NEW CONTEXTS FOR THE CLASSICS: WANDERERS AND REVOLUTIONARIES IN THE TALES OF THE FRANKLIN AND THE CLERK.[1]

Abstract

This paper attempts to compare the treatment and behaviour of female protagonists in two Chaucerian texts with later representations of feminine independence and self-assertion, particularly in Fanny Burney's novel *The Wanderer* (1814) and Maria Edgeworth's *The Modern Griselda* (1805), a rewriting of the Clerk's Tale. Recent fiminist criticism on Chaucer and the early nineteenth-century scene will be taken as references to read some sections of these texts about marriage and female freedom. I will try to show how both Doringen and Griselda denounced the constraints imposed by patriarchy and lived in a world as debilitating for women as early nineteenth-century Engliosh society.

Keywords: Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, Franklin's Tale, Clerk's Tale.

Resumen

Este artículo pretende comparar el tratamiento y comportamiento de las protagonistas femeninas en dos textos de Chaucer con representaciones posteriores de independencia y autoafirmación femenina, en concreto en la novela *The Wanderer* (1814) de Fanny Burney, y *The Modern Griselda* (1805) de Maria Edgeworth, siendo ésta una reescritura del "Cuento del Erudito". Tomaremos como referencia a la reciente crítica feminista sobre el matrimonio y la libertad femenina. Intentaré demostrar cómo Dirigen y Griselda denunciaron las restricciones impuestas por el patriarcado y vivieron en un mundo debilitante para las mujeres como la sociedad inglesa del principios del siglo XIX.

Palabras clave: Chaucer, *Cuentos de Canterbury,* Cuento del propietario, Cuento del escribano.

1. INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the diverse female protagonists in *The Canterbury Tales* since Kittredge's influential and disputable essay "Chaucer's

[1] This work was presented at the "Seventeenth SELIM International Conference" (Universidade da Coruña, 29th September- 1st October 2005) and is based on the unpublished paper "El feminismo de Chaucer en el 'Cuento del Erudito'" read at "Quinto Congreso de Literatura Española Contemporánea" (Universidade da Coruña, 19th -23rd April 2004). I would like to thank Rory J. Lynch, who kindly revised this paper and helped me to correct some minor mistakes.

Marriage Group".[2] However, the greatness of a classic writer lies precisely in our ability to perceive a plurality of readings of one's work and to relate it to other productions. Here I will analyse from a feminist perspective the tales of the Franklin and the Clerk by establishing a provocative dialogue with some British nineteenth-century texts. Of course, protest against patriarchy appears in all historical periods, but, as a student of English literature after the French Revolution, I wish to focus on the role of women in the two stories. The tales of the Franklin and the Clerk represent a challenge to traditional female images since their protagonists examine the natural and social order of the world at the same time as they expose injustice.

As Dinshaw explains, Chaucer consciously played with gendered models of literary activity, associating acts of writing and signifying with the masculine (1989: 9). He was also aware of the patriarchal power structures that determine the position occupied by the sexes when they read as a man or as a woman (1989: 12). I will support this view by comparing Dorigen's and Griselda's domestic constraints with the ones depicted by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British female writers who lived surrounded by conduct books and the pernicious cult of sensibility. This ideology was exposed, for example, in James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1766), Thomas Gisborne's *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (1797) or Dr. John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (1774), and it insisted on passivity, chastity, sweetness and self-control in females. It was assumed that certain intellectual domains, such as science and philosophy, were masculine, and women were defined as the sister, the daughter or the wife of a man. As we will see, both tales contain subversive protagonists departing from this model and voicing the contradictions of freedom later exposed in feminist fiction by Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth or Mary Wollstonecraft, among many others.

[2] He includes under this term the Franklin's, the Clerk's, the Merchant's and the Wife of Bath's Tale. Holman objects to this label because it avoids an analysis of the Tales themselves (1959: 240, see also Reiman 1963: 372).

2. MEDIEVAL FEMALE METAPHYSICS

It is important to highlight that neither of Chaucer's tales is original. Besides, the narrative frames highly condition our impression and evaluation of characters, especially if we turn to their narrators[3]and sources.[4] In the ambiguous *Franklin's Tale*, Chaucer introduces female virtue paradoxically wrestling with and protecting masculine honour, while social appearances and illusions play important roles.

[3] Spearing explains why the narrative voice in *The Canterbury Tales* has attracted criticism so powerfully: Kittredge's ideas appeared when dramatic monologue and the questionable narrator were regarded as crucial elements to study prose fiction and they contributed to new literary interpretations (2005: 104-6). The Franklin is a sanguine wealthy Epicurean at table while the Clerk is a cultivated man, and we find few positive judgements on the Franklin. Whereas Pearsall considers him a quiet person dominated by emotion (1985: 149), and Martin highlights his common sense (1990: 129), most criticism focuses on the Franklin's attempt to seduce readers with his personality and story. He wants to imitate the Knight, and his egocentric behaviour is comparable with the Orleans Clerk's one (Mathewson 1983: 35, Shoaf 1997: 246). As a proud character merely interested in appearances (Robertson 1974: 26), his speech is deliberately made to confound and he does not admit the complexity of human relationships (Aers 1980: 163-4). For Kittredge, his Tale is simply too elegant for him (1976: 210), and Carruthers notices that he is an expert in rhetoric (1981: 292). Furthermore, Chaucer uses the plural, positioning himself at the protagonists' level, so that the reader identifies himself/herself with the Tale (Jill 1982: 135).

[4] *The Franklin's Tale* surpasses its sources in psychological realism. Chaucer took Boccaccio's *Il Filocolo* (Nineteenth Day Fifth Tale*),* Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regnun Britanniae* (where one character is called Arviragus and the magic element appears too), Breton lays, Saint Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum* (particularly the *exempla* of virgins and martyrs) and Kean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose* (with an idealistic pact between spouses) (Bryan & Dempster 1959: 377-97, Aers 1980: 162, Cooper 1989: 234). Chaucer's is only one rewriting of the prolific Griselda's story, which was very popular and whose transmission has been well traced: Boccaccio rescued it from folklore and incorporated it to *Decameron* (Tenth Day Tenth Tale), then Petrarch translated the story into Latin in *Epistola Seniles* 17.3. This work and a thirteenth-century anonymous French translation called *Livre Griseldis* helped Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales*. However, the English writer feminised Griselda and added a religious dimension not present in the sources (Bryan & Dempster 1959: 288-91, Dinshaw 1989: 132, Cooper 1989: 188-91). The narratives themselves admit their filiation: in the Prologue it is stated that the Clerk takes his narrative from Petrarch (lines 27-31), and the Franklin recognises having heard his story in Brittany (lines 714-5).

A summary of the story shows how every character makes some sort of mistake. The Knight Arveragus marries Dorigen promising to be "Servant in love, lord in mariage" (line 793).[5] However, shortly afterwards he departs to England to obtain honours and Dorigen becomes disconsolate ("She moorneth, waketh, waileth, fasteth, pleineth;/ Desir of his presence hir so destreineth/ That al this wide world she set at noght", lines 819-21). One morning her admirer Aurelius confesses his love to her, who playfully answers that she would lie with him if the rocks of Brittany disappeared. Aurelius resorts to an Orleans Clerk who demands a thousand pounds to fulfil his goal, and Dorigen despairs when she sees the carefully prepared miracle. Arveragus comes back and tells her to fulfil her promise ("'Ye shul youre trouthe holden, by my fay!'", line 1474). However, Aurelius pities Dorigen, and, when the Clerk sees Aurelius's gesture towards the lady, he has mercy on him.

On the one hand, personal ambition masters Arveragus, who leaves his reputation in Dorigen's hands after having promised *souffrance* to her, a concept defined as a "mutual tolerance, a positive and willing embrace of the will of another as a means to the strengthening of the bond of love" (Pearsall 1985: 160).[6] On the other hand, the fulfilment of Aurelius's selfish desire involves a woman's adultery. It is Dorigen who becomes her own victim, the subject of 'a culturally sanctioned rape' (Raybin 1992: 76) while, if carefully analysed, her words are far from passive. There are some narrative gaps in the tale (nothing is said about what Arveragus was doing in England), and the

[5] All citations will be to Jill Mann's edition of *The Canterbury Tales*.

[6] For many critics, Arveragus sacrifices the initial equality compromise on behalf of his public persona. When Dorigen explains to him the nature of her promise, his ego resents: "The husband who has attempted to initiate mutual and non-coercive love, orders his obedient but unwilling wife to subject herself to another male while he himself displays the unreflexive masculine egotism habitual in the traditional culture" (Aers 1980: 166). Chaucer parodies a literary convention (Phillips 2000: 289) and uses some of its features to comment how men and women transform institutions (Holman 1959: 246-7, 249). However, Dorigen does not behave like a typical courtly love woman: she wants to remain faithful, and Arveragus relies on her (Holman 1959: 247-8).

promise between the spouses is never made public (Pearsall: 150). For Phillips, their union was atypical in medieval England:

> First, by its very act of questioning and discussing the unequal power relations between husband and wife; second, by its presentation of this as an attitude which men and women share: both sexes, it asserts, naturally desire liberty (268-9), and it is a man here who proposes that the husband's right to require obedience should not be enforced (745-50); and thirdly, by reformulating the marital relationship as one best regarded as one of love and friendship (2000: 287).

For David, characters simply make no sacrifices at all (1976: 190), and few critics defend Dorigen, who lacks patience and confuses illusion with reality (Pearsall 1985: 154). The tale offers a feminine point of view, and Arveragus is to blame for not having stayed at home (Thompson 1984: 170, 177). Martin thinks that she has the least freedom in the story: "She escapes the *hortus conclusus* and is excluded rather than enclosed" (1990: 130), whereas Raybin turns to the etymological sense of *free* and considers Dorigen as the most generous character. She triumphs over her lover's vulgarity and her husband's meanness since she forgives both, and Raybin goes further to assert: "queenlike, she rises above the vulgarity of her lover and the pettiness of her husband to lift them with her to a higher moral level…Dorigen is true generosity, the true nobility of spirit" (1992: 81). She affirms that she belongs to her husband ("'Ne shal I nevere been untrewe wif/ In word ne werk, as fer as I have wit'", lines 984-5) and, believing that the rocks will never move, she promises to be Aurelius's lover if he completes a challenge: "Ye remoeve alle the rokkes, stoon by stoon,/ That they ne lette ship ne boot to goon" (lines 993-4). Her rash promise not only compromises her virtue but also creates some emotional imbalance (Mathewson 1983: 31). Dorigen is later appalled, and her convictions undermined, when nature, a symbol of the social order in the story, is altered by an illusion. In fact, she believes so strongly in Aurelius's

words that she never goes to the sea to check because she firmly believes him and thinks of committing suicide.

Like *The Clerk's Tale*, *The Franklin's Tale* is a story about inconstancy and constraints to women's will epitomised by the bleak Breton rock.[7] Although Dorigen lacks philosophic learning,[8] her polished rhetoric reveals a lot, as Baker points out: "Chaucer is able to convey graphically the internal struggle of Dorigen, illuminating her character, and at the same time to develop, by the use of these materials, the structure of his tale, epitomising and adumbrating the moral of the Franklin" (1961: 64). According to Phillips, Dorigen's speech questions society, creation and even the Franklin who seems so honourable (2000: 289).[9] The sea-coast becomes a locus for self-reflection and it provides the opportunity to attack patriarchal culture. Chaucer's

[7] Cooper is interested in how this symbol affects characters (1989: 239). Dorigen sees in the rocks her marriage's solidity and firmness (David 1976: 187). They also stand for the fact that "Love cannot exist in a cage. To soar, the human spirit requires its liberty. Women, as well as men, need the obstacles to freedom, emblematized by the famous rocks of Brittany, be removed. Indeed, the key to understanding the message of the Franklin's Tale lies in the removal of those black rocks, the tale's central symbolic action. Chaucer tells much about love and marriage when he proposes so solid an obstacle to free passage may be made by simple magic to appear or disappear." (Raybin 1992: 79)

[8] Scholars never agree on Dorigen's erudition. For Cooper, she uses philosophic terminology (1989: 243, also Sledd 1947: 42). Bachman maintains that Boethius's language helps her to pose questions following logic (1977: 56-7) and at the same time to parody the Christian philosopher affirming the human side before the ideal world (1977: 60). There are several parallelisms between *The Franklin's Tale* and *De Consolatione Philosophiae*: the Clerk alters what characters see just like philosophy distracts men, Aurelius feels as depressed as the protagonist of Boethius's work and the Clerk knows beforehand Aurelius's problem as if he had some superior power (Bachman 1977: 62-3). Roney openly attacks Dorigen's erudition: because she is a woman, Dorigen is apparently not an appropriate object for moral reasoning. Yet she is the one who suffers the most, she is the one the authorities would sentence to death or defilement, and, of them all, she is the only real innocent... She is a wimp because, although she is highly educable, she has never learned how to mediate between conflicting ethical claims. The reason she has never learned is that, as a woman, all her life she has been systematically excluded from serious moral reasoning (1999: 24).

[9] Bloomfield states that "This is the first example in Western literature of which I know where the terrible and the frightening aspects of nature lead a spectator to question God's goodness...There's no answer to Dorigen's prayer and to the dilemma she faces" (1982: 189).

audience must interpret the indirect criticism of Arveragus: Dorigen has the mark of consolation impressed on her and wants to know the meaning of evil, facing the senseless rocks symbolising oppression, which, like ideals, war or hunger destroy men in the sea:

> Se ye nat, Lord, how mankinde it destroyeth?
> An hundred thousand bodies of mankinde
> Han rokkes slain, al be they nat in minde;
> Which mankinde is so fair part of thy werk
> That thow it madest lik to thin owene merk.
> Thanne semed it ye hadde a greet chiertee
> Toward mankinde; but how thanne may it be
> That ye swich menes make it to destroyen?
> — Whiche menes do no good, but evere anoyen (lines 876-84).

She cannot comprehend Aurelius's blind desire and condemns a male sexuality based merely on the satisfaction of lust: "What deintee sholde a man han in his lif/ For to go love another mannes wif,/ That hath hir body whan so that him liketh?' (lines 1003-5). Her long speech to Fortune includes exempla on sacrificed virgins and humiliated wives (lines 1355-1456) expressing how she neither wants to sleep with Aurelius nor displease her husband. Dorigen also realises her mistake: she has gone too far and is at stake between two men. At the same time that she attacks the submission of women and vindicates a space of her own, she casts some doubt on the validity of masculine honour:

> But nathelees, yet have I levere lese
> My lif, than of my body have a shame,
> Or knowe myselven fals, or lese my name.
> And with my deeth I may be quit, ywis.
> Hath ther nat many a noble wif er this,
> And many a maide, yslain hirself, allas,
> Rather than with hir body doon trespas? (lines 1360-6).

Her aware attitude can be related to the Dissenter Mary Wollstonecraft, who denounced in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792),[10] the fact that "understanding has been strictly denied to women; and instinct sublimated into wit and cunning, for the purposes of life has been substituted in its stead" (1975: 143). It also resembles Mary Hays's views in *The Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), whose protagonist likewise condemns females strictures:

> Why have I been rendered feeble and delicate by bodily constraint and fastidious by artificial refinement? Why are we bound, by habits of society, as with an adamantine chain? Why do we suffer ourselves to be confined within a magic circle without claiming, by a magnanimous effort, to disolve [sic] the barbarous spell? (1974: 55).

Dorigen's voice is more conservative than it seems and can be interpreted as a parody against rebellious women. In order to explain my view, I wish to refer in particular to Fanny Burney's novel, *The Wanderer (*1814*),* whose co-protagonist, Elinor Joddrel, parallels Dorigen in this sense. The author, Fanny Burney (1752-1840), appeared in English literature with the anonymous novel *Evelina* (1778) which made her instantly famous and was followed by *Cecilia* (1782) and *Camilla* (1796). Her last work, *The Wanderer*, was written after her exile in France and it depicts how a woman secretly married to a brutal officer of the French Revolution arrives in England stripped of the protection of a family and social position. Juliet holds several jobs (seamstress, milliner and shopkeeper) and pursues self-independence. In England, she meets Albert Harleigh, a man of true feeling in the sentimental tradition and also pursued by Elinor Joddrel, Juliet's opponent in *The Wanderer*. This young genuine Republican and free-thinker embraces radical politics and openly declares her passion for Harleigh facing a refusal on his part.

[10] Lorenzo's (2004) perceptive introduction to the Galician translation of *Vindication* gives a detailed account of Wollstonecraft's life and works.

Burney's fable on female identity appeared when the female philosopher was in fashion in works such as Charlotte Smith's *The Young Philosopher* (1798) or Elizabeth Hamilton's *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800). Obviously, this character was much indebted to Charlotte Lennox's memorable Arabella in *The Female Quixote* (1752).[11] For many critics, the Quixotic Elinor refers to Mary Wollstonecraft, who "provided a model for Elinor's eloquence, penetration, nobility of character and self destructive indulgence in emotion" (Rogers 1990: 163).[12]

Elinor is another aspect of the protagonist, the mysterious Juliet, who tries to earn her living while concealing her personal story. Unlike Dorigen, the Jacobin Elinor is single, she makes efforts to seduce Harleigh and attacks the social constraints hindering female freedom: "Debility and folly! Put aside your prejudices, and forget that you are a dawdling woman, to remember that you are an active human being and your FEMALE DIFFICULTIES will vanish into the vapour of which they are formed" (397). Burney's character denounces the causes and grounds for woman-hating:

> By the oppressions of their [men's] own statues and institutions, they render us insignificant; and then speak of us as if we were so born! But what have we tried, in which we have been foiled? They dare not trust us with their own education, and their own opportunities for distinction... Woman is left out in the scales of human merit, only because they dare not weigh her! (399).

[11] About the translation into Spanish, see Lorenzo (2006).

[12] Spacks admits many coincidences between Wollstonecraft's and Elinor's protest, but considers that Burney rejects the Dissenter's views and attacks passivity regarding female identity (1976: 183). For Brown, Elinor represents a point of view never before explicited in Burney and centres on the failure of revolutionary hope on a personal level (1986: 36). Even if we do not understand Elinor as personal parody, Wollstonecraft's ideology cannot be silenced in the novel.

Suicide and the intention to erase oneself from the world appear both in Dorigen's long speech and in Elinor's exaggerated attempts to kill herself: "Turn Harleigh, turn! and see thy willing martyr! —Behold, perfidious Ellis! behold thy victim!" (359), "Her! Harleigh, here!... 'tis here you must reciprocate your vows! Here is the spot! Here stands the altar for the happy; —here, the tomb for the hopeless!" (580). In Burney, suicide becomes only a thread, a way to obtain Harleigh's heart and to rebel against an imposed role in the world. Like Dorigen, Elinor sometimes seems almost mad and insists on her Self, a suspicious attitude permitted only to men in medieval and early nineteenth-century England.

The Wanderer can be interestingly interpreted in ecocritical terms as an exploration of nature's darkest side, which reminds us of Chaucer's tale set in Brittany. The novel deals with the fragmentation of reality and the human necessity to search for an answer to our alienation in the world. This philosophic approach is admirably materialised in the Stonehenge scene paralleling the Breton rocks as a solitary prehistoric shelter, where Juliet, like a female Lear, brings her tragedy to light. She is surrounded by stones, the representatives of female difficulties:

> This grand, uncouth monument of ancient days had a certain sad, indefinable attraction, more congenial to her distress, than all the polish, taste, and delicacy of modern skill...Here, on the contrary, was room for 'meditation even to madness', nothing distracted the sight, nothing broke in upon attention, nor varied the ideas. Thought, uninterrupted and uncontrouled [sic], was master of the mind (766).

On the other hand, Elinor deconstructs a literary masculine ideal of benevolent nature in the same way that Chaucer mocks the Franklin's hypocritical attitude and the high standards presented in his tale. Her excessive positioning is clearly reflected in her view of afterlife through the contemplation of the natural world:

> Look round the old churchyards! Is not every bone the prey, —or the disgust,— of every animal? How, when scattered, commixed, broken, battered, how shall they ever again be collected, united, arranged, covered and coloured as they appear regenerated? (789).

Rudat thinks that Chaucer supports lasting marriages in the tale (1982: 21), but the author also takes advantage to criticise empty discourse as Holman maintains: "both [the Merchant's and the Franklin's Tale] certainly are concerned with people caught in the conflict between the demands of matrimony and the courts of love" (1959: 241). The parody of philosophy and rhetoric in *The Franklin's Tale* turns into criticism against benevolence and Cambridge Platonism in *The Wanderer*. This can be specially observed in Elinor and Harleigh's long-winded conversation on the nature of the soul (781-94) and when she asks herself about woman: "'Must every thing [sic] that she does be prescribed by rule? Must every thing that she says be limited to what has been said before?'" (177). Dorigen shows how female self-perception is conditioned by masculine ideas on women encoded in the medieval courtly love and comparable with Sensibility,[13] harshly criticised by both conservatives and radicals for its excesses and a cultural opening through which the socially excluded could participate in the world. Like Dorigen, Elinor resembles a solitary Wanderer appealing for some social change, but it will be a peasant's daughter who articulates a more powerful criticism on the subjection of woman.

3. *THE CLERK'S TALE* OR THE COMPETITION WITH PATRIARCHY

[13] Erämetsä points out that this was regarded at the end of the eighteenth century as a "hybrid mixture of thought and feeling ... characterized by extreme innate sensitiveness, which responded to external stimuli with utmost quickness" (1951: 57-8).

The Clerk portrays an exemplary woman[14]who is tested through lies and painful separations in a story about the close relationship between the public and the private life. Walter, Marquis of Saluzzo, hears his countrymen's appeal and decides to marry with a condition:

> But I yow pray, and charge upon youre lif,
> That what wif that I take, ye me assure
> To worshipe hire whil that hir lif may dure,
> In word and werk, bothe here and everywhere,
> As she an emperoures doghter were.
>
> And ferthermoore, this shal ye swere: that ye
> Again my chois shal neither grucche ne strive.
> For sith I shal forgoon my libertee
> At your requeste, as evere mote I thrive,
> Theras min herte is set, ther wol I wive.
> And but ye wol assente in swich manere,
> I pray yow, speketh namoore of this matere (lines 164-75).

He chooses a virtuous poor woman called Griselda, who lives with her father and is a model of virtues since the Clerk describes how "But hye God som time senden can/ His grace into a litel oxes stalle" (lines 206-7). Griselda swears total submission to Walter:

> She seide,"Lord, undigne and unworthy
> Am I to thilke honour that ye me bede.
> But as ye wol yourself, right so wol I.
> And heere I swere that nevere willingly
> In werk ne thoght, I nil yow disobeye,
> For to be deed, thogh me were looth to deye" (lines 359-64).

[14] From our modern perspective Griselda is not an appealing character: "there are few Chaucerian tales about which medieval and modern values clash so much as in this tale of husbandly sadism and wifely masochism" (Hallisy 1995: 167).

She is soon beloved by everybody; however, Walter forces her to separate from her two children (lines 484-90 and 638-41), who are secretly sent to Bologna to be educated as noble people. Griselda accepts Walter's orders and appeals to love: "Deeth may nat make no comparisoun/ Unto youre love" (lines 666-7). The heroine is later told to leave her rich dwelling since Walter decides to marry another woman and Griselda goes back with Janicula until Walter calls her to prepare his new wife's arrival. When Walter asks her about his new lady, Griselda's courageous answer deserves the regaining of her old position, and Walter tells the truth to her. The husband rules his family like God and Griselda's obedience reproduces submission to patriarchy. As Reiman argues, "Griselda, who possesses more of the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity than does the high-born marquis, misdirects them by submitting patiently and obediently, not to God's law, but to the arbitrary and evil desires of a 'mortal man'" (1963: 163). For Martin: "her [Griselda's] story can be read as a nostalgic celebration or veiled critique of their [Walter's people] society with its corresponding hierarchies" (1990: 149), and Carruthers also sees Griselda as Walter's opposite, a woman who neither grew spoilt nor in luxury (1982-3: 225).[15]

The model wife never questions the legitimacy of Walter's actions up to a certain point. When he tries to substitute her for another woman, Griselda sets her passivity aside and makes us listen to the defence of her Self as something repressed in the tale:

> O thing biseke I yow, and warne also,
> That ye ne prike with no tormentinge
> This tendre maiden, as ye han don mo;
> For she is fostred in hir norissinge
> Moore tendrely, and to my supposinge,
> She koude nat adversitee endure

[15] Walter is cruel, but not a tyrant according to medieval political beliefs (Pearsal 1985: 267 and Hallisy 1995: 159).

As koude a povre fostred creature" (lines 1037-43).

The message here is not limited to the fact that husbands should not be like Walter because women are not Griseldas as Reiman maintains (1963: 369): she is emphasising her individual worth.[16] Finally, Walter tells the truth and the family happily lives together: "I have thy feith and thy benignitee,/ As wel as evere womman was, assayed,/ In greet estat, and povreliche arrayed./ Now knowe I, deere wif, thy stedfastnesse!" (lines 1053-6).

The prevailing view at the end of the eighteenth century was that women must submit to being in the shadow of a husband, as Hannah More explains in *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*:

> A woman may be knowing, active, witty, and amusing; but without propriety she cannot be amiable... It shows itself by a regular, orderly, undeviating course; and never starts from its sober orbit into any splendid eccentricities; for it would be ashamed of such praise as it might extort by any aberrations from its proper path. It renounces all commendation but what is characteristic (1974, 1: 6-7).

Maria Edgeworth's *The Modern Griselda*[17] (1805) is a parodic rewriting of *The Clerk's Tale* as the rational Emma Granby states: "The situation and understanding of women have been so much improved since his [Chaucer's] days. Women were then slaves, now they are free" (429). Edgeworth (1768-1849) cultivated the domestic novel and wrote collections of stories for

[16] Heffernan states that Griselda represents the "*commune* or common people facing an absolutist tyrant, Walter, with passive resistance and freeing him from the tyranny of his own will" (1983: 338).

[17] Butler, one of Edgeworth's best critics and her biographer, emphasises the novelist's importance and contribution: "In the first half of *Belinda*, in *The Modern Griselda*, *Émilie de Coulanges*, and *Manoeuvring*, she pioneered some of the most successful features of Jane Austen's novels" (1972: 327). Besides, "many of the techniques that Jane Austen later used so successfully —the subtly revealing dialogue, the intelligent principal characters, the relation between the intelligence of those characters and a continuously analytical narrative tone— were all to be found first in Maria Edgeworth" (1972: 328).

children and adults widely read and admired by generations of readers. Nowadays she is studied in particular for her chronicles of early nineteenth-century Irish society, in works such as *Castle Rackrent* (1800), *Ennui* (1809) and *The Absentee* (1812). The Anglo-Irish novelist built her story on George Ogle's well-known version of Chaucer's text (1741) and depicts the collapse of a marriage due to a bossy anti-Chaucerian wife who erodes her husband's authority with whims and verbal battles.[18] The shrew illustrates how marriage should be based on mutual admiration and respect, which is precisely Chaucer's thesis and a message to infer from the tale. Fordyce himself defined untamed women as the nightmare of patriarchy:

> A woman that affects to dispute, to decide, to dictate on every subject; that watches or makes opportunities of throwing out scraps of literature, or shreds of philosophy, in every company; that engrosses the conversation as if she alone were qualified to entertain; that betrays in short, a boundless intemperance of tongue, together with an inextinguishable passion for shining by the splendour of her supposed talents; such a woman is truly insufferable (1787: 176).

Edgeworth's Griselda responds to a stereotype and victimises herself before her husband:

> I know I am your [Bolingbroke's] plaything after all: you cannot consider me for a moment as your equal or your friend — I see that! — You talk of these things to your friend Mr. Granby — I am not worthy to hear them. — Well, I am sure I have no ambition, except to possess the confidence of the man I love (419).

[18] Martin highlights the difference: "Whereas the Knight in the Wife's Tale is schooled and punished into learning what women want, Griselda's programme is to renounce any individual desire and make her will corfom to Walter's until they are identical" (1990: 146).

> Do you [Bolingbroke] laugh at me? ... When it comes to this, I am wretched indeed! Never a man laughed at the woman he loved! As long as you had the slightest remains of love for me, you could not make me an object of derision: ridicule and love are incompatible, absolutely incompatible (421).

As tension grows more intense, Bolingbroke decides to separate, and Griselda feels desperate and powerless: "Conflicting passions assailed her heart. All the woman rushed upon her soul; she loved her husband more at this instant than she had ever loved him before. His firmness excited at once her anger and her admiration" (460). Challenging females like Edgeworth's Griselda are undesirable fictions, images to avoid, and in his work Chaucer must be seen as alerting us to the dangers of excessive behaviour by either sex.[19]

I would like to offer a plausible political interpretation of *The Clerk's Tale*. Reiman thinks that Chaucer wanted to parody his Petrarchian source because he differentiates between Walter's treatment of Griselda and God's treatment of man (1963: 366-8).[20] In my view, Griselda's excellent capacities to negotiate and rule when Walter is absent constitute a challenge to his authority: even before her marriage she ran the household efficiently and wanted to finish her chores in time to see the new Marquise (lines 223-31 and 281-7). Chaucer's Griselda turns into a political woman, like Dorigen a philosopher, they enter

[19] For Middleton, who analyses the changes Chaucer operated in his sources, the English writer invites us to examine "how woe can be delightful, how 'ernestful matere' becomes, through 'art poetical', an object of pleasure as well as use" (1980: 122). Morse responds to Middleton and doubts that Chaucer seriously endorses Griselda's example: "his awareness of the interpretative problems readers and listeners have, as well as his sense that Griselda places an extraordinary demand on the audience, makes him expect few to imitate her" (1985: 84). Hawkins also explains: "if the ways of man to woman in the Clerk's Tale are explicitly designed to be symbolic of the ways of God to man, then we remain free to criticize those ways as well" (1975: 356). For Ginsberg, the tale is as ambiguous as its teller, who fails of measure up his fiction and thus engages the reader (1978: 322-3).

[20] Walter is "both a social innovator and arch disbeliever in his own experiment in affording 'a povre fostred creature' the opportunity to become a fair lady" (Johnson, 1994: 207).

masculine realms, and Walter begins to think of destroying her or testing her sweetness, patience and compassion to the limit. However, for Pearsall, the point is not to make Walter conscious of his excessive pressure on Griselda but to "persuade him to a change of heart" (1985: 276). He does not really mind having children with a peasant, but he does mind losing power before an admirable woman, because he is an incompetent spoilt Marquis. Like the noble wife Dorigen, Griselda provokes certain suspicion in a powerful man, and sex, not class, destabilises society in the tale. Chaucer comes to state, as Hansen explains, that "virtue in a woman in fact provokes male aggression and that a woman's public powers, even if they are divinely sanctioned, matter little to her identity or fate as a female, both of which are shown to be ultimately and utterly under the control of her husband" (1988: 233). Griselda's situation reminds us of the one depicted in Mary Astell's *Some Reflections upon Marriage*:

> If Arbitrary Power is Evil in it self, and an improper Method of Governing Rational and Free Agents, it ought not to be practis'd any where; nor is it less, but rather more mischievous in Families than in Kingdoms, by how much 100,000 Tyrants are worse than one. What though a Husband can't deprive a Wife of Life without being responsible to the Law, he may, however, do what is much more grievous to a genrous [sic] mind render Life miserable, for which she has no Redress, scarce Pity which is afforded to every other Complainant it being thought a Wife's Duty to suffer every thing without Complaint. If all Men are born Free, how is it that all Women are born Slaves? (1700: 20).

The heroine has the potential of a Revolutionary, and, if Walter was previously attracted by her beauty and admirable conduct, now he acknowledges her value, so, like a maniac, he wants to torture her.[21]

In this analysis it is paradoxical that morality impregnates Chaucer's tales in concepts such as *sovereignty* and *gentilesse*. In *The Franklin's Tale* neither sex wants to submit and the narrator even labels Arveragus and Aurelius as *gentyl*, a complex idea which covered moral virtue and aristocratic status (Sledd 1947: 40) and protected against excessive social flexibility (Carruthers 1981: 287). Apart from *gentilesse*, in *The Clerk's Tale* there is another keyword, *womanhede,* described as feminine essence, either created or endowed and opposing male egotism. As the Clerk explains, Walter was attracted by this virtue in Griselda ("Commendynge in his herte hir wommanhede", line 239), and he finally reveals to her that all the suffering was "t'assaye in thee thy wommanheede'" (line 1075).[22] English proper ladies engendered harmony in a society which empowered them to perfection, and Griselda is indeed a fourteenth-century sweet and compliant Angel in the House, but also a leaf of grass taken from the natural world of Saluzzo. Her figure reminds us of the good daughter, the good lady and the good wife while Walter does as much as possible to frustrate her status as a good mother, and she eventually teaches a nobleman the true meaning of *gentilesse* as "a consequence of God-given grace that has nothing to do with ancestry" (Levy 1977: 309).

[21] Aers explores the story's psychological dimension: "Chaucer presents Walter as an authoritarian personality who fulfils his egotistic lust for dominion under the tyranny of his own sick will" (1980: 171). Cooper points out that the tale "call[s] into question the subjection of women that makes Walter's mindless cruelty possible…Chaucer's attack goes rather deeper [than Dioneo's one in *Decameron*], to produce a medieval equivalent to *The Wrongs of Woman*" (1989: 199).

[22] Heninger distinguishes Griselda's constancy from her patience: "Under all costs, regardless of change in her position, she has done her duty faithfully and benignly…Griselda's constancy, even in the face of manifestations of mutability, has maintained the natural order of God, in which good is justly rewarded" (1957: 391-2).

4. CONCLUSION

In this analysis I have inscribed Chaucer's tales into a different frame of reference, and they have proved to be more complex than they seem. Perhaps Dorigen and Griselda's treatment is completely ironic; however, the tales of the Franklin and the Clerk are obviously related: "one lesson to be derived from *The Clerk*'s *Tale* may be that in marriage, as in most human relationships, tyranny can be avoided only when all parties agree to observe the terms of a treatise that reads 'You be good to me, and I'll be good to you'" (Hawkins 1975: 350). Edgeworth's criticism of the situation of women in *The Modern Griselda* greatly differs from the Chaucerian text, though the female author also reproduces the war of the sexes. It is clear that Chaucer has given his characters a human touch like a Gothic sculptor working on scenes for the façade of a cathedral, an attitude already found in *The Legend of Good Women* (c. 1386). The subject of these tales should not be merely reduced to marriage since the stories affirm the right to express oneself, to question and to defend identity, which implies the respect towards Others. Female protagonists share something more than sacrifice: "Patience is too based upon integrity, the *trouthe* which persists through the vagaries of passion, and expresses itself as willing generosity, the ability to forgive" (Carruthers 1981: 296), a lesson to inculcate to the reader and which does not abound. The tales of the Franklin and the Clerk are also chronicles of males fearful of change, which would become more noticeable when, in modern England, female writers vied with the authority of their male counterparts. In this sense, Dorigen and Griselda probably just needed to take the pen.

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