Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*

by John Finlayson

ONE of the comforting certainties of Chaucer studies, until recently, has been the belief that Chaucer did not use Boccaccio's *Decameron* as a source for any of the *Canterbury Tales* and, indeed, was unaware of that work's existence. Critics and scholars have accepted the pronouncements of early commentators, chiefly Cummings, Pratt and Young, Farnham, and Severs, that most of the resemblances between Chaucer's *Tales* and the *Decameron* can be explained by reference to other European analogues or Boccaccio's bland imitator Sercambi, or, in the authoritative words of J. Burke Severs, that "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." Donald McGrady's careful analysis and rejection of most of the assertions and proofs advanced by Cummings and Farnham attracted little support until Helen Cooper's reference to it in *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales*:

It strains credibility less to believe that Chaucer knew the *Decameron*, than to believe that the circumstantial evidence for his knowledge of it is all mere coincidence, or that he found the inspiration for the *Canterbury Tales* in Boccaccio's uninspired imitators.1

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2 Helen Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales* (London: Duckworth, 1985), 116–17; see also her more comprehensive examination, "Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's

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Several comparative studies of Chaucer, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, while noting similarities of story matter and creative attitude in their general focus on Chaucer's difference or originality, have shied away from the obvious conclusion, finally deferring to the "no smoking gun" argument. The two most recent comparative studies, by N. S. Thompson and David Wallace, have, however, come as close as academic caution will apparently permit. Thompson says, "In the end I hope that the readings given here will be taken as evidence of Chaucer's knowledge of the Decameron . . . and, if nothing else, will show that there are stronger connections than have previously been thought." What exactly a stronger connection that is not an acceptance of Chaucer's knowledge and use of the Decameron might be is not clear. Unfortunately, also, many of his readings and deconstructions of both Boccaccio and Chaucer are highly debatable and so self-reflexive as to undermine even the thrust of his tentative conclusion. Wallace, wedded to his thesis of Petrarch as "absolutist" and Chaucer as "associationalist," sees the Clerk's Tale as a multifaceted critique of its Petrarchan source which has clear similarities to Boccaccio's approach to the story, but is unwilling to commit himself further: "My argument does not assume that Chaucer knew the Boccaccian Griselde story, although it is quite possible that he did. I am suggesting, however, that the political dimensions of Boccaccio's novella, its embeddedness in contemporary ideological debate, do have an important bearing on our reading of the Clerk's Tale." Both these fence-sittings allow their authors to avoid identifying the degree of originality in the many differences claimed between Chaucer and either Petrarch or Boccaccio or both, and as in earlier commentators, there is a tendency to oversimplify Boccaccio and Petrarch to fit a thesis of Chaucerian originality.

The "Chaucer did not know the Decameron" clericalism gained much of its enduring currency from Severs' firm pronouncements on the absence of Boccaccian influence on the Clerk's Tale in his monograph, along with its accession to classical status in Bryan and Dempster's Sources and Analogues. Chaucer's principal source for the Clerk's Tale is un-
doubtedly Petrarch’s version of the Griselda story, which exists in many late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century manuscripts, and is directly identified by the Clerk himself. In The Literary Relationships of Chaucer’s "Clerkes Tale" Severs identifies a particular manuscript family group of Petrarch’s work as Chaucer’s direct source and in addition proposes that a particular French translation of Petrarch was also used by Chaucer in his composition. He identifies the nature of Chaucer’s originality in his additions to, omissions from, and alterations of these two sources. In his chapter 11, “Chaucer’s Originality,” he establishes quite clearly that Chaucer, unlike the French translator, is not just translating sentence by sentence, but creatively enlarges and alters his principal source, Petrarch. Broadly speaking, the asserted differences between Petrarch and Chaucer are valid, and Chaucer is in no danger of being dismissed as merely a “grant translateur.” However, in a number of significant instances, Severs seems to me to have misrepresented, suppressed, or cavalierly rejected possible relationships, particularly in reference to Boccaccio, in pursuit of establishing the originality and artistic inferiority of Chaucer.

What I propose to do is re-examine some of these claims for Chaucer’s inventive originality and also point out where Severs has either suppressed or dismissed awkward similarities to Boccaccio’s treatment of the story, not in order to disestablish Petrarch as principal source, or Chaucer as creative rewriter or re-interpreter of the story, but to give both Petrarch and Boccaccio their proper due in Chaucer’s reconstruction of the Griselda story. This re-examination of the possible relationship of Chaucer both to Petrarch and Boccaccio will also throw light on the critical controversies over the nature and possible intention of the observable differences in conception between Petrarch and Chaucer, initiated in the work of Elizabeth Salter, who noted what she considered the unresolved conflict in Chaucer between the exemplary intent of his source and the “human” reactions of the people in the Tale and the narrator himself, and on A. C. Spearing’s development and proposed resolution of that “conflict,” as well as on the discontinuous allegorical interpretations emerging in Thompson and Wallace:*

Most scholars commenting on the relationship of Chaucer to Petrarch

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have necessarily relied on Severs' edition of Petrarch's Griselda story and the anonymous French translation in Bryan and Dempster or on Severs' representation of these in his Literary Relationships of Chaucer's "Clerkes Tale." Petrarch's reconstruction of Boccaccio's Griselda story was circulated in his Epistolae Seniles, book 17, letter 3, with a long preface, addressed to Boccaccio, in which Petrarch comments on the circumstances of his reading Boccaccio's novella, his attraction to the story, his reasons for "translating" it into Latin, and his modest claim that, while not a word for word translation, it is still Boccaccio's story. In Bryan and Dempster, the commonest reference for Chaucer-Petrarch commentators, this lengthy preface is completely omitted, and in Severs' Literary Relationships it is presented as an addendum. All the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century manuscripts of Petrarch's tale have this preface. Since it is clear that Chaucer had access to Petrarch's Latin, rather than simply a French translation, it is most probable that Chaucer's Latin text also had this preface and, therefore, that he must have known that Boccaccio had written an earlier version in his Decameron. Severs' omission and odd editorial rearrangements silently suppress this probability, particularly since even his own summary of his inspected manuscripts does not produce a fourteenth-century manuscript which omits the preface. Given that Petrarch exercised "extremely tight control over the production and diffusion of his works," the existence of such a manuscript is unlikely. We can, therefore, assert the very high probability that Chaucer knew that a Boccaccian source for Petrarch existed. While this does not of itself prove that Chaucer knew the Boccaccio story, but only that he most probably knew of it, it is worth noting that in many instances Chaucer has been led from a secondary source to the primary material: for example, the Ceyx-Alcione story in Machaut leads him back to Ovid's Metamorphoses; the references to Alanus de Insulis in the Roman de la Rose lead him to the direct invocation and use of the De Planctu in the Parlement; and Boccaccio's Filostrato leads him back to its source, Benoit de Ste. Maure's Roman de Troie.

Having pointed out Chaucer's close "sentence for sentence rendering" of the Latin and French sources in his chapter on "Chaucer's Technique" in Literary Relationships, Severs then turns to differences he perceives in order to show "how a man of genius transforms indifferent originals into works of art bearing the distinctive mark of his own pecu-
liar excellence.” His principal claim for Chaucer’s originality is that “the essential qualities of all characters and situations are seized upon, emphasized and set out in bold relief, frequently with telling and vivid contrasts of one element against another.”

Severs’ first important example is Chaucer’s treatment of the sergeant, Petrarch’s “satellitum fidissimum sibi,” and Boccaccio’s “familiare.” “In Petrarch,” says Severs, “this minion of Walter’s is a colorless figure, sent to perform a cruel mission,” though polite in speech and, in fact, not at all happy about his role or brutal in its execution. Instead of this, asserts Severs. Chaucer creates a “harsh, crude, cruel, unfeeling creature who rudely snatches the little child from its crib, and with malevolent grimace seems to express a will to murder it before the very eyes of its mother.”

While it may be legitimate to suggest that Chaucer has highlighted the cruelty of Walter’s testing by embodying it in the servant’s menacing appearance and some of his action, the transformation claimed by Severs is neither so stark nor so very different from Petrarch’s presentation, and the term “cruel servant” is probably derived from the French translation. In Petrarch the servant asks Griselda’s forgiveness for what he has unwillingly, to do, and reminds her, “Scis, sapientissima, quid est esse sub dominis, neque tali ingenio predite, quamvis inexperte dura parendi necessitas est ignota” [“You who are so wise know what it is like to be under a master; intelligent as you are, you realize the harsh necessity to obey, even if you have never had to”],

which emphasizes the obedience that is the exemplary virtue of Petrarch’s tale and, of course, is dramatically ironic, since both servant and Griselda are at that moment bound in what the translator just quoted renders as “the harsh necessity to obey.” The servant, then, is rendered speechless by his task. The “cruelty” is initially in Petrarch assigned clearly to the task, not the agent: “Hic sermonem abrupto, quasi crudeli ministerium silencio exprimens, subtiict.” [“Here he broke off speaking, and as though expressing by silence the cruelty of his task, he said no more”].

However, this tender sensitivity in the servant is somewhat countered in the next few lines: “Suspecta viri fama, suspecta facies, suspecta hora, suspecta erat

8 Severs, Literary Relationships, 228.
10 Ibid., 229
14 Ibid
13 Bryan and Dempster, 312, 30–31; Bernardo, 2:662.
oratorio, quibus etsi clare occisum iri dulcem filiam intelligere” [“The man’s reputation was suspect, his looks were suspect, the hour was suspect, and so were his words. Although she clearly understood from all this that her sweet daughter would be killed”].

The “cruel” sergeant is, in fact, either a more complex or inconsistent character than Severs’ construction suggests, and this complexity or inconsistency is largely caused by the French translator, whom Chaucer clearly used at this point, if not as much as is asserted. The French translation, as Severs points out, is a fairly faithful sentence-by-sentence rendering of Petrarch, with a few small expansions. In Chaucer the action of removing Griselda’s daughter by the “cruel sergeant” (531) occupies eight stanzas. In the first of these, 526–31, the sergeant begs forgiveness for what he must do: that is, as Severs himself noticed earlier, it follows Petrarch closely. The second stanza, 532–39, follows the French, though not as slavishly as Severs claims:

“This child I am comanded for to take—"
And spak namoore but out the child he hente,
Despitously, and gan a cheere make
As though he wolde han slayn it er he wente.
Griseldis moot al suffre and consente,
And as a lamb she sitteth meke and stilie,
And leet this cruell sergeant doon his willie.15

“Commandé m’est de prandre cest enfant.” Et en ce disant, ainsi qu’il voulisist faire crueuse et mauvaise chose, comme ce le monstroit par signes, prist l’enfant par rude et lourde maniere.

[“I am ordered to take this child.” And in saying this, as if he wished to do a cruel and wicked thing, indicating this, as it were, by gestures, seized the child in a rough and heavy (handed) way.]16

The second sentence of the French, which obviously influences Chaucer’s lines 534–36, corresponds in position to Petrarch’s “quasi crudele ministerium silencio exprimens.” However, the French translator has here creatively transferred the cruelty of Walter’s commands to the actions and appearance of the sergeant. Chaucer has obviously adopted this vivid transference, concentrating it in his phrase “this cruel sergeant,” which compresses the French, “Ce sergent estoit tenuz pour

16 Bryan and Dempster, 312, 30–34.
crueux homme” [“This sergeant was regarded as a cruel man”]. He has not, however, reproduced the French addition, “Pris l’enfant par rude et lourde maniere” [“Seized the child in a rough and heavy (handed) way”], which turns him into someone who is, a little, cruel, rather than simply appearing to be cruel, as he is in Petrarch.

Chaucer’s next stanza, 540–46, returns directly to Petrarch’s “suspecta viri fama, suspecta facies, suspecta hora, suspecta erat oratorio.” In Petrarch, there is a contrast between the servant’s reluctant but obedient carrying out of his master’s commands, his expressed sympathy for Griselda, and his appearance and reputation, which allow Griselda to believe that her child is to be killed. This contrast creates the pathos of the scene and, in both Griselda and the servant, emphasizes the costs of obedience to the master. The French translator, having correctly presented the sergeant as polite and reluctant, just “obeying orders,” then inconsistently turns him into a real, cruel embodiment of the suspected action, which reduces the double pathos. Chaucer, while adopting the phrase “cruel sergeant,” does not follow the French in this, as Severs claims. In stanza four, 547–53, Griselda

\[
\ldots\ \text{mekely} \ldots\ \text{to the sergeant preyde,}
\]
\[
\text{So as he was a worthy gentil man,}
\]
\[
\text{That she moste kisse hire child, er that it deyde.}
\]
\[
(548–50)
\]

Here, Chaucer is again directly following Petrarch, because only in the French text has the child already been grabbed “par rude et lourde maniere.” Chaucer’s lines patch over this narrative slip and, at the same time, in the expression “worthy, gentil man” return us to the reluctantly obedient servant. Chaucer’s “cruel sergeant,” then, is not identical with the French translator’s creation, which is, in any case, inconsistent. The phrase, as used by Chaucer, admirably compresses the appearance of his actions, their feared consequences, and the servant’s own appearance—all of which is in Petrarch’s presentation—but he does not, unlike the French, give him literally “cruel” actions.

Severs notes correctly that in describing the removal of Griselda’s son, Chaucer suppresses passages in Petrarch and the French which tend “to humanize the sergeant through revealing, however slightly, sympathy with the marquise.” However, what actually happens here is that Petrarch’s description of the servant’s sympathy, “Qui multum

\[\text{17 Ibid., 313, 39.}\]
\[\text{18 Severs, Literary Relationships, 230.}\]
excusata necessitate parendi, multumque petita venia siquid ei molestum aut fecisset aut faceret" ["Who, after many excuses for obeying out of necessity and many appeals for forgiveness"],\textsuperscript{19} is reduced by the French translator to "en soy excusant comment il lui convenoit obeir" ["in apologizing for how he was obliged to obey"].\textsuperscript{20} That is, Chaucer is further refining the transference of the apparent cruelty of the actions to the servant in a way which heightens the pathos of Griselda's situation by suppressing conflicting and other emotions—a movement, conscious or not, which is clearly initiated and established in the French text. Chaucer's "originality" here, therefore, is much less radical than Severs claims. Though there are notable differences between Chaucer's "cruel sergeant" and Petrarch's apologetic though threatening-seeming servant, they are not nearly as absolute or clear-cut as is asserted, since the sympathy the character manifests in Petrarch is still largely present in Chaucer, lying uneasily side by side with the French-initiated attempt to create a melodramatic or "appropriate" agent for the apparent cruelty of Walter's actions and Griselda's apprehensions.

Similar claims are made by Severs for Chaucer's portrayal of Walter: "Without dwelling upon the character of the marquis, Chaucer, by little added touches, a word here, a short phrase there, makes him seem more obstinately wilful, more heartless, more cruel than he is made out to be in Petrarch's tale."\textsuperscript{21} In fact, Petrarch takes Boccaccio's Gualtieri, who is rather underdeveloped as a character, and amplifies a single element which quickly suggests a more "human" character. In Boccaccio, when Griselda requests that she not be sent back to her father completely naked, "Gualtieri, che maggior voglia di piagnere aveva che d'altro, stando pur col viso duro, disse:—E tu una camiscia ne porta" ["Gualtieri wanted above all else to burst into tears, but maintaining a stern expression, he said: 'Very well, you may take a shift'."]\textsuperscript{22} Petrarch amplifies this by having Walter weep abundantly: "Abundant vire lacrime, ut contineri amplius iam non possent, itaque faciem avertens" ["Tears overflowed her husband's eyes so that he could no longer hold them back, so turning his face"],\textsuperscript{23} and Walter's tears are echoed in the court bystanders. Petrarch inserts several other indicators

\textsuperscript{19} Bryan and Dempster, 316, 28–30; Bernardo. 2:663.
\textsuperscript{20} Bryan and Dempster, 317, 7.
\textsuperscript{21} Severs, \textit{Literary Relationships}, 231.
\textsuperscript{23} Bryan and Dempster, 322, 35–37; Bernardo. 2:665
of Walter’s emotion in the midst of his apparently heartless testings, as when the servant returns to Walter with the daughter and reports Griselda’s tender submission, “vehementer paterna animum pietas movit” [“Fatherly devotion profoundly stirred his heart”]. Griselda’s obedient reply to Walter’s statement of his second testing similarly arouses emotion in him: “Admirans femine constanciam, turbato vultu abij” [“Admiring the woman’s constancy, he departed with troubled countenance”]. Petrarch’s additions and amplifications are retained by the French translator. In effect, Petrarch’s attribution of sympathetic emotions to Walter complicates his role, since both Petrarch and Boccaccio at other times directly condemn the marquis for his bizarre, obsessive testings. These conflicting presentations cannot easily be fitted into allegories with Walter as God or Ideal Ruler.

Chaucer, however, omits Petrarch’s amplifications and even further reduces Boccaccio’s suggestion that the marquis was near tears to the statement that he “went his way, for routhe and for pitee” (893). Instead, as Severs notes, he expands the considerable direct narratorial disapproval found in Petrarch and Boccaccio: “In this express disapproval of Walter’s actions, and in a generally unfavourable portrayal of the marquis’s character, Chaucer more nearly approaches the attitude of Boccaccio than of Petrarch, assuming a point of view about midway between the two” (my italics). Since Severs believes that Chaucer did not know the Decameron, his explanation for the similarity is “the element of kinship in the quality of genius which animated the two great story-tellers.” However, if we allow Chaucer’s probable acquaintance with Boccaccio’s tale, then the proper conclusion is that Chaucer has recognized the inconsistency generated by Petrarch’s presentation of both Walter and the sergeant as deeply, sympathetically moved by what they are doing to poor Griselda, while at the same time, as narrator, directly condemning Walter’s actions as unjustifiable. Thus, Chaucer may be seen as returning to Boccaccio’s simpler presentation of Walter, while adopting Petrarch’s weightier condemnation of Walter’s continued testing of Griselda:

Poterant riguissimo coniugi hec beniuiencie et fidei coniugalis experimenta sufficiere, sed sunt qui, ubi semel inceperint, non desinant; ymo incumbant herno-anteque proposito.

24 Bryan and Dempster, 314, 43; Bernardo, 2:662.
25 Bryan and Dempster, 316, 26–27; Bernardo, 2:663.
26 Severs, Literary Relationships, 232.
27 Ibid., 233.
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[These tests of conjugal affection and faithfulness could have sufficed for the most stubborn husband. But there are those who, once they begin, never stop, or rather, they press on and stick to their purpose.]²⁸

This is rendered almost unchanged by Chaucer, 696–705, except for the Clerk's direct appeal, "But now of wommen wolde I axen fayn . . ." (696). At this point in the story Boccaccio makes no direct condemnatory statement, though his final comment on Walter's actions is more savage, and clearly renders his marquis as no fit vehicle for allegorical elevation:

Che si potrà dir qui? se non anche nelle povere case piovono dal cielo de' divini spirit, come nelle reali di quegli che sarien più degni di guardar porci che d' avere sopra uomini signoria?

[What more needs to be said, except that celestial spirits may sometimes descend even into the houses of the poor, whilst there are those in royal palaces who would be better employed as swineherds than as rulers of men?]²⁹

The "magical transformation" which Severs claims for Chaucer's presentation of Walter and the "cruel sergeante" is, therefore, not as straightforward as he asserts. In effect, what Chaucer appears to do is to move in the direction of simplifying Petrarch's rather inconsistent Walter and servant (who are not as uniform as allegorizing interpreters claim) by reducing the sympathetic emotions of both, by embodying some of the horror of the situation, as apprehended by Griselda, in the figure of the servant, and in direct moral condemnation of Walter's actions. That is, Chaucer takes an element original to the French translator and returns to the less complicated conceptions of Boccaccio while using Petrarch's condemnation of obsessive husbands, thus heightening the apparent horror of Griselda's situation, stressing the heroic nature of her obedience, and contributing to the local pathos of the scenes. He does not, however, completely recast Petrarch's Walter and servant, and therefore some of the Petrarchan "sympathies" attributed to both still remain in Chaucer, creating either inconsistency or complexity, as our interpretations dictate.

From Severs through Salter's sensitive, non-allegorizing reading to Wallace, it is generally agreed that Chaucer has drawn attention much more than Petrarch to the human suffering of Griselda and the pathos of her position; and, of course, the contrast between Griselda's pain

²⁸ Bryan and Dempster, 3, 16–8, 44–47; Bernardo, 2:664.
²⁹ Boccaccio, Decameron, 712, 68–72; McWilliam, 794–95.
and the apparently motiveless "cruelty" of Walter creates the problems of interpretation both for Chaucer's Clerk and for critics. "As Chaucer has seized upon and heightened the essential qualities of Walter and the sergeant," says Severs, "so he seizes upon and heightens the essential qualities of Griseldis—namely her gentleness, her meekness, her submissiveness. The loving tenderness of Griseldis shows more tender in the presence of the reckless cruelty of the sergeant; her humility and submissiveness show more humble in the presence of the wilful unkindness of her lord." This assertion partly depends on his views on Chaucer's treatment of Walter and the sergeant, of course, but his claims that Chaucer adds considerably to Petrarch's narrative to "strikingly set forth Griselda's meekness" and "put before us with moving pathos the tender love and perfect submission of the heroine" suffer from the same simplification and exaggeration that vitiate his analysis of Chaucer's presentation of Walter and the sergeant. While he correctly notes that a number of lines in Chaucer's presentation of the first testing have no parallel in Petrarch—

\[
\text{Griseldis moot al suffre and consente}
\]
\[
\text{And as a lamb she sitteth meke and stille}
\]
\[
\text{And leet this cruel sergeant doon his wille.}
\]

\[(537-39)\]

—his assertion that a whole stanza in this section, 554–60, is original to Chaucer is wrong. The lines,

\[
\text{And thus she seyde, in hire benigne voys,}
\]
\[
\text{"Fareweel my child: I shal thee nevere see,}
\]
\[
\text{But sith I thee have mar ked with the croys}
\]
\[
\text{Of thilke Fader—blessed moote he be!—}
\]
\[
\text{That for us deyde upon a croys of tree,}
\]
\[
\text{Thy soule, litle child, I hym bitake,}
\]
\[
\text{For this nyght shaltow dyen for my sake."}
\]

are clearly related to a corresponding passage in Petrarch: "Sed tranquilla fronte puellulam accipiens, aliquantulum respexit. et simul ex- osculans, benedixit ac signum sancte crucis impressit" ["But with unwrinkled brow she picked up the little girl, looked at her for a short while, and as she kissed her fondly, she blessed and marked her with the sign of the holy cross"].

\[30\] Severs, Literary Relationships, 233–34.

\[31\] Bryan and Dempster, 312, 35–37; Bernardo, 2:662.
is both typical of his mature style and involves the reader more intimately with the personae as creatures of flesh and blood, as Salter remarks,\textsuperscript{32} but it is not an original addition. Moreover, the claims for Chaucer's originality depend somewhat on the reader's lack of familiarity with the whole episode in Petrarch, which is played equally, though not identically, for the pathos inherent in the presentation of the mother's "tender love" and "perfect submission." Moreover, the scene claimed here by Severs as original to Chaucer is also in Boccaccio:

per che prestamente presala della culla e baciatala e benedetola, come che gran noia nel cuor sentisse, senza mutar viso in braccio la pose al famigliare.

[So she quickly picked it up from its cradle, kissed it, gave it her blessing, and albeit she felt that her heart was about to break, placed the child in the arms of the servant without any trace of emotion.]\textsuperscript{33}

The facts are, then, that the basic pathetic scene in Boccaccio is slightly elaborated in Petrarch, and presented with, again, slightly more emotive emphasis in Chaucer, but all three present the same essential elements of narrative which illustrate the same conjunction of tender, maternal love and perfect submission. Severs' perception of Chaucer's originality here (and it is his major claim) is hardly supported by the texts.

Some of Severs' claims for Chaucer's originality depend on his assertion that Chaucer was not familiar with the \textit{Decameron}. However, if Chaucer \textit{was} familiar with that work, as seems increasingly to be tentatively accepted, then many of the apparently real differences between Petrarch and Chaucer are, in fact, the product of Chaucer's working between his main source and Petrarch's only source. For example, Severs notes that "when Walter tells her that her son must share the same fate as her daughter, she replies (with words lacking in both French and Latin versions):

\begin{quote}
'Naught greveth me at al,
Though that my daughter and my sone be slayn—
At youre comandement...'
\end{quote}

\textit{(647-49)}\textsuperscript{34}

In Boccaccio, however, after the son is taken from Griselda, and the narrator says Walter's subjects think he has slain his children, we have the lines:

\textsuperscript{32} See Salter, Chaucer, 50.
\textsuperscript{33} Boccaccio. \textit{Decameron}, 707, 30; McWilliam, 788.
\textsuperscript{34} Severs, \textit{Literary Relations}, 234.
I subditi suoi, credendo che egli uccidere avesse fatti i figliuoli, il biasimavan forte e reputavano crudelc uomo e alla donna avevan grandissima compassione. La quale con le donne, le quali con lei de' figliuoli così morti si condoleano, mai altro non disse se non che quello ne piaceva a lei che a colui che generati gli avea.

[His subjects, thinking he had caused the children to be murdered, roundly condemned him and judged him a cruel tyrant, whilst his wife became the object of their deepest compassion. But to the women who offered her their sympathy in the loss of her children, all she ever said was that the decision of their father was good enough for her.] 35

After noting a number of small vivifications of character and situation, which do indeed typify Chaucer’s general handling of most of his sources, Severs remarks on “a somewhat more important change, this time suggested by the French source, from which Chaucer adopted and elaborated it, [which] has to do with Griseldis’ consent to the marriage.” 36 Petrarch’s Valerius, he asserts, takes Griseldis’ acquiescence for granted, and “asks only whether . . . she will obey him in all things,” whereas the French translator, he claims, alters this passage, and his Walter in addition ask Griseldis if she “wishes it.” Chaucer, following the latter, according to Severs, writes: “Wol ye assente, or elles yow avysse” (350). This perceived difference is interpreted as Chaucer’s seeming “to stress the modern husband-wife relationship as opposed to the feudal lord-serf relationship.” 37 The difference claimed, however, is not readily apparent in the lines quoted by Severs in his section on source definition. Chaucer’s version reads, “Wol ye assente, or elles yow avyyse?”; the anonymous French translation reads, “se de bon cuer et plain vouloir, tu preste et le veuix”; and Petrarch reads, “an volenti animo sis.” 38 All three passages ask about the girl’s “willingness” to obey, rather than only the French and Chaucer. In addition, Severs claims that “in an earlier passage lacking in both Latin and French, Chaucer’s Walter has already expressed the same thought. To Janicola he has said:

‘For I wol axe if it hire wille be
To be my wyf and reule hire after me.’”

(326–27) 39

35 Boccaccio, Decameron, 707–8, 39; McWilliam, 789.
36 Severs, Literary Relationships, 240
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., 153.
39 Ibid., 240
In fact, this whole scene is to be found in Boccaccio:

"Io son venuto a sposar la Griselda, ma prima da lei voglio sapere alcuna cosa in tua presenza"; e domandò se ella sempre, togliendola egli per moglie, s'ingegnerebbe di compiacergli e di niuna cosa che egli dicesse o facesse non turbarsi, e se ella sarebbe obediente; e simili altre cose assai, delle quali ella a tutte rispose di si.

["I have come to marry Griselda, but first I want to ask her certain questions in your presence." He then asked her whether, if he were to marry her, she would always try to please him and never be upset by anything he said or did, whether she would obey him, and many other questions of this sort, to all of which she answered that she would.] \(^{40}\)

"Griselda, vuoi che tu per tuo marito?"
A cui ella rispose: "—Signor mio, si."

["Griselda, will you have me as your wedded husband?"
To which she replied: "I will my lord."\(^{41}\)]

Chaucer’s originality here, then, would seem to consist of selecting an element of Boccaccio’s treatment, omitted in Petrarch and the French translator, to make Griselda’s vow of obedience hers, not something imposed or automatic in the marital state.

Whether we see the *Clerk’s Tale* in terms of unresolved disharmony or intentional double perspectives, the conflict between an assumed Petrarchan allegorical interpretation and a “realist” one is less absolutely built into either Petrarch or Chaucer than is usually asserted or implicitly accepted. In particular, it should be noted that Walter is not presented in Petrarch as a judicial figure or one of imminent divine symbolic status.\(^{42}\) From the beginning, there is criticism of Walter in the text. Spearing sees this as more forceful in Chaucer because of its transference from indirect narrative commentary in Petrarch to the direct, engaged, partisan narration of the Clerk and the elaboration of Petrarch’s

[Meanwhile Gualtieri, as it happens to people, after the baby had been weaned, was seized by a strange craving—how praiseworthy, let the more learned ones

\(^{40}\) Boccaccio. *Decameron*, 705, 17-18; McWilliam, 789.


\(^{42}\) Wallace, for example, suggests that an “implied analogy between Walter and God can be taken seriously in Petrarch’s text because Walter’s tyrannical procullines are played down or passed over without comment” (*Chaucerian Polity*, 282), which, as I have pointed out, is not true.
judge—to probe deeper into his dear wife’s faithfulness, which he had already proved amply, and to keep testing it again and again}
to the Clerk’s direct, personalized address to his audience, which directly translates Petrarch:

He hadde assayed hire ynoth before,
And foond hire evere good: what neded it
Hire for to tempete, 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 rede,
And putten hire in angwyssh and in drede.

(456–62)43

Petrarch’s further comments assert disapproval, but are kept “cool and impersonal,”44 whereas the Clerk intervenes with far greater fervency, and in a way that directly invokes the natural human responses of the women in his audience:

But now of wommen wolde I axen fayn
If thise assayes myghte nat suffise?
What koude a sturdy housbonde moore devyse
To preewe hir wyhod and hir stedfastnes,
And he continuyng eve in sturdinesse?

(696–706)

This passage and the following stanza are a mixture of rhetorical doubling and direct translation of Petrarch’s “Poterant rigidissimo conugi hec benivolencia et fidei coniugalis experimenta sufficere; sed sunt qui, ubi semel inceperint, non desinant; ymo incumbant hereantque propo- sito” [“These tests of conjugal affection and faithfulness could have sufficed for the most stubborn husband. But there are those who, once they begin, never stop, or rather, they press on and stick to their purpose”].45 Few would dispute that Chaucer’s dramatic embodiment of Petrarch’s criticisms, along with the accompanying re-ordering and more informal voicing of the elements of these criticisms, is more emotionally effective. However, the fact remains that the conflict in the story between the illustration of perfect obedience and the pathos of Griselda’s submission and the conflicted agency of Walter exist well developed

43 Spearing, Criticism, 82; see also Derek Pearsall, The Canterbury Tales (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1985), 273. Quotation and translation of Petrarch from Bryan and Dempster, 316, 1–4; Bernardo, 2:661.
44 Spearing, Criticism, 85.
45 Bryan and Dempster, 316–18, 44–47; Bernardo, 2:664. See n. 31.
in Chaucer's direct source—heightened, perhaps, by our poet, but not conceived by him.

At the end of his retelling of Boccaccio's novella, Petrarch appends an explanation to his friend of why he decided to "translate" the story:

Hanc historiam stilo nunc alio retexere visum fuit, non tam ideo, ut matronas nostris temporis ad imitandam huius uxoris pacienciam, que michi vix imitabilis videtur, quam ut legentes ad imitandam saltem femine constanciam excitarem, ut quod hec viro suo prestitit, hoc prestare Deo nostro audeant. . . . Abunde ego constantibus viris ascriperim, quisquis is fuerit, qui pro Deo suo sine murmur paciatur quod pro suo mortali coniuge resticana hec muliercula passa est.

[I decided to retell this story in another language not so much to encourage the married women of our day to imitate this wife's patience, which to me seems hardly imitable, as to encourage the readers to imitate at least this woman's constancy, so that what she maintained toward her husband they may maintain toward our God. . . . I would number among the men overflowing with constancy whoever would suffer without a murmur for his God what this little peasant woman suffered for her mortal husband.]

This quite clearly differentiates between reading the story as about the human situation of a much tested wife, which in some manuscripts is entitled "Sulla straordinario obbedianza," and drawing from it some general significacio, as from a parable or exemplum. This distinction is reproduced in the Clerk's epilogue, and though Salter and Pearsall are correct to note the emotional disharmony produced by Chaucer's drive to the human dimensions of the story, it is as obvious that both Petrarch and the English poet recognize the conflicts of response and interpretation inherent in the matter itself, and both acknowledge the need to provide for their audiences a guide to their resolution or acceptance in a "double perspective," a common enough feature of medieval fiction.

This conflict of responses is, of course, presented first in Boccaccio: "e savissimo reputaron Gualtieri, come che troppo reputassero agra e intollerabili l'esperienze prese della sua donna, e sopra tutti savissima tenner Giselda" ["Gualtieri was acknowledged to be very wise, though the trials to which he had subjected his lady were regarded as harsh and intolerable, whilst Griselda was accounted the wisest of all"]. In his Preface to the novella, he writes: "vo' raggionar d'un marchese, non cosa magnifica ma una bestialità, come che bene ne gli seissise alla fine:

47 See Spearing, Criticism, 101–4; Pearsall, Canterbury Tales, 206.
48 Boccaccio, Decameron, 712, 66–67; McWilliam, 794.
la quale io non consiglio alcun che segua, per ciò che gran peccato fu che a constui ben n'avvenisse" ["I want to tell you of a marquis, whose actions, even though things turned out well for him in the end, were remarkable not so much for their magnificence as for their senseless brutality. Nor do I advise anyone to follow his example, for it was a great pity that the fellow should have drawn any profit from his conduct"]

Though conflicts in estimation of the action are thus identified, Boccaccio makes no attempt to reconcile the barbarity of Walter’s actions with their theoretic intention, draws no overarching moralitas. His story and narrator remain firmly rooted in the purely human literalis, and Dineo’s prefatory condemnation of Walter has obvious similarities to the developing outrage of the Clerk against the “brutality” of Walter. Though Chaucer reproduces Petrarch’s moralitas in three stanzas, 1142–55, he also has the Clerk amplify and qualify the “message” away from the “inportable” ideal towards the actual—

It were ful hard to fynd now-a-dayes
In al a toun Grisildis thre or two,

(1164–65)

—and its chief representative among the pilgrims, the Wife of Bath:

For which heere, for the Wyves love of Bathe—
Whos lyf and al hire secte God mayntene
In heigh maistrie, and elles were it scathe.

(1170–72)

The Envoy also confirms this basic sentiment, namely, that women should not attempt to emulate Griselda but, on the contrary, should, like the Wife, resist husbandly abuse, assume “governaille” and profit from their charms. Though it is usual to interpret this speech by the Clerk and the Envoy as deeply ironic mockery of the Wife, the effect is to overwhelm Petrarch’s “double perspective” and the possibleparable status of the Tale, and to direct attention firmly to hoc mundo and real, non-submissive women. This is, of course, original to Chaucer and also provides a resolution to the disharmony perceived by Salter by its repetition, lengthily amplified, that the Griselda story is not to be taken as an exemplum for real women; in fact, is to be completely rejected. Petrarch’s minimalist disclaimer “vix imitabilis” occupies center stage in Chaucer, and any virtue enshrined in Griselda’s obedience is sum-

49 Boccaccio, Decameron. 703, 3; McWilliam, 784.
marily marginalized. Chaucer’s conclusion, then, is firmly in the Boccaccian attitude to the story, though swelled to a major scene.30

It is also worth noting that Boccaccio’s ending, while drawing its own significacio, like Dineo’s Preface firmly rejects the idea that Griselda’s behavior is to be emulated or that any value is to be assigned to Walter’s testings:

Che si portrà dir qui se non che anche nelle povere case piovono dal cielo de’ divini spiriti. come nelle reali quelli che sarien più degni di guardar porci che d’avere sopra uomini signoria? Chi avrebbe, altri che Griselda, potuto coi viso non solamente acciuto ma lieto sofferir le rigide e mai più non udite pruove da Gualtieri fatte? Al quale non sarebbe forse stato male investito d’essersi abbatuto a una che quando, furo di casa, l’avesse fuori in camisca cacciata, s’avesse si a un altro fatto scuotere il pillicione, che riuscito ne fosse una bella roba.

[What more needs to be said, except that celestial spirits may sometimes descend even into the houses of the poor, whilst those in royal palaces would be better employed as swineherds rather than as rulers of men? Who else but Griselda could have endured so cheerfully the cruel and unheard of trials that Gualtieri imposed upon her without shedding a tear? For perhaps it would have served him right if he had chanced upon a wife who, being driven from the house in her shift, had found some other man to shake her skincoat for her, earning a fine new dress in the process.]51

If Petrarch’s voice is judicious and neutral, Dineo, Boccaccio’s narrator, is as vehemently sympathetic to Griselda as the Clerk, but also becomes as pro-female-mastery, and as bawdy, as the Wife of Bath would be if she were glossing the Tale. The Clerk cannot, in rhetorical-dramatic propriety, be used to go as far, and be as crude, as Dineo in proposing that women use their bodies for profit, but the reference to the Wife of Bath is precisely to the pilgrim who has “shaken her skincoat,” more than once, to earn “a fine new dress” and more. The invocation of the Wife here, therefore, whether or not directly inspired by Dineo’s fabliau-like remark, indirectly and dramatically parallels Boccaccio’s introduction of a radically different way for women to respond to matrimonial abuse.52

Both Boccaccio and Chaucer, that is, end their tales with images that firmly reject any possible application of Griselda’s behavior to real life and considerably overwhelm any audience inclination to explore the

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30 See also Wallace: “the tone and spirit of this closure is Boccaccian” (Chaucerian Polity, 293)
51 Boccaccio, Decameron, 712, 68–72; McWilliam, 794–95
52 Wallace also comments on this parallel as a “conjunction of sex and commerce” (Chaucerian Polity, 293).
story tropologically, unlike Petrarch, who piously directs his audience to just such an activity.

The view that Chaucer dramatically humanizes the Griselda story is broadly true. Petrarch's mainly indirect narrative and neutral judicial tone seem to engage the common critic less than Chaucer's looser, dialogic style and series of minute modifications of his main source. This may, however, be a cultural prejudice since Petrarch, in a letter to Boccaccio which immediately follows his letter retelling the story, writes about some contemporary reader-response:

A Paduan friend of ours, a man of the highest intellect and broad knowledge, read it for the first time; scarcely past the middle of the letter, he stopped, being overcome by sudden weeping; but after a while, when he took it in hand again and was about to read it through now that he had composed himself, a groan once more interrupted the reading as though it had made an appointment to come back then.53

Another friend reads the tale without sobbing, but explains: "I too would have wept, for the touching subject and the words fit for the subject prompted weeping, nor am I hard-hearted; but I believed, and still do, that the whole thing was made up".54 The responses Petrarch notes, then, are to the pathos created;55 the sympathy for the suffering of the mother—not the urge to tropology, and since these are friends, one can assume them not to have been naive readers. Perhaps readers of Chaucer, steeped in the particular "human" world he creates in his English language and amplifying rhetoric, are not entirely reliable guides to the affective powers of Petrarch or Boccaccio, and thus, comparisons of their respective arts may represent no more than our linguistic and cultural (and occasionally nationalistic) prejudices.

The traditional view, based on Severs' assertions, is that Chaucer radically recasts Petrarch's version of the Griselda story, which essentially was a religious fable, by redrawing the main characters and, through significant original additions, turns a religious exemplary narrative into

53 Bernardo, 2:669. Other than the Librorum Francisci Petrarcae annotato impressorum (Venice, 1507), no printed edition of this letter is recorded. A modern Italian translation is in Lettere Sentiti di Francesco Petrarcha, by Giuseppe Fracassetti (Firenze, 1869, vol. 2, pp. 561–64). Bernardo notes that the translation is "often too free and occasionally quite mistaken" (2.xii).

54 Bernardo, 2:669
a complex narratorial presentation in which the narrator's (or Chaucer's) human sympathies overwhelm or subvert the religious agenda of his source to create a work in which "doctrine" and "experience" remain either in unresolved disharmony or fruitful tension or are a critique of one political ideology by another. In fact, most of the major alterations and additions attributed to Chaucer are either minor modifications of Petrarch, misrepresentations of the differences, or can be seen to have a strong, often detailed relationship to Petrarch's own source, Boccaccio. It is, of course, true that Petrarch has substantially altered and expanded Boccaccio's novella, but here again commentators have exaggerated the differences in narrative action, apart from the essential one, namely that at the end of his tale Petrarch assigns a moral significance to the story which invites, as do certain moralitates such as those of Henryson, a radical, retrospective rereading of the text in which the apparent human values or sympathies of the literalis are reversed or rejected. This invitation has been eagerly accepted by modern exegetes and postmodern historicist-deconstructionists to present views of the relationships of Chaucer's, Petrarch's, and Boccaccio's works which are at least as selectively misleading as those of Severs. The totalizing, theoretical interpretation is, of course, a consummation devoutly to be pursued. However, a close comparison of the three Griselda stories, temporarily freed from vast Keys to all Mythologies, suggests that, while all three are distinctive, they are not as polar in their differences as is usually asserted; that the conceptual problems discovered in one are present to some extent in all and thus in inception; that while Chaucer does alter Petrarch's thrust in the direction of a final, moral message, both writers present similar inconsistencies in their largely undeveloped characters; that much of Chaucer's originality is a return to elements of Boccaccio's version; and that Petrarch's moral is presented not as the reading, but as an additional, not alternative level of reading, as his record of his friends' responses illustrates.

We can, then, conclude that the Clerk's Tale is dominantly a fairly faithful translation of Petrarch's narrative literalis, overlaid with an explicit rejection of the Petrarchan moral conclusion that is not simply Boccaccian in tone, but is also derived directly from the Decameron, though, of course, with innumerable small but significant additions and verbal felicities which make the Tale a typical Chaucerian production. The signs of an unresolved (in Aristotelian and possibly inappropriate terms) disharmony between the two Italian conceptions of the story, one derived from the other, are everywhere in the Clerk's Tale. Whether this is part of
Chaucer’s design, as critics with different agendas maintain, or is a not uncommon manifestation of what Elizabeth Salter described as his tendency to “a fluctuation of purpose . . . an uncertain movement between narrative and dramatic principles of organization,” which echoes late Gothic visual art, is, of course, still the central question for critics. That he keeps Petrarch’s moral ending, but drowns it in a vast elaboration of Petrarch’s own disclaimer of Griselda as a model for real women looks like a typical case of Chaucer having his cake and eating it: piety and pathos both exist in the text, but are not connected, or integrated; they remain on separate levels of apprehension, but one of them is given most of the dramatic weight. Since Chaucer, in effect, offers two lessons from one tale, perhaps we ought not to be too concerned about which one he “really” means.

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