Critique of the Courtly Class in Ballad Analogues of *The Clerk's Tale*

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Readers who are well immersed in the *Child Ballad* corpus, and who encounter Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* will find that reading it can cause many bells of recognition to chime. Its plotline is reminiscent of a few ballads which bear the theme of suffering wives or sweethearts, and the tests they must endure. This essay will refer mostly to folk balladry and to two literary ballads, 'The Nut Brown Maid' and 'Of Patient Grissil and a Noble Marquess' (Deloney). These ballads are related to *The Clerk's Tale* of Griselda by means of plot acts (motifs) and theme. This essay will show that *The Tale* is traceable in the ballads, and that the alterations present in them carry significance and meaning. The ballads alter the Griselda legend because of differences in genre and attitudes to gender and class. Gwendolyn A. Morgan has posited in her book the assumption that ballads are a genre contrived by, and intended for the lower classes, and as such served as a means of critique on the aristocracy, its values and the wrongs it inflicted on its subservient classes. Claude Levi-Strauss has argued that a myth is a way for a society to discuss a topic which it regards as taboo by shifting the discourse to one less controversial.

If ballads carry traces of each other, and use phraseology to signify meaning, then the meaning traceable in them is likely residual from times prior to their creation, and though no definite date can be given to the creation of most ballads, it is possible to assume that residual meaning and values from medieval times are traceable in them. that folkloric renditions of the story derive from the medieval tale and not vise-versa, but that they reflect the story's oral origins in them (Betteridge and Uttley154, 157). It is this essay's intent to demonstrate how *The Tale* of is traceable but altered in those ballads, and that the alterations made are a shift in discourse criticizing the ruling class, to a discourse that focuses on gender.

Ruben Valdés argues that the common audiences of the folk ballads could not have related to the chivalric notes in the Griselda tale, and therefore alter them so that they fit with more common perceptions. However, this supposition fails to recognize that the ballads were often created by yeomanry, who had more complex understandings. If we agree with Morgan, ballads are a response and satire of aristocracy as a cause of being in a middling position between classes. A question then arises, as to why the Griselda tale is the plot type chosen to embody this anti-chivalric message. Valdés claims that only certain tales survive as ballads (155 Medieval Narrative). Gender relations are a metaphor for class relations even in Chaucer, who, himself, belonged to a middling position, class-wise, being of a merchant family, but wed to an aristocrat. Walter's mistreating is a paragon of mis-governance in *The Tale*, as well. In other words, the theme of husbandly mistreating as a sign of lordly mistreating was already there in the original story. However, the

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fourteenth century, in which this story came into being, was 'an age when the middle class was rising economically and beginning to intermarry with the aristocracy', and therefore 'it is not surprising that the Griselda legend should be reformulated to include the sanction of a marriage of choice between a sovereign and subordinate' (Commensoli 201). Moreover, it is not surprising that a tale that originates in such a tumultuous age, class-wise, will end up being traceable in subsequent centuries as residual cultural story, but its message shifted further and further into a discourse on class. Ballads were not created in a vacuum, and it is more than plausible that the shift the tale underwent filtered to more popular, less literary forms, such as the ballads. The perception of marriage itself changed within that time frame, and the factors for this change are all related to the change in feudal society (Commensoli 201).

Furthermore, the ballad world chooses the Griselda story as its scene for commenting on the courtly class, because inherent in *The Tale* itself is Chaucer's view of *noblesse*, i.e., that it is not dependent on birth but on a person's inward values and virtue. Evans and Johnson observe that Walter's actions seem to exemplify what the hag in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* says about virtue not being dependent on noble birth (200). Walter believes it so much that he chooses a woman of low birth but of noble virtue and brings her up to a status that matches her god given virtue. But on the other hand, he disbelieves his own actions as he lies to her about his subjects' reaction to their marriage. So, he voices both Chaucer's view of *noblesse* and the more mainstream view of it. Balladry seems to latch on to the message about class that is voiced by the hag. It hails the idea of *noblesse* emanating from within, regardless of birth or class. On the more superficial level, it is why the ballads give their heroines happy endings, or berate their protagonists who go too far, by ending the plot it a tragic manner. On another level, the poor heroines' virtue, or born *noblesse* is what helps them survive and circumvent their position of no power.

Similarities and Differences Between the Ballads and the *Clerk's Tale*

What do the ballads have in common with the Griselda legend? And where and why do they differ? While the ballads discussed here are all of the same group of tales, though altered and layered, as the Griselda legend, and share key plotlines with it, they also depart from it in other elements. A recurring motif in *The Tale*, 'Le Fresne' and ballads is patient suffering. Women are praised in the ballads for 'the extent of the suffering they endure' (Valdez 101). Their suffering often arrives from their elders, or superior in rank, and when the oppressors are male, they are often the woman's husband. Often it is a man they have yet to marry, and the suffering is a test for them as wives, even before wedlock (101). *The Tale* is comparable to 'Child Waters', 'Fair Annie' and 'Le Fresne' by the element of godlike man abusing his patient female partner's patience (106). The protagonists' testing is also derived from the heroines' low status as women and peasants (106).

The ballad, which is most closely related to *The Clerk's Tale*, but also to Marie de France's lai 'Le Fresne', is 'Fair Annie'. The ballad's name is reminiscent of and may hark back to the Anglo-Norman pronunciation of 'Le Fresne', which was 'le frene' (Valdés, Medieval Narrative 99). In 'Fair Annie' (ll. 119-122), as well as the lai (ll. 321-329), it is a sister, rather than a daughter, who acts as the 'replacement bride'. In both, there is a recognition of the heroine's true, noble identity, and a relinquishing of the bridal right consequently, ('Fair Annie' ll. 121-128, 'Le Fresne' ll. 485-515) as the heroine gets her happy ending. However, in the ballad it is the sister, not the mother who recognizes the heroine, the story with the twin births is absent and replaced with a story of abduction/living as a

paramour, and the heroine, who is barren in 'Le Fresne', bears her lord seven sons. In 'Le Fresne', *The Tale* and the ballad, the heroine is asked to humble herself and prepare the house for the new bride's arrival. In the lai (ll. 359-88) and *Tale,* (ll. 960-972) the heroine does so with no qualms or protest. In the ballad, after offering to tend to the bride herself (ll. 10-14), Annie is upset, mentions that she cannot appear maidenly as she was asked to, having born seven sons, and curses her fate (ll. 19-22, 74-83). The motif of suffering beloved is present, though she is not quite as patient as Griselda or Le Fresne (Valdés, *Medieval Narrative* 99). The lord reveals his cruelty by having her wait on the new bride, having born him children and sharing his bed for years (ll.19-22). Instead of testing, the actual replacing of a true, loving paramour for a rich, unknown bride is seen as the lord's vice, his abuse of power deriving from his status.

There is an element from the Griselda repertoire that is present in the lai but absent from the ballad, which is the hero taking his nobles' advice to marry a more suitable bride. The ballad's protagonist does not confer with his councilors, and only the parts of the heroine preparing for a bride, and the resolution are present. Lord Thomas is also seen as crueler because his lover had born him seven children, and is not barren, like Le Fresne is said to be (ll. 322-26). The crueler men here are then Walter and the lord from the ballad, because their actions are unjustified. But Walter might be perceived as even the crueler of the two because his actions are not even done to marry elsewhere but just as a test. The ballad then criticizes the lord and his actions and makes him crueler by having him replace the mother of his children with a virgin, rather than a barren woman with a fertile one. This could be because the point the ballad wishes to stress here is about nobility's obsession with power and money, not one man's obsession with obedience, and so it takes the theme of the subdued wife to use the gender relationship as a guise for class struggle and criticism of nobility.

In 'Child Waters' the element of testing of patience is evident. He bids his lover not only follow him on foot while he rides, (ll. 43-4) and her being heavily pregnant to boot, but to do so as his pageboy, or horse-boy, (l 35) a male servant, and of the lowest rank. This is similar to *The Tale* also in the sense that the lord strips the heroine of her identity by stripping her of her fine clothes, much like *The Tale's* Walter strips Griselda when he marries her (ll.373-383), and again when he banishes her (ll.890-95) as part of his trials. The heroine of the ballad gets her happy ending having fulfilled her duty as a woman of feudal society, giving birth to an heir (l 159). Her identity is also restored to her with clothing, as the lord promises to 'clothe her all in silk' (ll.165-6). His strong emotional reaction (breaking down the stable door, ll.156-7) is reminiscent of Walter's stopping of the wedding charade at the end of *The Tale,* (ll.1049-51) but has a different undertone to it, a violent ending rather than simply putting a verbal stop, but the two men are similar in reaching the point where they cannot mistreat their beloved any longer. As Valdés puts it, the heroine in 'Child Waters' also 'suffers from social inequality' (150). The very fact of her pregnancy and her elopement with him put her in a disadvantage related to her gender and class (150). The ballad, in a generically typical manner concentrates, conflates her plight as female and her plight as a person of lower class. The story of Griselda, in contrast, is centred on her plight in marrying her feudal lord. This is because Chaucer's retelling is, among other meanings it bears, allegorical and wishes to single Griselda out as an exemplar, to comment through her on Christianity, while at the same time reminds us that Griselda is but a woman. Therefore, she signifies Christian faith and forbearance, but also similar wifely traits. The focus in Chaucer is therefore

Christianity and the domestic, all at once. Chaucer utilizes his character's voice to address both men and women, with allegory and satire all at once. The ballad, however, is more interested in how her, and her lord's, class and gender are tied together to subdue her, then to resolve her story.

A similar ballad is 'The False Lover Won back' wherein the element of 'replacement bride' appears. However, the lord does not mention a marriage of mercenary reasons, but states that he goes back to 'his true love' where 'the sun goes never down' (ll. 3-4). The heroine follows her lover, no physical testing is mentioned, but she rides after him on horseback while pregnant (ll.13-16). The lord tests her by offering her fine attire of increasing significance and price so that she leaves him, but she demands only 'love for love' until he softens towards her and bids her follow him (l 34). In other words, in this ballad the heroine's affection is tested less in the face of adversity but more in the face of the existence of a rival.

This existence of a rival is made even more explicit and dramatic in 'Lord Thomas and Fair Annette.' Another similar element is Thomas deliberating whom to wed. In the ballad he asks his parents who advise him to marry the richer brown girl (ll. 13-36). This could be a trace from Walter's qualms about marriage in *The Tale*, and from the councilors' advice to marry a wealthy woman in the early modern plays. The scene at the wedding starts with a similar attitude to that of *The Tale*. Annette shows forbearance and attends the wedding of her beloved to another (ll. 98-106), but that is where similarities end. The bridegroom, awed by her dazzling appearance, shows her more deference than to his bride (ll.107-10), who in her rage kills Annette (ll.127-130). Thomas then slays the bride and himself (ll.141-8). The happy, fairytale ending of *The Tale* (ll. 1051-1113) has turned into a bloodbath. 'Though this ballad ends tragically, […] it reaffirms the theme of young women having to cope with the actions of the powerful men they want to marry' (Wollstadt 298). In other words, Annette's plight as a woman is tied to her and Thomas's station in society, i.e., to class.

Somewhat less gory, but tragic nonetheless, is the ending of 'Earl of Aboyne'. Here too the heroine is presented with a rival (ll. 53-4). It seems, however, that it is a testing of affection, because the lord comes home to his lady asking for a kiss, a reconciliation, to stop him from marrying (ll. 51-2). The heroine's pride causes her to refuse (ll. 55-8), and the lord's pride to refuse her recanting (ll. 63-6)

The ballads and the lai are different from the Griselda legend by the fact that instead of patience alone that wins Griselda her happy ending, it is women's action that cares for the heroines (Valdés Medieval Narrative 107). It is noteworthy, though, that in 'Le Fresne' the mentioning of women is done to give agency and action to women, as they are women , not as a synecdoche to peasanthood, because Marie was a high-born noblewoman, and therefore did not use her narrative to offer criticism of the class to which she belonged, but to emphasize the wrongs done to her sex. Her criticism of her class manifests in her berating discourteous characters, or those she perceives as being so, such as Le Fresne's mother. This is another manner in which the ballads try to subvert the chivalric ideal. The woman, who stands for the peasant, is the one to initiate and expedite the resolution, not passivity and patience. Whether she decides to follow the lord or relinquish her bridal right and wealth to help her sister, it is a woman who resolves and brings forth the happy ending. When she is denied such, the outcomes are tragic ('Earl of Aboyne') or even gory ('Lord Thomas and Fair Annette'). Clearly, this can be comparable to values of resistance to the aristocracy.

The men in 'Le Fresne' play weaker roles, as opposed to *The Tale*. Griselda of *The Tale* accepts her fate with no complaint, until her lord takes pity on her and reveals the ruse and his wish to try her. Moreover, all the power rests in the hands of the man, Walter. 'His right and his ability to rule are mirrored in his wife's capacity to obey, i.e., to submit to abuse, as well as in the control she exercises over her feelings and her natural instincts as a mother.' Griselda's conflicts 'serve above all to ensure the legitimacy of the lord and order of society' (Freeman 18-19). The ballads favour men with weaker social standing or who are denied their access to power, as romantically/erotically appealing protagonists. This, combined with the relative activity of women in the ballads, can hint at the message the ballads wish to convey with this alteration. A strong, all powerful man who exerts his power is not the one who can resolve the plot, but needs women's action, along with her patience. This can be viewed as a reversal of the 'natural' order of things. And if woman stands for peasant, and husband for lord, then this is a critique of feudal order disguised as an inversion of gender relations.

The ballads referred to in this paper are all part of the same group of ballads, and are all retellings of the same folktale, which appears in both *The Tale* and the lai. It is possible to treat all these retellings as all being versions of the same myth. In his essay 'The Structuralist Study of Myth', Claude Levi-Strauss conceptualized that myth, and oral tradition in general, are 'addicted to duplication, triplication or quadruplication of the same sequence' (443) and asks why that is so. His answer is that 'repetition has as its function to make the structure of the myth apparent' (443). This is precisely compatible with the nature of balladry. The ballads repeat acts and phrasing in order to call into attention their relation to other tales in which these acts and phrases are repeated. They behave much in the same manner that Levi-Strauss metaphorized 'a myth exhibits a "slated" structure which seeps to the surface' (443). The ballads all have touching points and differing points and can be placed one upon the other like a deck of spread cards. However, the differences made to *The Tale,* as Levi-Strauss also understands, are not arbitrary. They appear because 'the purpose of mythology is to provide an outlet for repressed feelings' (Levi-Strauss 429).

When looking at myth things can appear to be arbitrary at first glance because 'anything is likely to happen. There is no logic, no continuity. (Levi-Strauss 429). On the other hand, myths are the same stories, told and retold, and repeat themselves, therefore, they cannot be contingent or arbitrary. Ballads have the characteristics of folk tales as conceptualized by Propp and Bakhtin. The Griselda ballads all belong to the same tale type even if some of them lack a function. The changes in plotlines occur in folktales because of being passed down from memory. 'Thus, a tale splits into plural sub tales. Ballads are designed to avoid this memorial lapse because they are ordered in stanzas and formulaic forms, thus they remain mostly the same' (Turner 429). The split of the Griselda tale to a few related ballads with different functions could also be explained with the memory hypothesis.

Myths contain 'not […] isolated relations but bundles of such relations and it is only as bundles that these relations can be put to use and combined so as to produce a meaning' (Levi-Strauss 431). Moreover, 'relations pertaining to the same bundle may appear diachronically at remote intervals, but when we have succeeded in grouping them together, we have reorganized our myth' (431). *The Clerk's Tale*, the plays and other literary retellings, and the folk ballads are all part of the same myth, or folktale type, because they all share a 'bundle of relations' between their 'Walters' and their 'Griseldas'. However,

changes made are not arbitrary, and the existence of a myth in society is there to help said society replace a discourse on an issue that it finds difficult, inappropriate, or confusing, with another (437-438).

Why, then, do the ballads alter *The Tale* of Griselda, conflating its comments on class with comments on gender? As we have seen, *The Tale* and the lai themselves deal with both gender relations and class, and in some manners *The Tale's* Griselda is also a synecdoche of the peasant class, just as its Walter a synecdoche of feudal lords. However, *The Tale* itself is bears also allegoric meaning, which is Christian relationship between Man and God, on top of its more critical comments which focus on gender relationships and the abuse of lordly powers. The literary retellings take this same storyline and shift the discourse to that of relations between lord and vassal. However, the plot and characters remain much the same. What makes the ballads, then, alter the story in this way?

In her book Gwendolyn A. Morgan posits the assumption that balladry was essentially a genre created and popularized by the medieval yeomanry, in order to critique the upper class and its ideals of *noblesse* and chivalry (2). It is possible to connect between the book's main claim and the alterations the ballads make to *The Tale*. The society which created balladry, which is yeomanry, took the Griselda myth, and altered it, in order to criticize the chivalric values in a covert manner. Therefore, it retains the same 'bundle of relations', i.e., a man testing his female companion, but altered it in a manner which seems to be about gender relations, but in reality, criticizes class relations and the values of the courtly class.

'Fair Annie' is closest, of all the folk ballads, to Griselda and 'Le Fresne'. Its 'Walter', Lord Thomas, is perceived as more heartless than *The Tale's* Walter. His cruelty is derived from his status as lord. Therefore, it is possible to surmise that the alteration made to this ballad was done to criticize the lordly power from which stems this cruelty. Since it cannot outrightly speak of the cruelty of masters, the ballad places the scene of mastery in a scenario of marriage, a situation which is unequal in its own right, and thus turns the subdued woman to a synecdoche of the subdued in general, and the tyrant husband to a synecdoche of tyrant lords, wherever they be.

This bundle of relations appears in all the Griselda repertoire ballads. As Wollstadt observes, 'Most of the time, male lovers in these ballads are specifically […] "gentlemen": lords, knights, earls, or perhaps squires. […] Even more pertinently, those "gentlemen" lovers who pervade the ballad tradition are "doers": these men act, and women must deal with their action" (296-297). However, the lai introduces weak men, and it is women's action which resolves the plot, and this is repeated in the ballads. The Griselda repertoire ballads subvert this structure of gender relations, and if gender stands for class, it is possible to surmise, that they wish to make a comment on subverting class structure. When a folktale "lives" in oral tradition, it circulates by virtue of the re-telling of the events that constitute it. When a ballad is in oral circulation, the language commemorating the event of the ballad is spread' (Turner 24). The very language, the wording a ballad or a group of ballads uses, not just its plot acts, determines its structure. The structure of a ballad is determined by which stanzas or parts of them were remembered and passed on. 'The teller of a folktale is limited only by his remembering of the story; the singer of a ballad is limited by his memory of the words that constitute it' (24). Many forces join together ballads in groups and many factors play in the alterations done to ballads within each group. It is possible to assume, then, that one of these factors is the ballads' penchant to satirize class relations, i.e., the ballads were formed of the 'building blocks', or stanzaic

parts, they were built so and remembered so because of the meaning carried in these building blocks, those stanzas and phrases. Because ballads have symbolic meanings, the balladic material 'tends to point away from the particular situation and toward a general meaning […] They are […] symbolic structures' (Turner 25). A myth will repeat itself until its cognitive conundrum is exhausted, and this could account for this plot type, or myth, occurring and reoccurring in the ballads, and altering itself again and again, in myth's 'addiction to repetition' (LS 443).

Ballads which share themes share symbolic meaning as well. The ballads change and alter to point at a larger meaning, and therein lies their success. The literary retellings alter the Griselda plot the least and carry religious allegorical messages the most. Since the ballads alter the Griselda story the most, and they are of the lower classes, it is possible to see that they use her, or her counterparts, as a synecdoche of an entire class of people. Her trials, then, are their trials, and the anger towards the cruel lords is directed towards the male protagonists, the Walters of the ballads. Medieval retellings 'use of husband/wife relationships to express spiritual relationships […] which might link relationships between male/female; husband/wife; soul/body; God/human subject; God/Church (the first of the pair denoting the superior position in each).' The ballads then take this scheme and apply it to the relations between lord/vassal.

There are ballads in which the outcome is tragic, like 'Lord Thomas and Fair Annette'. These are stories who demonstrate that testing of women's affection and patience ends badly, when the couple is not of equal stance, and that this is done as a comment on patriarchy (Valdez 101). However, this last connection to subverting patriarchy can be disputed because other ballads where the man tests his lover by saying he's married result in happy unions. If ballads subvert chivalric ideas, then the nobles are punished for their greed and for their abuse of power. Their peasant lovers are punished as collateral damage. This is what happens when these lordly men abuse their power and view their relationship with women/peasants as an extension of their divine privilege. This view can be a reading pertinent to both 'Lord Thomas and Fair Annette', and the 'Earl of Aboyne', wherein the testing of the female companion is masked as something else altogether and ends in tragedy. It is possible to see that these ballads take the lord's cruelty to his lover to the farthest realms because they wish to draw attention to it being derived from his *class* and his perception as a *lord* with *divine* privileges. However, they posit him as a *man,* who abuses his *masculine* privileges, instead; and the patient, suffering, tragic *peasant* is presented by a patient, suffering, tragic *female*. These ballads, ending tragically, could be a warning against such testing done by men to their lovers, and, if we take women to be synochdechy for peasants, and men for lords, then this is a poignant comment, warning the lower class audiences of the ballads to beware false lords who would abuse them under the guise of love/ protection, or to empower them to take action against it, but wisely.

Clothing is a recurring signifier in the ballads, signifying beauty, virtue, and sexuality. It often appears in the Griselda repertoire ballads as a means to dramatize gender and class relations in a tightknit grid conflating gender and class. It appears in 'Le Fresne' as the cloth that wrapped the heroine, which, as we have seen, is lacking in its close ballad analogue, 'Fair Annie'. It appears to signify the virtue and worth belonging to heroines or given to heroines when the plot is resolved. But it also appears to signify sexuality, in ballads such as 'Child Waters' and 'The False Lover', in which the heroine changes her attire, either under duress or to travel more lightly, but it results in her sexualized, or

gendered appearance. The cloth or clothing then serves a triple purpose. As a plot detail, as signifying class, and as signifying sexuality. 'An unmistakably erotic function […] is assigned to incomplete dress' (Rogers 272). It is used because it 'imposes on the ballad singer certain restrictions, which he has to circumvent by finding acceptable substitutes for the direct mention of taboos' (Rogers 294). Clothing is used as a substitute for less puritanical modes of expression, i.e., mentioning the sexual act, desire, or body parts as is. If gender and sexuality are a metaphor for class relations in the ballads, then drawing attention to the female's sexuality or gender is to draw attention to her class, and to draw attention to sexual misconduct towards her is to speak thus about the misconduct of lords.

If it is there to speak of sexuality, and sexuality is a metaphor for class relations, then cloth is there to hide the taboo of criticizing the courtly class, as well. It is why the ballads use it, in an alteration of the Griselda legend. Griselda's investment with the robes of noble ladies are traceable in the ballads with their mentioning of clothing given (Jaster 95). In other words, 'Child Waters' protagonist dressing Ellen in silk, the heroine in 'The False Lover Won Back' being given clothing as bribe, Annette's dressing up for the wedding, and Lady Aboyne beautifying herself with attire to ingratiate herself to the Earl are all traces of the Griselda story in ballads. It is a trace, but altered, and it serves to shift the tale to a discourse critical of the upper classes. The Griselda repertoire's 'use of the ritualized exchange of clothing, a shared code among the various versions, may also be significant in the dissemination of the story. Similarities also suggest that the tale's several audiences recognized in the depiction their own attitudes towards marriage, clothing and identity' (Jaster 95). Clothing is chosen as a signifier with reason. It embodies in real life, as well as in literature and folklore, the bride's clothing as a scene for her 'transference as goods between father and husband' (94).

Use of clothing as a mark of servility appears in Chaucer, as well, in a scene in *The Tale* in which Griselda claims that she took upon herself servility when she wore Walter's proffered clothes (ll. 656-657). Griselda equates being clothed to servility, and to relinquishing freedom. In marrying Walter, and agreeing to be clothed by him, she becomes even more servile to him than simply his serf. This ties not only Griselda's rapidly changing states of servility and freedom, marriage and maidenhead to clothing, but those of the heroines in the ballads, as well. Their servility to their lords ends not when they wed, but begins anew, in different form. This makes the happy resolutions of some ballads even further ironic and critical of class relations, making them perpetual and unbreakable.

Cloth and clothing not only ties gender and class together but offers a specific critique of the courtly, hierarchal, patriarchal society; its use of women as chattel to perpetuate itself. Critique of class through discourse on gender thus comes full circle and criticizes aristocracy's mistreatment of women, as well. If the ballads are anti chivalric but disguised as speaking of gender, then speaking of gender relations through a code is the way that the class discourse disguises itself. Marriage and the relationship between husband and wife were not arbitrarily chosen to be the scene in which the critique of class is placed. According to Christopher Brooke's historical analysis, in medieval customs, brought by the Normans, a marriage included an affirmation of the wife's dowry and a giving of a ring which was similar to a lord's gift to his vasal (248-9). Since marriage is vassalhood, then critique of its values of servitude can also be critique of the feudal system and ideas of chivalry. It is a way to tell a tale that society was more at ease with, it is easier to

critique wifehood and men than the entire infrastructure of society (107). This is why ballads exaggerate the husband's lawful rights (Freeman 19). If the husbands' testing is beyond what they are permitted as husbands, then their behaviour must stem also from their view of their prerogatives as feudal lords. This makes the heroine's meekness and obedience in the face of adversity more than simply wifely obedience, symbolic of something else, which is obedience towards an unjust lord. We can surmise, then, that since marriage is vassalhood, the clothing code thus serves as a double code, doubly encoding and doubly decoding meaning.

Conclusion

The ballads belonging to the Griselda repertoire alter the 'original' Griselda tale in plot and language alike by means specific to balladry. In doing so, they conflate gender relations with class relations, which they do in order to criticize the courtly classes and their abuse of power. This is done with the Griselda story because it already contains ideas of lordship and vassalhood and because marriage was seen as a scene for inequality, which allows Walter to abuse his lordly status. The ballads trace within them not just the plots and 'bundles of relation's found in the Griselda tale, but also language and its residual carrying both of the idea of noblesse and its subversion by Chaucer.

This, however, is not the only relation of the ballads to Chaucer's *Tale*. Chaucer's penchant for commenting on authoritative text through his translation of them is also apparent in the ballads, as they further translate his work not only in terms of 'speaking' in early-modern English instead of his Middle English, but in taking his use of textile and cloth as a metaphor for women and sexuality and further metaphorizing it as virtue and servility, both of the lower class and of women themselves. The layers of translation from Boccaccio, to Petrarch, to Chaucer, and to balladry, are piled further and further, creating what Levi-Strauss described as the slated roof (443), building upon each other but adding further meaning, repeating but changing, diffusing critique through changes they make to plot and language, in myth's tendency and 'addiction to repetition'.

Betteridge and Utley have argued that the post medieval folkloric retellings of Griselda use Chaucer as a source, but, that at the same time, they might be a 'modern' representation of the legend's oral sources, worked and reworked, translated and retranslated, through changes of genre, language, plot, and signifiers. If women, cloth, and texts are in Chaucer and in balladry codes or metaphors for each other, then it is possible to learn how translation, adaptation, and changes in genre and language also contribute to changes in the message of the story of Griselda, and how she herself becomes a sort of signifier, encapsulating the residual meanings assigned to her from the middle ages, through early modern times, and further on into current days.

Ballads have a unique type of temporality, as a never ending, non-teleological narrative, that repeats itself, self-references and thus takes its audience back to times past. Thus, they infer and inject meaning to reading a tale that precedes them and is based upon them at the same time and create a slated meaning for the modern reader of the literary Griselda and their own 'Griselda's', or heroines, because of its complex grid of meaning and relationship between orality and text. How does that bear on their being a form of critique of the courtly class? It is possible to say that the ballads *link* themselves to the literary Griselda when they wish to make the connection, plot wise, of mastery and servility, and its injustices, and when it wishes to borrow its bundle of relations; and *distance* themselves from the medieval, literary Griselda tales where they wish to conceal

their critique and to make it harsher, at the same time. Therefore, they translate, adapt, change, and repeat. Though Chaucer wrote an a influenced by and translated from Petrarch's allegorical poem which had a religious message, one of Man's vassalhood to God, he, in an typically Chaucerian move also brought in his more ironic comments on spousal relations and class relations, subverting and destabilizing the concepts of *kynde*, *noblesse* and *gentilesse*. This attitude reverberated through the ages as a tale of Man and Wife, and even more so, a tale of master and servant, or the subversion thereof.

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