Ranging from the ostentatious and richly ornamented to the utmost in simplicity, the basic undergarment—the smock—speaks to readers of medieval literature through select details chosen by authors. It is often employed metaphorically in phrases such as “clad in his [or her] sherte alone.” We find Chaucer’s variations of this well-known metaphor in *Troilus and Criseyde* (IV, 96, 1522–23).¹ These wearers of a “sherte alone” are presented in a state of virtual nakedness, bereft of all usual signs of social rank and, on occasion, suffering humiliation.² The smock can also be incorporated in descriptions as an important costume sign representing social status or character: nobility or peasant status, dignified duty or servile subjection, humiliation or triumphant dignity, personal humility or pride, to mention

---

¹ All references to Chaucer’s works are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston, 1987).

² As discussed in Laura F. Hodges, “Sartorial Signs in *Troilus and Criseyde*,” *Chaucer Review* 35 (2001): 233–59, esp. 233–34, 238, 240, and 233nn29–33, 234n35, 240n61. For a visual image of such humiliation, see the reproduction of the manuscript depiction of Griselda by the Master of Mansel in *La fleur des histoires* (Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale MS 9232, fol. 444v), wearing only her smock and departing Walter’s palace (as well as depictions of her other costumes), in Margaret Scott, *A Visual History of Costume: The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (London, 1986), pl. 87. Griselda in her smock appears in the lower left corner.
only a few of the many possibilities. Chaucer employs smock imagery in his costume rhetoric in the *Clerk’s Tale* in all of these significations, separately and sometimes multivalently. And, while numerous critics supply informative commentary on the costumes mentioned in this tale, they rarely do so with concerted attention paid to the broad combined contexts of medieval material culture and literature. With consideration given to these contexts, we may gain a deeper comprehension of Chaucer’s costume rhetoric and especially his smock imagery in the *Clerk’s Tale*.

*The Contextual Background of the Smock*

The *smock* (Middle English), synonymous with *chemise* (Old French), is also called variously *shert[e]* (Middle English), *camisia* or *camicia* or *camise* (Italian), and *sark, serke* (Scottish and northern). Each of these terms describes the traditional undergarment, defined by Jacqueline Herald as the “functional washable layer of clothing worn between the skin and the outer woollen or silk garments.” Chaucer’s terminology is straightforward; he uses the word *smock* only when referring to the female undergarment. Normally white, it is the garment worn closest to the body if several layers of garments are worn, or, possibly, as the only garment if the wearer is poor.

Linen is the fabric widely used in the Middle Ages for making underclothing, so much so that *linen* became the term of reference for “body linen” made from other fabrics as well; numerous costume historians mention the

---

3. *Shift*, unlisted in the *MED* but listed in the *OED* (s.v. *shift* n., sense 10.a), with a first example dated 1598, is another, but later, synonym for *smock*.


widespread use of linen for this purpose. This linen fabric was acquired from sources such as Holland and Rheims and usually was identified by its place of origin. For example, Guillem's chemise described in Flamenca (thirteenth century) is made of a fabric called muslin or cloth of Rheims. This fabric, known as the “finest, thinnest lawn,” is described by Stella Mary Newton as “the famous fine linen of Rheime” in her depiction of a 1474 masque in Urbino, in which Modesty and her nymphs wear chemises made of it. In this masque Modesty covers at least part of her chemise with an ermine mantle, while her nymphs in their lawn chemises, “edged with gold fringe, three fingers wide,” also wear flowered, silken, waist-length garments covering the bodice area. In addition, holland shirts “of linen made in that country are mentioned in the wardrobe of Edward IV.” Across the centuries, such undergarments maintained a general stability of style, and “holland fine” remains a staple of body linen, being the fabric of choice for Lord Thomas’s embroidered smock in the undated traditional Scottish ballad “Lord Thomas and Fair Annet”:

My maides, gae to my dressing-roome  
And dress to me my smock;  
The one half is o the holland fine,  
The other o needle-work.  
(lines 57–60)10


10. “Lord Thomas and Fair Annet,” in Charles W. Eliot, ed., English Poetry I: From Chaucer to Gray (New York, 1909; repr. 1937), 61–65, and Bartleby.com; a slightly different version is quoted by Planché, An Illustrated Dictionary, 470–71. This undated ballad, possibly originating much earlier, was collected and published in the eighteenth century, according to the OED; however, see Francis James Child, ed., The English and Scottish Popular Ballads, 8 vols. (New York, 1885; repr. 1965), 2:182–99, esp. 185, concerning the seventeenth-century broadside of the English version of this ballad, “Lord Thomas and Fair Ellinor.” I wish to thank Jean Goodrich for pointing this reference out to me.
Instead of linen, upper-class persons sometimes wore silk smocks (cendal and samite, and a mixed silk fabric called chainsil), while the poorest among the lower class wore shifts made of hemp, and the ascetic might choose to wear a smock made of wool.\footnote{For discussion of St. Etheldreda’s woolen smock, see Gale R. Owen-Crocker, \textit{Dress in Anglo-Saxon England}, 2nd edn. (Woodbridge, 2004), 133, 156–57, 297, and fig. 170 (dated ca. 971–84); and Virginia Blanton, \textit{Signs of Devotion: The Cult of St Æthelthryth in Medieval England} (University Park, Pa., 2007), 38, 47.} Some medieval fabrics used for smocks were fine enough to be transparent. A fifteenth-century tapestry in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art’s medieval collection depicts Adam and Eve in chemises that illustrate this transparency.\footnote{See Phyllis G. Tortora and Keith Eubank, \textit{Survey of Historic Costume: A History of Western Dress}, 4th edn. (New York, 2005), 135, for a photograph (fig. 6.12). Also note Cunnington and Cunnington, \textit{Underclothes}, 25, 32 (figs. 1, 9, line drawings of fourteenth- to fifteenth-century shirts and chemises), 261–62 (Appendix I, describing the Sture shirts of 1567). A sixteenth-century gold- or silver-embroidered shirt in the costume collection of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art is another such delicate shirt (catalogued #10.124.2).} Such sheer fabric is noted in \textit{The Romaunt of the Rose} (ca. 1370), in the description of Largesse:

\begin{quote}

thorough hir smoke, wrought with silk,
The flesh was seen as whit as mylk.

(1195–96)\footnote{The lines from \textit{Rom} quoted here derive from section A, commonly cited as Chaucer’s work.}
\end{quote}

The thirteenth-century source of \textit{The Romaunt, Le Roman de la Rose}, comments less blatantly on this sheer fabric,

\begin{quote}

Mes ce ne li seoit pas mal
que la cheveçaille ere overte,
s'avoit sa gorge descoverte
si que par outre la chemise
li blancheoit la char alise.

(lines 1168–72)
\end{quote}

However, it did not suit her badly that her collar was open and her throat disclosed so that her soft flesh showed its whiteness \textit{through her smock}.\footnote{Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, \textit{Le Roman de la Rose}, ed. Félix Lecoy, 3 vols. (Paris, 1970); Charles Dahlberg, trans., \textit{The Romance of the Rose} (Hanover, N.H., 1985). The italics in this translation represent my emendation based on Chaucer’s version of these lines.}
A fascinating literary smock is constructed from three separate qualities of fabric designated to cover different portions of the body. The finest cloth is designated for the collar area and sleeves, the next best for the body, and the worst for the back and loins, as two texts specify: in the mid-thirteenth-century Latin *De Vetula*, reworked in French in the mid-fourteenth century by Jean Lefèvre as *La vieille ou les dernières amours d’Ovide*, a go-between receives three pieces of cloth for a chemise as part of a bribe for future services.\(^{15}\) Such literary descriptions are especially valuable because manuscript collections include no written directions for making a smock, this being the kind of sewing project passed from seamstress to seamstress. However, working from extant examples, museum curators have deduced cutting layouts for smocks, such as those provided by Dorothy K. Burnham in *Cut My Cote*.\(^{16}\)

In various historical periods smocks were often decorated—embroidered or trimmed with self-fabric or silk binding.\(^{17}\) A famous example is the “so-called chemise or chasuble” that belonged to Saint Bathilde (Bathilidis), who rose from being a slave to being the wife of the Merovingian king Clovis II and later established a monastery at Chelles. Her linen smock, dated late sixth to seventh century, was embroidered in colored silks, of which fragments remain.\(^{18}\) A literary example of smock embroidery is mentioned in *The Romance of the Rose* or *Guillaume de Dole* by Jean

---


17. See Tortora and Eubank, *Survey*, 135 (fig. 6.10), 173 (fig. 8.1), 182 (fig. 8.9). See also Cunnington and Cunnington, *Underclothes*, regarding Norman shirts embroidered in colored threads at neck and wrist edges (25) and women’s smocks embroidered around the neck and hem edges (31); and Pinasa, *Costumes*, 35, 105.

18. Elizabeth Coatsworth, “Stitches in Time: Establishing a History of Anglo-Saxon Embroidery,” in Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker, eds., *Medieval Clothing and Textiles* 1 (Woodbridge, 2005), 1–27, esp. 5: “There are traces of bands or ribbons to fasten the front to the back, but the garment has been torn apart at the shoulders and only the front survives. Part of the embroidery has disappeared, but surviving threads and holes left in the fabric allow, according to H. E. F. Vierck, an almost complete restoration of the decoration.” Coatsworth cites H. E. F. Vierck, “La Chemise de Ste Bathilde à Chelles et l’Influence Byzantine sur l’Art de Cour Mérovingien au VIIe Siècle,” in E. Chirol, ed., *Actes du colloque international d’archéologie, Rouen 3-4-5 Juillet 1975* (Centenaire de l’Abbé Cochet) (Rouen, 1978), 521–64, about which she comments: “[Vierck’s] statement does not make clear how much of what one sees in a photograph of the piece is original work. What survives appears to represent two jewelled collars, a pendant cross, and a necklace with pendants, of a suite of jewellery of Byzantine style. Leonie Von Wilckens, following Vierck, considers that this smock was made locally, and represents an expression of the influence of Byzantine style on Merovingian metalwork [embroidery].” Coatsworth further cites Leonie Von Wilckens, *Die Textilen, Künste*, 173.
Renart. Liénor, the heroine of this early thirteenth-century romance, packs a smock for her visit to court, and this white undergarment was “embroidered with flowers.”

The decoration of smocks or shirts was an ancient tradition, as may be seen in a photograph of a fourth-century male shirt of linen “with tapestry-woven decoration in purple wool” (Fig. 1). Burnham’s example of how such early undergarments were decorated. Also, Jennifer Harris describes and provides a

19. Jean Renart, The Romance of the Rose or Guillaume de Dole, trans. Patricia Terry and Nancy Vine Durling (Philadelphia, 1993), 77. Terry and Durling include in Appendix 1 a description of female dress for 1204–28, the general dating for this work (current arguments favoring 1204): “Bliau, chainse, and cote were worn over the chemise . . . a long-sleeved undergarment made of soft fine fabric, sometimes pleated and sometimes laced on the sides. They could be elaborately embroidered, as was Liénor’s when she went to court” (107).

20. Burnham, Cut My Cote, 9 (pl. 4). My Fig. 1 is sketched from Burnham’s pl. 4, a photograph of a Egyptian Coptic shirt in the Walter Massey Collection (ROM 910.1.11), Royal Ontario Museum. See also Burnham, 10 (fig. 2).
photograph of a very early embroidered shift called a *poukamiso* from Argos, in a style worn by women for at least two thousand years and made of cotton (Fig. 2). These garments have all of the features of the medieval smock, and each was worn as the undermost layer—if layers were worn—or as the daily dress when only one garment was worn. Harris states that the *poukamiso* was usually embroidered in silk on cotton in “a monochrome dark red, dark blue or black in a clotted geometric pattern” for special occasions, but only those portions that could be seen feature this decoration.

Over the centuries and across geographical and cultural terrain, smock, chemise, or shirt styles maintained basic similarities, while varying from excessively plain to elaborate in cut, fabric, construction, and decoration. In general, the early difference between male and female shirts was length, with male shirts being shorter. Additionally, smock styles featured various

---

21. Jennifer Harris, ed., *5000 Years of Textiles* (London, 1993), 243 (color photograph, pl. 300); my Fig. 2 is drawn from this plate. See also Harris, 243 (pl. 301).
sleeve styles—loose or tight, long, short, or no sleeves at all. Smocks were also sometimes pleated for fullness,\textsuperscript{23} as was Enide’s chemise in Chrétien de Troyes’s romance \textit{Erec et Enide} (ca. 1164). It is described as a “chemise par panz lee./delïee, blanche et ridee” (a soft white under-robe with wide skirts hanging loose in folds).\textsuperscript{24} Furthermore, chemise necklines varied from period to period, depending on the highness or lowness of the neckline in the contemporary outer dress styles.

One twelfth-century style involved “slashing the sides of the outer garment, with corresponding openings in the chemise so that the bare skin was revealed,” a style that was denigrated from contemporary pulpits as signifying the “windows of hell.”\textsuperscript{25} Lanval’s lady wears this style with lacings decorating both sides of her “chainse” and “chemise,” in Marie de France’s \textit{Lanval} (ca. 1180).\textsuperscript{26}

Finally, no recounting of medieval material and literary smocks would be complete without mentioning Alisoun’s decorative smock in the \textit{Miller’s Tale}:

\begin{quote}
Whit was hir smok, and broyden al bifoore
And eek bihyne, on hir coler aboute,
Of col-blak silk, withinne and eek withoute.

(I 3238–40)
\end{quote}

This detailed late fourteenth-century depiction of Alison’s smock provides a sharp contrast to Chaucer’s treatment of Griselda’s rhetorically unembellished smocks in the \textit{Clerk’s Tale}.

\textit{Reading Griselda’s “Olde Geere” and Marital Gifts}

Against this varied and shifting cultural, sartorial, and literary context, the smocks worn by Griselda stand out primarily because they are presented

\begin{itemize}
\item 25. Cunnington and Cunnington, \textit{Underclothes}, 32. Enide’s \textit{chainse} does not fall into this category, according to Middleton, “Enide’s See-Through Dress,” 144. Regarding sermons about female garments that are too revealing, see G. R. Owst, \textit{Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England} (Oxford, 1966), 397 (on sideless gowns), and 395, 397 (on bare necks).
\end{itemize}
without rhetorical and sartorial elaboration in spite of their importance to the plot. Thus, we may only imagine these garments as worn by one of Chaucer's most controversial female characters. However, keeping in mind the material and literary context should result in our having an informed imagination. Oddly, although dress constitutes a major sign in the Clerk's Tale, Griselda receives no intricate poetic portrait providing elaborate costume details. Throughout this tale, as Roger Ramsey notes, changes of clothing signal the transformation of her social degree. These changes illustrate standard practice in the Middle Ages and mark all of the major plot events. Chaucer's costume rhetoric demonstrates an idea advanced by Grant McCracken that clothing is one of the chief opportunities for exercising the metaphoric and performative powers of ritual ... [and is] used to mark and even to effect the transition from one cultural category to another that occurs in the rite of passage.

Of Chaucer's focus on costume in this tale, Carolyn Dinshaw comments, "not only the Clerk, as narrator, but everyone in the narrative is acutely clothes-conscious." This very clothes-consciousness facilitates Chaucer's "centering of Griselda as public spectacle" in what Sarah Stanbury deems "a story about visual investigation," as narrated by a curious scholar-Clerk, a devotee of Petrarch and Aristotle.

In addition, in his depiction of Griselda's clothing, Chaucer apparently takes for granted that his Clerk-narrator's audience also possesses a certain degree of clothes-consciousness. This audience, with knowledge of contemporary material culture, would know the differences between the kind of smock worn by female peasants (normally utilitarian, undecorated, and made of the coarsest kind of cloth) and those worn by noble ladies (constructed of the finest linen or silk, with those parts of it designed to be seen [when styles permitted].

sometimes embellished with embroidery or other fine trimming). These are the two ends of the smock spectrum, and, undoubtedly, stylistic variations would have occurred between these two extremes.

Just as a contemporary audience would naturally form the proper mental image of Griselda's costume, peasant or noble, at any stage of her story, the same audience would have no trouble imagining the type and probable condition of Griselda's smock when Walter's ladies despoil her of her original garments, later referred to as her "olde geere" (IV 372). This is "geere" that the ladies do not want to handle before dressing her in the new and noble garments and jewels that Walter provides. Chaucer's depiction of these ladies' attitudes illustrates the disdain felt for old garments and the emphasis placed on newness within the fashion system so aptly described by Sarah-Grace Heller. Ironically, as Edward I. Condren notes, in arraying Griselda "as the world reckons beauty," these ladies perform in a tale that thoroughly demonstrates the "irrelevance of worldly array." Chaucer does not immediately describe Griselda's "olde geere," but if we apply the contextual information presented earlier, we understand that her basic garment is a smock, probably simply cut of poor fabric and unadorned, and its condition might be described as "worn." Griselda's old clothes also include a "coote" (IV 913), as later lines inform us when her father tries to redress her in it. Although we should not confuse medieval drawings with Chaucer's ideas of Griselda's costume, we may view a late fourteenth-century illustrator's version of Griselda's "geere"—both her original dress and her courtly garb—in twenty ink drawings "with touches of red" from L'Estoire de Griseldis, dated 1395.

Once Walter's ladies have redressed Griselda in the jewels and clothing that Walter presents to her, Griselda's transformation is complete. Such gifts of new clothing and jewels bestowed upon Griselda are a standard feature of folk and fairy tale lore in which the wearing of wonderful gift clothes (derived

31. The stripping is depicted in fifteenth-century Tuscan wedding cassones (caskets) that portray Griselda completely nude. Cristelle L. Baskins discusses the significance of this nudity in "Griselda, or the Renaissance Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelor in Tuscan Cassone Painting," Stanford Italian Review 10 (1991): 153–75, esp. 167–70. Regarding the groom's wedding gifts, including wedding caskets and the bride's dowry, see Susan Mosher Stuart, Gilding the Market: Luxury and Fashion in Fourteenth-Century Italy (Philadelphia, 2006), 119.
34. Judith Bronfman, Chaucer's Clerk's Tale: The Griselda Story Received, Rewritten, Illustrated (New York, 1994), 99–105, reproduces and discusses these drawings as well as fourteenth-century and later illustrations of versions of this tale. For another selection of these illustrations, see Roger Loomis, A Mirror of Chaucer's World (Princeton, 1965), 154–59. See also Robin Netherton, "The Tippet: Accessory after the Fact?" in Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker, eds., Medieval Clothing and Textiles 1 (Woodbridge, 2005), 114–32, at 123 (figs. 8.4–5).
from an “otherworld” person) are peculiarly significant of the union taking place, and customarily such fairy gifts “are made without measure,” according to Dudley David Griffin. In addition, Griffin posits that Chaucer has provided readers with a “rationalization of the fairy clothes made without measure” in his explanation that Griselda’s new clothes were made according to another’s dimensions: “of hir clothyng took he the mesure/By a mayde lyk to hire stature” (IV 256–57). If we acknowledge the fairy skills of the folk tradition behind this tale, and, more realistically and equally important, presume that Walter was capable of equating Griselda’s size and shape, upon which he had gazed “Ful oft” (IV 233), with those of one of the maidens of his court, then we may understand that Griselda’s new garments in the Clerk’s Tale should be a satisfactory fit. Lacking any contrary indication from Chaucer or his Clerk-narrator, like that regarding Griselda’s “olde coote” (IV 913), there is no valid reason to presume a misfit. For these reasons, I disagree with David Wallace’s claim that Griselda’s new garments and ornaments “cannot exactly or perfectly” fit her.

Walter’s reclothing of Griselda in fine dress and jewels follows the established practice, outlined by Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, in which a husband provides a wardrobe for his bride through “marital gifts” that are part of a public display. That this display establishes his “masculine authority” over his bride, as D. Elliott phrases it, ironically, only seems to obscure Walter’s early intuitive view of his wife as “ynogh” (IV 365) even in her rude dress of “low degree” (IV 425). Thomas J. Farrell points out Walter’s earlier knowledge “that under low degree/Was oft vertu hid” (IV 425–26) and his application of this perception to Griselda. At the same time and beyond the spectacle of Griselda’s change of costume, the Clerk’s audience would have been aware that Griselda had brought no dowry of a financial nature to this exchange, thus placing this union in the category of marriages that are “incomplete, hastily and carelessly fashioned.” And for

40. Klapisch-Zuber, “Griselda Complex,” 222, discussing any “alliance without both parties’ contributions [bridal dowry plus husband’s gifts] or lacking gifts to the bride.”
readers of all times, this change of clothing serves to emphasize the differences in original social status between Walter and Griselda.41

Reading Griselda’s New Smock

In the late fourteenth century, and assuming the usual pattern of noble dress for that period, Griselda’s new and noble ensemble would consist of a lady’s usual three or four layers of garments—a smock closest to her body, a cote worn over that, and a gown or surcote, with or without sleeves, as the outer layer. A mantle might have been worn over all. Add jewels and a crown,43 and Walter’s virtuous bride confirms the vital connection between clothing and identity in the Middle Ages, as discussed by Catherine Richardson,44 and visibly becomes, even to Walter’s people, the Marchioness Griselda. Stanbury refers to this reclothing as a “transformation and sacramental ritual” and a “ritual investiture.”45

Griselda’s new smock would have been made in the style, fabric, and decoration of a quality suitable for the wife of a marquis. It would have been crafted in the finest linen or silk and perhaps suitably embroidered or decorated with silk binding or braid. There were a number of ways in which smocks might be cut, as medieval pilgrim badges depicting the Blessed Virgin’s chemise attest (Fig. 3).46

---

41. See Griffin, Origin, 72–73.
42. The names of these garments making up a robe (‘suit of clothes’) vary among costume historians for different periods and places of origin. See Heller, “Anxiety,” esp. 318; Stella Mary Newton, *Fashion in the Age of the Black Prince* (Woodbridge, 1980; repr. 1999), 31–32, 38; Piponnier and Mane, *Costumes*, 78; and Kohler, *A History*, 136 (fig. 148).
43. See Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual*, 231–38, regarding the customary circulation of gifts, esp. those that are circular in shape, such as rings, diadems, and belts, among the kinship group at the time of a wedding, all of which are more loans than permanent gifts.
46. See E. Jane Burns, “Saracen Silk and the Virgin’s Chemise: Cultural Crossings in Cloth,” *Speculum* 81 (2006): 365–97, esp. 367–68 (figs. 1–3), from which my Fig. 3 is drawn.
Yet another smock style was seen by those in attendance when the short version of this paper was presented at Kalamazoo: a reconstructed, plain, late-fourteenth-century-style smock, hand-sewn by Robin Netherton and modeled by Cindy Myers. This smock, with a round, low-cut neckline shaped by tiny pinch-pleating and bound with self-fabric, was made of good but not fine linen, and it would be classified among the broad range of smocks worn by middle- and upper-class women, according to Netherton. Its round neckline was designed to be low enough to be completely hidden from view when a cote and a gown were worn over it.

We should also note the depictions of smocks made in more elaborate styles, either somewhat form-fitting, with gussets beneath the arm to give some freedom of movement, as in an Egyptian Islamic man’s tenth-to twelfth-century linen shirt bound at neck and wrist edges with silk (Fig. 4), or roomier, such as the medieval smocks with gores and tapered sleeves (Fig. 5). In whatever style Griselda’s new smock was fabricated, it could have been decorated with either silk binding at neck edges and wrist edges (Fig. 4), or embroidered as was customary from the earliest times (Figs. 1, 2), or decorated only around the neck edge and shoulder edge at the armhole, as in the sheer smock worn by Eve shown in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art’s fifteenth-century tapestry (Fig. 6). Customarily, when current fashion permitted, smocks were decorated in those areas that would have been seen even when the lady’s other garment layers were in place, although smocks embroidered overall in areas unavailable to a public gaze are extant. For example, one may compare a seventeenth-century smock embroidered in polychrome silk embroidery (Fig. 7) and a late sixteenth-century smock embroidered in “lavender floss silk” and gold (Fig. 8). The manner in which these sixteenth- and seventeenth-century smocks were cut and sewn involves no details that were impossible for late fourteenth-century seamstresses to achieve.

48. My Fig. 4 is sketched from Burnham, Cut My Cote, 11 (fig. 3).
49. My images in Fig. 5 are drawn from Burn’s illustrations in “Saracen Silk,” 383 (fig. 6), 394 (fig. 11); see also Burn’s discussion of the variety of chemise styles represented in these pilgrim badges (391–92) and the dating (374).
50. My Fig. 6 is drawn from Tortora and Eubank, Survey, 135 (fig. 6.12).
51. According to Harris, 5000 Years of Textiles, 243.
52. My Fig. 7 is drawn from Burnham, Cut My Cote, 13 (fig. 5).
53. My Fig. 8 is drawn from Tortora and Eubank, Survey, 173 (fig. 8.1).
although we have no surviving garments to offer as proof. And we note that late fourteenth-century fashion did not feature the display of smock areas, as did both earlier and succeeding period styles. One may observe,
for example, Figure 9, where strips of embroidery known as *black work* decorate those parts of a ca.1535 chemise revealed by the woman’s gown.54

In any case, Chaucer’s Clerk provides no fashion commentary concerning the details of Griselda’s smock. Perhaps this omission occurs because, as Farrell points out in his discussion of style, “the Clerk fairly consistently removes the rhetorical embellishment found in Petrarch.”55 In keeping with

54. My Fig. 9 is sketched from Tortora and Eubank, *Survey*, 182 (fig. 8.9). Other styles may be seen at these websites: <http://expositions.bnf.fr/gastro/grands/114.htm>, a 1432 Boccaccio manuscript depicting Griselda in a smock from Paris, Bibl. Nat., ms. Arsenal 5070, fol. 387; <http://expositions.bnf.fr/gastro/grands/118.htm>, a farmer’s wife in a smock, from ms. Arsenal 5070, fol. 347v; and <http://gallica.bnf.fr/scripts/mediator.exe?F-C&L=08100099&I=000121>, a woman wearing a white smock with tiny pleats shaping the neckline, from Paris, Bibl. Nat., Richelieu ms. fr. 111, fol. 139. I am grateful to Robin Netherton for pointing out these websites.

this practice, the Clerk would not be likely to add the rhetorical flourish of an intricate description of a “noble” style chemise. As saints’ lives generally include no rhetorical portraits in the twelfth through fourteenth centuries, according to L. A. Haselmayer,⁵⁶ might we assume that the same is true for stories of secular “saints” as well?⁵⁷

While Chaucer provides no precise fashion details, we do know the effect of Griselda’s new ensemble. When Walter comments on Griselda’s sartorial transformation, he quite briefly states, “I yow took out of youre povere array,/And putte yow in estaat of heigh noblesse” (IV 467–68).

The change in Griselda’s fortune is symbolized by her change of dress from rude to courtly. In these lines, Walter summarizes an exchange of “old for new” that Dolores W. Frese describes as “elevated from the simple episode of the folk sources to the ritual status of a religious clothing ceremony in the Clerk’s narrative.” Going one step further, we might read these new garments as signaling the putting on of Christ within Griselda’s life, as an analogy of “the life of Christian conversion,” as Charlotte C. Morse suggests. However, in his summary Walter specifically addresses his wife’s social estate and equates it to his own; thus we may assume that the effect of Griselda’s elevation would be reflected in even the least of her garments—her smock. Yet these new garments produce no change in Griselda’s representation of stability, that is, her fidelity. Fashionable garments are irrelevant to her, in sharp contrast to the literary evidence presented by Heller regarding “fashion’s effect on the personal psyche.” From such evidence, Heller argues that the wearer of fashionable dress, obviously admired by others, feels an enhanced sense of social approval, self-worth, and individuality. Conversely, the only interest Griselda ever expresses in her dress occurs later because, as she states, she wishes to protect Walter’s honor.

Reading Griselda’s Second Clothing Transformation

In the process of being divorced, Griselda comments on both her initial costume transformation and her abandoned old clothes, abandoned because she had accepted the life Walter offered her and its requirements:

58. Alfred L. Kellogg writes of the Petrarch version of this story in “The Evolution of the Clerk’s Tale: A Study in Connotation,” in his Chaucer, Langland, Arthur: Essays in Middle English Literature (New Brunswick, N.J., 1972), 276–299, at 290. Kellogg does not specifically compare Griselda’s two costumes to Fortune’s, but one may note the obvious similarities in Le Roman de la Rose, lines 6122–56 (trans. Dahlberg, 121–22). Here is a description of Fortune’s two houses and corresponding costumes, that is, her queenly dress and the subsequent stripping away of this lavish dress to the level of “nothing worth anything.”
61. Lynch, “Despoiling Griselda,” 63–64; and Baskins reminds us that Boccaccio “stresses Griselda’s static and unchanging essence, the way in which she refuses to be identified by outward costume” (‘Griselda,” 166).
63. For a parallel motivation, see Susan Crane regarding Griselda’s smock worn for the sake of modesty and her “visibility” (The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity during the Hundred Years War [Philadelphia, 2002], 36).
Those old clothes, Griselda’s only worldly goods, epitomize her earlier social status before she espoused Walter.

In her second clothing transformation, emphasizing her reversal of status from being Walter’s wife to being Janicula’s discarded daughter, we again note Chaucer’s spare costume rhetoric, a leanness emphasized in comparison with a later version of this tale. The “Ballad of Patient Grissell” (ca. 1600), even though it is much later, offers more informative details of dress, details that would not have changed significantly since the late fourteenth century. In this ballad we first learn that Grissell’s “countrey russet” was changed by her husband to “silk and veluet.” Then when the ballad’s Marquis prepares to send Grissell from court, he informs her,

“Thou must be stript out of thy costly garments all.
and as thou comest to me.
In homely gray in steed of bisse & puccest pall
now all thy cloathing must be.”

Her velvet gown most patienely [sic] she slipped off,
hers kirtles of silks with the same:
Her russet gown was broght again with many a scoffe.64

However, Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale offers no such clothing details. Griselda simply says,

“But ther as ye me profre swich dowaire
As I first broghte, it is wel in my mynde
It were my wrecched clothes, nothyng faire,
The whiche to me were hard now for to fynde.”

(IV 848–51)

64. Included in Bronfman, Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale, 131–36. Her bibliography lists “A most pleasant ballad of patient Grissell. To the tune of the Brides good morrow.” Ca. 1600; Huth Collection, BL, STC 12384; rpt., The Roxburghe Ballads 2 (Hertford, U.K., 1874); also other editions’ (138).
Further, she acknowledges that:

“Ye dide me streepe out of my povre weede,
And richely me cladden, of youre grace.”
(IV 863–64)

Clearly Griselda’s earlier “wrecched,” “povre,” and “nothyng faire” smock constitutes a lowly body covering, indeed, in comparison with the kind of fine undergarment she would have worn daily as Walter’s wife.

As later lines make clear, retaining the fine smock she wears at the time, Griselda divests herself of her courtly array and returns it to Walter’s keeping:

“And heere agayn your clothynge I restoore,
And eek your weddyng ryng, for everemore.

The remenant of youre jueles redy be
Inwith youre chambre, dar I sauly sayn.”
(IV 867–70)

Griselda’s Second Despoiling, Enacted

Dramatizing the truism that experiential background heightens understanding, Griselda’s time-consuming divestment of courtly dress was enacted during the reading of Alan Gaylord’s paper, “Griselda’s Smok: The Naked Truth,” in a session sponsored by the Medieval Association of the Midwest, May 12, 2007, at the 42nd International Congress on Medieval Studies, in Kalamazoo, Michigan. The following is an account of this second despoiling.

In response to a cue given by Gaylord, Robin Netherton in the guise of “Griselda,” wearing a reconstructed late fourteenth-century ensemble, entered from the back of the room and walked up the aisle.65 She faced the audience to provide a complete view of her dress, then faced Gaylord, who, for the purposes of her modeling, took the place of Walter.

65. Netherton created the reconstructed costume based on her research of clothing from this period. The hose were made by Elizabeth Johnson, and the garters by Deborah Peters. Gina Frasson-Hudson assisted with dressing.
Having first removed her ruffled veil, unpinned her braids, and loosened her hair, “Griselda” unfastened the dozen large jeweled buttons down the front of her blue and red wool brocade overgown. Still facing “Walter” and carefully tugging on her fur-trimmed sleeves, she eased the gown off of her shoulders with some difficulty and removed this overgarment. Quite correctly, she had no help from a tiring woman. She laid the overgown on a nearby chair and then removed her leather shoes, buckled garters, and woolen hose. With these actions, “Griselda” complied with Chaucer’s text that describes her as bareheaded and barefooted when she leaves Walter’s court. Her linked metal belt, a fringed silk purse, and a necklace joined the footwear on the growing pile.

Still gazing at her “husband,” “Griselda” next unlaced the front opening of her red silk cote and unbuttoned the numerous tiny buttons of her sleeves from wrist to elbow. This process took considerable time. She then bent over and drew the skirt of the cote forward over her head, pulling it inside out. She struggled to free her arms from the tight cote sleeves. Finally the cote was removed, leaving “Griselda” standing in her single remaining garment, her white linen smock. At this point, she picked up the stack of clothes on the chair and, thrusting them forward, presented them to “Walter,” who was startled into accepting them.

Throughout this enactment, with the time spinning out into eight, possibly more, minutes, “Griselda” maintained eye contact with “Walter,” while the audience remained spellbound. All of us had read that scene, but none had imagined it taking so long and being as dramatic as we now knew it to be.

Some in the audience had surmised, beforehand, that Griselda would surely have gone to her room to undress. But, when the reenactment was finished, everyone had personally experienced how long such disrobing would take, how it would look, and how it would feel to witness Griselda disrobing upon Walter’s demand. This time, her own despoothing made a major statement concerning Walter’s character and her obedience: in the emerging picture of Walter as husband of both kingdom and wife, he was neither wise nor benevolent, but all the while Griselda was obedient to her husband in every detail of her actions. Thus Griselda returns all of her marriage gifts when the marriage is terminated, as was customary for such provisional gifts.66

Griselda’s Commentary Regarding Her Transformations

Griselda speaks of her two sartorial, marital, and social transformations:

“Naked out of my fadres hous,” quod she,
“I cam, and naked moot I turne agayn.”

(IV 871–72)

At this point she challenges Walter not to send her completely unclad into the streets to be seen by all. This challenge dramatizes the ideas advanced by McCracken that clothing “is sometimes an instrument of attempted domination,” as well as that clothing is “sometimes an armoury of resistance and protest.”67 Walter initially illustrates the former idea of domination when he has Griselda’s old clothing removed and replaced by courtly dress suitable for a marchioness. And Griselda evokes the latter idea of resistance and protest when she simultaneously rejects Walter’s domination and requests, for his honor,68 that she might be allowed to keep her body covered by a smock:

“But yet I hope it be nat youre entente
That I smoklees out of youre paleys wente.

Ye koude nat doon so dishonest a thyng,
That thilke wombe in which youre children leye
Sholde biforn the peple, in my walkyng,
Be seyn al bare.”

(IV 874–79)

Griselda humbly and specifically asks only that “swich a smok as I was wont to were” (IV 896) in her maiden days be given to her. This is a proactive


68. In two unpublished conference papers from 1998, John Carmi Parsons discussed royal women who appear in public places wearing only their smocks, and in both cases, these acts of sartorial defiance are performed for the purpose of maintaining their husbands’ honor (“The Queen in Medieval Sermon Exempla” and “Violence: The Queen’s Body and the Medieval Body Politic”). Concerning a literary smock signifying humiliation, see Guinevere’s despoiling in Thomas Malory, Works, ed. Eugène Vinaver, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1977), 684 (lines 5, 12).
and not a passive request. She seeks only a smock suitable to her former peasant state, plain and simple:

“wherfore I yow preye,
Lat me nat lyk a worm go by the weye.

Wherfore, in gerdon of my maydenhede,
Which that I broghte, and noght agayn I bere,
As voucheth sauf to yeve me, to my meede,
But swich a smok as I was wont to were,
That I therwith may wrye the wombe of here
That was youre wyf.”

(IV 879–80, 883–88)

Either such an humble smock is nowhere to be found in Walter’s present stores, or he wishes to be—or is shamed or challenged into being—somewhat more generous than he initially seemed. Neither Chaucer nor his Clerk-narrator specifies Walter’s motivation. However, having witnessed the drama of “Griselda’s” disrobing, we may comprehend that Walter might have welcomed the end of this spectacle and been only too happy to allow Griselda to leave his court wearing the smock she has on. As Robin Waugh points out, there is a “tension between stillness and action that exists in Walter’s orders concerning Griselda’s smock when she is cast out” with his directive: “Lat it be stille, and bere it forth with thee” (IV 891).


Reading Griselda’s Smock of Divorce

For whatever reason, Walter grants Griselda the smock that she wears on her body at that time (IV 890), which is necessarily one of fine quality. Concerning the effective value of this smock, Emma Campbell comments, “Griselda’s maidenhood is traded in for a smock.” From a literal standpoint, her body is not completely nude; from a symbolic point of view, she retains this last remnant of high social status, and perhaps this fine smock signals that Walter’s rejection is neither total nor final. Alternatively, her
retention of this smock may well constitute Walter’s acknowledgment that by law he is obligated to cover Griselda in this one “necessary” garment.71 Thus she departs Walter’s court wearing a fine smock. She does not go in “rags,” as Patricia Cramer posits,72 although she goes bareheaded and barefoot in her smock (IV 890, 895) to her father’s house, all undoubted signs of social humiliation.73

Griselda’s father tries to cover her smock-clad body with her “olde coote”74 but finds that it no longer fits her body (IV 913–17). This is a realistic touch and also a symbolic one. Realistically, in the intervening time period of her marriage, she would have undergone the changes wrought by time and the bearing of two children, as well as those brought about by social experience and courtly responsibilities. Literally and symbolically, her “olde coote” would no longer fit. Although she dutifully returns to her father, her recent lifestyle has rendered her too large for ease in taking up her former circumstances, and her inability to resume wearing her “olde coote” sartorially proclaims this truth. Nevertheless, she might wear this poorly fitting cote, even straining or bursting at the seams, when she returns to Walter at his request. Whatever her clothes at that time, they are described as “rude and somdeel eek torent” (IV 1012) and of “so povre array” (IV 1020). Andrea Denny-Brown compares these torn garments to the Clerk’s own threadbare clothing, “a symbol of pared-down simplicity.”75 If Griselda retains or wears the fine smock in which she returned to her father’s house, we do not hear of it.

Reading Griselda’s Third Costume Transformation and Final Fine Smock

Griselda’s marriage, as the Clerk-narrator relates it, is marked by three ritual strippings76 and two investitures of grandeur. In her second grand dressing,

73. Cramer, “Lordship,” 500, 505n33, posits a mythic background for Griselda’s humiliating stripping, citing George Bataille (*Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo* [New York, 1962], 18), who equates such public stripping with both killing and eroticism. Griffin, *Origin*, 7–120, concurs, and provides the account of “Tulisa, the Wood-Cutter’s Daughter” and her changes of clothes (31–32). See also New York, Pierpont Morgan Library MS M457, fol. 85v, portraying prisoners further humiliated in wearing only a chemise for their public execution (reproduced in Tortora and Eubank, *Survey*, 133 [fig. 6.10]).
74. See Bronfman’s illustrations in *Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale* for various artistic treatments of this cote.
76. On stripping and redressing, see Denny-Brown, “Povre Griselda,” 79n6, 103.
Griselda receives a cloth-of-gold gown. Already by the late 1380s and early 1390s, cloth-of-gold gowns may have been the traditional gift from an Italian bridegroom to his bride, according to Diane Owen Hughes. Muriel Whitaker comments about Griselda’s “clooth of gold that brighte shoon” (IV 1117) that Chaucer has added to this story, and her “coroune of many a riche stoon” (IV 1118), stating:

[They] evoke the magnificent courtly dress of the International Gothic style…. Tropologically, the costume reasserts power, glory, magnanimity, and by bringing into play the aesthetics of light, conveys beauty, harmony, purity. Anagogically the images of golden robe and jewelled crown reintroduce as a context for Griselda’s virtue the iconography of the Virgin Mary, whose liturgy had assimilated the words of Psalm xlv, 9, ‘Astitit regina a dextris tuis in vestitu deaurato’ (‘Upon thy right hand did stand the queen in gold’) and Psalm xxi, 3, ‘Posuiti in capite ejus coronam de lapide pretiosa’ (Thou settest a crown of pure gold on his head), images that artists incorporated to depict the Virgin’s coronation.

Once Griselda is restored to her place as Walter’s wife, we may be certain that when she is redressed in a gown made of cloth of gold, she first would be garbed in a smock made of fine fabric worthy to be embellished with equally fine decoration. The ultimate in fine smocks might be represented in the “Italian” body linen embroidered in gold and silver threads, especially

77. Such gowns, increasing in costliness, were ultimately forbidden in a 1443 Venetian law that banned both cloth of gold or silver and embroideries using gold or silver threads (Diane Owen Hughes, “Sumptuary Laws and Social Relations in Renaissance Italy,” in John Bossy, ed., Disputes and Settlements: Law and Human Relations in the West [Cambridge, U.K., 1983], 69–99, esp. 78–79).
81. Cloth of gold is a general term that was used for numerous types of fabrics utilizing gold threads alone or mixed with threads of other colors. See the variety of such cloths described in Anne E. Wardwell, “Flight of the Phoenix: Crosscurrents in Late Thirteenth- to Fourteenth-Century Silk Patterns and Motifs,” The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art 74 (1987): 2–31; and Denny-Brown, “Povre Griselda,” 102–3.
the shirt with reversible embroidery, which is all part of the holdings of the Metropolitan Museum of New York. These garments were possibly part of a sixteenth-century dowry, but they represent nothing new in smock-making; gold and silver embroidery was well-known in fourteenth-century England. And there are also medieval literary precedents for gold-embellished body linen: for example Dido’s shirt embellished with gold filament and Grammatica’s “delicate” silk shirt side-laced with gold “strings,” as discussed by Joachim Bumke, and the gold- or silver-embroidered silk shirt made by Soredamors in Chrétien de Troyes’s Cligès.

Consideration of Griselda’s wearing such sumptuous dress, in each layer from the skin outward, provides a greater depth of meaning to John P. McCall’s idea that her “clooth of gold” gown and “coroune of many a riche stoon” were the visible display of her virtue “and the fruit of the complete abnegation of her will”—which was “sovereignty.” Griselda in this grand costume is figuratively dressed in her virtues. In addition, if Griselda represents the “soul of man—tested but constant,” as Robin Kirkpatrick states, then this golden raiment symbolizes not only that she wears her virtues, but also that, so dressed, she is the shining spectacle of a sovereign soul who has “put on the new man.”

Thus, in his sartorial imagery in the Clerk’s Tale, Chaucer follows literary convention, but with unexpected and inventive twists. He might have written a set-piece portrait of a faithful, and some say saintly, marchioness of naturally noble but originally peasant stock, and he could have included a detailed evocation of her costume such as he bestows upon Alisoun in the Miller’s Tale. However, he does neither, leaving the details of both Griselda’s rustic smock and her fine smocks to be fabricated in the informed imaginations of his contemporary audience. As a result of Chaucer’s descriptive restraint, although his costume rhetoric reinforces each major development in the plot,
in any sense of late fourteenth-century fashion commentary, the *Clerk's Tale*
remains, for the most part, rhetorically undressed. Present-day readers must
necessarily draw on contextual materials from medieval visual arts and litera-
ture, historical and sociological studies, and works on the history of costume,
and then, to the extent that this is possible, to imagine and to form mental
pictures of the details of Griselda’s smocks in the *Clerk's Tale*. In doing so,
although we cannot totally recover authentic experiential knowledge, we may
approach that comprehension possessed by Chaucer’s contemporary audi-
ence when they read of Griselda’s “povre” smock and knew without being told
just how fine her marital smocks must have been.

Houston, Texas
(LFHodges1@juno.com)