerk does not retell his source material verbatim; he not only interrupts the tale on multiple occasions but also adds a song “for the Wyves love of Bathe.”¹⁰² The Clerk wields narratorial authority as teller of the exemplum to

⁹⁷ George Lyman Kittredge, *Chaucer and his Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1915), 147.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 191.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 194.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), IV.1170.

repurpose the Griselda story for a socially and theologically destabilized present. When the Wife of Bath claims “it is an impossible / That any clerk wol speke good of wyves,” she is wrong. Despite the suspected irony of the Clerk’s Tale and Envoy, the Clerk reinvents Petrarch’s exemplum for contemporary audiences by appropriating the Griselda story through interruptions and the Envoy. In the wake of the Avignon papacy, the Great Schism, John Wyclif’s heretical tracts, and the consequent weakening of ecclesiastical credibility and authority, the Clerk disrupts the expected narratorial authority of the exemplum form and the traditional system of received authority in marriage. In direct opposition to Church precept, the Clerk reduces literary authorities and hierarchical systems of received authority by reminding everyone that man’s shared mortality levels all regardless of estate. Furthermore, he espouses social mobility instead of hierarchical stasis, decries cruel assays by husbands regardless of divine or Christian purpose, asserts obligation to natural instinct instead of traditional systems of authority, and authorizes wives to be the moral keepers of their husbands for common spiritual profit.

Because the Clerk presents his Tale as a retelling, the exemplum form appears to be a passive choice dictated by Petrarchan literary authority. However, the Clerk’s chosen form enables him to appropriate Petrarch’s authority and reimagine the Griselda narrative. Larry Scanlon explains that the exemplum is “a narrative form which explicitly combines narrative with cultural authority.”¹⁰³ That cultural authority is expressed in the *sententia* or moral attached to the narrative. As a public exemplum, the Clerk’s Tale is distinct from the sermon exemplum in three ways: (1) it concerns lay authority as opposed to hagiography or ecclesiastical authority, (2) its narrative demonstrates a

¹⁰³ Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 4.

violation instead of a fulfillment of the stated moral, and (3) it locates authority in the monarch rather than the Church. These three features define the Griselda narrative as Petrarch tells it, but the conflict between lay and ecclesiastical authority is especially relevant to the Clerk's retelling. Scanlon observes that the relocation of authority in public exempla corresponds to the chaotic historical environment of the exemplum's telling and its narrator.¹⁰⁴

Historical disorder in the Middle Ages is not hard to find. The five crises of the Middle Ages—the Great Famine, the Black Death, the Avignon papacy, the Great Schism, and the Hundred Years' War—all occurred from the fourteenth to the fifteenth centuries. England additionally faced the turbulent reign of the boy king Richard II and witnessed one the best-documented uprisings in English history, the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. However, as Scanlon proposes, the chaotic historical environment most relevant to the public exempla is ecclesiastical. As he explains, the terms *auctoritas* and *potestas* defined the division of power between Church and lay authorities. The Church believed “*auctoritas* designated the overriding sovereignty the Church wielded through the pope over all *societas Christiana*, while *potestas* designated only the power of execution, and the day-to-day overseeing of administrative matters to which lay princes were restricted.”¹⁰⁵ Whether or not the papalist view of *auctoritas* ever truly depicted reality, the five crises of the Middle Ages resulted in considerable doubt towards traditional theological authority and unquestionably impaired the Church's aspirations for complete *auctoritas*. It is in the midst of a crisis of ecclesiastical authority, demonstrated by the

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 81.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 38.

Avignon papacy, Great Schism, and John Wyclif's heretical challenges to Church property that the Clerk's public exemplum resides.

The Clerk is especially burdened with the crisis of ecclesiastical authority as a hopeful recipient of a Church benefice and self-professed moral instructor. According to Anne M. Scott, the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 gave members of the clergy the authority to teach, dictated what to teach, and required the clergy to teach "in a form which the unlearned can comprehend."¹⁰⁶ The Clerk is faced with two rival demands: on one hand, he is subject to the same doubts of traditional Church authority as the rest of society; on the other, he has the responsibility to teach Church precepts, thereby supporting and spreading the ecclesiastical authority currently in question. Under such circumstances, the Clerk's choice of exemplum and Christian subject matter are undeniably significant decisions. The exemplum form, fraught with the problem of lay, ecclesiastical, and narratorial authority, requires the Clerk to confront and engage with the current crises in authority. Moreover, his inclination to teach in spite of papal doubt is clearly not a passive decision.

The description of the Clerk in the General Prologue suggests an individual learned in rhetoric and ecclesiastical precepts, who is not only well-suited to tell a public exemplum but also inclined to do so. The Clerk "That unto logyk hadde longe ygo" is a student of logic, a "philosopher," and a reader of Aristotle's philosophy.¹⁰⁷ His devotion to study is visible in his stature—"And he nas nat right fat, I undertake, / But looked

¹⁰⁶ Anne M. Scott, "The Role of Exempla in Educating through Emotion: The Deadly Sin of 'lecherie' in Robert Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne* (1303-1317)," in *Authority, Gender, and Emotions in Late Medieval and Early Modern England*, ed. Susan Broomhall (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 35.

¹⁰⁷ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, l.286, 297.

holwe, and therto sobrelly.”¹⁰⁸ His poverty is a consequence of uncompromising moral virtue, for “he hadde gotten hym yet no benefice, / Ne was so worldly for to have office.”¹⁰⁹ Since the Clerk is so committed to theological study, he denies secular, “worldly” office and instead hopes for ecclesiastical living. He would rather have “twenty bookes” than “robes riche, or fithete, or gay sautrie.”¹¹⁰ In keeping with the Fourth Lateran Council’s directions, “gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche.”¹¹¹ In spite of the historical pressures facing him, or perhaps because of those pressures, the Clerk desires to impart theological teachings to the fellow pilgrims. Though the genre he chooses may have been inspired by the poet laureate Petrarch, the Clerk would have also been aware of the exemplum as a popular educational medium of the Church.

The Church “syllabus,” instituted in Archbishop Pecham’s Council of Lambeth in 1281, contained the moral instruction required for the laity to live a good life and follow Church precepts. The text included proverbs, examples, and exempla “to give both textual authority and the authority of commonly held folk wisdom to the precepts.”¹¹² According to Scott, the exempla were “specifically designed to educate by engaging the emotions” and are “locked into the authority of all who have created, used, and adapted this material.”¹¹³ For educated and uneducated audiences alike, a successful exemplum persuaded through entertainment; Scott explains, “their power to move the audience to change depended ... on the emotional impact of the narrative.”¹¹⁴ In a period of strained

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 288-9.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 291-2.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 294, 296.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 308.

¹¹² Scott, “The Role of Exempla in Educating through Emotion,” 34.

¹¹³ Ibid., 35. Scott is referring to scriptural authority and the teachings of the Church fathers, as well as exempla, in this quote concerning authority. She references sections of Robert Mannyng’s *Handlyng Synne*, but the authority vested in his exempla also apply to the exemplum in the Clerk’s Tale.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 38.

papal authority, the exemplum is a complicated and unavoidably political genre. Yet, the Clerk knowingly chooses a form that relies on ecclesiastical authority and dictates Church-authorized morals during a period of doubt. Such a choice may be motivated by the tale-telling structure of pilgrim's dialogue.

Exempla appear frequently in the *Canterbury Tales*, likely because they meet the instructive and entertaining requirements of the Host's tale-telling game. The Wife of Bath's Tale, as mentioned above, is an exemplum, as is the Pardoner's. Before allowing the Clerk to speak, the Host lays out his demands for the coming story:

“Sire Clerk of Oxenford,”oure Hooste sayde,
“Ye ryde as coy and stille as dooth a mayde
Were newe spoused, sittynge at the bord;
This day ne herde I of youre tonge a word.
I trowe ye studie aboute som sophyme;
But Salomon seith ‘every thyng hath tyme.’

“For Goddes sake, as beth of bettre cheere!
It is no tyme for to studien heere.
Telle us som myrie tale, by youre fey!
For what man that is entred in a pley,
He nedes moot unto the pley assente.
But precheth nat, as freres doon in Lente,
To make us for oure olde synnes wepe,
Ne that thy tale make us nat to slepe.”¹¹⁵

Though the Host equates the Clerk's silence with a woman on her wedding night, the Clerk humbly acquiesces to his demands. The Clerk “benignely” answers, “I am under youre yerde; / Ye han of us as now the governance, / And therefore wol I do yow obesiance.”¹¹⁶ Agreeing not to admonish the pilgrims for their past sins, the Clerk will impart instructions for future behavior with “best sentence and moost solass.”¹¹⁷ The

¹¹⁵ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, IV.1-14.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21, 22-23.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, I.798.

narrative of the exemplum satisfies the Host's demand for a "myrie tale," while the *sententia* allows the Clerk to pass on Church precepts to the fellow pilgrims and fulfill his own desire to teach. Seemingly, his chosen exemplum—the Griselda tale as told by "Fraunceys Petrak, the lauriate poete"—appears to uphold traditional authority through its prestigious author and his conservative, Christian moral.¹¹⁸

The Griselda narrative is attached to not only Petrarch's literary status but also a long line of authoritative and esteemed authors. As J. Burke Severs observes, of the seven potential versions of the Griselda folk tale that predated 1400, the first written version of the Griselda story occurred in Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* published in 1353. Petrarch took Boccaccio's original Italian and translated it (with copious additions) into Latin in 1373.¹¹⁹ Of the five remaining versions, only one is relevant to the Clerk's Tale: an anonymous French prose translation that was written sometime before the Clerk's Tale.¹²⁰ Noting the close—often word-for-word—parallels between Petrarch's and the anonymous French prose versions, Severs asserts that both texts are the source material for the Clerk's Tale "beyond the slightest doubt."¹²¹

The original source for Boccaccio and the subsequent translations derives from an orally transmitted folk tale, though elements of the original have been lost. The folk tale belongs to the Cupid and Psyche genre, which involves the relationship of a mortal wife

¹¹⁸ Ibid., IV.31.

¹¹⁹ J. Burke Severs, *The Literary Relationships of Chaucer's "Clerkes Tale"* (Hamden: Yale University Press, 1942), 3.

¹²⁰ Ibid. See Severs p. 3 for descriptions of all versions of the Griselda story before 1400. Giovanni Sercambi retold Griselda's story in 1374, working from Boccaccio's version and retaining the original Italian. Using Petrarch's Latin as his source, Philippe de Mézières published *Le Menagier de Paris* in 1393 in French. The last version of Griselda's story before Chaucer's retelling occurred in the French play *L'Estoire de la Marquise de Saluce Miz par Personnages et Rigme* in 1395. The potential seventh source, a Latin verse translation based on Petrarch, may have existed before Chaucer's death, as well.

¹²¹ Ibid., 36-37.

and immortal husband, whose love encounters obstacles arising from their unlike natures.¹²² Of the Cupid and Psyche genre, Griselda's folk tale is a member of the highly specialized Patience Group. The specific characteristics of the Patience Group are as follows: the immortal husband demands absolute, emotionless obedience from his mortal wife; the wife's children are taken and said to be killed; the husband leaves his wife and marries a new bride, whose wedding the old wife helps to arrange; and, after overcoming all these obstacles, the true (old) wife is recognized as the rightful partner of her immortal husband and her children are returned to her.¹²³

By the time the Griselda folk tale reached Boccaccio, all traces of the supernatural had been erased, meaning that supernatural elements are absent from all later versions of the tale.¹²⁴ These missing elements present a problem of motivation for subsequent authors. In Boccaccio's retelling, the immortal husband becomes a demanding, arbitrary, and uncontrollable prince. Boccaccio sees Gualtieri (the Clerk's Walter) as not just an unsympathetic annoyance but an unforgivable, condemnable monster. For him, only Griselda could have withstood such inhumane trials without emotion, and such constancy is impossible to expect in women or men.¹²⁵ Boccaccio's attitude toward the tale is a worldly, licentious one. Employing the cultural authority entailed in the exemplum form, Petrarch reimagines the Griselda narrative and Valterius (Boccaccio's Gualtieri).

Rather than become irritated at Valterius' seeming lack of motivation for cruelly testing his wife, Petrarch sees a Christian lesson. He celebrates the fortitude and constancy of Griselda for withstanding all afflictions; Griselda, then, becomes the model

¹²² Ibid., 4.

¹²³ Ibid., 5.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 7.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 12-13.

Christian, patiently facing God-sent trials.¹²⁶ Valterius' actions are forgiven, or at least considered necessary for expressing Petrarch's moral. Consequently, Petrarch softens Valterius' actions where Boccaccio explicitly condemns him; Griselda receives more attention from Petrarch in speeches, revealing her willing submission for the love of her husband.¹²⁷ It is this softened and sympathized version of Valterius, as well as the model Christian version of Griselda, that appear in the anonymous French translation of Petrarch. Petrarch's version of the Griselda narrative inspired two more retellings: the Clerk's Tale and *Le Ménagier de Paris*.

The anonymous *Le Ménagier de Paris*, compiled between 1392 and 1394 is a household conduct book, narrated by a wealthy, older Parisian husband for his fifteen-year-old wife, that includes the Griselda narrative in a section on wifely obedience.¹²⁸ The story's purpose, the narrator says, is an example "concerning this matter of disobedience and indeed how benefits come to a woman who is obedient to her husband."¹²⁹ Like the Clerk, the narrator of *Le Ménagier* names his source as "Master Francis Petrarch who was crowned poet laureate in Rome," but the narrator actually relies on the French translation of Petrarch by Philippe de Mézières.¹³⁰ Like the *Canterbury Tales*, the author should be differentiated from the dramatic narrator of *Le Ménagier*. The work is generally considered a "literary" creation as opposed to a "sincere didactic treatise from an actual husband."¹³¹ The Clerk and the narrator of *Le Ménagier*

¹²⁶ Ibid., 13.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 14.

¹²⁸ *The Good Wife's Guide (Le Ménagier de Paris): A Medieval Household Book*, trans. and ed. Gina Greco and Christine Rose (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 1.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 105.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 105, 115.

¹³¹ Ibid., 2.

purposefully name their authoritative source material, but the narrators manipulate the authority of the exemplum form for different ends.

Although the *sententia* of an exemplum, as Scanlon explains, is an expression of cultural authority, such authority, he adds, is dynamic and changing. The exemplum “did not merely ‘confirm’ moral authority, but reproduced it.”¹³² The *sententia* assigned to a narrative changes with each teller, consequently bestowing the narrator with the authority to create and disseminate a new moral; narratives, then, are repurposed with new *sententia* according to the whims of their tellers but also the cultural and moral environment of the retold exemplum. Appropriating authority depends on temporal or historical change, for “it involves not just deference to the past but a claim of identification with it and a representation of that identity made by one part of the present to another.”¹³³ Authority is not passively repeated from past dictums; reproducing authority requires agency in the present. As Scanlon argues, “The power to define the past is also the power to control the constraint the past exerts in the present.”¹³⁴ The exemplum form epitomizes the evolution of cultural authority over time and offers its narrator the ability to reinterpret past authorities.

The Clerk’s Tale is decidedly not an inert reiteration of Petrarch’s exemplum. The Clerk confronts the history of authoritative retellings of the Griselda tale, recognizes the ecclesiastical crisis of authority, and claims himself an interpreter of cultural morality in his choice of genre and subject material. Both the Clerk and the narrator of *Le Ménagier* assert the authority to manipulate their source texts, a process of appropriation that allows

¹³² Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power*, 5.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

them to wield cultural power. Bertrand H. Bronson's opinion that "there is no need to differentiate the Clerk and Chaucer in this narrative" ignores the appropriation of authority entailed in the exemplum form.¹³⁵ The equation of the Clerk with Chaucer presents further problems when Bronson claims that "Chaucer *not* ironically but quite humbly sets vast store, as no doubt did most of his contemporaries, on the weight of ancient authority."¹³⁶ Even if Chaucer unequivocally complied with traditional authority, the Clerk clearly does not share the same tacit acceptance. To furthermore accept that "from this attitude of reverence it follows that the primary obligation of him who retells is not to 'falsen hir mateere' but to give a faithful report" turns the Clerk's Tale into a mere translation and not an exemplum as Scanlon defines it.¹³⁷ Equating Chaucer with the Clerk limits the exemplum as a dynamic marker of social change and ignores the Clerk's politically significant decision to manipulate Petrarch's source text.

Bronson's claim that Chaucer and the Clerk are reverent translators of previous authorities is further denied by the Clerk's pointed changes to the original text, which he clearly indicates in his Prologue. After praising Petrarch whose "rethorike sweete / Enlumyned al Ytaille of poetrie," the Clerk summarizes the "prohemye" written in "heigh stile" preceding Petrarch's version of the Griselda tale.¹³⁸ Yet, for all the respect he pays to Petrarchan authority, the Clerk says of Petrarch's introduction "And trewely, as to my juggement, / Me thynketh it a thyng impertinent."¹³⁹ The Clerk establishes that his tale will not be a direct translation of Petrarch but a repurposing meant to suit the needs of the

¹³⁵ Bertrand H. Bronson, *In Search of Chaucer* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960), 105.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹³⁸ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, IV.32, 43, 42.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 53-54. In this use, "impertinent" should be understood as "irrelevant" as opposed to its modern meaning.

Clerk's audience. Where the Clerk clearly distances himself from Petrarch, the *Le Ménagier* narrator names his authoritative source material and introduces the Griselda narrative as an unaltered retelling, simply saying, "The story reads as follows."¹⁴⁰ Before the Tale begins, the Clerk continues to hold Petrarch at arm's length and assert his own authority over the Griselda story.

When the Clerk repeatedly emphasizes that Petrarch is "now deed and nayled in his cheste," he offers an explanation or justification for deviating from his authoritative source material.¹⁴¹ Of Petrarch and Giovanni da Lignano ("Lynyan") the Clerk says that "Deeth, that wol nat suffre us dwellen heer, / But as it were a twynkng of an ye, / Hem bothe hath slayn, and alle shul we dye."¹⁴² The Clerk reminds the pilgrims that his authority figures are dead and that death will meet everyone—a morbid warning that would be particularly appropriate for a society that saw the Great Famine, the Black Plague, and the Hundred Years' War. The Clerk displaces his authorities, removing them from the "heer" in which the pilgrims reside, but he also reduces their immortality to the level of man; these traditional authority figures could not escape man's shared fate. After effectively placing these intellectual authorities in the past, the Clerk asserts himself as new authority in the present, calling Petrarch's introduction "a thyng impertinent." As Scanlon suggests, "Authority, then, is an enabling past reproduced in the present."¹⁴³ The Clerk identifies with the past by appropriating Petrarch's exemplum, but the Clerk also limits the power of past authority in his appropriation of the Griselda tale. The Clerk

¹⁴⁰ *The Good Wife's Guide*, 105.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 34, 36-38.

¹⁴³ Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power*, 38.

envisioned by Bronson would not dare to contradict traditional authority so casually.¹⁴⁴

Rather, the Clerk, fully aware of the exemplum as a shifting, dynamic genre, manipulates the Griselda story to fit his current social and moral environment, while limiting the power of Petrarch's cultural authority in a new age.

Neither the Clerk nor the narrator of *Le Ménagier* is the first to retell the Griselda story. The narrative appeared previously in a litany of exempla, each author attributing a modified *sententia* to Griselda's tribulations. With each new *sententia*, another author asserts the authority not only to comment on societal mores but also to attempt to provoke a reaction in the audience. Scott explains that "the exempla fulfill the role of engaging the emotions – the mind assents and the heart drives the will to action."¹⁴⁵ For the Pardoner, that action is the penitent purchase of an indulgence.¹⁴⁶ Petrarch's intended reaction is similarly theological: all people should bear the suffering of God-sent affliction with the patience of Griselda. When J. Allan Mitchell claims that "a failure to come to grips with a unifying moral principle governing the tale is finally no objection to it," he leaves the exemplum unfulfilled.¹⁴⁷ Mitchell forgets the expected result of the exemplum when he argues, "even when the morality [of the Tale] is persuasive, its generality does not entail a predictable generality on the side of reader response." The very goal of the exemplum is to "entail a predictable generality on the side of reader response" and to appropriate cultural authority in doing so.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ See review of Bronson above, notes 135-137.

¹⁴⁵ Scott, "The Role of Exempla in Educating through Emotion," 38.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁴⁷ J. Allan Mitchell, "The Clerk's Tale and the Question of Ethical Monstrosity," *Studies in Philology* 102, no. 1 (2005): 25.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

By altering Petrarch's moral, the Clerk necessarily provokes a new and different response. Not only does he insist that his audience recognize his modifications by figuratively killing Petrarch and past authorities, but he reminds the audience of his authoritative changes to the text in multiple authorial insertions throughout the narrative. These insertions are purposefully marked with the first-person pronoun, both to assert the Clerk's power over the text and to differentiate the Clerk's exemplum from Petrarch's. In his pointed uses of the first-person pronoun, the Clerk denies the continued legitimacy of Petrarch's Christian moral in the face of unstable papal authority and disrupted social order. Instead, the Clerk denies the conventions of the exemplum form by offering authority to listening female pilgrims, ultimately condemning the destabilization of papal authority and supporting, for common profit, the reversal of authority in marriage.

The Griselda story, as told by Petrarch and reiterated by the narrator of *Le Ménagier*, opens in the picturesque region called Saluzzo. According to *Le Ménagier*, the region "from thence to the present has been governed by noble and powerful princes."¹⁴⁹ The current ruler, Walter, is "One of the noblest and most powerful among them." He is "handsome, strong, and nimble, and from noble blood, rich in possessions and power, imbued with good morals, and endowed by nature with a sterling character."¹⁵⁰ Despite the Marquis' glowing portrait, his people are "in a good deal of distress" because "he had one failing: he greatly loved solitude and did not consider the future, and by no means would he marry."¹⁵¹ Where the narrator of *Le Ménagier* recites Walter's one failing

¹⁴⁹ *The Good Wife's Guide*, 106.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

“according to the story” and in third person, the Clerk offers a lesson in the Marquis’ failure, notably using the first-person pronoun “I”:

I blame hym thus: that he considered noght
In tyme comynge what myghte hym bityde,
But on his lust present was al his thoght,
As for to hauke and hunte on every syde.
Wel ny alle othere cures leet he slyde,
And eek he nolde — and that was worst of alle —
Wedde no wyf, for noght that may bifalle.¹⁵²

By not taking a wife, Walter has failed to plan responsibly for the future of Saluzzo.

Without an heir, he would leave his people exposed to the dangers of unknown succession. For Petrarch and the *Le Ménagier* narrator, Walter’s failure to wed acts as instigation for him to marry and thus meet Griselda. The Clerk, however, dwells on this exposition as a moment to establish authority and delineate the social obligations of a ruler.

The Clerk’s insertion appears immediately before a seven-stanza speech orated by one of the townspeople, who reminds the Marquis of the region’s uncertain future upon his death. Though Petrarch’s original and *Le Ménagier* also contain the same emphasis on Walter’s inevitable death, only the Clerk juxtaposes the Marquis’ death with a prologue of authorities’ deaths. The Clerk earlier reminded his audience, “But Deeth, that wol nat suffre us dwellen heer, / But as it were a twynklyng of an ye, / Hem bothe hath slayn, and alle shul we dye.”¹⁵³ Similarly, the people advise the Marquis:

“And thogh youre grene youthe floure as yit,
In crepeth age alwey, as stille as stoon,
And deeth manaceth every age, and smyt
In ech estaat, for ther escapeth noon;
And al so certein as we knowe echoon
That we shul deye, as uncerteyn we alle

¹⁵² Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, IV.78-84.

¹⁵³ See note 142.

Been of that day whan deeth shal on us falle.¹⁵⁴

Where the Clerk used death as a distancing mechanism, placing Petrarch and old authority figures firmly in the past, the people now present death as an equalizer. Death affects all estates, ending the lives of nobility and peasantry alike. Petrarch and the *Le Ménagier* narrator espouse the same sentiment (“All must die”), but the Clerk and the people are connected in their leveling of authority—hierarchical for the townspeople and literary for the Clerk.¹⁵⁵

Walter assents to the marriage and his peoples’ demands, but he requests that he choose his own wife, the very virtuous Griselda. Upon acceptance of Walter’s proposal, Griselda is “dispoillen” on the street, dressed in clothes fitting the nobility, and the two are married the same day.¹⁵⁶ The Clerk then remarks:

And shortly forth this tale for to chace,
I seye that to this newe markysesse
God hath swich favour sent hire of his grace
That it ne semed nat by liklynesse
That she was born and fed in rudenesse,
As in a cote or in an oxe-stalle,
But norissed in an emperoures halle.¹⁵⁷

Where the Clerk presented Walter as a poor example of a ruler, he suggests that Griselda is God-favored. Moreover, the Clerk remarks on her birth as divinely blessed, while the people are surprised at her low estate:

To every wight she woxen is so deere
And worshipful that folk ther she was bore,
And from hire birthe knewe hire yeer by yeere,
Unnethe trowed they — but dorste han swore —
That to Janicle, of which I spak bifore,
She doghter were, for, as by conjecture,

¹⁵⁴ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, IV.120-6.

¹⁵⁵ *The Good Wife’s Guide*, 106.

¹⁵⁶ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, IV.374.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 393-399.

Hem thoughte she was another creature.¹⁵⁸

The Clerk finds Griselda's low birth and rise to the nobility fitting or divinely ordained, but the townspeople hardly believe she is daughter to Janicula, the poorest man of the town.

The Clerk's comments here do not differ substantially from the *Le Ménagier* text. Griselda "shone with divine grace;" she "seemed not to have been brought up and nurtured in a shepherd's or a laborer's hut but rather in a royal or imperial palace."¹⁵⁹ The *Le Ménagier* narrator actually emphasizes Griselda's divine perfection; the people claim "this lady had been sent to them by heaven for the salvation of the realm."¹⁶⁰ The difference between texts is that the Clerk voices the opinion held by the people in Petrarch's and *Le Ménagier*'s versions of the story. Where "everyone remarked" or "they could hardly believe" that Griselda was raised in poverty, the Clerk attributes these views to himself—"I seye."¹⁶¹ Rather than simply praise Griselda or recite the feelings of the people, the Clerk uses this moment to offer another social lesson.

The Clerk sees change in the social order as divine—God allows the virtuous to climb from their low estate to a rank befitting their character. The people see estate as fixed—Griselda's virtuousness is not suited to poverty or the laboring class; she must have come from nobler lineage. Their view would be supported by the traditional medieval belief in a static social hierarchy. However, by inserting himself as narrator and cultural authority, the Clerk denies the people's view and instead instructs the pilgrims that social mobility is not only possible but divinely ordained. Coupled with the Clerk's

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 400-406.

¹⁵⁹ *The Goodwife's Guide*, 109.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid. Also see note 157 for the Clerk's remarks.

earlier leveling of literary authority by inescapable mortality, his insertions thus far have directly challenged or even denied traditional sources of authority. Moreover, the Clerk's statements are not in line with the teachings of the Catholic Church, which relied on faith in traditional authority to establish *auctoritas* over *societas Christiana*. As stated in a sermon by Thomas Wimbleton in 1388, "And þese stasis beþ also nedeful to þe chirche þat non may wel ben wiþouten oþer."¹⁶² Another priest emphasized the importance of social stasis: "iff euery parte of Cristes chirche wold hold hem content with here own occupacions... þan þe grace of almyghty God shuld floresh."¹⁶³ The Church, including the clergy to which the Clerk belongs, required the obedience of all people to their estate. Where the people of Saluzzo still reiterate belief in social stasis, the Clerk advocates for a divinely-ordained social mobility not approved by the Church. He asserts his authority over Petrarch's authoritative source text and Catholic precept.

After Griselda bears her first child, the Clerk continues to interrogate and contradict Petrarch's original narrative. Where Walter decides to "test and tempt" his wife by feigning his daughter's death in *Le Ménagier*, the Clerk interrupts the tale to interject his opinion:¹⁶⁴

He hadde assayed hire ynogh bifore,
 And foond hire evere good; what neded it
 Hire for to tempte, and alwey moore and moore,
 Though som men preise it for a subtil wit?
 But as for me, I seye that yvele it sit
 To assaye a wyf whan that it is no nede,
 And putten hire in angwyssh and in drede.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² Thomas Wimbleton quoted in David Aers, *Chaucer, Langland, and the Creative Imagination* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 2.

¹⁶³ *Middle English Sermons* quoted in Aers, *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination*, 3.

¹⁶⁴ *The Goodwife's Guide*, 109-10.

¹⁶⁵ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, IV.456-463.

The Clerk claims that Walter has already tested his wife enough (presumably during his proposal demands) and rebukes Walter for failing to perform another social obligation; where before Walter cared too little to marry, now he tests his wife beyond reason. In addition to propagating divinely ordained mobility, the Clerk preaches against assaying wives and contradicts Petrarch's Christian moral. He adds, "Nedelees, God woot, he thoghte hire for t'affraye."¹⁶⁶ Petrarch saw Griselda's trials as demonstrative of God-sent tribulation; her patience represented Christian humility amidst divine affliction. The Clerk, however, denies the morality of Walter's trials; even God knows that Griselda should not be tested so cruelly. Where divine suffering is a purposeful lesson in patience for Petrarch, the Clerk views Walter's trials as unnecessary and inhumane. The Clerk asserts his cultural and theological authority over Petrarch's, claiming husbands do not have divine justification to cruelly test their wives, and that he has more accurate knowledge of God's intentions than Petrarch did.

Interestingly, the *Le Ménagier* narrator maintains Petrarch's original, Christian moral while also deeming Walter's trials unnecessary. He holds that, "one must always forbear and return to, accept, and recall ourselves lovingly and graciously to the love of the sovereign, immortal, eternal, and everlasting God, through the example of this poor woman, born in poverty, from a lowly family without distinction or learning, who suffered so much for her mortal friend."¹⁶⁷ Notably, the narrator's explanation of the Griselda story's purpose appears not as an insertion or interruption but after the tale concludes. The narrator, too, indicts Walter for cruelty, adding, "God keep me from trying you in this or any other manner, under any false pretenses!" and apologizes "if the

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 455.

¹⁶⁷ *The Goodwife's Guide*, 118.

story contains excessive amounts of cruelty, in my opinion more than is fitting.”¹⁶⁸ The Clerk’s Tale and *Le Ménagier* similarly condemn excessive testing of wives, even if Petrarch authorized it for the sake of Christian patience.

Still, the *Le Ménagier* narrator does not claim new authority over the Griselda story. Instead, he reminds his audience of Petrarch’s continued influence: “But the story is thus, and I must not amend or change it, for someone wiser than I compiled and recounted it. Since others are familiar with it, I very much wish that you also may be familiar with it and be able to converse about such things as everyone else does.”¹⁶⁹ The narrator abstains from interrupting or altering his authoritative source text. Moreover, the Griselda story, even if the narrator does not understand Walter’s cruel assays, is a lesson in the narrator’s larger scheme of educating his new wife in well-known literary authorities and texts. Though the narrator modifies Petrarch’s original moral, he still explains that the story “was translated to show that since God, the Church, and reason require that [wives] be obedient, and since their husbands will that they have so much to suffer, to avoid worse they must submit themselves in all things to the will of their husbands and endure patiently all that their husbands require.”¹⁷⁰ *Le Ménagier*, far from contradicting Petrarch’s Christian lesson, actually extends his lesson to wifely obedience. Women should be obedient not just to God’s will but to their husbands’. The *Le Ménagier* narrator may question Walter’s actions, but he ultimately reaffirms the importance of scholastic authority on contemporary society.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 119.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 118.

In contrast, the Clerk expands his criticism of Petrarch's authoritative original. Though he earlier upheld Griselda as an example of virtue, the Clerk admonishes Griselda's complete obedience to her husband as an impediment to her maternal obligations. After she allows her daughter to be taken to her supposed death, he remarks:

I trowe that to a norice in this cas
It had been hard this reuthe for to se;
Well myghte a mooder thane han cryd "allas!"
But nathelees so sad stidefast was she
That she endured al adversitee.¹⁷¹

Le Ménagier praises Griselda's "virtuous reserves of courage" and "obedience to her lord," where the Clerk suggests that she should have prioritized maternal instinct.¹⁷² If Petrarch's purpose in telling the Griselda tale was to advise submission to all adversity, the Clerk has now directly contradicted his source's lesson. Instead, the Clerk proposes that the social obligation to motherhood outweighs obedience in marriage. Here, the Clerk's interruption indicates a change in social obligation that likely corresponds to the historical disorder of the Late Middle Ages. With increased doubt in papal authority and a destabilized social hierarchy, commitment to the most foundational level of social obligation—the marriage—is arguably shaken too. In the chaotic social environment of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, obligation to a putatively natural order, to maternal instincts, is more essential than adherence to the Church-propagated social hierarchy. By critiquing Petrarch's outdated exemplum, the Clerk limits the power of past authorities over present life. The very quality that Petrarch celebrated in his exemplum—Griselda's steadfastness—is the object of the Clerk's criticism; her steadfastness is anachronistic in an age of social and theological upheaval.

¹⁷¹ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, IV.561-5.

¹⁷² *The Goodwife's Guide*, 110.

Upon the feigned death of Griselda's second child, the Clerk indicts both Walter's and Griselda's adherence to the received system of authority in marriage over their parental obligations. In contrast, *Le Ménagier* applauds her actions and softens Walter's cruelty; the narrator posits that "Queens, princesses, marquises, and all other women, hear what the lady replied to her lord and take example."¹⁷³ The Clerk omits such praise. Unlike in the Clerk's previous interruptions, he now poses the question of Griselda's behavior to the audience:

But now of wommen wolde I axen fayne
If thise assayes myghte nat suffise?
What koude a sturdy housbonde moore devyse
To preeve hir wyfhod and hir stedefastnesse,
And he continuyng evere in sturdinesse?¹⁷⁴

The Clerk offers this question to the female pilgrims, including the Wife of Bath. The shift from a declarative statement to an interrogative question is significant, especially since the question is voiced by a male clerk. Until this point, the Clerk has appropriated the exemplum's cultural authority for himself; he has leveled literary and hierarchical authority through inescapable mortality, criticized Petrarch's original exemplum to espouse social mobility instead of stasis, decried cruel assays by husbands regardless of divine or Christian purpose, and asserted obligation to natural or maternal instinct in spite of the traditional system of received authority. Now, however, the Clerk extends authority to outside observers, to listening pilgrims. In doing so, he dramatically disrupts the exemplum and the traditional authority bestowed on its narrator. By removing cultural authority from himself, the Clerk gives authority to the female pilgrims and denies the expectations of the genre. Further disrupting the exemplum form, the Clerk

¹⁷³ Ibid., 112.

¹⁷⁴ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, IV.696-700.

appropriates a convention of the *demande d'amour*, the love problem, frequently posed in medieval romances. The Clerk denies the expectations of the exemplum form, offers traditionally male, clerical authority to women, and pointedly contradicts conventional clerical attitudes towards wives.

Sharon Farmer explains that women and wives were seen increasingly as a “source of disorder in society;” social stability was predicated on the controlled distribution of women through marriage—both to continue the arrangement of noble marriages to secure alliances and to preserve the system of primogeniture.¹⁷⁵ The Church supported patriarchy as the traditional Church sentiment that “husbands should rule over wives” strengthened, causing clerics to instruct married men “to restrain the potentially destructive power of their wives.”¹⁷⁶ Women and wives were forbidden from authoritative roles in both marriage and the Church on the basis of supposed moral and biological differences between the sexes. And yet the ceding of authority to wives was not entirely unheard of in the Middle Ages. In 1215, Thomas of Chobham enjoined wives “to be preachers to their husbands, because no priest is able to soften the heart of a man the way his wife can.”¹⁷⁷ Thomas added that, “For this reason, the sin of a man is often imputed to his wife if, through her negligence, he is not corrected.”¹⁷⁸ Despite the Church-authorized inclination to wrest authority from women, the Clerk mirrors Thomas’s views in returning spiritual responsibility to wives as moral keepers of their husbands; *Le Ménagier* does not.

¹⁷⁵ Sharon Farmer, “Clerical Images of Medieval Wives,” *Speculum* 61, no. 3 (1986), 519.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ Thomas Chobham, *Summa confessorum*, quoted in Farmer, “Clerical Images of Medieval Wives,” 517.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

Here, the interpretations espoused by the Clerk and the *Le Ménagier* narrator become incompatible. For *Le Ménagier*, obedience to one's husband is also obedience to God; the narrator can question Walter's cruelty while maintaining Petrarch's overarching Christian *sententia*. The Clerk, however, preaches a reversal of the system of received authority in marriage. Wives have not only the ability but also the responsibility to correct their husbands' immoral actions. Griselda's failure to reproach Walter makes her culpable in the feigned murder of her children. The *Le Ménagier* narrator's dictum that "good ladies should conceal their sufferings and be silent concerning them" enables the immoral behavior of their husbands, resulting in an obedience unfavorable to God.¹⁷⁹ Instead, as Thomas of Chobham advised, a wife should "exercise her influence by means of oral communication" and in verbally persuading her husband against sin, "the wife imitate[s] Christ."¹⁸⁰ Far from displeasing God, a reversal of the system of received authority in marriage allows men and women to better fulfill God's will.

The Clerk agrees with Thomas' advice for wives in the Lenvoy de Chaucer:
 O noble wyves, ful of heigh prudence,
 Lat noon humylitee youre tonge naille,
 Ne lat no clerk have cause or diligence
 To write of yow a storie of swich mervaille
 As of Grisildis pacient and kynde,
 Lest Chichevache yow swelwe in hire entraille!

Folweth Ekko, that holdeth no silence,
 But evere answereth at the countretaille.
 Beth nat bidaffed for youre innocence,
 But sharply taak on yow the governaille.
 Emprinteth wel this lessoun in youre mynde,
 For commune profit sith it may availle.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ *The Goodwife's Guide*, 118.

¹⁸⁰ Farmer, "Clerical Images of Medieval Wives," 531. Farmer is speaking in summary of Thomas of Chobham's opinions.

¹⁸¹ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, IV.1183-1194.

The Clerk, rather than preaching societal disorder and lamenting uncontrolled wives, instead affirms that wives must be vocal for the betterment of the community. Authoritative wives must heed the Clerk's lesson to "sharply taak on yow the governaille" since "for commune profit...it may availle." Wives should not emulate Griselda's silence, but save their husbands from sin; a vocal Griselda could have ended Walter's cruel assays and prevented her children's feigned murders. Women whose allegiance to maternal obligation instead of Church-constructed marriage roles can better effect God's will to the benefit of all. Moreover, Mitchell's claims of "irresolution" or "undecidability" are contradicted by the Clerk's own words.¹⁸² He clearly delineates the "lessoun" he intends, providing the female pilgrims with the exact model of wifhood he hopes they fulfill: wives should spiritually govern their husbands for greater communal obedience to God. Despite the very direct *sententia* the Clerk presents in Lenvoy, the conclusion of the Tale just before the Clerk's Envoy appears to return to Petrarch's Christian lesson.

Critics often assume the Clerk intends to restate and reaffirm Petrarch's original moral at the narrative's conclusion, regardless of textual evidence that contradicts such a claim. Once Walter's concerns are assuaged, he reunites Griselda with her children, and the Clerk says:

This storie is seyde, nat for that wyves sholde
 Folwen Grisilde as in humylitee,
 For it were inportable, though they wolde,
 But for that every wight, in his degree,
 Sholde be constant in adversitee
 As was Grisilde; Therefore Petrak writeth
 This storie, which with heigh style he enditeth.

For sith a womman was so pacient

¹⁸² Mitchell, "The *Clerk's Tale* and the Question of Ethical Monstrosity," 3, 18.

Unto a mortal man, wel moore us oghte
Receyven al in gree that God us sent;
For greet skile is he preeve that he wroghte.
But he ne tempteth no man that he boghte
As seith Seint Jame, if ye his pistel rede;
He preeveth folk al day, it is no drede,

And suffreth us, as for oure excercise,
With sharpe scourges of adversitee
Ful ofte to be bete in sondry wise;
Nat for to knowe oure wyl, for certes he,
Er we were born, knew al oure freletee;
And for our beste is al his governaunce.
Lat us thanne lyve in vertuous suffraunce.¹⁸³

A fair representative of received opinion, Kittredge holds that the Clerk's Tale reiterates Petrarch's original edict: "It teaches all of us, men and women alike, how we should submit ourselves to the afflictions that God sends."¹⁸⁴ Bronson agrees that the Tale is "a paradigm for all of us, of constancy in adversity."¹⁸⁵ Even Severs, whose source criticism painstakingly identifies the significant changes between the Clerk's Tale and the original texts, does not suggest that a change has occurred in the story's Christian moral. Rather, Severs presents Chaucer's changes as evidence of his poetic genius, stating, "Chaucer more nearly approaches the attitude of Boccaccio than of Petrarch, assuming a point of view about midway between the two. Since Chaucer did not know Boccaccio's novella, this is significant evidence of at least one element of kinship in the quality of genius which animated two great story-tellers."¹⁸⁶ Scanlon much more recently reduces the significance of the changes between the Clerk's Tale, Petrarch's translation, and Boccaccio's original texts to inconsequential variation. He argues that, "Variations

¹⁸³ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, IV.1142-1169.

¹⁸⁴ Kittredge, *Chaucer and his Poetry*, 196.

¹⁸⁵ Bronson, *In Search of Chaucer*, 111.

¹⁸⁶ Severs, *The Literary Relationships of Chaucer's 'Clerkes Tale,'* 232-3.

among the three major versions, significant though they are, are largely confined to interpretive differences oriented around the same narrative core. If these differences reorient the narrative, they also pass it on, perpetuating the general range of ideological possibilities it implies.”¹⁸⁷

Kittredge, Bronson, and Severs misjudge the Clerk. Despite the Clerk’s multiple interruptions and blatant critiques of Petrarch’s original narrative, these scholars assume that the Clerk would not contradict scholastic authority. However, as Scanlon explains, the public exemplum is defined by (1) lay authority as opposed to hagiography or ecclesiastical authority, (2) violation instead of fulfillment of the stated moral, and (3) authority located in the monarch rather than the Church. The public exemplum is an inherently political and powerful form. Rather than agree with past authority, especially in the Church, the exemplum involves an active reinterpretation of past maxims and a generation of cultural authority for new authors. The Clerk, learned in rhetoric, is clearly aware of the power afforded by his choice in genre—power which is evidenced by his interruptions and interrogations of Petrarch’s original exemplum throughout the *Griselda* narrative. Moreover, the Clerk has cause to question past authority in the midst of historical disorder. If the real historical environment of the Clerk’s Tale—the Great Famine, the Black Plague, the Avignon papacy, the Great Schism, and the Hundred Years’ War—is not enough incentive for the Clerk to relocate cultural authority, his statements concerning papal authority within the Tale clearly indicate the particular crisis of credibility shaping his exemplum.

¹⁸⁷ Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power*, 177.

After the supposed death of Griselda's second child, Walter is still unsatisfied and devises a new plan to test her obedience. According to the *Le Ménagier* narrator, "The marquis [sent] secretly to Rome to the Holy Father the Pope to request sacred bulls, which started a rumor among his people that he had permission from the Pope of Rome, for the peace and repose of himself and his subjects, to relinquish and cast aside his first marriage and take in lawful wedlock another woman."¹⁸⁸ In *Le Ménagier*'s version, the people spread a rumor of the Pope's acquiescence to Walter's demands. Whether or not the Pope indeed sent the requested papal bulls is not clarified. The Clerk is much more specific in his version of events:

Whan that his doghter twelve yeer was of age,
 He to the court of Rome, in subtil wyse
 Enformed of his wyl, sente his message,
 Commaundyng hem swiche bulles to devyse
 As to his crueel purpos may suffyse —
 How that the pope, as for his peples rest,
 Bad hym to wedde another, if hym leste.

I seye, he bad they sholde countrefete
 The popes bulles, makynge mencion
 That he hath leve his firste wyf to lete,
 As by the popes dispensacion,
 To stynte rancor and dissencion
 Bitwixe his peple and hym; thus seyde the bulle,
 The which they han publiced atte fulle.¹⁸⁹

The Clerk leaves little doubt as to the falseness or reality of the papal bulls. Walter, a lay authority, is able to command not just any ecclesiastical authority, but the Vatican, to falsely create papal bulls allowing him to take a new wife. Moreover, the bull is published for all society to see. The falsification and apparent power of lay authority over ecclesiastical authority is hardly coincidental in a period of crisis within Church

¹⁸⁸ *The Goodwife's Guide*, 113.

¹⁸⁹ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, IV.736-749.

government. That Walter's feigned papal bulls list public rancor as a reason to remarry mirrors the people's demand of an Italian pope in 1378—the onset of the Great Schism. Moreover, the falsification of papal bulls by authorities in the court of Rome, but not by the pope himself, suggests the power of church government over the pope—a reorganization of authority within the Church that undeniably mirrors the battle for power between Pope Urban VI and the cardinals. Finally, Walter is able to publish fake papal bulls with no repercussion from the Church, and those bulls are seen as credible pope-ordained documents by the common people; such oversight allowed John Wyclif to write increasingly radical texts that would eventually inspire Lollardism—a heretical movement that rejected the authority of the Church.

The Clerk imposes the historical disorder, specifically in Church authority and credibility, on the Griselda narrative. Evidence supporting Scanlon's claim that social upheaval motivates the public exemplum can be found in the corrupt ecclesiastical authority visible in the Clerk's Tale. Rather than reiterate or assert the theological authority present in Petrarch's original exemplum, the Clerk locates corrupted power in lay authority as symbolized by Walter. Furthermore, he distances himself from both Petrarch and ecclesiastical authority by restating and emphasizing the contrast between his and Petrarch's moral following the Griselda narrative. Just as the Clerk introduced the narrative with "I wol yow telle a tale which that I / Lerned at Padowe of a worthy clerk," he now ends it with "Therefore Petrak writeth / This storie."¹⁹⁰ The Clerk uses the same language to bookend Petrarch's tale, saying "with heigh stile he enditeth" at its introduction and conclusion.¹⁹¹ In a further act of separation, the Clerk returns to the

¹⁹⁰ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 26-7, 1147-8.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 41, 1148.

temporal distance between Petrarch and his own Tale. Of Petrarch he says, “He is now deed and nayled in his cheste;” in the Envoy, he states, “Grisilde is deed, and eek hire pacience, / And bothe atones buried in Ytaille.”¹⁹² The remarkable similarity of the Clerk’s language at the narrative’s beginning and conclusion is no coincidence. By essentially bookending the Griselda narrative with Petrarch’s original Christian lesson, the Clerk recognizes past authority while controlling its power on the present; at the same moment, the Clerk demonstrates that the received systems of authority that Petrarch represents is destabilized and inappropriate for his pilgrim audience.

Yet, Kittredge and Bronson demand that the Envoy is an ironic indictment of the Wife of Bath. Kittredge assumes that the Wife of Bath has “scandalized” the Clerk with her “heresies;” the Clerk’s Tale serves to rebuke the Wife of Bath and “set up again the orthodox tenet of wifely obedience.”¹⁹³ The Envoy, he suggests, “is a masterpiece of sustained and mordant irony,” “a marvelous specimen...of concentrated satire” directed at the Wife of Bath alone.¹⁹⁴ Bronson claims this irony is so venomous that it uncontrollably seeps into the Merchant’s Tale: “We cannot but feel that ultimately the ironic Envoy answers more than the dramatic needs of the occasion *vis-a-vis* the Wife of Bath, and serves as a genuine, though unconscious, repudiation of the false morality that the poet was forced by the story to espouse.”¹⁹⁵ Both Bronson and Mitchell, among other critics, view Griselda’s behavior as “ethical monstrosity.”¹⁹⁶ Bronson adds that “Chaucer has received a story in good faith from laureate authority and proceeded, almost

¹⁹² Ibid., 29, 1177-8.

¹⁹³ Kittredge, *Chaucer and his Poetry*, 189, 197.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 199.

¹⁹⁵ Bronson, *In Search of Chaucer*, 112.

¹⁹⁶ “Ethical monstrosity” is a term originally used by Slavoj Žižek in reference to the Clerk’s Tale. See Mitchell’s “The *Clerk’s Tale* and the Question of Ethical Monstrosity” for a full discussion of Griselda’s monstrosity and critics’ interpretations of it, especially pages 22 and 23.

involuntarily, to render it unacceptable not only to us but possibly even to himself.”¹⁹⁷

Faithful to literary authority, Bronson holds that Chaucer reasserts Petrarch’s Christian moral, but sympathizes too much with Griselda’s cruel assays, and so essentially fails in retelling Petrarch’s tale. According to these scholars, Lenvoy can be seen as only an ironic response to overly-assertive wives, for Chaucer would dare not contradict his source material or clerical anti-feminism.

To suggest irony in the Clerk’s song to the Wife of Bath, however, requires ignoring the Clerk’s intentions in choosing the public exemplum form, in augmenting and interrupting Petrarch’s original text, in instructing wives to maintain the spiritual well-being of their husbands, and in responding to a destabilized ecclesiastical authority. Moreover, the Clerk insistently repeats his lesson, suggesting that he wants his audience to act on his precepts rather than acknowledge their irony. Far from shifting tone between the Tale and Lenvoy, the Clerk reiterates the same *sententia* before and during his song:

Bout o word, lordynges, herkneth er I go:
It were ful hard to fynde now-a-dayes
In al a toun Grisildis thre or two;
For if that they were put to swiche assayes,
The gold of hem hath now so badde alayes
With bras, that thogh the coyne be fair at ye,
It wolde rather breste a-two than plye.¹⁹⁸

As Scott explains, successful exempla depend “on the audience having a clear understanding of the issues being exemplified.”¹⁹⁹ Not only has the Clerk posed Griselda as a morally irresponsible example of wives during the narrative—an expected feature of the ever-critical public exemplum—but now he reminds the pilgrims that her

¹⁹⁷ Bronson, *In Search of Chaucer*, 103.

¹⁹⁸ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, IV.1156-69.

¹⁹⁹ Scott, “The Role of Exempla in Educating through Emotion.”

characteristics should not be valued. Though Griselda's long-suffering obedience was certainly valued as "gold" in the past, such women now may be "fair at ye" but will "breste a-two than plye." The coin metaphor offers two important lessons to the Clerk's audience. First, Petrarch's past "gold" is now full of "badde alayes;" the Clerk here denies the legitimacy of past authorities on the present due to the erosion of papal authority as evidenced by the Avignon papacy, the Great Schism, and Wyclif's heresies. Second, the Clerk holds that silent and submissive wives have no value in a destabilized present. The Clerk maintains skepticism towards traditional ecclesiastical authority, and he expects his audience to be skeptical of women that appear to be Griselda's "gold." Unending wifely obedience is essentially devalued spiritual currency; adherence to one's husband may appear the path towards salvation and devotion to God, but a wife who does not reprimand her husband's sinful behavior is complicit in his immorality. When the Clerk says, "for the Wyves love of Bathe — / Whos lyf and al hire secte God mayntene / In heigh maistrie, and elles were it scathe," he is far from being ironic.²⁰⁰ Bronson is right, however, that the Clerk's Tale has unintended and far-reaching effects in the Merchant's Tale to follow. It is the Clerk's particular relationship with destabilized ecclesiastical authority that allows him to celebrate and advocate for the increased power of wives; for the Merchant, whose livelihood and cultural prestige depends on traditional systems of received authority, the lost "gold" of Griselda-like wives signifies a larger disruption of aristocratic values and the Merchant's place within an already unstable social and marital hierarchy.

²⁰⁰ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, IV. 1170-3.

The Merchant, a Marriage, and Received Authority: Failed Aristocratic Pretensions in the Merchant's Tale

When Thomas of Chobham advised wives to be spiritual safeguards of their husbands, he emphasized wifely guidance specifically for sins related to money. His advice, Sharon Farmer suggests, corresponds to the rise of the money economy, as he posed wives should correct their husbands' avarice, involvement in usury, and oppression of the poor.²⁰¹ His association of the household with money was a tenet of the Aristotelian and medieval economy, or the "science or body of knowledge about household management."²⁰² According to the authoritative Aristotelian understanding of economics, the household was "an ethical unit concerning itself with virtue" as well as "the tempering of greed, prodigality, and lust," for the aim of "material and cultural productivity."²⁰³ While Thomas of Chobham labeled usury or avarice as sin, orthodox scholastic thought viewed usury as unnatural fecundity—the breeding of money, which cannot breed—and therefore posed it against the natural fertility and generation of the home.²⁰⁴ Both ecclesiastical and secular ideologies viewed merchants, the representatives of usury, greed, and profit, with suspicion and dislike. This overlapping of Church and lay attitudes towards merchants corresponded with an ongoing evolution of the three-estate system—the tripartite division of society in which merchants had no distinct place. It is in this chaotic political, religious, and social environment that the Merchant tells his tale. Thickening the already complicated context of the Merchant's Tale is the

²⁰¹ Sharon Farmer, "Clerical Images of Medieval Wives," *Speculum* 61, no. 3 (1986), 535.

²⁰² Elizabeth B. Edwards. "The Cheerful Science: Nicholas Oresme, Home Economics, and Literary Dissemination," in *Medieval Latin and Middle English Literature: Essays in Honour of Jill Mann*, ed. Christopher Cannon and Maura Nolan (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011), 94.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 96.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 97-8.

surrounding dialogue on marriage, especially the Clerk's praise of vocal wives. After all, when the Clerk advocates for wives as spiritual guides in marriage, he relies on a history of authoritative clerical texts that specifically praise wives for correcting their husbands' avarice or injustice—implicitly implicating merchants as those husbands requiring moral rigor. The Merchant's Tale, then, is a bitter response and defense of aristocratic husbands against their lecherous wives, indicting women as cause of the ongoing social upheaval. . The Merchant manipulates the fabliau to renegotiate his perceived social and gendered role in society, hoping to preserve the prestigious position he seeks in his marriage and the nobility; however, in his attempt to justify the complete authority of men in aristocratic marriages, the Merchant recognizes that the aristocracy and the three-estate system are already destabilized social systems; by allowing January to remain oblivious to his wife's adultery, the Merchant reveals that even a traditionally influential and respected aristocratic male like January participates in the ongoing social upheaval by failing to fulfill his social obligation as husband.

The Canterbury Tales, first published in 1400, was written in an age when the received system of social authority was being questioned. No event represents that turmoil better than the Rising of 1381, which was felt all across Europe but especially in London, where thousands of rebels burned the Savoy, beheaded members of the nobility, and murdered countless Flemings.²⁰⁵ In the end, of course, the rebels were executed and the revolt suppressed. The demands of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381—the end of serfdom, the reduction of taxes, and the removal of the supposedly unjust members of the royal hierarchy—though unsuccessful, represented a drastic rejection of the accepted ideology.

²⁰⁵ Larry D. Benson, Introduction to *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), xxii.

Just as the uprising indicates a threat to the received system of social and political authority, so too does the subject of Chaucer's writing in the *Canterbury Tales*. Lee Patterson identifies Chaucer's works as written for and appealing to court culture—that is, before the *Canterbury Tales*. When writing for the aristocracy, Chaucer removed himself from his historical setting, displacing medieval reality in exchange for a “fantasy world of amorous play.”²⁰⁶ *The Canterbury Tales*, however, signifies not only an acknowledgment of the social hierarchy but an analysis of it, first indicated by the specific attention to estate both in the pilgrims' descriptions as well as their order of appearance in the General Prologue.²⁰⁷ Though the Peasants' Revolt and Chaucer's newfound focus on a broader spectrum of society coincide historically, as Larry D. Benson points out, there is no concrete evidence that Chaucer was actually at Aldgate when the uprising took place.²⁰⁸ That being said, Chaucer explicitly invokes the revolt in The Nun's Priest's Tale: “So hydous was the noyse — a, benedicitee! — / Certes, he Jakke Straw and his meynee / Ne made nevere shoutes half so shrille / Whan that they wolden any Flemyng kille.”²⁰⁹ In a much less explicit reference, the townspeople who follow Griselda after her dismissal from the Marquis' palace in the Clerk's Tale, though they appear peaceful, gather because of their disapproval with the ruling class as symbolized by the Marquis: “The folk hire folwe, wepyng in hir weye, / And Fortune ay they cursen as they goon.”²¹⁰ Perhaps it cannot be empirically established that Chaucer

²⁰⁶ Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 25.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁰⁸ Benson, Introduction to *The Riverside Chaucer*, xxii.

²⁰⁹ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), VII.3393-96.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, IV.897-8.

was present for the Peasants' Revolt, but he was certainly aware of it and influenced by it during his writing of the *Canterbury Tales*.

Many scholars have assessed the significance of social and political turmoil on Chaucer's writing, especially in the *Canterbury Tales*. However, the potential social commentary of the *Canterbury Tales* is lost in debates over Chaucer's envisioned attachment of prologues, tales, and epilogues to specific pilgrims. While Chaucer's intended order of the pilgrims' tales is highly disputed, the dominant tradition of scholarship disputes the attachment of the Merchant's Prologue to his Tale in the majority of modern manuscripts. J. S. P. Tatlock falls into this group, arguing that the Merchant's Tale was meant as the Wife of Bath's response to the Shipman's Tale.²¹¹ Building on this premise, Tatlock asserts the Tale's assignment to the Merchant, and the creation of the entire Merchant character, is an afterthought, claiming, "Nor is the writing of such a tale for the Merchant called for by anything in the account of him in the general Prologue, nor sufficiently by his own prologue."²¹²

Bertrand H. Bronson seconds Tatlock, assuming that the Merchant's Prologue was completed well before the Tale and that the two were never meant to be connected; therefore, the Tale must be read in complete isolation, without connection to any pilgrim.²¹³ Bronson claims that the "explanation [Chaucer] had provided," in adding the Merchant's Prologue to the Tale, "worked an instant sea-change on the story itself."²¹⁴ The Merchant's unhappy marriage, described in the prologue, colors the entire tale with a

²¹¹ J. S. P. Tatlock, "Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*," *Modern Philology* 33, no. 4 (1936): 375.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 380.

²¹³ Bertrand H. Bronson, "Afterthoughts on the Merchant's Tale," *Studies in Philology* 58, no. 4 (1961): 585-6

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 596.

biting misogyny that Chaucer did not intend; Bronson, then, labels the Prologue as a mistake that Chaucer either forgot or chose not to correct.²¹⁵

In a more recent study agreeing with both Tatlock and Bronson, Christian Sheridan adds that “there are no details in the telling that suggest its narrator is a merchant.”²¹⁶ Because the narrator largely voices January’s opinions on marriage, the Merchant’s identity is too unreliable to be used as an “interpretive key.” Therefore, Sheridan recommends ignoring the issue of the narrator’s identity, instead directing attention to the content of the Merchant’s speech.²¹⁷ Though Sheridan does not separate the Merchant’s Prologue from the Tale, he does reject all interpretative significance of the Tale’s narrator and consequently removes the Prologue from the purview of interpretation in connection to the Tale itself, much like Tatlock and Bronson.

The extant manuscript includes the Merchant’s Prologue and presumably reflects Chaucer’s chosen order rather than an old man’s mistake. Literary scholars, unfortunately, cannot rewrite history or ignore texts. Rather than searching for disunity, perhaps the task, as suggested by Norman T. Harrington, lies in finding unity between the unhappily married merchant in the Prologue and the strangely happy marriage in the Tale.²¹⁸ George L. Kittredge values reading the Prologue and Tale together for another reason, proposing that, “the Pilgrims do not exist for the sake of stories, but *vice versa*.”²¹⁹ That is, “the stories are merely long speeches expressing, directly or indirectly,

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Christian Sheridan, “May in the Marketplace: Commodification and Textuality in the *Merchant’s Tale*,” *Studies in Philology* 102, no. 1 (2005): 29.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 30.

²¹⁸ Norman T. Harrington, “Chaucer’s Merchant’s Tale: Another Swing of the Pendulum,” *PMLA* 86, no. 1 (1971): 26.

²¹⁹ George Lyman Kittredge, *Chaucer and his Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1915), 155.

the characters of several persons.”²²⁰ Leaving out the situational context—that is, the prologues and epilogues—inhibits fully understanding a given character as a member of an ongoing discussion, reacting to preceding tales, and informing a tale’s meaning by the character’s preface of it.²²¹ The dialogue structure of the *Canterbury Tales* is essential to understanding the immediate context of the Merchant’s Tale as a bitter and ironic response to the Clerk’s previous praise of vocal, authoritative wives.

Among the studies that agree on a unified and deeply ironic narrator shared by the Merchant’s Prologue and Tale, there is still a pervading tendency to disregard the unconventional fabliau present in the Tale or to deny its potential significance. The Merchant’s intended irony is unquestionable: Tatlock observes that the Tale’s “unrelieved acidity” is “approached nowhere in Chaucer’s works”;²²² Harrington claims the Tale is distinguished by “an irony so dark and mordant that it is unique in the *Canterbury Tales*”;²²³ Kittredge notes the Merchant’s unmatched “savage and cynical satire”;²²⁴ Bronson places the Tale in the “tradition of anti-feminist japery”;²²⁵ and David Aers asserts that Chaucer intends the Merchant to be an “egotistic, self-deceiving, and thoroughly foolish” narrator.²²⁶ That the tale is a fabliau, too, is undeniable; the well-trodden tradition of naïve old men cuckolded by amorous young wives is present in the Miller’s and the Reeve’s Tales, as well as many others. The importance lies in the difference between it and other uses of fabliau in the *Canterbury Tales*, in which the

²²⁰ Ibid., 155.

²²¹ Ibid., 156.

²²² Tatlock, “Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale*,” 367.

²²³ Harrington, “Chaucer’s Merchant’s Tale: Another Swing of the Pendulum,” 25.

²²⁴ Kittredge, *Chaucer and his Poetry*, 202.

²²⁵ Bronson, “Afterthoughts on the Merchant’s Tale,” 596.

²²⁶ David Aers, *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 156.

husband is cuckolded and becomes only too aware of it; in the Merchant's Tale, January is confronted with cuckoldry but denies it, disrupting the expected conclusion of the fabliau. The dominant trend in criticism is to ignore the problem of genre or recognize that the fabliau cannot fully explain the ending of the Merchant's Tale—and then shift focus elsewhere.

In one such shift, Aers proposes that Chaucer uses the Merchant's Tale to explore the ideology of medieval marriage as a church-supported economic transaction in which wives function as commodities. January is entirely unconscious of his lustful commodification of May as mother to his heir, and therefore, unknowingly participates in the marriage market; May subverts the regulation of women through marriage by choosing her own relationship with Damian, even though her newfound 'love' is largely still a product of the dominantly patriarchal culture.²²⁷ The entire tale, then, is an exploration of "the culture's disastrous fragmentation of love, sexuality and marriage, joined with its pervasive acceptance of capricious male power over women."²²⁸ Undoubtedly, the Merchant's Tale is concerned with secular and lay models of marriage, especially both models' distribution of authority; however, Aers ignores the significance of the unfulfilled fabliau form in the Tale's larger discussion of marriage.

Harrington argues that the fabliau fails when January regains his sight but remains blind to his cuckoldry, suggesting that, for the Merchant, the only happiness is artificial and mental blindness is preferable to reality. The lack of any redeeming character or comic effect is explained by the Merchant himself, who is "coldly bitter, ridden by sex,

²²⁷ Ibid., 156-7.

²²⁸ Ibid., 160.

protecting himself against the hurts of the world by the constant play of his irony.”²²⁹ The Merchant’s deeply bitter and ironic view of reality prevents easy categorization of the Tale, which Harrington suggests is a result of Chaucer’s “experience with the world that forced him beyond the available literary genres into a new and freer form that is very much *sui generis*.”²³⁰ Though Harrington is certainly correct that Chaucer’s denial of existing forms and the traditional fabliau in the Merchant’s Tale is a response to social and political change, he does not consider the consequences of broken form in light of the Merchant’s character. The dialogic nature of the *Canterbury Tales* emphasizes relations between the pilgrims and develops the pilgrims as distinct characters beginning in the General Prologue. The Prologues and Tales articulate the pilgrims’ characters and their particular responses to the chaotic social upheaval evidenced by the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381.

The first indication of the Merchant’s ideological leanings appears in the General Prologue. Despite critics’ claims of an inconsistent or indecipherable Merchant narrator the Merchant clearly supports legible and absolute social hierarchy as shown in the General Prologue, the Merchant’s Prologue, and the Tale. Of special note among all his stately attire is his “Flaundryssh bever hat.”²³¹ Flemish craftsmen were imported by Edward III, who preferred foreign cloth-manufacturers to the craftsmen of England; to discontented laborers, Flemish goods represented the unfair practices of government.²³² No doubt, in a post-Peasants’ Revolt world, the Flemish beaver hat would be an unmistakable symbol, suggesting that the Merchant, as a wealthy male, is in favor of the

²²⁹ Harrington, “Chaucer’s Merchant’s Tale,” 30.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

²³¹ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, I.272.

²³² Kittredge, *Chaucer and his Poetry*, 3.

existing status quo. The Merchant's portrait in the General Prologue offers further evidence of his profit off the Flemish, or at least foreign imports: "He wolde alway the see were kept for any thyng / Bitwixe Middelburgh and Orewelle" (i.e., Holland and England).²³³ Supporting revolution would be antithetical to the Merchant's interests if he is "Sownynge alwey th'encrees of his wynnynge."²³⁴

The Merchant's livelihood depends on stability in the social hierarchy; his constant desire for riches suggests that the Merchant, like others of his wealth and aspirations, used money to determine social standing. As Brian Gastle notes, merchants occupied an undefined but economically and politically powerful position in the tripartite division of society. Wealthier than peasants but restricted from the aristocracy, merchants used their "wynnynge" as a basis on which to rewrite "their own social standing," which Gastle claims "threatened the power of both church and state."²³⁵ Merchants used titles to represent themselves as a kind of "economic aristocracy," though few merchant wives could claim the title of "Lady," a term used only by wives of knights and squires.²³⁶ Nevertheless, both merchant husbands and wives were interested in social advancement to the nobility.²³⁷ The same merchants aspiring to join the ranks of the aristocracy also threatened the three-estate system upon which the aristocracy's prestige and power was based. The Merchant of the *Canterbury Tales*, with his imported clothing, pursuits of greater wealth, and dependence on the traditional social hierarchy, likely would have felt the same aristocratic aspirations as his contemporaries. Moreover, the Merchant's

²³³Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, I.276-7.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 275.

²³⁵ Brian W. Gastle, "Breaking the Stained Glass Ceiling: Mercantile Authority, Margaret Paston, and Margery Kempe," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 36, no. 1 (2003): 126.

²³⁶ *Ibid.* 128-9.

²³⁷ Brian W. Gastle, "Chaucer's 'Shaply' Guildsmen and Mercantile Pretensions," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 99, no. 2 (1998).

ideological leanings towards stable and absolute social hierarchy are what prompt him to respond to the Clerk's Tale and to depict the moral weakness of women in his story.

Indicating that the Merchant's Tale to follow is a direct response to the Clerk's Tale, the Merchant immediately criticizes the Clerk's advice for wives, saying, "Wepyng and wayng, care and oother sorwe / I knowe ynough, on even and a-morwe."²³⁸ Where the Clerk upheld wives as spiritual guides, the Merchant likens his wife to the devil: "I have a wyf, the wroste that may be; / For thogh the feend to hire ycoupled were, / She wolde hym overmache, I dar wel swere."²³⁹ In yet another rebuke, the Merchant reverses the Clerk's interpretation of the Griselda story; the Merchant regards Griselda as a praise-worthy example for silent wives, even in the case of overbearing marital cruelty:

Ther is a long and large difference
Bitwix Grisildis grete pacience
And of my wyf the passyng crueltee.
Were I unbounden, also moot I thee,
I wolde nevere eft comen in the snare.
We wedded men lyven in sorwe and care.
Assaye whoso wole, and he shal fynde
That I seye sooth, by Seint Thomas of Ynde,
As for the moore part — I sey nat alle.
God shilde that it sholde so bifalle!²⁴⁰

In his Prologue, the Merchant responds to the Clerk's Tale as a serious and perhaps Church-authorized model of wifhood, but between the two models of marriage and the sexes depicted by the Clerk and the Merchant, there lies an ocean of ideological difference and conflict.

Though the Clerk's argument for wives as spiritual authority figures is not mirrored by the larger Catholic Church, he does espouse a largely similar ideal to the

²³⁸ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, IV.1213-4.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1218-20.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1223-32.

Church's prescribed relationship between men, women, and God in marriage. The Church saw marriage as a tolerable restraint on lust and the only acceptable location of sexuality. Georges Duby explains that "the Church emphasized the union of two hearts in marriage and postulated that its validity rested...especially on the consent (*consensus*) of the two individuals concerned."²⁴¹ Marriage, though the lowest level of perfection for individuals, served the constructive social purpose of curbing violence.²⁴² The marriage pact and equal consent prevented male greed and abduction, thereby making marriage an instrument of public order.²⁴³ However, the Church-approved model of equal consent conflicted considerably with the lay, aristocratic model of marriage. Duby holds that "the Church unintentionally tended to take a stand against the power of heads of households in matters of marriage, against the lay conception of misalliance, and, indeed, against male supremacy, for it asserted the equality of the sexes in concluding the marriage pact and in the accomplishment of duties thereby implied."²⁴⁴ The conflict between Church-condoned and aristocratic models of marriage lies at the heart of the Merchant's Tale.

As an affluent and aspiring wealthy merchant, the Merchant of the *Canterbury Tales* would have likely embraced the lay model of marriage, or, more importantly, aligned himself against the Church's model. The lay model was entirely concerned with continuing male, noble lineage. As Duby observes, the system was "designed to protect the patrimony, to maintain the economic position of children born of wedded couples."²⁴⁵

Aristocratic standing required the succession of inheritance and continuation of noble

²⁴¹ Georges Duby, *Medieval Marriage: Two Models from Twelfth-Century France*, trans. Elborg Forster (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 17.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁴³ Georges Duby, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest: The Making of Modern Marriage in Medieval France*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 32.

²⁴⁴ Duby, *Medieval Marriage*, 17.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

lineage; for this reason, ultimate authority resided with the male head of the household.²⁴⁶ David Aers describes lay marriage as “primarily a transaction organized by males to serve economic and political ends, with the woman treated as a useful, child-bearing appendage to the land or goods being exchanged.”²⁴⁷ Aers adds that “the best attitudes are utter subservience on the part of the women and unquestioning domination on the part of men.”²⁴⁸ In keeping with this utilitarian relationship, men demanded the silence, submission, obedience, and labor of their wives, both in domestic duties and in the literal sense of bearing children.²⁴⁹ The Church’s emphasis on a woman’s consent to be married threatened the long-standing authority of men to choose their wives for continuation of the patrimony. The very purpose of marriage between the two models conflicted: for the Church, marriage curbed male lust and greed, while the aristocracy depended on men’s ultimate authority to choose and control their wives for the benefit of noble lineage. This conflict between Church and noble ideals created a crisis in marital practice particularly for aristocratic males.

The Merchant’s Prologue reveals that the conflict between ecclesiastical and lay notions of marriage is happening in his own marriage, which is merely “monthes two” long.²⁵⁰ By celebrating Griselda’s silence and submission as opposed to his wife’s “cursednesse,” the Merchant clearly aligns himself with the aristocratic model of marriage, which privileges men as ultimate household authorities.²⁵¹ Moreover, because marriage is intimately linked to the larger social hierarchy, the Merchant, too, reveals his

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 9-10.

²⁴⁷ David Aers, *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 143.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 144.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 143-4.

²⁵⁰ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, IV.1234.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 1239.

resistance to social change in favor of the three-estate system. Duby explains that “through marriage, societies try to maintain and perpetuate their own structures, seen in terms of a set of symbols and of the image they have of their own ideal perfection.”²⁵² S.K. Heninger Jr. adds that the medieval social hierarchy depended on the obedience of individuals to their social roles, an obedience that was especially observed in a wife’s submission to her husband.²⁵³ As Heninger notes, “A woman, if she wished to be virtuous, was required to fill her position in God’s order as a loyal and obedient partner to her husband.”²⁵⁴ The aristocratic model of marriage supported the traditional social hierarchy, protecting patriarchy and patrimony. However, the crisis between lay and Church-preferred models of marriage mirrors what Duby refers to as “the same general movement that was causing all social relations to change.”²⁵⁵ Arguably, the anxiety the Merchant feels towards his own marriage reflects his anxiety towards change in the larger social order—change epitomized by the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. Though his tale directly refutes the Clerk’s vision of marriage, the Merchant’s story necessarily responds to the destabilized social hierarchy as well. Both marital and social concerns weigh on the Merchant as he tells the fabliau of January and May.

The Merchant’s Tale follows the marital pursuits of January, a retired bachelor knight. January’s status immediately implies his association with the aristocratic model of marriage and the conservative social values attached. As a knight, January occupies a privileged position in the nobility. January’s vision of marriage is ironically opposed to

²⁵² Duby, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest*, 18.

²⁵³ S. K. Heninger Jr., “The Concept of Order in Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale*,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 56, no. 3 (1957): 383.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 384.

²⁵⁵ Duby, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest*, 19.

the Merchant's experience. His desire to marry stems from the wish to "Lyveth a lyf blisful and ordinaat."²⁵⁶ Of his future wife, he expects "She nys nat wery hym to love and serve."²⁵⁷ As he says, "For who kan be so buxom as a wyf?"²⁵⁸ January assumes the perfect obedience of his wife, imagining a woman much like Griselda. His fantasy requires the lay model of marriage, which positions him as authority figure and his wife as an obedient mother of his heir.

January, "sixty yeer a wyflees man," needs a wife to pass his "greet prosperitee" to an heir and continue his family name.²⁵⁹ In fact, he specifically places a wife's value in her ability to "engendren hym an heir."²⁶⁰ His wife will be a possession much like "londes, rentes, pasture, or commune, / Or moebles."²⁶¹ Unlike those impermanent signs of wealth, she will continue his lineage—"A wyf wol laste, and in thyn hous endure, / Wel lenger than thee list, paraventure."²⁶² January's marriage, like all aristocratic marriages, extends the noble lineage and safeguards the family patrimony. This aristocratic model of marriage affirms the existing social order, maintaining class distinction through land ownership and inheritance. Lay marriage and the traditional social hierarchy are what January terms man's "paradys terrestre."²⁶³ Like many of his noble contemporaries, January hopes for a young wife to provide him an heir and meet his demands.

²⁵⁶ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, IV.1284.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 1291.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1287.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 1248, 1247.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 1272.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 1313-4.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 1317-8.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 1332.

Enabled by the authority aristocratic marriage affords him, January demands that any prospective wives “shal nat passe twenty yeer.”²⁶⁴ According to James A. Brundage, the forty-year age difference would not have been unusual, for “more than a third of marriageable women wound up with substantially older husbands.”²⁶⁵ While a teenage wife certainly appeals to the old knight’s sex drive and his desire for an heir, he names another reason for the age disparity:

And eek thise olde wydwes, God it woot,
They konne so muchel craft, on Wades boot,
So muchel broken harm, whan that hem leste,
That with hem sholde I nevere lyve in reste.
For sondry scoles maken sotile clerkis;
Womman of manye scoles half a clerk is.
But certeynly, a yong thyng may men gye,
Right as men may warm wex with handes plye.²⁶⁶

In a clear reference to the Wife of Bath, January rejects old wives as being too educated in marriage and manipulation. Like the Merchant’s wife, who is skilled in malice and cruelty, old wives have already learned how to pain their husbands. A young wife can be taught anything, including submissiveness. January can fit his new wife into whatever mold he likes, namely a submissive wife much like Griselda. This power to shape or mold his future wife stems directly from January’s position of highest authority in marriage—a position that the Church-authorized model of marriage threatens through wifely consent. In addition to his privileged status as husband, January’s position as member of the nobility exempts him from the constraints of his less-esteemed peers’ opinions.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 1417.

²⁶⁵ James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 495.

²⁶⁶ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, IV.1423-30.

Though he asks the advice of his brothers, January, as a man of fairly high estate, has no reason to listen to his inferiors; rather, this invitation for input from Placebo and Justinus allows the Merchant to voice his own social and marital authority. Placebo, a courtier who is obviously quick to please, affirms January's decision to marry instantly: "I holde youre owene conseil is the beste."²⁶⁷ Placating in every way, Placebo not only supports January's marital decision but also his hierarchical worldview:

I woot wel that my lord kan moore than I.
With that he seith, I holde it ferme and stable;
I seye the same or elles thyng semblable.
A ful greet fool is any conseillour
That serveth any lord of heigh honour,
That dar presume, or elles thenken it,
That his conseil sholde passe his lordes wit.²⁶⁸

Placebo reinforces the traditional social hierarchy in which authority and knowledge are received from a higher estate; he clearly feels obliged, in talking with January, to acknowledge this submission to authority. Instead of encouraging or supporting marriage, this passage indicates that Placebo's agreement stems from his belief in the received system of authority and the strictly hierarchical social order—a belief shared by January and the Merchant.

Justinus, on the other hand, feels the same anti-marriage sentiment expressed in the Merchant's Prologue. He reminds January of his overly idealistic expectations for a wife, advising, "no man fynden shal / Noon in this world that trotteth hool in al, / Ne man, ne beest, swich as men koude devyse."²⁶⁹ He suggests January consider the input of others: "I warne yow wel, it is no childes pley / To take a wyf withouten avysement."²⁷⁰

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 1490.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 1498-504.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 1537-9.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 1530-31.

His advice is typical of lay marriage. Since inheritance and noble lineage are at stake, members of aristocratic families married “with considerable forethought, preparation, and formality.”²⁷¹ Without negotiation or advice, January risks choosing a wife like the Justinus’s or the Merchant’s:

Men moste enquire — this is myn assent —
Wher she be wys, or sobre, or dronkelewe,
Or proud, or elles ootherweys a shrewe,
A chidestere, or wastour of thy good,
Or riche, or poore, or elles mannyssh wood.²⁷²

If January is to take a wife, he should enquire at least “if so were that she hadde / Mo goode thewes than hire vices badde.”²⁷³ Justinus voices the marital advice any member of the aristocracy might have offered.

Moreover, Justinus’s words are accompanied by his significant name. Where Placebo placated, Justinus appears to voice or represent the Aristotelian sense of justice. Elizabeth Edwards describes the Aristotelian sense of virtue as “a mean between two vices.”²⁷⁴ Specifically, justice is a “mean between a certain gain and a certain loss.”²⁷⁵ Justinus advises January to relinquish his absolute authority in order to create a better match. In doing so, Justinus acts as representative of virtue in the fabliau, a form which Edwards posits is a comedy of the “abstract Aristotelian figures of excess and defect.” Virtues outside the mean are analogized as types like “the old husband” or “the libidinous wife.”²⁷⁶ Justinus advocates for virtuous living, but January ignores Justinus’s counsel; instead, January allows his lustful passion for a young, new wife to overrule any well-

²⁷¹ Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, 497.

²⁷² Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, IV.1532-6.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 1541-2.

²⁷⁴ Edwards, “The Cheerful Science,” 95.

²⁷⁵ Nicholas Oresme, *Ethiques*, quoted in Edwards, “The Cheerful Science,” 95.

²⁷⁶ Edwards, “The Cheerful Science,” 107.

intended advice from Justinus. January's excessive desire becomes vice, causing him to become a comic character in the fabliau—mocked for behaving “*outside* the dictates of right reason.”²⁷⁷

Taken together, Placebo and Justinus reveal the Merchant's worldview. Placebo should be seen not as a supporter of marriage but as a proponent of absolute social hierarchy. Like Placebo, the Merchant has much to gain from adhering to the existing social system; the Merchant does not wish for court preferment as Placebo does, but hopes for profits in business and perhaps prestige. In a sense, the name Placebo, Latin for “I shall please,” is an apt description of the Merchant, for he supports the existing status quo. Justinus, like the Merchant, is unhappy with his own wife. Even though he recognizes her steadfastness, Justinus holds that no wife is perfect and advises against marriage for nearly all men. The name Justinus may presuppose his correct prophecy to January that “Ye shul nat plesen hire fully yeres thre.”²⁷⁸ His name may also suggest that moderation and consideration of an appropriate partnership are virtues in the pursuit of marriage. More than that, though, Justinus mirrors the Merchant's resentment of wives, and his name suggests the justness or correctness of the Merchant's worldview in both marriage and society. Justinus's complaints against wives are founded in a traditional view of marital authority; when he decries imperfect wives, he praises the distribution of authority in lay marriage—a relationship in which wives silently and obediently fulfill their husbands' demands. Since Justinus agrees with the Merchant's anti-marriage sentiment, he arguably justifies the aristocratic distribution of domestic authority and the static social hierarchy aristocratic marriage perpetuates.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 106.

²⁷⁸ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, IV.1562.

January shares the Merchant's and Justinus's commitment to the traditional social order. He dreams of the marital bliss soon to come. January turns the search for a wife into an exploration of his own fantasies:

As whoso tooke a mirour polished bryght,
And sette it in a commune market-place,
Thanne sholde he se ful many a figure pace
By his mirour; and in the same wyse
Gan Januarie inwith his thocht devyse
Of maydens whiche that dwelten hym bisyde.²⁷⁹

All maidens are subject to January's illusions, without any notable agency of their own. The entire marketplace is his pool from which to choose. The word 'mirror' too turns the selection process into a reflection of January's desires rather than a relationship between two people, making the metaphor a perfect representation of the aristocratic marriage; men married to meet their own desires, economic, social and sexual. Women were silent, obedient followers of their husbands' orders. Wives possessed no more agency than a reflection in a mirror. For a man who revels in the existing social order, January's vision of authority in marriage is another manifestation of the system that affords power to husbands and those of high estate.

Demonstrating his authority in marriage, January denies his future wife the agency to accept or reject his marriage proposal, instead sending his attendants to collect her. May's name is first mentioned just before the signing of legal documents, as she is "feffed" in January's land;²⁸⁰ the term has a two-fold significance: not only does she now possess his land, she is enfeoffed, or given land in exchange for her service, same as any serf. Despite May's already "smal degree," the marriage ceremony similarly treats her as

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 1582-7.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 1698.

a laborer purchased by her husband.²⁸¹ Like the late appearance of her name, May's thoughts are only indirectly mentioned after their wedding night, as "She preyeth nat his pleyng worth a bene"²⁸² Regardless of her feelings about January's "pleyng," May still occupies the wife's submissive role in lay marriage.

However, May is offered another role when January's squire Damian falls desperately in love with her. January, like the jealous, watchful husbands common to the fabliau, plays the foolish old man, entirely unaware of the disloyalty occurring between his wife and his squire. Though, critics like Aers have suggested that May exercises relative power in seeking love and choosing Damian, Damian actually chooses her; May is allowed similarly little agency in her affair with Damian as in her marriage with January. And, her acceptance of the affair is an expression not of power but of sympathy: "pitee renneth soone in gentil herte!"²⁸³ Moreover, according to popular thought, women were subject to lechery and moral weakness. As Brundage states, "The widely held belief" was "that women are sexually more voracious than men, that they desire intercourse more ardently and enjoy it more, and that in consequence their sexual behavior requires stricter supervision than that of men."²⁸⁴ Women's sexuality required regulation and control by their husbands. Since, as Duby explains, "A wife is naturally deceitful," she must be kept "under the strict control of her husband."²⁸⁵ More than that, "It was a husband's duty to shield his wife from temptation."²⁸⁶ May's affair with Damian is expected thanks to female hyper-sexuality, and January's failure to regulate

²⁸¹ Ibid., 1625.

²⁸² Ibid., 1854.

²⁸³ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, IV.1986. Also, see Aers' opinion on May's agency above.

²⁸⁴ Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, 492.

²⁸⁵ Duby, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest*, 65.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 47.

her sexual behavior is an indictment of his authority. As husband, he should have protected May from the advances of other men. Far from regaining marital authority and stopping the affair, January becomes mentally and physically blind to the usurpation of authority in his house.

January is stricken with blindness and, soon thereafter, obsessive jealousy. In his over-protectiveness, he declares authority over May's life past his own death, deciding "For neither after his deeth nor in his lyf / Ne wolde he that she were love ne wyf, / But evere lyve as wydwe in clothes blake."²⁸⁷ The actual blindness of the knight physically represents his pre-existing mental blindness; the affair that January fears so much is already occurring. January is so immersed in his own fantasy of marriage that he ignores reality:

O Januarie, what myghte it thee availle,
Thogh thou myghtest see as fer as shippes saille?
For as good is blynd deceyved be
As to be deceyved whan a man may se.
Lo, Argus, which that hadde an hondred yen,
For al that evere he koude poure or pryen,
Yet was he blent, and God woot, so been mo
That wenen wisly that it be nat so.
Passe over is an ese, I sey namore.²⁸⁸

The Merchant recognizes January's mental blindness and pities him for it. However, to "passe over is an ese" is poor advice for husbands. As mentioned above, husbands were authoritative safeguards against their wives' uncontrollable lust; adultery was as much the fault of the husband as it was the wife who committed the sin. Moreover, Duby asserts that regardless of ecclesiastical or aristocratic models, marriage "was the main foundation of public peace" that mitigated "woman's cunning and man's roughness,"

²⁸⁷ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, IV.2077-9.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 2107-15..

thereby creating social harmony.²⁸⁹ When January ignores an ongoing affair, he fails to uphold his role as husband in the aristocratic marriage and prevents marriage from serving its stabilizing function for society.

Proof of January's deteriorating marital authority is clear when, in language remarkably reminiscent of January's molding of young wives, May molds a garden key for Damian. Where January believed young wives were malleable, "Right as men may warm wex with handes plye,"²⁹⁰ May "In warm wex hath emprented the clyket."²⁹¹ Now, the shaping process has been reversed. January believed he could mold the wife he wanted, but May has proven him false as she molds the means to her affair. Where both January and May participated in the molding process, only one successfully achieved the mold. May's relative authority here, in secretly plotting and executing her affair, is the result of January's failing. By allowing his wife to engage in an extramarital affair with his own squire, January undermines the larger social order.

Both lay and Church-authorized models of marriage agreed that the married regulated and restrained the unmarried.²⁹² Specifically, married, elder males restricted the behavior of younger, unmarried men, a relationship Duby claims represented "the principle of order in aristocratic society."²⁹³ The tightening of lineage for protection of the patrimony led to an excess of bachelors; marriage and continuing the noble line became the sole obligation of the eldest male of aristocratic families. Though a bachelor had access to sexual pursuits, he was prohibited from marriage—an event that

²⁸⁹ Duby, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest*, 35, 33.

²⁹⁰ See above.

²⁹¹ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, IV.2117.

²⁹² Duby, *Medieval Marriage*, 20.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 12.

“transformed a man’s life” by affording him “both power and wisdom.”²⁹⁴ The ideology of courtly love, Duby explains, allowed a young man of an aristocratic house to attempt to win the affection of the lady of the house, breaking up the marriage of an elder and winning the elder’s power and wife for himself. However, the game of courtly love never ended in successful adultery, for “it was the elder (*senior*) who pulled the strings in this game.”²⁹⁵ The elder male allowed his lady to be wooed by the bachelors of his house but never won; in participating in courtly love, the eldest male “domesticated” the youths and glorified the married state.²⁹⁶ Courtly love acted as a regulation of bachelor sexuality, consequently safeguarding the “keystone of dominant society—the married state.”²⁹⁷

As an aristocratic elder male, January benefits from and should perpetuate the system of courtly love. Damian, his squire, is free to fantasize and even charm May, the lady of the house; but, January has allowed the game to go too far as Damian and May plot their affair. In failing to act as authority in his home, January threatens the stability that courtly love and the marital state provide society. As Duby clearly states, “The fact was, by abduction and adultery, male sexuality undermined the rules governing society.” Disobedient male sexuality that went unpunished threatened not only the marriage pact but also the larger social hierarchy to which it was intimately connected.²⁹⁸ The threat that adultery—and, indirectly, bachelor youths—posed to society is clear in its punishment. “The longest punishment of all, forty days of penance each year for seven years,” Duby explains, “was the chastisement inflicted not only on bestiality but also on abduction and

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 14.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 15.

²⁹⁸ Duby, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest*, 68.

adultery.”²⁹⁹ Yet, Brundage notes that adultery litigation was relatively rare, likely because the shameful nature of the situation often resulted in private reckoning.³⁰⁰ If January does not discover the affair and learn from his shaming, then he fails to fulfill his social role as husband and aristocratic male and endangers the larger social hierarchy dependent on marriage. For an aspirational Merchant, hopeful to join the aristocracy, such poor maintenance of received systems of authority threatens his social goals. In addition, the Merchant’s own precarious position in the three-estate system is already cause for anxiety; he can only hope to become an authoritative, aristocratic male if the traditional social hierarchy is stabilized.

Just before Damian and May execute their plan and January becomes the unknowing cuckold, Pluto intervenes to restore January’s domestic authority and the traditional power of all men in aristocratic marriages. Pluto decries “The tresons whiche that wommen doon to man,” citing Solomon and Jesus as authorities on women’s “wikkednesse.”³⁰¹ He takes May’s deception to be representative of all women’s “untrouthe and brotilnesse”.³⁰²

Now wol I graunten, of my magestee,
Unto this olde, blynde, worthy knight
That he shal have ayen his eyen syght,
Whan that his wyf wold doon hym vileynye.
Thanne shal he knowen al hire harlotrye,
Bothe in repreve of hire and othere mo.³⁰³

Pluto plans to administer justice—a righting of the wrongs that have taken place against men. Restoring January’s vision should reveal May’s deception, allow January to

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, 513.

³⁰¹ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, IV.2239, 2249.

³⁰² Ibid., 2241.

³⁰³ Ibid., 2258-63.

recognize and prevent his cuckoldry, and return proper marital authority to January in order to avert all danger to the social order. Pluto's act should re-establish the traditional distribution of authority in aristocratic marriage and the larger society, sustaining the status quo in which men disseminate knowledge and reserve power. Pluto voices much the same complaints as both Justinus and the Merchant do, also relying on anti-marriage authorities. Pluto is also associated with the wealth and riches of the underworld, a connection that clearly links him with the Merchant's livelihood and preoccupation with profit. The Merchant justifies his social desires through Pluto's divine commands in much the same way that Justinus's name vindicates the Merchant's criticism of wives. As a symbol of divinity, albeit a Roman divinity, Pluto attempts to stabilize the entire social hierarchy—therefore maintaining proper order in marriage and the system of received authority in larger society. His actions support and appeal to male, aristocratic authority both for January and the Merchant.

Proserpina, however, acts as an opposing divine force, upsetting Pluto's (and January's and the Merchant's) traditional social hierarchy. She disdains the authorities on women, especially Solomon, whom she calls a "lecchour and an ydolastre."³⁰⁴ To defend her and her kind from the "al the vileyne / That ye of wommen write,"³⁰⁵ she too decides:

That I shal yeven hire suffisant answere,
And alle wommen after, for hir sake,
That, though they be in any gilt ytake,
With face boold they shulle hemself excuse,
And bere hem down that woulden hem accuse.
For lak of answere noon of hem shal dyen.
Al hadde men seyn a thing with bothe his yen,
Yit shul we wommen visage it hardily,
And wepe, and swere, and chyde subtilly,

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 2298.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 22303-4.

So that ye men shul been as lewed as gees.³⁰⁶

Here, Proserpina gives women the ability to contest authority—she makes possible a relatively radical change to the existing system of received authority in the aristocratic marriage. Her redistribution of knowledge and authority mirrors the Clerk's advice for vocal wives; however, Proserpina names no spiritual or divine purpose in authoritative wives. Rather, she gives women the power of rebuke to respond to the long tradition of anti-feminist authors, especially Solomon. Where Pluto restored justice by returning to the traditional distribution of authority in marriage and the larger social order, Proserpina asserts her own definition of justice in defending women against male chauvinism. In her version of justice, women should be able to contest the countless male authorities attacking their gender. Proserpina, though perhaps she may not have leveled the imbalance of received authority within a marriage, has allowed women to be disputers of knowledge rather than passive receivers. As a divine force, she has given wives the ability to deceive their husbands and challenge the system of received knowledge in aristocratic marriage.

The Merchant's choice to invoke Roman divinity, as opposed to Judeo-Christian, may suggest that Pluto and Proserpina be taken as symbolic, gendered forces acting on the social hierarchy. Here, the Merchant could be proposing that the behavior of the genders, specifically in marriage, is either supporting or dissolving the traditional social hierarchy. Pluto, representative of authoritative men, retains men's traditional authority in the medieval marriage; by analogy, Pluto also protects the three-estate system in which the Merchant and January are invested. Pluto's connection with wealth makes him an

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 2266-75.

undeniably representative of the Merchant's economic, and therefore social, interests. Here, men are figured as protectors of social stability, tradition, and the status quo. Proserpina represents women, namely wives of aristocratic marriages. Like May, Proserpina had no choice in marriage; Pluto forcibly carried her to the underworld, where she remains for part of the year. Therefore, when Proserpina gives women the power of retort, she challenges the system of received authority in aristocratic marriage. Since marriage is the foundation of social stability, Proserpina's actions constitute a threat to the traditional social order. If Proserpina is taken as representative of women, then the Merchant identifies increasing authority of women as the agency of social change and, to him, social destabilization.

The Merchant's critical opinion of women clearly stems from his own marriage, but it may also have root in the role of women in his livelihood. By the fourteenth century, the vast majority of guilds were composed equally of men and women, both married and single.³⁰⁷ The development of what Gastle labels the "*femme sole* status," or the operation of businesses by single or married women apart from their husbands, resulted in "a disruption of the family economy."³⁰⁸ Economically independent female merchants threatened to weaken the traditional understanding of the household and its gender responsibilities. Moreover, mercantilism allowed women to "exert a degree of social, sexual, and, ultimately, economic control and disrupt the patriarchal hermeneutic of the late Middle Ages."³⁰⁹ Contemporary merchants were witnessing the increasing power of women in mercantilism and the resulting threat authoritative women posed to

³⁰⁷ Lucy Tomlin Smith, Introduction to *English Guilds* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Humanities Text Initiative, 1999), xxx.

³⁰⁸ Gastle, "Breaking the Stained Glass Ceiling," 125, 130.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 125.

the traditional sense of economy and gender relations. The Merchant, already concerned with his position in the three-estate system and suspicious of authoritative women, would no doubt have shared his peers' anxiety over the increasing visibility of women in their livelihood.

Gastle suggests that the mercantile texts of women like Margaret Paston and Margery Kempe allowed them "to renegotiate the perceptions of roles assigned to men and women and to create a space within the dominating systems wherein women are empowered."³¹⁰ Though Gastle's definition of text is written—as in the letters of Paston and the autobiography of Kempe—the Merchant's oral narrative can serve the same empowering function. The Merchant's Tale is colored by his experience with the world, namely his livelihood, social aspirations, and unhappy marriage. His Tale resides in a dialogue with the other pilgrims, and his story is a bitter reaction to the Clerk's Tale that precedes it. Ultimately, his Tale is a renegotiation of his perceived social and gendered role in society as much as Paston's or Kempe's narratives. Rather than empowering women, though, the Merchant is asserting his own aristocratic, male authority. Meridee L. Bailey supposes that, "At a time when the dominance and moral supremacy of the nobility and the noble household were declining, it is noticeable that moral order and political agendas were visible in the manuscripts associated with gentry, urban, and merchant environments."³¹¹ The Merchant uses his authority as author of his Tale in much the same way that other morally instructive texts, such as the *Book of Good Manners*, did. As Bailey holds, "These texts strengthened the authority of men, and

³¹⁰ Ibid., 143.

³¹¹ Meridee L. Bailey, "Anxieties with Political and Social Order in Fifteenth-Century England," in *Authority, Gender, and Emotions in Late Medieval and Early Modern England*, ed. Susan Broomhall (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 90.

specifically strengthened the authority of men who governed households, by reinforcing their roles in advancing moral conduct to dependents like children and servants.”³¹²

These texts were marketed to and read by the same social groups they were authored by—aristocratic males.³¹³ The Merchant’s Tale is a renegotiation of how society perceives the Merchant, but the Merchant also uses the Tale to assert proper conduct of men and women in the aristocratic marriage—all for the stability of society as a whole.

The Merchant’s choice of fabliau, then, is particularly telling as a comedy of distorted Aristotelian virtues. The Merchant’s Tale satirizes the Clerk’s ideal for wives. If wives like Griselda exchange silence and obedience for vocal authority, the social system dependent on aristocratic marriage will crumble. Ultimate male authority in marriage is necessary to maintain the status quo. Increasingly powerful women, perhaps encouraged by the Clerk’s advice for vocal wives, destabilize patriarchy and threaten social stability; it is the responsibility of aristocratic men to maintain the traditional system of received authority in marriage and protect the social hierarchy. Bailey holds that the end result of the fabliau, as in the Miller’s and the Reeve’s Tales, is the reaffirmation of Aristotelian virtues. In the fabliau, the libidinous old husband should be appropriately shamed for failing to maintain authority in his home. In fact, the audience laughs as the betrayed husband realizes his cuckoldry. Shame becomes an instructive emotion with the aim to “affirm moral standards” and “encourage self-assessment” says Bailey.³¹⁴ The pilgrims laugh at the Miller’s or the Reeve’s Tales, but none want to play the part of cuckolded husband. The Merchant manipulates the shame inherent in the fabliau to preserve male

³¹² Ibid., 100-1.

³¹³ Ibid., 101.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

authority in the aristocratic marriage. The cuckolded husband should behave with more caution towards usurping youths, consequently preventing adultery and preserving the social peace that marriage maintains. The Merchant's Tale should conclude with January's shame at the realization of his wife and squire's affair; listening male pilgrims might then avoid January's naivety by exerting greater authority in marriage, thereby preserving the status quo in marriage and the larger social order.

The Merchant's Tale, however, fails to fulfill the fabliau's expected conclusion. Back in the garden, Pluto gives January his sight just in time to see May defiled right before his eyes. In turn, Proserpina allows May to dispute January's sight, which she does deftly:

I have yow holpe on bothe youre eyen blynde.
Up peril of my soule, I shal nat lyen,
As me was taught, to heele with youre eyen,
Was no thing bet, to make yow to see,
Than to strugle with a man upon a tree.³¹⁵

If January had simply denied May's response, the traditional fabliau would be carried to its comic intentions. The cuckoldry would have been discovered, January would be made the fool, and listening male pilgrims might learn from January's mistakes; however, May convinces January that the cuckoldry happening before his eyes did not happen at all. May denies January's knowledge of adultery, subverting the system of received authority in marriage.

Her subversion poses a dangerous threat to the aristocracy. When January "on hire wombe he stoketh hire ful softe," the Merchant implies that May is not merely pregnant but possibly pregnant with another man's child.³¹⁶ As Duby explains, "The

³¹⁵ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, IV.2370-4.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2414.

worst danger of all was that a wife might be made pregnant by a man other than her husband, and children of a blood different from that of the master of the house might one day bear the name of his ancestors and succeed to their inheritance.”³¹⁷ By failing to protect his wife from adultery, January has endangered his patrimony, which may now go to a child not of his blood. The continuation of the aristocracy depends on the system of patrimonial inheritance, and May’s adultery has threatened the future stability of January’s lineage. The preservation of the aristocracy has been symbolically disrupted by an adulterous wife but also, and more importantly, by an unobservant and unauthoritative husband.

Upon this realization—of the upset of the system of received authority in marriage, the threat to the continuation of aristocratic patrimony, and the destabilization of marriage’s peace-keeping function for society—the Merchant ends his tale with biting irony: “This Januarie, who is glad but he?”³¹⁸ To the listening male pilgrims he says, “Now, goode men, I pray yow to be glad. / Thus endeth heere my tale of Januarie; / God blesse us, and his mooder Seinte Marie!”³¹⁹ The Merchant’s attempt to manipulate the fabliau’s shaming function ultimately fails in light of his anxiety towards social change. Here, the Merchant falls victim to what Bailey defines as the problem of instructive, male-authored and male-read texts, which “offered solutions to perceived social and political problems while reinforcing the very fears that lay underneath them.”³²⁰ The rise in influential female merchants and the challenge to received authority posed by the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 are undeniable historical evidence that the three-estate system is

³¹⁷ Duby, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest*, 47.

³¹⁸ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, IV. 2412.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2416-8.

³²⁰ Baily, “Anxieties with Political and Social Order in Fifteenth-Century England,” 102.

changing; even the precarious nature of mercantilism is evidence of social instability since merchants occupied no distinct estate in the received hierarchy. Unfortunately for the Merchant, his aspirations for the authority afforded aristocratic males will likely never be achieved. Despite the Merchant's attempt to restate the value of aristocratic marriage and the traditional social hierarchy in larger society, the aristocracy is already irreversibly destabilized. He is powerless to avert social change. The Tale is arguably the Merchant's only outlet to espouse the social stasis he desires. His narrative affords the Merchant relative power to renegotiate his perceived social and gendered identity; he can contradict the Clerk's advice for vocal wives and defend male authority in aristocratic marriages. Moreover, the fabliau enables the Merchant to shame men who do not uphold their social obligations and advocate for stricter regulation of women in marriage. The Merchant longs to find a prestige and power in the disintegrating system of received authority; his Tale mourns the loss of aristocratic tradition as much as it attempts to keep tradition in place. In spite of the Merchant's valiant effort to maintain the status quo, his labor fails in light of unstoppable social change. The Merchant's aristocratic hopes are lost along with the unquestionable authority of the received social system.

EPILOGUE: “BEST SENTENCE AND MOOST SOLASS?”

In 1915, Kittredge advocated reading the *Canterbury Tales* from “the dramatic point of view,” a suggestion that has defined and divided the critical discussion for the past century.³²¹ Such a dramatic view requires reading the Tales in the context of a larger dialogue and attributing equal value to the pilgrims and their stories. Kittredge’s most debated claim, the foundation of his “dramatic point of view,” is that “the pilgrims are not static: they move and live.”³²² Individual men and women tell their tales in an active discussion, reacting to each other not as types but as people. Tales serve to inform pilgrims’ personalities, and plots center on relations between pilgrims. As Kittredge argues, “. . . the story of any pilgrim may be affected or determined, — in its contents, or in the manner of the telling, or in both, — not only by his character in general, but also by the circumstances, by the situation, by his momentary relations to the others in the company, or even by something in a tale that has come before.”³²³

Kittredge attributes to the pilgrims a subjectivity often denied to the characters of medieval literature; this same individualism is undermined by Jill Mann. Chaucer wrote the General Prologue in the tradition of estates satire, or “a satiric representation of all classes of society.”³²⁴ The pilgrims are described and defined by a long list of their professional skills in the General Prologue—description which aims “to direct our attention to the social and occupational functions, habits and qualities of the *Prologue*

³²¹ George Lyman Kittredge, *Chaucer and his Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1915), 151.

³²² *Ibid.*, 154.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 156.

³²⁴ Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 1.

figures.”³²⁵ Estate dictates the appearance and qualities of each character, turning pilgrims into idealized or normalized types of a profession. Chaucer foregrounds the estate, not the “individual psychology” of the pilgrims.³²⁶ The Clerk is an ideal representation of the poor scholar, but his portrait serves only to show that he “is a splendid example of his estate,” leaving the goal of his studies purposefully unaddressed.³²⁷ Similarly, the Merchant is a professional stereotype. “Without our sense of the Merchant’s professional *persona*, of the enigmatic reality behind it, and of the past history which makes it possible to label a characteristic a habit,” Mann argues, “they could not give us the sense we have of the Merchant as an individual.”³²⁸ Personality is inseparable from estate.

Kittredge, Mann, and all Chaucerian scholars face the unavoidable question of pilgrim identity and the dramatic frame of the *Canterbury Tales*. Their expansions or limitations of subjectivity problematize the issue of authorship: is Chaucer the ever-present narrator or do the pilgrims speak for themselves? If selfhood is defined entirely by estate, the pilgrims cannot represent individuals with unique and subjective voices in the larger dialogue; their personae are limited to the stereotypical qualities of their hierarchical position. The debate over dramatic authorship is as much a conversation on medieval subjectivity as it is the *Canterbury Tales*.

Lee Patterson describes the oft-repeated division of early English literature between the Renaissance “idea of the individual, and the psychological and social dilemmas that such an idea entails” and the medieval “unproblematic world of identity

³²⁵ Ibid., 12.

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Ibid., 85.

³²⁸ Ibid., 103.

formation.”³²⁹ Such segmentation of literary periods presents medieval identity as determined by hierarchical position—a view espoused by Mann in her explication of the General Prologue; estate dictates the individual. Only in the Renaissance did individuals become “aware of themselves as freestanding individuals, defined not by social relations but by an inner sense of self-presence, a sense of their own subjectivity.”³³⁰

Perhaps defining individuality according to literary period is not a productive means of understanding the *Canterbury Tales*; an equally fruitless venture may be defining the medieval self primarily by the subjective individual or the estate type. Instead, Patterson opts for a reconsideration of long-established boundaries in both identity and history. He posits:

If we can understand that subjectivity is a human characteristic that has always been part of our history, albeit in different configurations and with different powers and values, we can also recognize that it has often been experienced as being set in some form of opposition to both the past from which it emerges and the social world within which its destiny is shaped.³³¹

The medieval self is not wholly dictated by social function or subjectivity; rather, individuality is established both toward and against societal demand and fashioned by contemporary historical events. The medieval individual cannot be understood without recognizing his or her subjectivity in the face of hierarchical obligation and historical setting.

In much the same way that the Clerk and the Merchant deviate from conventions of form, the task for scholars is to disrupt conventional partitions in Chaucerian critical history. The theories of Kittredge and Mann should not be seen as two mutually exclusive

³²⁹ Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 7.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

approaches, but as two productive methods of interpretation. The pilgrims are the subjective, individual and authoritative authors of their tales, but their personalities do not exist in isolation. Just as the characters respond to each other through prologues, tales, and epilogues, each individual is shaped by a particular social history. For the Clerk, that history is the destabilization of papal authority, the ecclesiastical model of marriage, the Clerk's social obligation to teach, and the Wife of Bath's preceding tale; these historical and social factors influence his choice exemplum, his reinterpretation of the Griselda narrative, and his argument for vocal wives as spiritual leaders in marriage. The Merchant's social history is a challenged social hierarchy following the Peasants' Revolt. He reacts to the Clerk's Tale, an authoritative wife, and a destabilized social system in which he has no traditional place. The broken fabliau results from the Merchant's failed aristocratic pretensions and the shifting distribution of authority in marriage. Yet, the Clerk and the Merchant are only two voices in the Marriage Group and the larger dialogue of the *Canterbury Tales*.

Chaucer's voice has often been silenced in critical discussion. Despite the dialogic nature of the Tales, critical opinion presents a politically quietistic Chaucer, who is disengaged with his own social history. Bertrand Bronson unhesitatingly labels Chaucer the "least contentious of men," whose "innocent works" are merely "artistic frivolity."³³² Any suggestion of a subversive Chaucer is a result of modern bias: "it is next to impossible to reconcile ourselves to the idea that an admittedly very great poet wrote mainly for fun."³³³ Yet, if the Canterbury pilgrims voice their subjective reactions to momentous political, religious, and social change, why is Chaucer denied the same

³³² Bertrand H. Bronson, *In Search of Chaucer* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960), 3.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 5.

capacity to speak? Though much work must be done to reveal the previously limited reactions to social change espoused by the pilgrims and their tales, even more attention is required to reveal the author behind this dialogue. Chaucer is as much a pilgrim as the Clerk or the Merchant. The question remains as to how social history informs his subjective reaction to change and his telling of the *Canterbury Tales*.

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