



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## 'The Clerk's Prologue and Tale': An Idea of Transformation

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

Received: Jul 9, 2024

Accepted: Sep 3, 2024

### Keywords

Chaucer

The Clerk

Canterbury Tales

Transformation

In Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1387), the Clerk is described as a hardworking, sincere student at Oxford University. He is loved and respected by all the pilgrims. As a pilgrim who loves learning and spends his money on books, readers of his tale expect something great and valuable after all. His story is about a marquis named Walter, who marries a peasant, named Griselda. Later, he puts her to a number of cruel tests. The pilgrims in Chaucer's masterwork experience changes that are detailed in this literary work. These changes take many different kinds and manifest in many ways. One of these travelers is the Clerk. In the following discussion, I'll look at how 'The Clerk's Prologue and Tale' handles metamorphosis. By reading this article, readers will realize that transformation is not limited to the one of the hag that occurs at the end of 'The Wife of Bath's Tale.' Close-reading method will be used to analyze the tale. Exploring the context thoroughly will help understand different changes that take place in life. The result of the analysis shows that marriage goes through various transformations. It is also a way to explore and have a glimpse of the social medieval life.

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## INTRODUCTION

One of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is 'The Clerk's Tale,' a classic work of medieval literature. A group of pilgrims making their way from Southwark to Canterbury narrates the stories. The pilgrims, who represent a spectrum of English social classes, paint a striking picture of life in the country throughout the fourteenth century. They get the opportunity to amuse themselves and voice their ideas on various subjects. Through some of his narrators, including the Clerk, "Chaucer creates strong personalities, portraying their opinions and personal reflections regarding the institution of marriage with respect to their social positions" (Marcotte, 2007, p. 1).

'The Clerk's Tale' is about a marquis named Walter, a bachelor who assents his subjects to marry and decides to marry a peasant, named Griselda. She is tested by her husband "in a series of cruel torments that recall the biblical *Book of Job*" (cf. Wikipedia). The tale "forces us to experience just what is asked of human beings in their submission to the divine will" (Mann, 2002, p. 122). There is no way to accept the idea that what Griselda is exposed to could be requested by a normal husband-she is tested in a divine way where a human being has no choice, but to accept and obey the deity at all cases (Condren, 1984).

In his introduction to *The Canterbury Tales*, Benson (1987) points out that "there are two transformations in the [Wife of Bath's] tale, that of the loathly lady and that of the knight" (p. 11). Critics and researchers usually concentrate on the two transformations mentioned by Benson. Reading the above quotation attract the attention to other transformations that occur in *The Canterbury Tales*. Due to the fact that there are many changes, this paper will only focus on main transformations in 'The Clerk's Prologue and Tale' (hereafter referred to as *C's P & T*).

Critics contend that *The Canterbury Tales* accurately depict the society in which they are set. They

are the epitome of the time and its norms. Weisel (1998) argues that violence against women is justified because they are viewed as depraved beings (p. 115–17). Many commentators, ranging from Hinckley (1917) to Mann (2002), have discussed Griselda's standing as a wretched and unrealistic lady in relation to 'The Clerk's Tale.' Hinckley (1917) contends that Griselda is more of a servant than a respected wife in regards to her fidelity (p. 298). Additionally, Mann (2002) maintains that Walter had more freedom to exercise dictatorship since he deliberately selected Griselda as his wife (p. 116). Also, Baker (1992) praises Griselda's patience as a virtue in return, stating that it was just a necessary means to her outstanding obedience—a virtue that was highly respected in the Middle Ages (p. 243). Recently, Alanazi (2023) discusses in an article "how representation of female characters from the male perspective distorts the real persona of women" (p. 30). Alanazi (2023) points out that "the image of Griselda in 'The Clerk's Tale' is representative of the male-designed archetype of women of the Middle Ages" (p. 30). By the way, Dohal (2021) analyzes transformations in an article entitled "Transformation in Chaucer's 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale'." This article will focus on transformations in 'The Clerk's Prologue and Tale.'

Discourse analysis will be employed in this article. The primary changes that occur in 'The Clerk's Prologue and Tale' are traced through an analysis of the text. Beyond the individual sentences, the discourse of the entire tale examines the overarching and generic meanings that are expressed within the discourse. This essay will primarily reveal numerous alterations that have impacted the main characters through close reading. Indeed, "thoughtful, critical analysis of a text... in order to develop a deep, precise understanding of the text" is how Burke (2020) describes close reading (p. 2).

## DISCUSSION

In fact, the act of pilgrimage itself is a kind of transformation; travelers depart from the material world and travel to Canterbury, a representation of the spiritual realm. Dohal (2021) argues that transformation can occur in any of the following domains: form, appearance, nature, class, behavior, circumstance, understanding, etc. (p. 128). *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (1987) defines "transform" as changing "the shape, appearance, quality, or nature." Therefore, metamorphosis entails a change in nature rather than just form and appearance. Certain changes stand out more than others, as demonstrated by the transformation of the hag in 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale.' However, this article concentrates on other noteworthy changes that take place in 'The Clerk's Prologue and Tale.'

The clerk is expected to tell his story in a lofty, pedantic style for he has learnt logic and is studying philosophy; "he was a true philosopher" ('The General Prologue,' line 297). Yet, he avoids philosophy and its style; he chooses a style that is plain and straightforward after the host warns him:

Speak out plainly at this time, we pray,  
So we can understand all that you say. (*C's P & T*, lines 19-20)

Hence, the pilgrim promises to "show obedience" (*C's P & T*, line 24). As long as the purpose of his story is to entertain, and not to show his education and ability, he fulfills the request of the host. This switch of style is the first change that is noticed.

The clerk assures to tell a tale he "learned at Padua from a worthy clerk" (*C's P & T*, line 27), who "is dead now, and nailed up in his chest" (*C's P & T*, line 29). Of course, death is a kind of transformation; death is the termination of life. Later, the Clerk refers to the change of death that should take place sometime: "as we all shall die" (*C's P & T*, line 38). By stating that he has "learned," apparently he wants to emphasize the importance of knowledge; it is acquired. Hence, through learning and knowledge, he changes the status of ignorance. Indirectly, he emphasizes the gist of what he is doing; i. e. learning and studying.

In 'The Clerk's Tale,' there are main changes that might be traced as follows:

The first thing we learn from the tale is that Walter, a marquis, is:

Beloved and feared, by favour of Fortune,  
Both by his lords, and all of his commune. (*C's P & T*, lines 69-70)

Later, the love of his people is transformed into hatred due to his deeds:

... whereas the people there before  
Had loved him well, the ill-report for shame  
Made them hate him bitterly, and more. (*C's P & T*, lines 729-31)

Indeed, love is the main topic that is required for marriage to continue and prosper because we need love to construct a relationship and think of a family. Regardless of what or whom you love, life needs love to maintain continuity. And love, like hate, is a renewed, changing state that requires personal motives to be achieved. One of the Canterbury pilgrims' motivations is their love of making this arduous journey in order to satisfy their spiritual instincts. They are looking for a transformation from this aspect; they try to culminate their efforts with spiritual matters that limit their worldly desires.

According to the tale, Walter's people ask him to marry because they know that nothing is eternal; everything is vulnerable to transformation and change:

That we shall die, as uncertain are we all  
Of the one day on which our death shall fall. (*C's P & T*, lines 125-26)

They are to take a successor after him, and they prefer his offspring. By the way, death is referred to for the second time, and it will be mentioned again at the end of the tale. Death symbolizes an inevitable transformation for any living entity.

On the other hand, marriage is a state of change that an individual needs, either to satisfy his whims or achieve his desires and have offspring, as intended in the tale here. In politics, people usually prefer the change that they expect, and the people in the tale advise the marquis to marry so that their rule will continue in the same smooth way, not to have someone whom they do not know his method and do not expect his goals.

The Cinderella motif is a kind of transformation as well in the tale. This happens when Griselda is transferred from the poor life she has lived into the luxurious life after being married. Before marriage,

She drank, and in virtue sought to please,  
Knowing much labour, and no idle ease. (*C's P & T*, lines 216-17)

And after marriage, "she transformed was by such richness" (*C's P & T*, line 385). This is a transformation of her social life. Also this marriage causes the change of her rank; Griselda becomes the "new marchioness" (*C's P & T*, line 394) after she has been in "estate full low" (*C's P & T*, line 473). Moreover, "the transformation into the marquis's wife comes as a shock to the people" (Mann, 2002, p. 66);

The throng scarce knew her in her loveliness  
When she transformed was by such richness. (*C's P & T*, lines 384-385)

Indeed, the marquis refers to this type of change when he emphasizes,

When I took you from your poor array,  
And set you in a state of nobleness. (*C's P & T*, line 467-68)

Well, for Alexander (2011), "his motivation for selecting her is entirely for power: he wants someone so lowly and servile that she will dare not question him nor goad him into doing what he does not want to do" (p. 58). Although this judgment is relative, it is possible. He has power over his people as a ruler, and at the same time he tends to keep power at home. Such a ruler does not want a competitor in his life. People like Walter must know that their desires and ideas are the real challenges they must face; what happens to Walter is his internal conflict with his whims and behavioral deviations, which prompts him to conduct tests on his wife to prove her loyalty to him.

After marriage, "she temporarily transcends the visible class structure to rule in Walter's stead" (Nakley, 2018, p. na). She becomes a marchioness who could solve some of the lords' problems during her husband's absence. More than this, the marquis takes her out of everything she has used to, even her clothes:

And that nothing of her former gear  
She should bring into his house. (*C's P & T*, lines 372-73)

She must be stripped of everything she has had, including her "labour" clothes, and put on new clothes suitable for the place she will occupy when she moves to the Marquis' house, what a transformation! Hence,

But nonetheless, this maiden bright of hue  
Foot to head they clothed again all new. (*C's P & T*, line 377-78)

Having new clothes indicates a transformation of appearance. Appearance is important in our lives to leave an impression on people because the essence maybe something that others simply cannot perceive. Ethics are of fundamental importance, but they may be hidden from many people. Therefore, the appearance may be tainted by a kind of uncalculated artificiality, and the goal is clear, i. e. to leave an impression on others. This is all a kind of changing the truth which may amount to deception. As indicated earlier,

Moreover, Griselda becomes a judge for  
When noblemen or others of that country  
Were wrath, she would make them atone. (*C's P & T*, line 436-37)

This is a transformation of position; everything in her life changes. So it is not only a change and transformation in her social status, but also a shift in what her new social condition requires. This marchioness is to solve some of the lords' problems as well; she is in a position of responsibility.

Later, Griselda is exposed to some atrocities. Her "sufferings are inflicted upon her by her husband, who wants to test her obedience and submissiveness. When she receives a proposal from a marquis, he requires that she consent to his every demand" (Gestsdóttir, 2021, p. 25). Griselda asserts, "But as you wish yourself, so then will I" (*C's P & T*, line 351). So when she accepts his proposal, she gives up everything, including her will and freedom. Hence, "her free choice obligates her to accept both good and bad eventualities in their marriage" (Ohale, 1980, p. 16).

At the beginning, Walter takes Griselda's children, and wants to know:

If from his wife's face he might see,  
Or by her words perceive, whether she  
Had changed at all. (*C's P & T*, lines 599-601)

Indeed, "as a mother Griselda fails to protect her children against the purported cruelty of their father, emerging as a dehumanised, impossibly passive creature" (Stadnik, 2016, p. 56). Griselda gives up to his manipulation that her son should be slain along with their daughter. According to the tale, he wants to examine the eternal gist of her life; i. e. her morals, but these morals do not change according to the tale; "for though ever virtuous was she" (*C's P & T*, line 407). Griselda represents an "ideal 'good' wife" (Gestsdóttir, 2021, p. 21); she is "virtuous, obedient, and faithful" (Gestsdóttir, 2021, p. 23). She keeps her promise even if not for Walter's sake; it is for her consistence that she takes as her ideal. At the same time, marriage restricts her freedom which she has enjoyed before marriage.

Indeed, Griselda becomes a kind of slave instead of being liberal before marriage:

When first I came to you, then so,' quoth she,  
'I left my will and all my liberty,  
And donned clothes of yours, wherefore I pray,

Do your pleasure; I will your wish obey. (*C's P & T*, lines 655-58)

In this tale, Chaucer wants to clarify that marriage as a change of the social status requires some responsibilities that, in turn, require performing some marital duties, which limit the freedom that this woman has enjoyed before marriage. When she accepts to obey him blindly, she chooses to become a toy-like; this behavior bothers readers of this story. Here, she neglects her human instincts and inclinations. In real life, one may give up some things for some reasons, but it is difficult, if not impossible, to give up everything.

Later, when the Marquis tells her that he is going to divorce her and marry someone else, she knows she will become a widow; she states:

My life there will I lead till I be dead,  
A widow clean in body, heart and all. (*C's P & T*, line 835-36)

By having been dismissed, Griselda is exposed to another transformation of her current state because she has come to him:

My lord, you know that in my father's place  
You did me strip of all the clothes I had,  
And richly clad me then, of your grace.  
To you I brought naught else, be it said,  
But faith, and nakedness, and maidenhead.  
And here again your clothing I restore,  
And your wedding ring for evermore. (*C's P & T*, lines 862-68)

In the above quotation, she reminds him that her maidenhood he has taken, and begs him to grant her a smock in return when they part:

In recompense then for my maidenhead,  
Which I brought you, and no longer bear,  
Vouchsafe a gift and grant me instead  
Such a smock as I was wont to wear. (*C's P & T*, line 883-86)

All these actions, after all, are changes that the reader may not pay attention to—changes that could be traced and noticed after a careful reading of the tale. Generally speaking, marriage requires changes in the lives of both spouses.

By the time Griselda shows Walter that she does not care about his getting married, his cruelty changes into sympathy according to the tale:

The marquis in his heart could not repress  
His pity for such wifely steadfastness. (*C's P & T*, lines 1049-50)

After many atrocities he has done with her, he declares, "You are my wife" (*C's P & T*, line 1063). It is a transformation of his reaction towards her steadfastness. Does he want her to be more of a monument than a human being? According to Alexander (2011), "Griselda's reading changes Walter so that *his* mind becomes one with *hers*. Here, Griselda is the one with all the power" (p. 8). According to Mann (2002), "Griselda's strength makes itself felt in the very act of self-denial" (p. 115). Whatever it is whether it is her reading or self-denial, it is hard to believe her reaction-- it is unrealistic. What an arrogant tyrant he is! How can a person with such audacity be loved by his people? Also, where can we find a woman like Griselda? It is an ideal idea that does not exist at all. The reader may go further than that, wondering how a person with such a mentality would do to his people. Wicher (2021) wonders how "the heroine accepts his sudden change of heart in a spirit of gratitude and perfect satisfaction" (p. 335)!

At the end of the tale, readers notice a transformation of her sorrow into rest and concord; she is supposed to be human. After having the life of "sickness, and then woe and pain" (*C's P & T*, line 451), "these two lived, in concord and in rest" (*C's P & T*, lines 1128-29). Thus, "Griselda must serve as both the ruler's consort, translated from poverty to power, and an inconvertible, untranslatable exemplar of the lower class" (Nakley, 2018, p. na). Despite the difficulty of its reality, it is a transformation that requires studying. Sledd argues that both behaviors of Walter in testing his wife and Griselda in surrendering her children lead to the conclusion that "the tale must not be read as a realistic fiction" (Sledd, 1953, p. 79). In turn, Alanazi (2023) contends, "her character is unrealistic because she undergoes and passes such inhuman tests" (p. 35). Well, according to the norms and Standards the period, a wife should be obedient and docile. Yet, it is hard to believe what happened to Griselda. Behavior is very important in our lives and can determine a lot of our actions, but what happens to the heroine of this tale is closer to imagination than reality.

Finally, there is a transformation of marital status when "richly his daughter married" (*C's P & T*, line 1130). In addition, there is a change in the court when:

His son succeeded, and his heritage

Enjoyed in peace, after his father's day. (*C's P & T*, lines 1135-36)

Here, we have another reference to death, which is a sign of transformation and change.

## CONCLUSION

'The Clerk's Prologue and Tale' by Geoffrey Chaucer features numerous transformations that assume various shapes and appearances. The story's most striking change is the peasant's rise from lowly social standing to a prominent position in Walter's court. In addition, the heroine of the tale undergoes a variety of harsh tests that alter and influence her life. All tests prove that the characters are unrealistic. However, the Clerk advises the wives not to submit to their husbands "either with humility or patience, lest they imitate Griselda" (Baker, 1986, p. 65). Then, he exhorts them to dominate their spouses; "But take on you the mastery without fail" (*C's P & T*, line 1191). Such advice is contrary to what a patriarchal society support at that time. The Clerk attempts to convey a lesson for women to comprehend and act toward the opposite gender as a response to 'The Wife of Bath's Tale.' Anyhow, it is hard to believe that what has happened in his tale is actually true and realistic because of how gruesomely it is portrayed.

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