

The *Contemplatif* Life: Social and Political Sovereignty and Chaucer's Oxford Clerk

by

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For my mom and dad,  
for their support and love no matter where I'm going.

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## Abstract

A great amount of Chaucer scholarship has interpreted and contextualized the *Clerk's Tale* both in relation to the other *Canterbury Tales* and in relation to its literary sources. Not much attention has been given, however, to Chaucer's specific framing of this tale. An examination of the reserved character of the Oxford Clerk and his relationship with the Host can provide a more nuanced reading of the *Clerk's Tale*, especially its political implications. Various scholars have addressed the theme of political theory in the *Canterbury Tales*, and some have focused on the Host's position as a self-appointed ruler figure. The focus of this thesis, then, is the Clerk's responsive self-portrayal as an obedient subject and the effect of such a rehearsal on the social and political significance of his tale.

The bulk of the textual analysis in the thesis focuses on the *Canterbury Tales*. Attention is also given to Petrarch's version of the Griselda tale, especially to identify differences in Chaucer's telling that can be related to his Clerk's unique narrative perspective. To connect the Clerk's rehearsal with his Oxford context, Chaucer's text is compared to the medieval political writings of John of Trevisa, especially his Middle English translation of *De Regimine Principum*. Comparisons of Chaucer's text to Trevisa's suggest this real-life Oxford scholar as a possible source for political discourse in the *Canterbury Tales*.

The thesis has been divided into two chapters. The first identifies the Clerk as an ideally reticent scholar whose contemplative perspective is thus pitted against that of the domineering Host as early as the group formation of the *General Prologue*. The second chapter analyzes the *Clerk's Tale* with special attention to the Clerk's critical narrative voice and to the themes of rhetorical and political prudence with which his character is inevitably preoccupied. In his response to the Wife of Bath, the Clerk confronts and critiques another strong personality while acknowledging a shared problem of masculine authority as represented by the Host, Walter, and Jankin.

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## INTRODUCTION

The portrait of Chaucer's Clerk in the *General Prologue* and in the *Prologue* to his own *Tale* has been elusive and intriguing to many critics. The complexity of the Clerk's character, already present upon a closer examination of his portrait, becomes readily apparent in the tale that he chooses to tell. The *Clerk's Tale* is one of unopposed male tyranny toward unflinching female obedience. The story of the obedient Griselda and despotic Walter was first written down in Italian by Boccaccio as the final novella in his *Decameron*. It was subsequently translated into Latin by Petrarch, whom the Clerk claims as the source of his own rendition. The story presents the modern reader with a myriad of moral and interpretive problems, which Anne Middleton has pointed out were as troubling to medieval readers of the tale as far back as Petrarch as they continue to be today. Warren Ginsberg asserts, "Not many *Canterbury Tales* disturb Chaucer's readers as much as the Clerk's."<sup>1</sup> He nevertheless has a theory for why readers keep coming back to the story:

In Chaucer, the trials of Griselda and Walter are told by the Clerk, and it is his telling, I think, that has divided the critics so passionately... When one examines the changes Chaucer made in his version, a design that combines secular and religious details begins to appear, a design that ultimately affords us a glimpse of Chaucer forming a character.<sup>2</sup>

There is certainly a substantial amount of character formation to be observed in Chaucer's Oxford Clerk. In my examination in this thesis, I aim to determine what the Clerk's demeanor and tale have to say about his role in society as an unemployed scholar. Ginsberg has identified

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<sup>1</sup> Warren Ginsberg, "'And Speketh so Pleyn': The *Clerk's Tale* and its Teller," *Criticisim* 20.3 (Summer 1978): 307.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 307-8.

the “secular and religious” confusion that marks the Clerk’s narration, a result of the movement of educated clerical figures away from the church in the late medieval period: “The clash between two contradicting traits produces a curious kind of double vision: the Clerk is both worldly and spiritual; he is neither worldly nor spiritual.”<sup>3</sup>

The amount of intriguing and troubling content in the Griselda story itself often provides enough material to occupy a critical study of the *Clerk’s Tale*. The relation of the tale to its teller is given less attention, though many critics acknowledge cursorily the appropriateness of the fable—moralized and allegorized by Petrarch—to a clerical figure given to “heigh style.” The specific significance of the Host-Clerk relationship and the characterization of these two figures to the telling of the *Clerk’s Tale* have been given little to no attention in the critical literature. Among the many interpretive dilemmas offered by Chaucer’s Clerk, most interesting are the relationships that the framing narrative of the *Tales* allows Chaucer to create between the Clerk and other Canterbury pilgrims. Chaucer’s narration of the Host and the Clerk characters, I will argue, intentionally sets up a conflict of power between the two. This conflict, though it is pointedly emphasized by the Clerk and used to his own purposes in his recital of a tale about tyranny, is certainly instigated by the Host himself beginning in the *General Prologue*.

In the first chapter of the thesis, I will focus on the characterization of the Clerk and the Host and propose that Chaucer created with his Oxford scholar an ideal clerk figure whose most distinctive trait is his reticent withdrawal from social interaction with his fellow travelers. His contemplative nature is juxtaposed with the thoughtless, domineering leadership of the Host as well as the carefree sociability of the other pilgrims. Inspired by the Host’s aspirations to social tyranny, when called upon the Clerk tells a tale about a northern Italian marquis given to

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 322.

imprudent, ultimately tyrannical action. I will thus focus in the second chapter of the thesis on the development and significance of the Clerk's critical voice. His preoccupation with prudent governance can be linked with the political writings of John of Trevisa, a contemporary of Chaucer's and, not coincidentally, a Oxford clerk. In drawing comparisons between the Clerk and his real-life counterpart, I will focus on two of Trevisa's translations: *Dialogus Inter Militem et Clericum*, a knight's defense of temporal monarchies against church involvement, and more importantly the *De Regimine Principum*, or *The Governance of Kings and Princes*. In this work, one finds a sufficient number of connections with Chaucer's text to justify further investigation as to whether Chaucer could have known John of Trevisa's work.

My method throughout the thesis will involve close analysis of Chaucer's language to allow textual comparison with John of Trevisa and also to identify significant revisions that the Clerk introduces to the Griselda tale he has inherited from Petrarch. The focus of this analysis therefore represents a rather small section of Chaucer's text: my focus is the Oxford Clerk and the preoccupations of his recital. I don't intend to trace any broad patterns through the whole of the *Canterbury Tales*: references to other pilgrims and tales—the Wife of Bath and the *Melibee*, for example— and to other Chaucer works are only employed as they relate to the Clerk's point of view and position within the work. The value of such a close study is revealed as observations of personality and character, connections to Trevisa, and thus an identification of the Chaucerian political discourse style that a knowledge of Trevisa creates, allow important insight into Chaucer's work as a whole.

## CHAPTER ONE: THE OXFORD CLERK'S IDEAL RETICENCE

In this chapter of the thesis, I will first discuss the implications of the Clerk's silence on his overall identity in the *Canterbury Tales*. In *Chaucer and Universe of Learning*, Anne Astell details the similarity of Chaucer's "clerkly persona" to that of his Oxford Clerk and proposes the Clerk's as an ideal portrait representing a "fourth estate" of university scholars.<sup>1</sup> Clerical reticence, I will argue, is central to Chaucer's construction of this ideal—the most defining characteristic of a respectable scholar. Perhaps not coincidentally, the text of John of Trevisa, himself an Oxford scholar, illuminates the topic of ideal clerical reticence in a way pressingly relevant to the characterization of Chaucer's Oxford Clerk.

After establishing the nature of the Clerk's silence as ideal and connected with Oxford, I will begin to examine that reticence as a way of imagining the Clerk's perspective as a Canterbury pilgrim. In a hastily formed *felaweshipe* characterized by simple, enthusiastic accord, the social environment—determined by a loud, domineering Host—is problematic for a silent, thoughtful scholar. From this perspective, the loss of individual voices in the unanimous establishment of the tale telling contest represents the muting of quieter—and potentially wiser—opinions more than it indicates a possibility for perfectly collective accord.

### I. "Doubt as a stoon": The Clerk's Silence

The quotation in this section's title, spoken by the Host in the *General Prologue*, provides the impetus for an analysis of the Host-Clerk relationship from the beginning of the *Canterbury Tales*. These two characters are perhaps the most implicitly opposed to one another before any explicit interaction between the two takes place in the text: Chaucer places a reticent Oxford scholar under the rule of a boisterous, outspoken tavern owner who would characterize

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Astell, *Chaucer and the Universe of Learning* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996). See pages 54-60, "Chaucer's Clerk of Oxenford and the Fourth Estate."

the Clerk's contemplative nature as part of the "dumb-as-a-stone" dullness to be avoided even on pilgrimage. In this section, a close reading of the Clerk's silent manner will be illuminated by an explanation of *shamefastnesse* in John of Trevisa's *De Regimine Principum*. I will examine the Clerk's—and Chaucer's—introverted silence as the main characteristic that makes a clerk "ideal." Bookish learning, as Anne Astell points out, is gaining importance in medieval England; she observes, "The diverse company of pilgrims speaking for and as clerks recalls the ever widening boundaries of the university community in Chaucer's time."<sup>2</sup> As the spread of both lay literacy and vernacular texts bridges a gap between the Clerk and his fellow pilgrims, then, the Clerk's reticence becomes the most important trait of the ideal scholar.

If the Clerk's introspective nature is the scholarly ideal, then he has met his opposite—for learning and for personality—in the Host, whose comments criticizing the Clerk's reticence display his own awareness of their difference. The first part of this section will focus on the Host's judgment of reticence as dull—opposed to good *chere*—and overtly feminine: his censure of the Clerk's *shamefastnesse* is a social criticism of the Clerk's personality, rhetorical style, and gender. Comparisons to Chaucer's self-portrayal as a withdrawn thinker reveal the extremity of the Clerk's reticent manner: the Chaucer pilgrim is able to integrate himself into the pilgrim group through speech, while the Clerk remains reserved enough to merit the Host's critical attention by the end of the *General Prologue*. Finally, Trevisa's text provides a surprisingly lucid and relevant explication of the inseparability of true scholarly knowledge and *shamefaste* reticence in a *parfit* clerk, through a passage that presents a gendered comparison parallel to that employed by the Host.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 59.

According to the Host's assessment in the *Clerk's Prologue*, the Clerk is not engaged enough in the tale-telling contest that forms the narrative frame for the *Tales* and structures the interaction between the pilgrims as they ride toward Canterbury. Too unsociably silent, the Clerk is presumably absorbed by the thought of "som sophyme" and merits the Host's direct reproof: "But Salomon seith 'every thyng hath tyme.' / For Goddes sake, as beth of bettre cheere! / It is no tyme for to studien heere" (IV.6-8). This address to his fellow traveler as a figure in particular need of explicit instruction is preceded by the Host's open observation of the characteristics that, for him, mark the Clerk as, potentially, a very bad storyteller:

"Sire Clerk of Oxenford," oure Hooste sayde,  
 "Ye ryde as coy and stille as dooth a mayde  
 Were newe spoused, sittynge at the bord;  
 This day ne herde I of youre tonge a word.  
 I trowe ye studie aboute som sophyme (IV.1-4).

Here, the Host's primary observation—or criticism—is that the Clerk is too silent, so "coy and stille" that he has not been heard to utter "a word" all day. The explanation is, for the Host, simple: the "Oxenford" clerk is certainly deep in thought, studying "aboute som sophyme." In this direct address to the Clerk, Harry Bailly's comparison of his male companion to "a mayde / were newe spoused" seems rather derogatory and also fairly misguided. By drawing this simile, the Host reveals in very few words his skewed perspective on gender roles: he criticizes a silent male figure while evoking the image of an idealistically silent female.

The Host's criticism of silent introspection in the *Clerk's Prologue* follows his earlier expression of the same idea in the *General Prologue*. After the Chaucer narrator has introduced each pilgrim at the Tabard Inn, he explains how the Host of the Tabard, Harry Bailly, proposes to

accompany the group on their pilgrimage and amuse them by overseeing a storytelling contest on the way to and from Canterbury. The appeal of such a game is, explains the Host, reasonably self-evident:

And wel I woot, as ye goon by the weye,  
Ye shapen yow to talen and to pleye;  
For trewely, confort ne myrthe is noon  
To ride by the weye doumb as a stoon       (I.771-4).

Here, in an address to the whole group of pilgrims gathered at the inn, the Host prefaces his tale-telling proposal with a confident assumption—“wel I woot”—that the travelers already have plans “to talen and to pleye” as they make their way to Canterbury. His assumption follows logically from his evident belief that a pilgrimage should provide “confort” and “myrthe” for a traveler. By citing tale telling and playing as the activities conducive to a pleasant trip, the Host precludes the possibility for a more personal or spiritual, quieter type of pleasure, and the *Middle English Dictionary* appropriately cites his use of the word *confort* here to mean “pleasure, delight, gratification” without any religious connotation.<sup>3</sup> In the same way, *myrthe* here has already been established by the Host to indicate a purely gratifying entertainment: “Fayn wolde I doon yow myrthe, wiste I how. / And of a myrthe I am right now bythoght” (I.766-7). He wants to entertain his new friends on their journey, and right on the spot he thinks up an appropriate *myrthe*—“an entertainment or amusement; divertissement, distraction.”<sup>4</sup> To clarify his position before moving into a description of the amusement he proposes, the Host says that “trewely” the absolute antithesis of *confort* and *myrthe* is “to ride by the weye doumb as a stoon.”

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<sup>3</sup> *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “comfort (n.),” 3a.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, s.v. “mirthe (n.),” 5a.

In light of this derogatory judgment of reticence from the *General Prologue*, the Host seems destined to eventually come up against the one character who is explicitly in opposition to his distaste for silent, un-mirthful travel. Though the Host may not yet have the Clerk specifically in mind, his “dumb-as-a-stone” expression appropriately predicts his subsequent, more direct addresses to this character: *doumb* in the sense used here can and does mean “reticent” or “silent,” but the word in Middle English also expands at times to include the denotation “impotent.”<sup>5</sup> Given this potential shade of meaning, it is no wonder that the Host later moves to more explicitly emasculate his silent companion by comparing him to a shy and silent “mayde” (IV.2).

Another instance in the Chaucer corpus of the “dumb-as-a-stone” idiom can be usefully examined here to reveal the centrality of this issue of talkativeness for Chaucer himself. Nowhere else in the *Canterbury Tales* does Chaucer apply an identical simile,<sup>6</sup> but it does appear in Book II of the *House of Fame* when the golden eagle explains his purpose in bearing the Chaucer narrator skyward in his talons:

“For when thy labour doon al ys,  
 And hast mad alle thy rekenynges,  
 In stede of reste and newe thynges  
 Thou goost hom to thy hous anoon,  
 And, *also domb as any stoon*,  
 Thou sittest at another book

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., s.v. “domb (adj.),” 3a, 6a.

<sup>6</sup> Chaucer does often use the image of *ston* in similes in the *Canterbury Tales* – about eight other times. The qualitative comparison, however, is never to dumbness; instead, characters are portrayed as being variously *stille*, *hard*, *blynd*, and *aswowne* as *ston*. In the *Man of Law’s Tale* we also get the simile “as doumb stant as a tree” (II.1055).

Tyl fully daswed ys thy look;  
 ...  
 “And therefore Joves, thorgh hys grace,  
 Wol that I bere the to a place  
 Which that highte the Hous of Fame,  
*To do the some disport and game,*  
 In som recompensacion  
 Of labour and devocion  
 That thou hast had ...  
 ...  
 Wol with som maner thing the quyte,  
 So that thou wolt *be of good chere.*”<sup>7</sup>

In this passage Chaucer tellingly connects his own narrator character closely with his Oxford Clerk. The Clerk is silent, thoughtful, and studious. He would rather possess “twenty bookes” than any amusements such as “robes riche, or fithete, or gay sautrie” (I.294-6). He concerns himself with nothing but scholarly pursuit and is by no means a great conversationalist: “Of studie took he moost cure and moost heede. / Noght o word spak he moore than was neede” (I.303-4). Likewise, the Chaucer narrator dedicates all his “labour and devocion” to learning, staring at his books until he is “fully daswed [dazed].” The Host and the eagle point out the excessive studiousness of the Clerk and Chaucer, respectively, and each proposes—or rather, imposes—an alternative amusement in which these scholars must engage. The Clerk has “entred in a pley” by agreeing to the rules of the Host’s tale telling game (IV.10); now, rather than

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<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The House of Fame*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), lines 652-71.

“studien,” he must seek to “beth of bettre cheere.” The *House of Fame* narrator is identically constrained: physically carried toward “some disport and game” by the eagle, the “recompensacion” planned for him by Jove is intended to ensure that he “be of good chere.”

The similarity between Chaucer and his Clerk is not exact, however, and an examination of their respective portrayals in the *Legend of Good Women* and the *General Prologue* finds the self-narrated Chaucer to be a more well-rounded scholar than his fictional counterpart. In the opening lines of the *General Prologue* the Chaucer narrator explains how he joins the other Canterbury pilgrims at the Tabard Inn. David Wallace has emphasized the importance of spoken language to Chaucer’s admittance to the group in this scene:<sup>8</sup>

At nyght was come into that hostelrye  
 Wel nyne and twenty in a compaignye,  
 Of sondry folk, by aventure yfalle  
 In felaweshipe, and pilgrimes were they alle,  
 That toward Caunterbury wolden ryde.

...

And shortly, whan the sonne was to reste,  
 So hadde I spoken with hem everichon

That I was of hir felaweshipe anon. (I.23-27, 30-32)

Chaucer’s self-depiction here is not at all consistent with that of his *House of Fame* portrait; rather than wish to go “hom to [his] hous anon” and be with his books, the narrator not only welcomes the company of twenty-nine newly arrived fellow pilgrims but even makes an effort to speak “with hem everichon.” This paradoxical representation is reconciled in Chaucer’s self-

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<sup>8</sup> David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 67.

assessment of his scholarly nature at the beginning of the *Legend of Good Women*, allowing us to continue considering the Chaucer narrator as a reasonably consistent character throughout his pre-*Canterbury* works.

And as for me, though that I konne but lyte,  
 On bokes for to rede I me delyte,  
 ...  
 So hertely, that ther is game noon  
 That fro my bokes maketh me to goon,  
 But yt be seldom on the holyday,  
 Save, certeynly, whan that the month of May  
 Is comen, and that I here the foules synge,  
 And that the floures gynnen for to sprynge,  
 Farewel my bok and my devocioun!<sup>9</sup>

In these lines, the narrator asserts his “delyte” for book learning, which he feels “so hertely, that ther is game noon” that could possibly draw him away from his precious volumes. In clerkly fashion, though, he immediately qualifies this affirmation of unconditional attachment with “but” and “save” clauses. When the “foules” and “floures” of spring arrive in May he lightly bids “farewel” to both his “bok” and his “devocioun.” This passage, which connects desire with seasonal change, recalls the first lines of the *Canterbury Tales*: “Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote / The droghte of March hath perced to the roote, / ... / Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages” (I.1-12). This *General Prologue* passage includes the same imagery of “flour” and “foweles” that appears in the *Legend of Good Women* excerpt (I.4, 9). The Chaucer narrator

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<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Legend of Good Women*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), lines 29-39.

thus places himself in harmony with nature and with the other “folk” who experience such seasonal longing to leave their habitual pursuits and “goon.”

The Clerk’s reticent nature sets him apart from his conventionally sociable companions and complicates the group dynamic that characterizes the *General Prologue*. This group dynamic has been examined in political and social terms by both David Wallace and Paul Strohm, though in both cases a closer reading of the character of the Clerk can contribute to a more nuanced analysis. In his discussion of the lines above in which Chaucer falls in with the other pilgrims, David Wallace points out the sense of the natural contained in both the movement of the sun and the pilgrims’ communication with each other, citing Aquinas and Dante as just two examples of the medieval belief in “the natural sociability of human beings.”<sup>10</sup> Given the Clerk’s evident unsociability, this distinction must strike the reader as excluding at least one pilgrim from such a natural impulse toward the kind of casual chitchat that characterizes the communication between “sondry folk” at this “hostelrye.” The formation of this socially disparate group of travelers into a *compaignye* or *felaweshipe*, Wallace reasonably maintains, represents “a moment of political confidence [by an author] that will not be repeated on English territory.”<sup>11</sup> Paul Strohm likewise identifies the group formation as, if not revolutionary, at least indicative of the contemporary, developing idea of the natural state, “in which the ruler enjoyed a consensual or contractual relation with his subjects” and which “was to dominate fourteenth-century English thought.”<sup>12</sup>

We must ask, however, where a socially reserved scholar who is minimally involved in the communicative formation of such a group fits into the political picture. Strohm acknowledges

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<sup>10</sup> Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 67.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 147.

the possibility for “transgression” in this social system,<sup>13</sup> and he points to the temporal narration of the *Tales* as an effective way to demonstrate the presence and resolution of tensions that arise in a “commonwealth” of diverse characters: “The great resource of narration, fully exploited in the *Canterbury Tales*, is its capacity to reveal the self-maintaining processes by which a social body may act in time to accommodate new social groups, reconcile disputes, and chastise antisocial impulses.”<sup>14</sup> In Strohm’s study, the use of the term “antisocial” here is widely relevant and applicable to the themes of hierarchical societal structure he is analyzing, rather than to a narrower sense of its relation to an uncommunicative, “antisocial” personality type: Any character whose behavior threatens the stability of the group’s *coherentia*, the belligerent Miller for example, may be considered “antisocial”—in opposition to a cohesive social order.<sup>15</sup> In such a “self-maintaining” system, then, the Clerk’s reticent unsociability has significantly less impact on the group’s stability than does the “antisocial” action of his overly outspoken companions.

If we identify the reticent Clerk as an introverted personality type, his participation in the pilgrim group becomes potentially antagonistic to his own perspective, threatening to drown his voice among louder personalities or, perhaps worse, to force him into performative speech solely for the sake of his merrymaking companions. Through an examination of many of the same *Canterbury* passages I am analyzing here, Frank Perez has suggested the Clerk as a possible prototype for T.S. Eliot’s J. Alfred Prufrock. In addition to some significant textual basis for this comparison, Perez’s argument hinges on an overall sense of the sociability of these two characters:

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 157.

Both Prufrock and the Clerk seem to be caught in the middle of a dichotomy between the internal and the external; between the substantial and the superficial; between individualistic impulses and societal expectations. Psychologically, the dichotomy is essentially that of introversion and extroversion.<sup>16</sup>

The Clerk's introversion, distinctive enough to allow his personality to become a prototype, pushes against the "societal expectations" of his group setting and complicates the "political confidence" Wallace attributes to the moment of the group's formation.

Before the end of the *General Prologue*, the Host has recognized the Clerk's contemplative reticence and singled him out as a potentially troublesome player. Instructing the pilgrims to draw straws to determine the first tale-teller, Harry Bailly starts to micromanage his *compaignye*:

"Sire Knyght," quod he, "my mayster and my lord,  
Now draweth cut, for that is myn accord.  
Cometh neer," quod he, "my lady Prioress  
And ye, sire Clerk, lat be youre shamefastnesse,  
Ne studieth nought; ley hond to, every man!" (I.837-841).

The Host calls specifically on the Knight, his "mayster" and "lord," presumably out of respect for his high rank and perhaps as a signal that the selection of who will tell the first tale is fixed by the Host in some way to favor the Knight; the Host wants to please those higher up in the social hierarchy, as demonstrated by his suggestion that the Monk follow the Knight later on. The Prioress, perhaps of aristocratic origin, is likewise worthy and obviously desirous of the solicitous attention of such singling out as the Host gives her here. Despite the show of pleasing

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<sup>16</sup> Frank Perez, "Chaucer's Clerk of Oxford: A Prototype for Prufrock?" *Yeats Eliot Review* 17.2 (April 2001): 3.

attention, the Host's straightforward speech betrays the prevailing motivation—and justification—for his decisions: “for that is myn accord.” The Host calls on the Clerk not to honor or please but to chide him for his manner: “lat be youre shamefastnesse, / Ne studieth noght.” The Clerk's studious “shamefastnesse” seems well suited to the purported purpose of a pilgrimage—that of self-reflection and spiritual cleansing. But it is not at all suited to the Host's own opinions—or to his game. Though denoting the seriousness that accompanies scholarly pursuit, *shamefastnesse* also indicates “modesty” and “bashfulness,” further prefiguring in its connotation of femininity the “mayde” comparison in the *Clerk's Prologue*.<sup>17</sup> Even before the tales have begun, then, the Host singles out the Clerk as the pilgrim who needs the most instruction for how to engage in the very social activity he has proposed. If the quiet, thoughtful Clerk was not already struck by the Host's “doubt as a stoon” comment, at this point Harry Bailly has definitively challenged his companion's silent manner—and unwittingly set himself up for a clerk's studied response.

Of particular relevance here is a passage from John of Trevisa's *De Regimine Principum*. In the second book of the treatise, on household rule, the eighteenth chapter explains at length “that in wymmen som what is to preysyng and som what is to blamyng.” The first trait for which wommen should be praised is *shamefastnesse*, and the antifeminist explanation for why women are *shamefast* contains a rather flattering image of silent clerks:

And first, wymmen ben to preysynge, for thei ben comynlich *schamefast* and that is for double cause: first, for thei desiren to be preysed . . . And wymmen desiren greetlich to be preysed for al that ben inparfit desiren more to be ipreysed than thulke that ben parfit, as inparfit clerkes that hauen vnparfite connyng desiren more to be cleped cunnyng and to haue the name that thei ben excellent

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<sup>17</sup> *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “shamefastnesse (n).”

clerkes than don clerkes that ben verreyliche cunnyng. For *thei that ben verreyliche connyng* hauen ioye of that that is in hymself and reccheth not therefore so moche to be holde connyng. But thei that ben inparfitlich conyng, for thei fynden non connyng in hemself wherof he scholde be glad, what thei hauen not in dede they wolle haue in opynyoun of man.<sup>18</sup>

The explanation of *shamefastnesse* here says as much about the general opinion of clerks as it does about women: a good clerk is *shamefaste*, unboastfully content in his own “connyng” and thus not requiring any satisfaction of how other men “holde” him. This juxtaposed image of ideally humble, reticent clerks with praise-seeking, silent women is an exact reversal of the Host’s silent *mayde* simile in the *Clerk’s Prologue*, in which the Clerk’s reticence is faulted and the new bride’s silence portrayed as ideal and characteristically feminine.<sup>19</sup> Chaucer provides with the Oxford Clerk an example of a *parfit* Trevisan clerk—“excellent” and “verreyliche connyng,” but, more importantly, quietly unboastful. He speaks only when he is called upon to do so and requires no further attention from his companions. Chaucer’s other clerks—Nicholas in the *Miller’s Tale* for example—can be measured against this standard of modest reticence. The Clerk rejects the fiddle and the harp; Nicholas takes up his “gay sautrie” to make “a-nyghtes melodie / So swetely that all the chambre rong” (l.3213-5). The Clerk is unresponsively silent in the face of the Host’s criticism; Nicholas goes out of his way to use his clerkly cunning in an elaborate lovemaking scheme. If the Clerk represents the scholarly ideal suggested by Astell, his reticence is morally commendable. The personalities most inclined, then, toward an *inparfit* clerk are those who can only see in such reticence a “dumb-as-stone” dullness in need of correction.

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<sup>18</sup> John of Trevisa, *The Governance of Kings and Princes: John Trevisa’s Middle English Translation of the De Regimine Principum of Aegidius Romanus*, ed. David C. Fowler, Charles F. Briggs, and Paul G. Remley (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997): 197-8.

<sup>19</sup> See page 6 above.

The Host, as leader of the pilgrim group, will take it upon himself to oversee such an improvement in the Clerk's character.

## II. "Noght worth to make it wys": The Host's Idea of *Felaweshipe*

Further attention to the *General Prologue* is necessary at this point to determine the position of the reticent Clerk in the pilgrim group. David Wallace and Paul Strohm have each interpreted the group formation in the *General Prologue* of the *Canterbury Tales* as Chaucer's strongest depiction of what Wallace terms an "associational ideology"<sup>20</sup>: Chaucer gathers his characters from different social ranks and professions and renders them social equals as competitors in the storytelling contest that connects the *Tales*. This reading of social and political polity is productively applied by Wallace to an examination of English guild culture as a potential model for Chaucerian collective behavior. Closer attention must be given, however, to the Host's position within the *felaweshipe* of pilgrims. Wallace presents a confused character whose "masculine heterosexuality" conflicts with his attempt to construct a *myrthe* for the pilgrims. I will suggest that the Host's abundant *manhod* (I.756), far from confusing his goal, allows his creation of the competition to be viewed by the Clerk as an explicit attempt at gaining absolute control as a social ruler, thereby opposing the Host's point of view to that of his potential followers, who make up the *compaignye* of pilgrims. The lack of *avys* among the enthusiastic pilgrims and the Clerk's likely passivity in such an agreement are necessarily connected to the Clerk's subsequent treatment of thoughtful, prudent action in his *Tale*. A reading of the group formation in the *General Prologue*, using the Clerk's perspective as a lens, allows the reader to anticipate the issues of governance the Clerk observes in the Host's seemingly jovial rule.

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<sup>20</sup> David Wallace. *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997.

As he examines the Host's proposal of the tale-telling game, Wallace paints a picture of the pilgrim group that seems to contain just the "exterior, hierarchical gaze" that he credits them with evading. While acknowledging the Host's initial resemblance to a "demented despot," Wallace nevertheless dismisses the Host's dictatorial tendencies as easily as, he remarks, do the rest of the pilgrims. In his examination of associational ideology in the *General Prologue*, then, he observes, "the political tact and acumen lacking in the Host is generously supplied by the *felaweshipe* itself."<sup>21</sup> This reading, though viable for Wallace's purpose of examining the pilgrim group's relation to guild structure, assumes too much by grouping the silent clerk with his sociable companions. Addressing the Host's own intentions for the organization of the game and its players, both Wallace and the collective of pilgrims interpret the Host as merely a confused instigator of a sort of collective "myrthe." From the Clerk's point of view, however, the Host can be read instead as an unsuccessful ruler whose original, self-proclaimed intention is to exercise his own *juggement*.

The *compaignye*'s dismissive, rather belittling allowance of the Host's initial proposal that they all "stonden at [his] juggement" (I.778) reflects a glaring tension between the Host's and the pilgrims' perceptions of the group and the game that have just been established. There is little or no deliberation among the group members before they accept "by oon assent" the Host's proposal:

Oure conseil was nat longe for to seche.  
 Us thoughte it was nocht worth to make it wys,  
 And graunted hym withouten moore avys,  
 And bad him seye his voidit as hym leste. (I.784-7)

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Wallace cites line 1785 as the pilgrims' recognition that the "political muddle" into which the Host has gotten himself with his proposal is "ill-conceived but not malicious." The ambiguity of the term "worth" here allows considerable speculation about what the pilgrims really think of the Host's idea. No matter their opinions about whether the Host would be a good ruler, their agreement here does not commit them to any obedience as subjects of such rule. They allow him to "seye his voidit as hym leste" without any promise of responsive action.

One pilgrim, however, may remain with some sense of the Host's maliciousness, the "doubt as a stoon" observation having come just ten lines earlier. As will become apparent in the next section of the thesis, the *Clerk's Tale* dwells on themes of prudent political action subtly invoked by the Clerk's narration. His preoccupation with this theme can be traced as far back as this moment in the *General Prologue*, as his fellow pilgrims hold a short "conseil" and act rashly "withouten moore avys." The language here is echoed later in the *Tale of Melibee*, when Prudence explains to Melibee his mistake in acting hastily on bad advice: "Ye han erred also, for it semeth that yow suffiseth to han been conseilled by thise conseillours oonly, and with litel avys" (VII.1252). Unimpressed with the large group of untrusty counselors her husband assembled to hear his troubles, Prudence explains the danger of such large group decisions:

"And sith ye woot wel that men shal alwey fynde a gretter nombre of fooles than of wise men,/ and therefore the conseils that been at congregaciouns and multitudes of folk, there as men take moore reward to the nombre than to the sapience of persones,/ ye se wel that in swiche conseillynges fooles han the maistrie" (VII.1258-60)

This analysis essentially precludes the possibility of serious debate over a question when decisions are made by "congregaciouns": "wise men" are outnumbered and "fooles han the

maistrie.” According to Prudence’s explanation, the “oon assent” with which the pilgrims are accorded to agree with the Host in the *General Prologue* becomes the inevitable work of the “gretter nombre” rather than a true unanimity of opinion.

Deeming the Host’s proposal “noght worth” any argument and choosing not to challenge his aspirations to leadership, the pilgrims recognize that the absence of an actual political environment limits the Host’s actions as a ruler. They are, in reality, still just a group of travelers whose relation to one another will end upon their return to Southwark. The Host’s powers are, in fact, limited to offering up meals and travel expenses as veritable rewards and punishments. His explanation of the rules of the game thus constitutes a humorous juxtaposition of divinely sanctioned absolute power with the type of “meede” that a group of vacationing pilgrims is reasonably concerned with (I.770). The Host declares that the winner of the contest will get a free dinner: whoever tells “tales of best sentence and moost solaas— / Shal have a soper at oure aller cost /.../ Whan that we come agayn fro Caunterbury” (I.796-801). The pilgrim who tells the four most impressive tales over the course of the entire trip to Canterbury and back will receive a free meal, yes, but at no great expense to the rest of the group: the price of the supper, “at oure aller cost,” will be split amongst almost thirty people.

Despite the general acknowledgement that the contest represents only a *myrthe* rather than a real political situation, the punishment for disobeying the Host’s *juggement* is surprisingly more costly than the reward is appealing, and his introduction of a monetary penalty departs from his original promise of a no-risk entertainment. He articulates the rule very clearly both before the oaths are sworn and the next morning when they all depart for Canterbury:

And for to make yow the moore mury,  
I wol myselven goodly with yow ryde,

Right at myn owene cost, and be youre gyde,  
 And whoso wole my juggement withseye  
 Shal paye al that we spenden by the weye. (I.802-6)

As evere mote I drynke wyn or ale,  
 Whoso be rebel to my juggement  
 Shal paye for al that by the wey is spent. (I.832-4)

When he first introduces the rule, the Host says that to ensure the group is “mury” enough, he will ride with them to Canterbury, but as if realizing that such a trip could become expensive—“right at myn owene cost”—he quickly adds the stipulation that whoever speaks against his “juggement” will have to “paye al that we spenden by the weye.” In the second iteration of the rule, the Host states again that anyone “rebel to [his] juggement” will “paye for al that...is spent,” this time swearing on his own habit of drinking “wyn or ale”—a habit shared by other pilgrims, which will incur some serious expense “by the wey.” By imposing and insisting on such a penalty, the Host has completely abandoned his initial assertion that this *myrthe* “shal coste noght” (I.768).

If they have been listening, the pilgrims must have some qualms about agreeing to pay everyone’s expenses at the whim of one impartial and thirsty judge. Pichaske and Sweetland identify the Host’s proposed penalty as a troubling mark of “a perverse willfulness and megalomania that certainly call his benevolence into question.”<sup>22</sup> Yet the pilgrims agree to the Host’s game a second time, more emphatically than the first:

This thyng was graunted, and oure othes swore

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<sup>22</sup> David R. Pichaske and Laura Sweetland, “Chaucer on the Medieval Monarchy: Harry Bailly in the *Canterbury Tales*,” *The Chaucer Review* 11.3 (Winter 1977): 183.

With ful glad herte, and preyden hym also  
 That he wolde vouche sauf for to do so  
 And that he wolde been oure governour,  
 And oure tales juge and reportour,  
 And sette a soper at a certeyn pris,  
 And we wol reuled been at his devys  
 In heigh and lough; and thus by oon assent  
 We been acorded to his juggement. (I.810-818)

All this enthusiasm—“with ful glad herte”, “by oon assent we been acorded”—does not necessarily indicate true obedience or acceptance of all the Host’s rules. The pilgrims remain grounded in the reality that what they have entered into is a game without any actual political implications. With regard to the Host’s proposals for reward and punishment, they take him up on the prize of a “soper” for the winning contestant and encourage him to set a “certeyn pris” that they can agree on, but they make no mention of his less attractive proposed penalty that those who rebel will “paye al.” The Host nevertheless assumes that both of his propositions have been accepted and in the morning reminds his newfound subjects of their agreement, restating only the hefty penalty that awaits them if they choose to rebel (I.828-834).

In the remainder of the *Canterbury Tales* neither the Host nor the other pilgrims choose to recall the harsh penalty to which they have agreed. Through the Host’s recollection of the contest in the *Clerk’s Prologue*, though, the Oxford Clerk acknowledges his memory of the original agreement and Chaucer recalls that agreement to the minds of his readers. Explicitly confronted by the Host’s distaste for his contemplative reticence, the Clerk subtly offers his critique of the dangerously tyrannical setup to which the inattentive *compaignye* has been

accorded. The despotic marquis of his tale will provide the Clerk with an opportunity to examine the socially domineering figure of the Host as a potential tyrant figure in the political analogy afforded by the group of pilgrims.

## CHAPTER TWO: A *SHAMEFASTE* RESPONSE TO IMPRUDENT RULE

In this chapter of the thesis I will examine the Clerk as a narrator preoccupied with the ideas of governance and obedience that have so personally been brought to his mind through his interactions with the Host. The Clerk's response to these ideas is careful and subtle, but cues from Chaucer's characterization of the Clerk up to this point help illuminate the relevance of his perspective to the telling of his tale. The Clerk does exhibit, through his famous interjections disapproving Walter's outrageous treatment of Griselda, some very overt criticism of tyrannical behavior. The sentiments expressed in these three interjections are recognizable and universal, typical of the self-consciously problematic nature of the tale since its inception in the *Decameron*.<sup>1</sup> His more subtle commentary on governance, exhibited through various other emendations to the text, is the focus of this study.

### I. "As to my juggement": The Clerk's Qualified Obedience

The Clerk's responses, both explicit and implicit, to the Host's direct instructions in the *Clerk's Prologue* represent a complex meditation on both the politics of obedience and the social construction of entertainment. When he calls upon the Clerk to tell a tale, the Host reminds him of the rules to which all the pilgrims agreed in the *General Prologue*: "'Telle us som myrie tale, by youre fey! / For what man that is entred in a pley, / He nedes moot unto the pley assente'" (IV.9-11). This is not the only instance in which Harry Bailly reminds one of his fellow travelers of the "pley" to which they have all consented: at the beginning of Fragment II he extends a similar injunction to the Man of Law. The exchange between these two characters, though, is

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<sup>1</sup> The Clerk's major interjections occur at IV.455-62, IV.621-3, and IV.696-707. See also K. P. Clarke, "Reading/Writing Griselda," *On Allegory*, ed. Mary Carr, K. P. Clarke, and Marco Nievergelt (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008): 183-208 for an interesting account of one fourteenth-century reader's reaction to Boccaccio's version of the Griselda tale.

brief and friendly, and the rhetoric is very grounded in the legal context relevant to the Man of Law:

“Sire Man of Lawe,” quod he, “so have ye blis,  
 Telle us a tale anon, as forward is.  
 Ye been submytted, thurgh youre free assent,  
 To stonden in this cas at my juggement.  
 Acquiteth yow now of youre biheeste;  
 Thanne have ye do youre devoir atte leeste.” (II.33-38)

Rather than a critique of the Man of Law’s present behavior or even a warning to prevent any bad behavior, the Host’s injunction here fittingly and respectfully acknowledges the relevance of “behests” and “acquittals” to his current audience. The Man of Law’s response to the Host’s reminder is spoken with ready and gracious agreement and, appropriately for his character, repeats and adds to the legal terminology employed by the Host – e.g. *assente*, *biheste*, *dette*, *lawe* (II.39-45).<sup>2</sup>

The six lines cited above comprise the Host’s entire address to the Man of Law in his *Introduction* and *Prologue*; his instructions for the Clerk are significantly longer and more detailed. Having demanded “som myrie tale,” he goes on to specify that the Clerk should not preach “as freres doon in Lente” and that his tale should be sufficiently engaging—that it “make us nat to slepe.” More specifically, this tale should be “some murie thyng of adventures” (IV.12-15). After these directions for content, the Host moves on to specify style:

“Yourre termes, youre colours, and youre figures,  
 Keepe hem in stoor til so be that ye endite

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<sup>2</sup> Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, 855n.

Heigh style, as whan that men to kynges write.

Speketh so pleyn at this tyme, we yow preye,

That we may understonde what ye seye.” (IV.16-20)

By speaking against clerical language here, the Host’s words reflect a contemporary debate on the use of “heigh style.” Nicholas Watson’s examination of affective spirituality and laicization in the medieval period can help explain the Host’s demand for *pleyne* speech here:

Affectivity also focused attention on the spiritual importance of the laity by elevating feeling over knowledge. ...The distinction between *scientia* and *sapientia* (head knowledge and heart knowledge) invoked in attacks on scholasticism was easily translated into an opposition between the hypocritical learning of clerics and the humble love for God felt by the unlearned.<sup>3</sup>

The Host, valuing “heart knowledge” over “head knowledge,” thus prohibits the Clerk from employing the “termes,” “colours,” and “figures” of “heigh style” that signal the “hypocritical learning of clerics” and preclude the understanding of “the unlearned.” The “Clerk of Oxenford” must treat his audience of fellow pilgrims, or at least the Host, as listeners who are unlikely to “understonde” what he says.

A similar injunction to speak plainly can be found in John of Trevisa’s 1473 *Dialogus Inter Militem et Clericum*. In this translation of a Latin dialogue by William of Ockham, a knight and a clerk discuss ecclesiastical control over temporal matters, to which extension of papal power the knight is decidedly opposed. The knight dominates the conversation, with short responses and questions from the clerk dispersed throughout the dialogue. In the first lines of the

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<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Watson, “Christian Ideologies,” *A Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Peter Brown (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000): 79.

work, the clerk introduces the topic, but the knight is not satisfied with his level of clarity and thus requests that he speak in a plainer style:

Clericus. Ich wondre Syr Noble Knyght that in fewe dayes, tymes beth chaungide, right is y-buryed, lawes beth overturned, & statutes beth y-tode under feet.

Miles [knight]. Ich am a lewed man & may nought understonde sotil & derk speche; therefore thou most take more pleyn maner of spekyng.<sup>4</sup>

In the words of both the Host and this knight, issues of understanding and *pleyn* speaking are emphasized in response to the “heigh style” of clerks, which passes the “capacite” of those without “so profounde lernygne.” The Trevisa dialogue is cited by Margaret Schlauch as likely produced for a relatively large “popular” audience: “The restricted length and the dialogue form, which was so often used by mediaeval writers to render works of instruction more palatable, both indicate that the text was planned for more general circulation.”<sup>5</sup> Whether or not this particular text was known to Chaucer, the common theme of plainness and understanding in the two works reflects the larger issue of laicization expounded by Watson.

The first words spoken by the Clerk in the *Tales* are inextricably connected with concepts of good rule, and he moves immediately to check the overbearingly bad governance of the domineering Host. In his qualified agreement to obey the Host’s demands, the Clerk recalls language relevant to the vow made in the *General Prologue* while also looking ahead to ideas regarding sovereignty that will continue to be relevant in his tale:

This worthy clerk benignely answerde:

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<sup>4</sup> John of Trevisa, *Dialogus Inter Militem et Clericum*, ed. A. J. Perry (London Oxford University Press, 1925): 1. Spelling has been normalized.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Schlauch. “Chaucer’s Doctrine of Kings and Tyrants,” *Speculum* 20:2 (1945): 145.

“Hooste,” quod he, “I am under youre yerde;  
 Ye han of us as now the governance,  
 And therefore wol I do yow obeisance,  
 As fer as resoun axeth, hardily.” (IV.21-25)

Though acknowledging the Host’s authority in this situation, the Clerk’s “obeisance” is qualified by the condition, “As fer as resoun axeth, hardily.” This faithfulness to “resoun” in matters of governance and obedience is already present when the Host has the pilgrims draw straws to decide the first storyteller. When the first turn goes to the Knight, his obligation to tell a tale is clearly indicated by the agreement he has just made: “And telle he moste his tale, as was resoun, / By foreward and by composicioun, / As ye han herd; what nedeth wordes mo?” (I.847-49). In this case, the applicable rules are clearly defined—the pilgrims must each tell two tales on the way to Canterbury, and they are all under the Host’s judgment—so as to make the Knight’s obedience a simple matter of reasonable cooperation. The further injunctions that the Host has laid out for the Clerk, however, concern less concrete, less judgeable criteria involving entertainment value and rhetorical style—the estimation of which varies with personal opinion. Determination, then, of how far exactly “resoun axeth” that he remain obedient to those criteria is complicated and inevitably subjective.

Another echo of Trevisa’s text is apparent in the Clerk’s response to the Host’s demands, and it addresses the same qualification concerning the “resoun” exercised by the ruled. At one point the knight defends a king’s authority to “putt to privyleges & lawes, & withdrawe & chaunge & redresse evereche that erreth by consail of resoun & assent of lordes as hit semeth that resoun axith.”<sup>6</sup> The phrase “as reason asks,” spoken by both the Clerk and the knight in the

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<sup>6</sup> John of Trevisa, *Dialogus Inter Militem et Clericum*, 36-7.

dialogue, connects these two texts not only through this specific vocabulary, but in a more thematic way that gestures toward the complicated and subtle commentary on political power being introduced by the Clerk in his *Prologue*. In the same way that the king's rule and alteration of laws must be accompanied to some extent—as reason asks—by “consail of resoun & assent of lordes,” the Clerk acknowledges that his position under the “yerde” of the Host requires his “obeisance,” but also only to a certain extent—only so far as reason asks. In their well-researched article on the Host's rule in the *Canterbury Tales*, David Pichaske and Laura Sweetland point out the temporality emphasized by this phrase and also its common occurrence in medieval political theory:

“Harry has of them *now* the governance; the Clerk will obey him *as far as reason requires*—precisely the limitations placed on temporal rulers by political theorists. The Clerk goes further, subtly and ever so indirectly: in asserting the temporality of all things and the dominance of reason (developed in his subsequent remarks about death), the Clerk circumscribes the free range of Harry's will. For the first time we sense Chaucer's and another pilgrim's awareness of the perimeters within which a ruler governs, of the limitations on human will.”<sup>7</sup>

The observations here reveal further nuances contained in the language of reasonable action. The emphasis on curbing excessive willpower, certainly relevant for the Host, also prefigures the Clerk's preoccupation with the behavior of the hasty, impulsive marquis of his tale.

The Clerk's introduction of the source text for his story contains already an instance of reasonable, limited obedience. As he introduces his Griselda tale as one he learned from

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<sup>7</sup> Pichaske and Sweetland, “Chaucer on the Medieval Monarchy,” 188. Emphasis theirs.

Petrarch, “a worthy clerk” like himself, the Clerk exercises some of his “resoun” to adapt his rehearsal for his audience:

I seye that first with heigh stile he [Petrarch] enditeth,

Er he the body of his tale writeth,

A prohemye

...

The which a long thyng were to devyse.

And trewely, as to my juggement,

Me thynketh it a thyng impertinent,

Save that he wole conveyen his mateere;

But this his tale, which that ye may heere. (IV.41-42, 52-56)

By labeling Petrarch’s original proem “a long thyng...to devyse” or “a thyng impertinent,” the Clerk explains that this opinion results “trewely” from his own “juggement.” But what does the Clerk’s “juggement” consist of in this situation? By rejecting precisely the “heigh stile” with which a fellow clerk “enditeth” his proem, the Clerk demonstrates that he is consciously subject to the *juggement* of the Host. His judgment here, that the lengthy proem is “impertinent” is the Clerk’s assessment of the Host’s view, rather than an expression of his own. At first glance, this looks like an instance of perfect “obeisance” of the Host’s “governance.” The Clerk is sure, however, to qualify the judgment of the Host with what sounds more like his own opinion – “Save that he wole conveyen his mateere.” The importance of telling the whole truth, or matter, here echoes the Chaucer narrator’s opinion on rehearsing “everich a word” to avoid being false (I.731-4). Harry Bailly’s *juggement* is thus pitted against the Clerk’s—and the narrator’s—desire to rehearse everything. The Clerk basically fulfills that desire when, in a classic Chaucerian

maneuver, he recites most of the proem that he claims to be editing from his rehearsal (IV.43-51). Warren Ginsberg observes, “Our student explains in nineteen lines of poetry why he is not repeating fifteen lines of prose.”<sup>8</sup> Reason, then, constrains the Clerk to consider and acknowledge the Host’s demands, but it does not prohibit him from voicing his own opposing viewpoint, or even from subtly disobeying the *juggement* he acknowledges.

The Clerk’s display of limited obedience is part of the political relationship that he is constructing between himself and the Host. The subtle politicization of the Clerk’s submissive language reveals contemporary political tensions more than it proves his genuine obedience. In drawing this connection to medieval political structures, I do not propose to label the specific type of ruler-ruled relationship being represented by the Host and his pilgrim-subjects. In their study, Pichaske and Sweetland follow political language and situations through the *Tales* and present the hypothesis that Harry Bailly can initially be read as “the elected medieval monarch governing this pilgrim society,” whose rule is “far from ideal” and can be compared to that of Richard II at the end of the fourteenth century. They go on to claim that the Host undergoes a “shift of character” as the *Tales* progress in the Ellesmere order until he displays “less of the egocentric tyrant and more of the generous public servant as the pilgrimage nears its completion.”<sup>9</sup> To prove or disprove this claim is not a concern of this thesis, but I do hold that the relationship between the Host and the Clerk, along with the Clerk’s depiction of governance in his *Tale*, seems indicative of the highly dynamic political environment in the late medieval period. I do not, therefore, propose that the Clerk’s emphasis on good and bad governance is indicative of any one type of political relationship or that it alludes to a specific historical figure.

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<sup>8</sup> Warren Ginsberg, “‘And Speketh so Pleyn’: The *Clerk’s Tale* and its Teller,” *Criticism* 20.3 (Summer 1978): 314.

<sup>9</sup> Pichaske and Sweetland, “Chaucer on the Medieval Monarchy,” 180.

Rather, I aim to employ some close textual analysis, with continued attention to the political writing of John of Trevisa, to further identify the environment and preoccupations that may be relevant to an Oxford Clerk.

## II. “I blame hym thus”: The Clerk’s Critical Voice

The narration of the *Clerk’s Tale* contains a markedly political criticism of its characters. These critical aspects are directly connected with both the Clerk’s sensitive perspective and Chaucer’s own preoccupation with political themes. Departures from Petrarch’s version of the story, subtle though significant throughout, result from and reveal these preoccupations.<sup>10</sup> The passages from the Clerk’s *Tale* that I analyze below are those in which through subtle revisions and additions the Clerk voices his own critical perspective on the story he has borrowed from Petrarch. Given the Clerk’s reticent and contemplative nature, it is logical that his revisions to the tale he tells indicate a preoccupation with the idea of prudence—a moral and political virtue wrapped up in issues both of rhetorical performance and of thoughtful political action.

In my comparison of Chaucer’s tale to his sources I have followed the widely cited and accepted work of J. Burke Severs and consulted his reproductions of Petrarch’s Latin adaptation in Book 17 of *Epistolae Seniles* and the anonymous French version *Le Livre Griseldis*. In his extensive study of the manuscript relationships of the *Clerk’s Tale* to its sources, Burke concludes that Chaucer relied heavily on both his Latin and his French sources; I have therefore consulted both these sources and provide quotations from each of them when I discuss significant departures in Chaucer’s text, in conjunction with Robert French’s English translation of the Petrarchan text. I have not attempted a comprehensive study of Chaucer’s emendations; my focus has been instead on passages that reflect the preoccupations and perspectives of the

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<sup>10</sup> All English quotations of Petrarch’s version taken from Robert D. French, *A Chaucer Handbook* (New York: F. S. Crofts, 1927).

Clerk that I have been tracing throughout this thesis. Connections of Chaucer's text with John of Trevisa's *De Regimine Principum* will continue to play an important role in this analysis.

In the first part of the tale, the Clerk's introduction of the marquis is flattering at a glance but more critical upon closer examination, much like the response he has just given the Host. Although Chaucer's sources attribute to the marquis a certain nobility of character, the Clerk focuses on Walter's nobility as lineally inherited rather than personally merited. This distinction is elaborated in the second stanza of the *Clerk's Tale*, the whole of which represents a departure both the Latin and French sources:

A markys whilom lord was of that lond,  
 As were his worthy eldres hym bifore;  
 And *obeisant*, ay redy to his hond,  
 Were alle his liges, *bothe lasse and moore*.  
 Thus in delit he lyveth, and hath doon yoore,  
*Biloved and drad*, thurgh favour of Fortune,  
 Bothe of his lordes and of his commune. (IV.64-70, emphasis mine)

According to the Clerk's account here, Walter is privileged to have gained his position "thurgh favour of Fortune": he has inherited his title from "his worthy eldres." The Clerk thus emphasizes Walter's reliance on inherited gentility by making him one in a long line of marquises of Saluzzo. The hereditary nobility described by the Clerk marks a departure from both of Chaucer's source texts, in which Walter is portrayed as nobly born but the first and greatest in the line of marquises: "It [Saluzzo] is ruled over by noble marquises, *the first and greatest of whom*, according to tradition, was a certain Walter, to whom the direction of his own

estates and of all the land pertained.”<sup>11</sup> While Petrarch paints Walter as the patriarch and peak of a noble line, the Clerk inserts him somewhere in this progression of rulers, rendering him markedly more dependent, in terms of public reputation, on his titled ancestors.

The Clerk’s subtle adaptation of the nature of Walter’s nobility renders this passage directly relevant to the sermon on *gentillesse* that appears in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*. Through this discourse the low-born loathly lady argues that nobility “cometh fro God allone” rather than from “old richesse” or “heigh parage” (III.1109-1176). Her sermon represents another instance in which Chaucer is uniquely concerned with complicating and politicizing his tale: the passage on *gentillesse* is original to Chaucer’s telling, with no source in the various analogues of the loathly lady tale.<sup>12</sup>

The transformation of the marquis into a fortunate inheritor of power also allows the Clerk to insert an early critique of his subjects’ undiscerning acceptance of Walter’s rule. The Clerk emphasizes Walter’s relationship with the inhabitants of Saluzzo, while any description of the behavior of the people toward their marquis at this point is absent from the corresponding Latin and French.<sup>13</sup> Walter’s subjects, of varying social rank—“bothe lasse and moore,” “lordes” and “commune”—are loyal and compliant, “obeisant, ay redy to his hond.” For no reason other

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<sup>11</sup> French, *Chaucer Handbook*, 291-2 (emphasis mine). I give below the full corresponding quotations from the Latin and the French (emphasis mine).

The Latin is: “Terra Saluciarum vicis et castellis satis frequens, marchionum arbitrio nobilium quorundam regitur virorum, quorum *unus primusque omnium et maximus* fuisse traditur Valterius quidam, ad quem familie ac terrarum omnium regimen pertineret” (Severs 254).

The French is: “Est la terre de Saluces, qui jadis estoit moult peulee de bonnes villes et chastiaux, en laquelle avoit plusieurs grans seigneurs et gentilz hommes, desquelz *le premier et le plus* grant on treuve esté un marquis appellez en son propre nom Wautier, auquel principalement appartenoit le gouvernement et dominacion d’icelle terre” (Severs 255).

<sup>12</sup> *Riverside Chaucer*, 873n.

<sup>13</sup> In both sources, the first attitude or action expressed by the people is their disapproval of Walter’s reluctance to marry.

than his good fortune, it seems, he is “biloved and drad” by all these subjects. The phrase “biloved and drad” is a direct echo of Trevisa’s language in the third book of *De Regimine Principum*. In the final chapter of Part II, the author outlines “how kynges and princes scholde bere hemself for to be loued of the puple and how for to be dradde.”<sup>14</sup> After an outline of the methods for being loved and for being feared, the final sentences characterize these two attitudes of the people, in an anti-Machiavellian vein, in terms of their respective importance: though it is best to be both beloved *and* feared, it is ultimately better to be beloved, since most people are motivated by love for their ruler more than by fear of punishment to work for the common profit.

And eyther is nedful—to be drad and iloved—for not alle ben so good and parfit that they wollen leue euel doynge onliche for loue of honest and of the comyn profit and of the makere of lawe that desireth the comyn profite. Thanne som men mote be broughte to goode and withdrawe fro euel by drede of peyne. Nathalees bettere it is to be loued than idrad, as it is declared tofore.<sup>15</sup>

The concept of a “biloved and drad” ruler is closely linked with the maintenance of the common profit in Trevisa’s text. To gain the love of his people, the advice for a ruler is that he “putte hemself yif it nedeth to peril for the comyn profit.” The good social behavior of the people thus hinges on a ruler’s own care for the affairs of his reign.

The Clerk’s continued characterization of Walter in the opening stanzas of the *Tale* reveals a ruler who is far removed from thoughts of the common profit. He is the “gentilleste” in the region of Lombardy, but only “to speke as of lynage” (IV.71-2); in terms of character, he is *not* necessarily the gentlest to be found in “this noble contree” (IV.63). Walter does exhibit, at least outwardly, some personal merit: he is “fair,” “strong,” “yong,” and “ful of honour and of

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<sup>14</sup> John of Trevisa, *De Regimine Principum*, 390.

<sup>15</sup> John of Trevisa, *De Regimine Principum*, 392.

curteisye” (IV.73-4). Despite his handsome, youthful vigor and good manners, though, he is just “discreet ynogh” to govern his land with some notable shortcomings – “save in somme thynges that he was to blame” (IV.75-6). In Petrarch’s text, Walter is simply “as noble in his ways as in his birth;”<sup>16</sup> the image of the marquis’s noble demeanor is uncomplicatedly positive and not specific to his position as a political figure. The Clerk’s observation of the just-enough amount of discretion Walter possesses “his contree for to gye [govern]” thus lends a political tone to this point in the narrative that is not present in Chaucer’s sources. The focus on discretion emphasizes the issue of prudent rule that is about to be raised in the Clerk’s critique. His qualification here, present also in the Latin and French, identifies “somme thynges” for which Walter merits “blame.” The “save-that” construction of this qualifying statement echoes that of line 55 in the *Clerk’s Prologue*,<sup>17</sup> and the Clerk thus very naturally inserts his first-person voice at a point where the source text lends itself to his own rhetorical style. His penchant for qualifications distinguishes the Clerk as a deeply thoughtful narrator: generalizations are eschewed for an accurate rehearsal, and here, as with the analysis of Petrarch’s proem, this accuracy depends upon the Clerk’s insertion of his own opinion into the narration. In the following stanza, he elaborates on the “somme thynges” of which Walter is blameworthy, taking personal ownership of the first criticism he offers: “*I blame hym thus*” (IV.78, emphasis mine). By inserting this first-person narration at this early juncture in the *Tale*, the Clerk establishes a tension between his own perspective and the opinion of the characters he narrates, allowing himself to take a much more critical view of the story’s “gentle” leader than will be demonstrated by Walter’s loyal subjects. The absence of any first-person narration in Chaucer’s

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<sup>16</sup> French, *Chaucer Handbook*, 292. The Latin is “nec minus moribus quam sanguine nobilis” (Severs 254). The French is “et en somme noble en toutes manieres” (Severs 257).

<sup>17</sup> “Save that he wole conveyen his mateere” (IV.55). See page 30 above.

main source texts renders the criticism of Walter in those texts much less polemical, as simple facts stated by omniscient narrators rather than as the narrator's personal accusation.

In the estimation of the Clerk, then, Walter's major fault is his complete lack of forethought: "He considered nocht / In tyme comynge what myghte hym bityde, / But on his lust present was al his thocht" (IV.78-80). Consumed by his own amusement—"to hauke and hunte on every syde"—Walter has no attention for the many matters that should perhaps interest a marquis with so many faithful subjects: "Wel ny alle othere cures leet he slyde" (IV.81-2). One such neglected duty, the "worst of alle," is that of matrimony: "he nolde.../ Wedde no wyf, for nocht that may bifalle" (IV.83-4). Walter's unwillingness to marry will ensure the end of the line of "worthy eldres" he has succeeded as marquis of Saluzzo. However unconcerned he may be with this prospect, his people are unwilling to allow it. They may recognize to varying extents the larger character flaw embodied by their marquis, of which his bachelor state is just a part, but it is this and no other behavior with which they actively take issue: "Oonly *that* point his peple bar so soore / That flokemeele on a day they to hym wente" (IV.85-6, emphasis mine). By giving the Clerk ownership of the wider, more serious criticism, Chaucer shows him to be more discerning—or less tolerant—than are his characters in his judgment of a ruler, in the same way that his contemplative nature has sensitized him to the Host's domineering leadership among a group of less concerned companions. This distinction between narrator and characters is Chaucer's addition to the text; in Petrarch the description of Walter's lack of "care for the future" and reluctance to marry are narrated in a consistently third-person voice that attributes all criticism of the marquis to his people (292). The Clerk's preoccupation with Walter's lack of foresight is consistent with his position in a group that chooses not to "make it wys" in their selection of a leader (I.785). The deliberation that is missing from the actions of his fellow pilgrims and of

Walter, a main character of his tale, prompt the Clerk to address this pattern by emphasizing the virtue of looking ahead—prudence—as he tells his story.

### III. Rhetorical and Political Prudence in Chaucer

The emendations to Chaucer's source texts observed thus far have demonstrated the contemplative Clerk's preoccupation with instances in which either ruler or ruled figures do not display sufficient consideration for the future: Walter does not consider the implications of his lusty lack of forethought on the common profit, and his people are only jarred to concerned action by their marquis's overtly unnatural disinclination to find a wife and continue his noble line. The theme of prudent action continues to subtly guide the Clerk's narration throughout his *Tale* and merits close examination. An overview of the concept of prudence in Chaucer's medieval context will thus be useful before returning to the *Tale*. Though in its modern sense *prudence* conveys a relatively narrow meaning, the Clerk's use of this term should be read as pointedly political, intended to evoke ideas both of the good governance associated with rulers and of the good moral behavior expected of all citizens. John Burrow examines various medieval instances of prudence in art and literature, which he says "may serve to illustrate both the range of human activities for which prudence is required, and also the ability of medieval writers to see moral, even spiritual, issues in matters which to us may seem purely practical."<sup>18</sup> The two most notable examples of prudence in Chaucer are the allegories of the virtue that occur in the *Melibee* and in Book V of *Troilus and Criseyde*. In *Troilus*, Chaucer depicts the traditional three eyes of prudence, one each to look toward the past, present, and future. Criseyde laments having lacked Prudence's third eye and attributes her current predicament to that lack of foresight:

"To late is now to speke of that matere;

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<sup>18</sup> John Burrow and Ian P. Wei, *Medieval Futures: Attitudes to the Future in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2000) 42.

Prudence, allas, oon of thyne eyen thre  
 Me lakked alwey er that I come here:  
 On tyme y-passed wel remembred me,  
 And present tyme ek koud ich wel i-se,  
 But future tyme, er I was in the snare,  
 Koude I nat sen; that causeth now my care.” (V.743-9)

Chaucer’s use of this image of three-eyed Prudence can be attributed to various medieval sources, including Dante. The image emphasizes the temporal aspect of this virtue, which relies on a simultaneous awareness of “tyme y-passed,” “present tyme,” and “future tyme.”

More important to this analysis is the portrayal of Dame Prudence in the *Melibee*. The words of Prudence have already been examined in the first part of this thesis for their relevance to the pilgrims’ hasty agreement to put themselves under the Host’s *yerde*.<sup>19</sup> Another instance in which Prudence critiques *hastifnesse* is directly applicable to the rashness exhibited by Walter as he tests Griselda. When Walter takes Griselda’s daughter from her, his actions spring from a “merveillous desir his wyf t’assaye” that occurs “in his herte,” and when he takes her son in the same manner he has “caughte yet another lest / To tempte his wyf yet ofter” (IV.454, 619-20). This specifically heart-centered desire is critiqued by Prudence as she examines Melibee’s passionate and hasty decision to make war out of anger for the wrong that has been done to his family:

“And, sire, ye moste also dryve out of youre herte hastifnesse; for certes,/ ye ne may nat deeme for the beste by a sodeyn thought that falleth in youre herte, but ye moste avyse yow on it ful ofte.” (VII.1132-3).

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<sup>19</sup> See page 19 in Chapter One above.

The “sodeyn thought” to which Melibee has fallen victim is even more attributable to Walter’s actions than to Melibee’s: while Melibee is prompted to make war by the near-murder of his daughter, the Clerk points out that Walter’s desire to tempt Griselda is “yvele” and “nedelees,” not stemming from any clear motive—in short, unreasonably cruel (IV.460, 621). Lack of prudence, in this case manifested as *hastifnesse*, is detrimental to a leader’s ability to make unbiased, reasonable decisions.

Providing counsel to a leader who has abandoned prudent action turns out to be, in the *Melibee*, a task that in itself requires another type of prudence—the discretion to know when to speak. The wise old man whose call for peace is outnumbered by the general desire for war wisely chooses to save his breath in a room full of people who do not want to hear him:

For soothly, he that precheth to hem that listen nat heeren his wordes, his sermon hem anoieth./ For Jhesus Syrak seith that “musik in wepyng is a noyous thyng”; this is to seyn: as muche availleth to speken bifore folk to which his speche anoyeth as it is to synge biforn hym that wepeth./ And whan this wise man saugh that hym wanted audience, al shamefast he sette hym doun agayn./ For Salomon seith: “Ther as thou ne mayst have noon audience, enforce thee nat to speke.”

(VII.1043-6)

This description of rhetorical prudence—knowledge of when and when not to speak—is applicable to the portrait of the Clerk, whose reticence we have established is the ideal for “fourth-estate” scholars. The wise man in the *Melibee* stops talking and sits down “al shamefast,” and the Clerk’s own *shamefastnesse* can be read as equally deliberate, stemming from his knowledge that his speech would go unheard or, worse, would “annoy” the company of pilgrims. Dame

Prudence is also aware of the importance of timeliness in giving advice: her addresses to her husband are consistently accompanied by an indication of forethought:

For which resoun this noble wyf Prudence suffred hir housbonde for to wepe and  
 crie as for a certein space,/ and whan she saugh hir tyme, she seyde to hym in this  
 wise... (VII.979-80)

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Whanne dame Prudence, ful debonairly and with greet pacience, hadde herd al  
 that hir housbonde liked for to seye, thanne axed she of hym licence for to speke,  
 and seyde in this wise... (VII.1066)

In his chapter on the *Melibee*, David Wallace explains the nature of Prudence's rhetorical method in these and other similar passages:

Seeing Melibee wholly absorbed in dramatizing his grief, Prudence initiates her own performance: the performance of rhetoric. She begins by recognizing the vital interplay of speaking and silence ... She begins with *tacendi*, recognizing that Melibee must be allowed to weep "for a certein tyme" before he can be considered amenable to arguments. The importance of maintaining silence is then underlined before the crucial moment of *dicendi*, linguistic intervention, is signaled [e.g., "whan she saw hir tyme"].<sup>20</sup>

The Clerk, who says nothing unless called upon and often reflects upon his own words, can be read as another prudent speaker who understands well the importance of "maintaining silence." When it comes time for him to speak, he acknowledges the desires of his audience without

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<sup>20</sup> Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 232.

sacrificing his own *sentence*, and his tale should be read with an eye to what message he intends, and for what audience.

The importance of prudence as not only a rhetorical but also a political virtue, both in England and abroad, cannot have escaped Chaucer's notice. Wallace, in response to the image of Chaucer as "a bedazzled voyeur" in medieval Florence, points out that Chaucer's societal position indicates a certain level of cultural awareness:

Since Chaucer was chosen to travel to Italy for his ability to read political signs and to help facilitate political negotiations, he was surely primed to read all cultural and civic forms (buildings, paintings, piazzas, and literary texts) as particular expressions of and clues to specific political communities.<sup>21</sup>

Ambrogio Lorenzetti's 1330s depiction of the effects of good and bad government is one such expression of political community Chaucer could have encountered in medieval Tuscany (Figure 1). The set of frescoes adorns three walls of the Sala della Pace in Siena's Palazzo Pubblico, the town hall. This room served as a gathering place for the governing powers of the republic of Siena, the *Governo dei Nove*. On the middle wall, the city leaders were faced with Lorenzetti's allegorical representations of good government. The frescoes mark one notable pictorial representation in which the allegorized figure of Prudence is afforded a prominent position among her fellow virtues. She is seated among the other virtues at the right hand of the enthroned monarch figure representing the *Comune di Siena* (Figure 2). Though there is no way of knowing whether Chaucer came in contact with the frescoes themselves, Lorenzetti's work is representative of the medieval Tuscan artistic tradition that Chaucer would have had ample opportunity to observe.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.



Figure 1: Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Allegory of Good Government* (c.1338)



**Figure 2: Detail of Figure 1, Prudentia**

The importance of prudence as a moral virtue is likewise expounded in many political treatises that would have been available to Chaucer. For my analysis, I will rely once again on John of Trevisa’s *Governance of Kings and Princes* for an explication of the nature of prudence and as a possible source for Chaucer’s use of the term in his own writing. Prudence is one of the four cardinal virtues, and Trevisa clarifies the term, *prudencia*, as *redinesse* (40). In the Trevisa text, prudence is given its characteristic spot ahead of the other three virtues—justice, fortitude, and temperance: “Prudencia is more principal than al the other, for it rewleth al the othere” (46).

A close examination of the representation of prudence in the *Clerk’s Tale* shows Walter’s discretion to be predominantly superficial, while that of Griselda actually represents the prudent rule of a wise leader. Trevisa’s text clarifies that, since prudence is a moral virtue—and that upon which all the others depend, “it is impossible to be prudens and not good” (37). That Walter seems to lack prudence, then, becomes an indicator of his potential deficiency in all other attributes desirable for a good ruler.

#### IV. “Prudent” Figures in the *Tale* and *Envoy*

Having acceded to the wishes of his people, Walter enters a state of marital bliss and public approval. After his marriage to Griselda, who is immediately adored by the public, Walter’s ability to govern is praised by his people while once again subtly criticized by the Clerk’s narration. By choosing Griselda, the marquis has wedded “lowely – nay, but roially” (IV.421); his new wife is not high-born, but she has sufficient “wit” to address the numerous concerns of her public—those “other cures” that Walter had so long been content to let slide.

The commune profit koude she redresse.  
 Ther nas discord, rancour, ne hevynesse  
 In al that land that she ne koude apese,  
 And wisely brynge hem alle in reste and ese. (IV.431-4)

Margaret Schlauch points out that Chaucer’s use of the term “commune profit” in this passage, an alteration from Petrarch’s “salutem publicam” (translated by French as “public weal”),<sup>22</sup> “brings the passage closer to political theory”: According to ideas of political theory circulating at this time, a good ruler addressed the “commune profit,” and a bad ruler—otherwise known as a tyrant—ignored the common good to pursue his own will,<sup>23</sup> or “lust present,” much as Walter is shown to do from the beginning of the *Tale*. In the third book of *De Regimine Principum* John of Trevisa waxes long on the neglect of the common profit observable in *tyraundise*:

Yif a kyng hath lordshepe, he desireth the comyne profit; for he is no kyng but he  
 be vertuous and desire the comyn profit. ... Yif a tyraunt is lord, for oon that is  
 lord in that wise desireth not but his owne profit, he desireth not the comyn profit.  
 Thanne for a principate is not rightful but it be in som wise goddysch, and for

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 298.

<sup>23</sup> Margaret Schlauch, “Chaucer’s Doctrine of Kings and Tyrants,” *Speculum* 20.2 (1945): 153.

therinne principaliche the comyn profit scholde be desired that is more goddische than eny singuler profit, the lasse comyn profit is desired in tyrauntes ther is the worse principate.<sup>24</sup>

If Griselda is acting as a good ruler should and as her husband never had, then their people have profited greatly by Walter's marriage, seeing a selfish tyrant replaced with his more capable, "kingly" wife.

By redressing the "commune profit" for "al that land," then, Griselda brings "reste and ese" not only for her people but also for her husband: "Thus Walter...lyveth ful esily / At hoom" (IV.423-4). If he could have predicted this happy outcome, his decision to marry Griselda could be seen as proof of some rarely exhibited foresight on his part, but the Clerk reminds his audience that Walter's situation is at least in part "fortunat" rather than calculated (IV.422).<sup>25</sup> In a further qualification, the Clerk states, "and outward grace ynogh had he" (IV.424). The use of "ynogh" here echoes that at line 75 and contains the same "*just-enough*" connotation: Walter is just discreet enough to rule his country and appears, outwardly, just virtuous enough to rest easy as his wife works "wisely" to "redresse" and "apese" any true "discord."<sup>26</sup> The people

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<sup>24</sup> John of Trevisa, *De Regimine Principum*, 334.

<sup>25</sup> Chaucer's text gives, "Thus Walter lowely – nay, but roially – / Wedded with fortunat honestetee" (IV.422). Petrarch's Latin reads "Sic Valterius, humili quidem sed insigni ac proprio matrimonio honestatis" (Severs 266). Severs points out that Chaucer's Latin manuscript was corrupt at this point and should have read *honestatus* rather than *honestatis*—the participle rather than the noun. Interestingly, the correct translation of Petrarch's version does thus imply the concept of fortune in this passage: Robert French uses *honestatus* and translates, "So, graced by a marriage, which, however humble, was distinguished and prosperous" (298). Perhaps, even with a corrupt copy, Chaucer saw the potential of the participle and added "fortunat" as a result; otherwise, the addition is completely his. The French text of *Le Livre Griseldis* is the most cursory here: "Et ainsi le marquis, humblement mais virtueusement mariez" (Severs 267).

<sup>26</sup> The Latin and the French are both much more generous here: "summa domi in pace, *extra vero summa cum gratia* hominum, vivebat" (Severs 266), and "vivoit en bonne paix en sa maison et en grant grace dehors" (Severs 267). Robert French translates, "and abroad he was held in the highest esteem" (298).

nevertheless admire Walter for the discretion of his choice: “And for he saugh that under low degree / Was ofte vertu hid, the peple hym heelde / A prudent man, and that is seyn ful seelde” (IV.425-7). The Clerk’s earlier distinction between himself–“I”–and “the peple” excludes him from this praise of Walter’s character. In fact, his addition to Petrarch’s text here subtly undermines the portrayal of a “prudent” Walter: that a ruler is considered prudent by the public “is seyn ful seelde,” the Clerk points out. Read simply, this qualification flatters Walter by singling him out as the positive exception to the rule. Read with a more critical eye, or in hindsight, however, this phrase emphasizes the actual unlikelihood of a seldom-seen wisdom appearing in a marquis who must be accosted by his people before he even contemplates marriage. Walter goes on to test the “virtu” he sees in Griselda, and his outrageous behavior establishes his previous status as “prudent man” to be decidedly inaccurate, never having been more than how “the peple hym heelde.” By anticipating the breakdown of this fair image of Walter, the Clerk’s subtle criticism reaches not only to the ruler himself, but also to the subjects who praise him so liberally.

In the final section of the *Tale*, some of Walter’s subjects – “sadde folk in that citee”– provide a harsh criticism of the “stormy peple” who are so quickly impressed with Walter’s new bride (IV.995-1002). Ultimately, this verbal criticism of his people reflects even more negatively on the marquis himself. If his people are “undiscreet and chaungyne as a fane” for approving of his new choice (IV.996), he is even less prudent for having chosen to take a new wife in the first place. These critics conclude that “A ful greet fool is he that on yow [the people] leeveth” (IV.1001), effectively negating the good opinion that the people hold of Walter: he is not, as when he chose to marry Griselda, a “prudent man,” and his “governaunce” should not be commended (IV.994). The Clerk’s critique of the public praise for Walter here is completely his

own addition. While Petrarch's text *does* mention prudence in this passage—"Erantque qui dicerent prudenter Valterium ac feliciter permutasse [There were those who said that Walter had been fortunate and prudent in the change he made]"<sup>27</sup>—the Clerk refuses to allow more praise than "Walter was no fool" (IV.986) and then goes on to condemn the imprudent, *indiscreet* opinion of the people.

Griselda is meanwhile gracefully preparing the way for her replacement, and the guests at the feast she has prepared to honor the newly arrived bride, not knowing who she is, are exceedingly impressed by her behavior:

With so glad chiere his gestes she receyveth,  
 And konnyngly, everich in his degree,  
 That no defaute no man aperceyveth,  
 But ay they wondren what she myghte bee  
 That in so povre array was for to see,  
 And koude swich honour and reverence,  
 And worthily they preisen hire prudence. (IV.1016-1022)

In this passage the reader is given a sense of what "prudence" might mean among Walter and his fellow nobles. Griselda's virtue can hardly escape their notice as she greets them, but they are hard-put to reconcile her "povre array" with her noble demeanor – "but ay they wondren what she myghte bee." The guests praise the prudent manner in which Griselda receives them, "everich in his degree," and the knowledge she displays of upper class social convention – "and koude swich honour and reverence." The "virtue" that is described here is, upon examination, rather superficial, based upon Griselda's ability to respectfully usher guests into the hall. This

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<sup>27</sup> Severs 284, French 308.

worthy behavior is, in fact, exhibited by Griselda only after her transformative union with Walter: “For though that evere vertuous was she, / She was encressed in swich excellence / Of thewes goode, yset in heigh bountee, / And so discreet and fair of eloquence, / So benigne and so digne of reverence” (IV.407-411). Through her marriage to Walter and entrance into his noble society, Griselda has thus gained a society-specific type of rhetorical prudence, which is praised by the members of that society and which seems not to be tempered by any sense of real political prudence.

By addressing his *Envoy* to the Wife of Bath and negating the Griselda story’s potential to serve as an *exemplum*—for women or for good Christians—the Clerk allows further speculation about the behavior of the noble marquis and about responses to masculine authority more generally. Though Petrarch’s text does contain, to a more limited extent, some narrative criticism of Walter’s actions, the allegorical interpretation that ends the story, by equating the husband’s testing of his wife with God’s “proving” of his people, ultimately renders Walter’s behavior both inevitable and beneficial for his people. The Clerk’s more critical, *prudent* reading addresses one listener who takes a much different view of the marriage relationship and invites the reader to judge what type of *prudence* the Wife herself embodies:

O noble wyves, ful of heigh prudence,  
 Lat noon humylitee youre tonge naille,  
 Ne lat no clerk have cause or diligence  
 To write of yow a storie of swich mervaille  
 As of Grisildis pacient and kynde,  
 Lest Chichevache yow swelwe in hire entraille!

Folweth Ekko, that holdeth no silence,  
 But evere answereth at the countretaille.  
 Beth nat bidaffed for youre innocence,  
 But sharply taak on yow the governaille.  
 Emprinteth wel this lessoun in youre mynde,  
 For commune profit sith it may availle. (IV.1183-1194)

The Griselda tale falls short as an allegory because the reader—along with the Clerk, in his various interjections—is inevitably caught up in the very real situation, that of a husband and wife, meant to symbolize a more abstract relationship with God. Instead of reconciling the complexities of these relations, this story projects the polemics of the male-dominated marriage relationship onto God’s relationship with his people, emphasizing the helplessness both of the obedient wife who is “bidaffed for [her] innocence” and of the man who bears heaven-sent “sharpe scourges of adversitee” with “vertuous suffrance” (IV.1157-62). In their “heigh prudence,” the Clerk proclaims, wives should take care not to be “paciend and kynde” like Griselda so as not be swept into the “entraille” of wifely obedience. No patience, no kindness, “noon humylitee,” and “no silence” are the counsel of the hyperbolically emphatic and approving Clerk. By rebelling against their husbands, however, wives will create another type of “storie of swich mervaille,” such as the one performed by the Wife in her *Prologue*; she shuns Griselda-style womanly suffering to keep her husbands in line—to “taak on [herself] the governaille.” This type of rebellion, as described by the Clerk, involves not only a strong-willed independence but also imitation and repetition: “Folweth Ekko, that holdeth no silence, / But evere answereth at the countretaille. /.../ Emprinteth wel this lessoun in youre mynde.” By subjugating their husbands to their own authority, wives are actually imitating the behavior of their domineering

male counterparts. The *prudence* to avoid a display of wifely obedience thus involves the ability to beat husbands at their own game, continuously responding “at the countretaille.” Like Echo, women should always speak back to their husbands, but the mythological allusion here is more accurate than that: any response to a husband’s governance will reverse the roles of ruler and ruled, husband and wife, while leaving the unequal relationship—and its rhetoric—unaltered.

The Host, upon hearing the Clerk’s *Tale*, reveals himself to be a husband on whom these roles have been reversed by one such “prudent,” governing wife:

This worthy Clerk, whan ended was his tale,  
 Oure Hooste seyde, and swoor, “By Goddes bones,  
 Me were levere than a barel ale  
 My wyf at hoom had herd this legende ones!  
 This is a gentil tale for the nones,  
 As to my purpos, wiste ye my wille;  
 But thyng that wol nat be, lat it be stille.” (IV.1212a-g)

The Host makes his “purpos” quite clear here, seeing the “gentil” tale’s value as an exemplum for his wife, whom he wishes would behave more like Griselda. It is his “wille” to have an obedient wife, but he has resigned himself to the reality of his marriage relationship: “thyng that wol nat be, lat it be stille.” The Host’s failed effort to have a marriage like Walter’s has perhaps prompted him to exert his own “wille” to rule in other arenas—namely, among the group of pilgrims he has adopted as his subjects. Any usurpation of power, such as that of the Host’s wife, thus leads to a “countretaille” elsewhere. By remaining obedient, the Clerk seemingly halts this cycle and thereby emphasizes its ill effects on both personal and political relationships. The actions of the Wife, he will concede, proceed to a certain extent from a preemptory type of self-

preserving prudent action: a wife who chooses to allow her husband all the governance could well be *bidaffed* for her obedience. In his own superficial tale-telling environment, however, the Clerk prudently sees an opportunity to expose bad governance—the Host’s and Walter’s—in a setting that is literary, fictional and yet readily applicable to the social and political concerns of his time.

## CONCLUSIONS

A thoughtful and subtle response to an overbearing authority, the Clerk's contemplation on prudence in his *Tale* requires an equally thoughtful audience. The changes to the story made by the Clerk on which I have concentrated occur throughout the text of the tale from beginning to end, and all are preoccupied with issues of prudent rule – both of a people and of one's self. Inspired by the Host's own position as a bad ruler, if only socially, as well as by the pilgrim group's hasty agreement to be ruled by him in the *General Prologue*, the Clerk criticizes the behavior of Walter, the marquis of Saluzzo, as inherently imprudent. Rather than a straightforward act of criticism, though, he troubles ideas of prudence across lines of social position and gender. The Clerk's inability—or unwillingness—to incorporate a cohesive position on prudent rule is consistent with the indecision of his rehearsal with which Warren Ginsberg finds fault: “One sees from his injudicious apostrophes and from his confusing appeals to the reader's sympathy that the Clerk himself does not fully understand the tale he tells.”<sup>1</sup> Ginsberg's study focuses on emendations to the Latin text that bring the moral, allegorical reading provided by Petrarch down to a worldly level: through his relative emphasis on Griselda's human suffering, the Clerk's version of the story complicates its moral—Ginsberg says inadvertently. I would argue, however, that the Clerk's lack of moral decisiveness is characteristic of his position in the new “fourth estate” of increasingly secularized scholars discussed by Anne Astell, and that such ambiguity reflects positively on his character rather than demonstrating an unconsciously flawed performance. Ginsberg also recognizes the Clerk's unique position in late medieval English society, but he concludes that such an ambiguous identity only hurts the “substance” of his tale: “The Clerk, in sum, is *in transitu*; a young and eager man, in orders, who may become a

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<sup>1</sup> Warren Ginsberg, “‘And Speketh so Pleyn’: The *Clerk's Tale* and its Teller,” *Criticisim* 20.3 (Summer 1978): 319.

preacher of note; a man who reveres learning and eloquence, sometimes at the expense of substance, who in time we hope will learn clarity of expression is a virtue.”<sup>2</sup> Since the Clerk’s lack of “clarity” in his treatment of a troublesome tale is precisely what motivates so many critics, Ginsberg included, to take note of his rehearsal, I am inclined not to hope that the Clerk will lose his penchant for ambiguous analysis.

A great amount of Chaucer scholarship has interpreted and contextualized the *Clerk’s Tale* both in relation to the other *Canterbury Tales* and in relation to its literary sources. This thesis has attempted to analyze the specific framing of the *Tale* to reveal the unique perspectives and preoccupations of its narrator. An examination of the reserved character of the Oxford Clerk and his relationship with the Host provides a more nuanced reading of the *Clerk’s Tale*, especially its political implications. The main focus of the thesis has thus been the Clerk’s responsive self-portrayal as an obedient subject and the effect of such a rehearsal on the social and political significance of his tale. His preoccupation with *prudence* as a moral and political virtue becomes a central part of this reading. Textual and thematic similarities with John of Trevisa’s work suggest this real-life Oxford scholar as a possible source for the Clerk’s rehearsal and for Chaucer’s treatment of *prudence* in the *Tales*. In addition to political prudence, Trevisa’s text is relevant to ideas of clerkly *shamefastnesse* and injunctions to *pleyn* speech and reasonable governance. Whether or not Chaucer read John of Trevisa’s work, an analysis of the Oxford Clerk’s position in the *Canterbury Tales* supplemented with Trevisa’s ideas has usefully illuminated the Clerk’s character and social context. Another passage from the *De Regimine Principum* can further elucidate the Clerk’s interest in prudent action:

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 322.

Twey felicitees the philosofer setteth. The oon is politik and the other is contemplatif. ... And the philosofer moeneth that in politik lif the parfit vertue is prudencia, redynesse; and in contemplatif lif the parfit vertue is sapiencia, wisdom, other methaphysica. And he meneth that eueriche man that can redilich rewle wel other men, he is politik felix; and he that can goode skyle in speculacioun by methaphysica is contemplatif felix.<sup>3</sup>

The juxtaposition here of “prudencia” and “speculacioun” as “politik” and “contemplatif,” respectively, provides a clear structure for the Clerk’s rehearsal. Himself an ideal manifestation of contemplative speculation, he naturally seeks an ideal counterpart in the form of a prudent ruler. The dominant male leaders he confronts—the Host and Walter—fall far short of an ideally *prudent* rule.

The Clerk’s response to the Wife of Bath must be read as part of his prudent rehearsal; his choice to address the Wife is not only a clerk’s witty comeback but also a genuine acknowledgment that she represents in all probability his most attentive audience. The Wife and the Clerk respond oppositely to a shared issue of masculine dominance; what matters to the Clerk in his rehearsal is what they share rather than where they differ. Though the Wife’s action is reactive and ultimately not remedial in terms of sovereignty in the marriage relationship, the Clerk’s speculative nature allows all possibilities; in the absence of prudence where it should be found—in patriarchal rulers—the Clerk is willing to consider other sources and forms of morally political behavior.

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<sup>3</sup> John of Trevisa, *De Regimine Principum*, 29-30.

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