

Character Analysis of the Clerk in Canterbury Tales

After the Summoner concludes his story, the Host turns to the Clerk from Oxford saying, "You haven't said a word since we left . . . for goodness sake cheer and tell us a lively tale." The Clerk agrees and says he will tell a story he heard from a great gentleman from Padua named Francis Petrarch.

Part I: On the western shores of Italy lives Walter, the noble and gracious king who is handsome, young, and strong. Walter loves his freedom and has refused to be bound by marriage; his subjects, however, long for an heir to the throne. One day, a delegation of lords of the kingdom humbly beseeches Walter to seek a wife. The king is so impressed with their petition that he agrees to marry. To confirm the agreement, the lords ask him to set a wedding date. Walter grants the lords the right to choose the wedding day, and he will choose his own bride.

Part II: The day of the wedding arrives, and all preparations are complete. A very poor man named Janicula, with a beautiful and virtuous daughter named Griselda, lives nearby. Walter has often seen her and admired her beauty. Shortly before the wedding, Walter asks Janicula for permission to marry his daughter; the old man agrees. Then Walter wins Griselda's consent. He makes one condition for their marriage: that Griselda promise to obey his will and to do so cheerfully, even if it cause her pain. Griselda assents to these conditions, and they are married. Soon, Griselda bears her husband a daughter, and there is great rejoicing.

Part III: While his daughter is still an infant, the king resolves to banish any doubt about his wife's loyalty. He tells her that one of his courtiers will soon come for the child, and he expresses the hope that taking the child from her will in no way change her love for him. She says that it will not. The king's agent arrives and takes the child. Griselda does not utter one word that would indicate her objections.

Part IV: Four years pass, and Griselda bears a son. Walter again decides to test his wife's patience and fidelity by telling her that she must give up her son, now two years old. Again, Griselda takes the news patiently and accepts her husband's decision. When Walter's daughter is twelve and his son "a little lad of seven," he decides to put Griselda to one final test. He has a Papal Bull forged, declaring himself free of Griselda and giving him permission to marry another woman. Then he orders his sister, with whom the children have been placed, to bring his daughter and son home. Plans are then set in motion for another wedding.

Part V: Walter calls Griselda before him, shows her the counterfeit Papal permission, and tells her of his intent to marry again. Griselda accepts the news with a sad heart. Once again, with great patience and humility, she says that she will abide by her husband's decision and return to her father's house. She then returns to her father, who receives her with sadness.

Part VI: Through her ordeal, Griselda helps prepare the beautiful young girl, whom she does not recognize as her daughter, for the wedding. But Walter can stand his own cruelty no longer. He confesses to Griselda that the beautiful girl and the handsome young boy are their children and

they have been given loving care in Bologna. He confesses that the cruel tests had been perfectly met by Griselda and that he could find no more patient and steadfast woman. They live the rest of their lives in bliss, and when Walter dies, his son succeeds to the throne.

In an envoy to The Clerk's Tale, Chaucer warns all husbands not to test the patience of their wives in the hope of finding another patient Griselda "for in certein, ye shal faille." Chaucer then warns all wives not to allow humility to nail shut their tongues for fear of finding themselves, like Chichevache, engulfed or swallowed up. Chaucer then advises wives to be like Echo, who never fled and always returned tit for tat.

Analysis

Chaucer uses the Clerk's prologue to explain the techniques to be used in narrating a good story: no abstruse boring meditations, no moralizing about sins, no high rhetorical flourishes, but plain and direct speaking. The Host's warning against too lofty and pedantic style is not necessary because the Clerk tells his story in an "honest method, as wholesome as sweet."

In The Prologue, Chaucer tells us that the Clerk "never spoke a word more than was need" and that he would "gladly learn and gladly teach." Therefore the reader must assume that his tale will teach some sort of moral or ethical lesson. The story he narrates is attributed to Francis Petrarch, (1303-1374), an Italian poet and humanist. Petrarch was recognized all over Europe, and Chaucer admired his work.

The reader should remember that The Clerk's Tale is told as a result of the Wife of Bath's story about women who desire sovereignty over their husbands. Thus the Clerk tells a story with the opposite view: that of a woman who is completely submissive to her husband, never loses her patience, and remains steadfast through all adversities.

The Clerk's Tale treats a large range of loosely feudal interrelationships, both on a social and private level. Initially, the central focus is on the lord, Walter, who consents to marry at the desire of his people (a sign of a good ruler is one who is concerned for the happiness of his subjects). He breaks with the strict traditions of his time and chooses a peasant girl for his bride, thus violating the social distinctions. He then violates humane standards by cruelly and needlessly testing his wife to prove her worthiness. What interests the Clerk as he tells his story of patient Griselda (judging from his asides to the pilgrims) is the contrast between Griselda's almost superhuman and determined patience contrasted with Walter's insufferable tests and his sad deficiency in that virtue of patience.

Griselda presents some problems for the modern reader. Can a peasant girl suddenly lifted from poverty and placed among the riches of the palace maintain her "sweet nobility"? Is it possible for a woman to possess this overwhelming patience and unquestioning obedience? Can a mother actually relinquish her innocent children without a single protest? Many modern readers consider Griselda a rather ridiculous creature and Chaucer's portrait of this tender maiden one that taxes the imagination.

The character of Walter is a different matter. Having selected Griselda, Walter first asks the free consent of Griselda's father; afterwards he asks the free consent of Griselda herself — a good beginning because Walter could have simply taken Griselda by any means. Nevertheless, Walter is arrogant, as well as selfish, spoiled, and wantonly cruel. He revels in his eccentric choices of Griselda as his queen and seems to take pleasure in being cruel to her. Chaucer coats this bitter pill by telling us that he is young, handsome, good-natured, and loved by his people.

The structure of this story, therefore, grows out of the nature of the two main characters. Walter seems to be as determined to be cruel and wanton in his testing of Griselda as Griselda is in being submissive to Walter's perverted demands. Each then possesses a single quality, and these are seen pitted against each other. But because Griselda tolerates everything, she brings about a happy conclusion for both of them.

The word envoy carries two meanings: First, it is a diplomatic term used to infer subtlety and authority; thus, Chaucer instructs both husband and wife about proper marriage behavior. Second, in literature, envoy means a short, simple concluding stanza. While the envoy to The Clerk's Tale could belong to the Clerk, most readers believe Chaucer himself is speaking out to us.

The use of the word Chichevache is itself a comment on the function of "patience" ("chiche"-thin and "vache"-cow). In an old French fable, there were two cows, Chichevache and Bicorné. Bicorné is very fat and contented because her diet consists of patient husbands, of which there are plenty. Poor Chichevache, on the other hand, is fed only patience wives, and because of the scarcity of patient wives, she is thin as a rail.