

The Clerk's Tale

Authority (Familial, Political, Written) in the *Clerk's Tale*

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An essay chapter for *The Open Access Companion to the Canterbury Tales* (September 2017)

The *Clerk's Prologue* confronts the social politics of translation and accessibility (CIP 1-56). There, the Host demands a jargon-free tale that all may understand from the learned Clerk, who cites as his source Francis Petrarch: the Italian poet crowned laureate in Rome for his Latin verse in 1341. Petrarch had encountered Dioneo's tale of Griselda as Giovanni Boccaccio's original Italian finale to his *Decameron*. Petrarch addresses his authoritative Latin translation to the younger Boccaccio with a letter that essentially admonishes Boccaccio for making such a story accessible to the rabble yet also praises the narrative itself and announces Petrarch's own desire to make it accessible to learned men who read Latin but no Italian.^[1] The *Clerk's Tale* pivots to translate Griselda's story into English. Chaucer's re-vernacularization dares to make it accessible to a politically and culturally different set: English commoners who used the vernacular in his own linguistically stratified society (Wallace 286). While the *Decameron's* storytellers and immediate audience are all young, unmarried nobles, Chaucer's Canterbury-bound pilgrims represent a more diverse range of classes, ages, and—arguably—genders. By invoking Petrarch's laureate status while setting him in scholarly Padua rather than imperial Rome before this English translation, the Clerk intimates the twin concepts of *translatio imperii* and *translatio studii*. Literally “translations” or “transfers” of “rule” (*imperii*) and “learning” (*studii*), these concepts undergird a medieval understanding of history as the interdependent transfer of political power with cultural knowledge across time, space, and communities. Chaucer carefully and politely erases Petrarch's move to hoard such power and knowledge in Latinate circles, which tended toward male and aristocratic homogeneity and ultimately toward political tyranny and cultural hegemony. His English translation progresses instead toward class and gender accessibility insofar as it satisfies the Host's request for jargon-free language that not just kings but all—including commoners—might understand.

Indeed, the story addresses the politics of tyranny and class more directly than any other contribution to the Canterbury collection.^[2] It pursues these matters through the marriage of Walter, a ruler atop a social and political hierarchy, and Griselda, the daughter of his lowliest, poorest subject. Griselda must serve as both the ruler's consort, translated from poverty to power, and an inconvertible, untranslatable exemplar of the lower class. Her peculiar class identity periodically reinscribes the prologue's urgency: the stipulation that commoners have access to authoritative meditations on political theory and practice like this tale of class, rule and oppression—and, in their own language. Whether Walter is a master of authoritative discourse,

a tyrant, an eminently efficient sovereign, an allegorical figure for God, or a whimsical brat, he stars in a tale that invites all English language users to consider the lines between sovereignty, tyranny, and perhaps even totalitarian rule –as well as their chilling intersections. This chapter shows how the *Clerk's Tale* compares these forms of rule expressly through its own shifting attitudes toward class and authority. The first section surveys the roles of class and authority in concepts of sovereignty, tyranny and totalitarianism; the second presents close readings of key textual moments; the third suggests avenues for further inquiry.

Tools

Theoretically, medieval sovereignty is a hierarchical mode of shared ownership and judgment that is never absolute, always measured. Practically, such sovereignty's application varies with those who inhabit the sovereign role, and it generally exceeds or fails expectation. In ideal communities governed by sovereignty, authority inheres in different classes both limiting freedoms and encouraging collaborations that pool strength and resources across hierarchies. Chaucer, building on the authoritative structure Walter's people perform in Petrarch's telling, begins this *Tale* explicitly with sovereignty, which indicates shared ownership and judgment and operates as a hierarchical, though negotiable and affective political authority throughout the *Canterbury Tales*.^[3] Five of Chaucer's six total uses of the term occur in domestic contexts describing relationships between lovers and/or husbands and wives that themselves stress sovereignty's affective nature, if not always its negotiability. The *Parson's Tale*, however, explicates sovereignty as a divinely ordained power that regulates greed and abolishes thralldom, yet ensures class stratification (ParsT 769-780) (Scanlon 15-22). Like authority in the twentieth-century thinker Hannah Arendt's view, Chaucerian sovereignty never means to abolish freedom, only to limit or restrict it, securing both communal hierarchies and a modicum of freedom for all (Arendt 404-405). In every Chaucerian instance, sovereignty also mediates relationships among free adults holding uneven power and bound by affection.

The *Clerk's Tale* invokes sovereignty and excludes the words tyranny and tyrant, which appear elsewhere in the *Canterbury Tales*. David Wallace nevertheless reads the tale as a critique “of Lombard tyranny,” the absolutist despotism Chaucer observed in Lombardy; indeed, it reflects tyranny insofar as Walter tortures Griselda and manipulates public opinion extending to the functions of class across his society to serve his individual whims over shared interests (294). In a sense, tyranny, as Wallace identifies it here, boldly refuses sovereignty (including its conventional hierarchies), yet aggressively retains the authority that depends upon such hierarchies. Walter's tyranny effectively refuses to share ownership and judgment. He hoards authority by breaking his own laws, traditions, and promises; his tyranny intensifies as a drive to take authority exclusively unto itself.

“If lawfulness is the essence of non-tyrannical government and lawlessness is the essence of tyranny, then terror is the essence of totalitarian domination,” observes Arendt (464). The term totalitarian, from the Italian *totalitario*, emerges in the twentieth century to reflect the theories of jurist Carl Schmitt and the dictatorial regimes that Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler led. The *Clerk's Tale* includes no analogous term, but it does feature sixteen instances of words denoting terror or fear (most often *dred*), which may represent a confluence of Arendt's and Chaucer's

concerns (CIT 69, 134, 181, 358, 455, 462, 508, 532, 634, 636, 838, 865, 1052, 1107, 1155, 1201).^[4] Totalitarian terror, Arendt writes,

aims at abolishing freedom, even at eliminating human spontaneity in general, and by no means at a restriction of freedom no matter how tyrannical. Technically, this absence of any authority or hierarchy in the totalitarian system is shown by the fact that between the supreme power (the Fuehrer) and the ruled there are no reliable intervening levels, each of which would receive its due share of authority and obedience. (404-5)

Walter's rule both inspires fear and purges spontaneity from Griselda's repertoire, granting him her share and more: he has total freedom to behave according to the tyrannical whims that Wallace's reading emphasizes. However, we shall see that fear also serves as an impetus toward his government, which flagrantly alleges that it limits freedoms authoritatively. Arendt wrote *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in the wake of two twentieth-century world wars, the Nazi death factories, and mass exile: unprecedented pain, homelessness and destruction. I do not mean to suggest that totalitarianism originated in fourteenth-century political realities or even that Chaucer, Petrarch, or Boccaccio proleptically imagine totalitarianism in their artful narrations of Griselda's legend. Yet, we should note that Boccaccio tells Griselda's story in the aftermath of the Black Death, while Chaucer rewrites it in English having lived through the Rising of 1381, sometimes called the Peasant's Revolt, late medieval England's greatest popular uprising. I do want to consider how Arendt's conceptions of totalitarianism enlighten the dynamics of class and authority in the *Clerk's Tale* and how that tale, which also responds to experiences of social and political upheaval and human suffering, might in return complicate Arendt's interrelation of class, authority, fear and freedom.

Before proceeding to the tale itself, I want briefly to address authority's particular intricacies in the Chaucerian tradition. Larry Scanlon, who examines authority centrally there, recognizes its interdependence with power and explains that authority "is a cultural and ideological structure," one "that must be produced and maintained" (15, 26). Authority corroborates power by embodying legitimacy, yet it also involves the manipulation of power. We might consider authority a performance of power that enacts a stable legitimacy and reinforces hierarchies. As Scanlon's reading shows, authority also manages to expose the negotiability of class and other hierarchies in the *Clerk's Tale*, which claims both political and moral authority for lay culture (179).

Text

Chaucer's Clerk tells the story of Walter and Griselda in six parts. The first sets the scene in Saluzzo, introduces Walter as its marquis, and presents an active, classed society that operates as if it holds the authority to compel Walter to marry and produce an heir to his sovereign seat. Walter's "peple" come to him, "flokmele" (distinctly in groups), but also with a spokesman who stands above yet for these masses, endowed with some ambiguous authority (CIT 85, 86). Is it that the spokesman "wisest was of loore," was the one "that the lord best wolde assente," or perhaps he who "koude . . . shewe wel swich mateere" (CIT 87, 88, 90)? Raising these possibilities, the Clerk suggests that not gentility and lineage alone, but teaching, learning, knowledge, and rhetorical finesse might each shape authority— and even sovereignty itself.

Stipulating that he has no more personal interest in Walter's marriage than any other group member, the spokesman highlights the organized and hierarchical structure of authority that the people must produce and maintain in order to exercise their power within sovereignty's sphere.

The spokesman's medieval vision of sovereignty emphasizes this iteration's theoretical flexibility. He offers an injunction: "Boweth youre nekke under that blisful yok/ Of soveraynetee, noght of servyse,/ Which that men clepe spousaille or wedlok. . ." (CIT 113-15). Here, the people are ostensibly telling their sovereign what to do and simultaneously elaborating their political philosophy. Their sovereignty parallels marriage: both structures yoke sovereign with subject such that the ruler must coordinate with the ruled to make movement possible. In section one, the people's sovereignty functions much as their metaphor describes; it is a yoke that limits freedom and allows movement in both directions. Walter indeed stresses that marriage will curtail his freedom (CIT 143-47, 171), while also acquiescing to it of his "free wyl," decisively retaining some freedom even as he accepts his people's authority (CIT 150).

The people make their request expressly to secure political stability, demonstrating, moreover, that they understand how realms of love and politics, private and public, interpenetrate via the domestic in marriage. Their spokesman specifies that the people will "in sovereyn hertes reste," where they currently fret in "bisy drede," only when Walter produces an heir to preclude any "straunge successour" (CIT 112, 134, 138). Walter responds by complicating conventional class hierarchies and their desire to escape fear: two defining characteristics of the social world they imagine, which Arendt's totalitarianism also frustrates. The people promise Walter a wife "Born of the gentilleste and the meeste/ Of al this land," but he discards the social and political tradition their promise assumes (CIT 131-32). Echoing Dante's *Purgatorio* VII, Walter circumvents hereditary class's conventions and appeals directly to God, who knows that children "ofte been / Unlyk hir worthy elders;" he entrusts his marriage and his "estaat," his ultimate status, to "Goddes bountee," a stable source of authority seemingly beyond cultural tradition (CIT 155-56, 160, 159). Walter thus begins to destabilize social hierarchies in his idiosyncratic submission to the authority that his hierarchically organized people have just performed and promoted. Given that sovereignty theoretically ensures social hierarchies just as it abolishes thralldom in the *Parson's Tale*, Walter's move, though it looks progressive, shakes the underpinnings of shared ownership and judgment as it appears elsewhere in the *Canterbury Tales* and throughout medieval culture. He explicitly agrees to limit his freedom and his people limit their power, accepting that Walter will choose his own wife. However, that arrangement perpetuates the fear that he might not marry after all (CIT 181-82). Together, they maintain a sovereign realm that resembles the yoke metaphor on the surface but already contains deep fissures in the foundations of class and authority. Part one closes with a classed, hierarchical community (including "officeres" as well as "privee knyghtes and squieres") preparing for a state wedding with conventional authority, while the bride's anonymity weakens social tradition and perpetuates fear (CIT 190-95 at 190, 92). This section asserts sovereignty only to subvert the social hierarchy on which its authority rests; still, tyranny's selfish whimsy remains hidden.

Part two also evinces a hierarchical society and ignores tyranny as Walter manipulates the relation between class and authority more forcefully. The Clerk associates Griselda and other poor village folk closely with work (CIT 197-231) and then contrasts them with "roial markys" Walter and his "richely arrayed" retinue of lords, ladies, and bachelor knights (CIT 267-73 at

267). However, the Clerk erases the familial authority shielding the ruled (Griselda) from the supreme political ruler (Walter). Walter begins his conquest of Griselda politely, informing Janicula, “If that thou vouche sauf, what so betide, / Thy doghter wol I take, er that I wende,/ As for my wyf, unto hir lyves ende” (CIT 306-08). But Walter then preempts Janicula’s response and his paternal authority by assuming his subject’s love, faith, and compulsory compliance with “al that liketh me,” thus emphasizing Janicula’s impotence (CIT 309-15 at 311). Janicula admits, “my wyllynge/ Is as ye wole, ne ayeynes youre likynge/ I wol no thyng,” conceding that any authority he might claim lacks autonomous power (CIT 319-21). Between Walter (the ruler) and the ruled (including Janicula and Griselda) “there are no reliable intervening levels, each of which would receive its due share of authority and obedience,” as Arendt writes (405). Part two suggests that ruler and ruled no longer coordinate as if yoked together, for Janicula and Griselda utterly lack autonomy. Walter is no longer a sovereign in accord with the metaphor his people offer: not quite yet a tyrant, he appears rather as a cattle herder, his own neck free of any yoke.^[5]

This part also shows that despite— or perhaps because Griselda conforms entirely to Walter’s desires and will— she temporarily transcends the visible class structure to rule in Walter’s stead. This marriage grants Walter’s lowliest subject’s daughter authority to judge “gentil men or othere of hire contree”: “So wise and rype wordes hadde she,/ And juggementz of so greet equitee,/ That she from hevene sente was, as men wende” (CIT 435, 438-40). Walter’s marital choice thus disorders the hierarchical structure of authority that his people invoke with sovereignty in part one. Here, he siphons authority away from his gentlefolk, drawing it closer to himself, circuitously through the nadir of the class hierarchy— through Griselda.

Accordingly, in the following two sections, local authorities of gentility and estate remain operative only insofar as Walter manipulates them rhetorically to terrorize Griselda, resurrect her class difference, and abduct her children (CIT 467-83, 632). Walter crucially cites his “gentils” among his “peple” as the motivation for removing Griselda’s daughter, though we hear nothing from them directly (CIT 480, 490). He thereby continues to accrue authority to himself. His decision to test Griselda by pretending to kill her children, moreover, derives not from Dante, Petrarch or any other learned authority, but only from “merveillous desire” within Walter’s “herte”: tyrannically solipsistic whimsy (CIT 454, 451). Here Walter plainly performs the tyranny Wallace notes. Simultaneously, class hierarchies relocate from Saluzzo to Panico for all practical purposes; there the countess and earl, Walter’s sister and her husband, raise Griselda’s children “in alle gentillesse” (CIT 593).

Walter’s own people grumble about his missing children, growing to hate their once beloved marquis (CIT 729-31). These masses of “rude peple” do nothing, yet somehow eclipse the organized social hierarchy that authoritatively instigated Walter’s marriage, eloquently demanded an heir, and carefully prepared his wedding feast in part one (CIT 750). Even as these noisy masses temporarily overwhelm, overshadow and blur distinctions between social and political classes, Griselda carries and represents the underclass’s burden.^[6] The Clerk describes parts three and four’s most active agent, a “sergeant” who removes Griselda’s children, thus: “Suspecious was the diffame of this man,/ Suspect his face, suspect his word also;/ Suspect the tyme in which he this bigan” (CIT 519, 540-42). Walter’s officer embodies terror in abstract and concrete ways from reputation to physical appearance. Now fear, inarticulate masses, and

Walter's police exercise power, though their authority is dubious. As in Arendt's totalitarian model, classes transform into masses, supplanting legitimate authority and the "social, legal, and political traditions of the country" with new institutions; meanwhile, "the center of power [shifts] from the army to the police" (460). The *Clerk's Tale* never mentions Walter's army, but his sergeant emerges as a police force and Griselda, who complies completely with his murderous orders sweetly releasing her children for slaughter, as the ideal totalitarian subject. Medieval queens were typically intercessors and dispute settlers; although Griselda proves duly adept earlier, she appears to be suited "equally well for the role of executioner and the role of victim" in parts three and four (Arendt 486).

Nevertheless, as Walter's rule grows more absolute, Griselda shatters the molds of executioner and victim. The end of part four sees Walter manipulating Church authority, specifically its *authoritee*, or written authority, by counterfeiting papal edicts that would authorize him to divorce and remarry a higher-class woman (CIT 631-37).^[7] Beyond written authority, *authoritee* suggests a gendered and classed authority, since upper class men were far more literate than others in Chaucer's England. *Auctoritee* might inhere in an individual and be derived from erudition in reading and writing, from being an *author*. Pieces of writing themselves could also be taken to have their own *authoritee*. *Auctoritee* is perhaps Chaucer's most critical form of authority; he compares it with *experience*—or lived authority—in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* (WBP 1-3). *Experience* and *authoritee*, together again, shape the *Clerk's Tale's* ending.

Class reemerges with new force in part five, when Walter breaks his promise to Janicula and returns Griselda to her original station in her father's house: the space of her lower-class life experience. All manner of society reappears in part six. Most significantly, Griselda speaks, not as a victim or executioner among the masses, but eloquently with the *experience*—the lived authority—of Saluzzo's poor, its lowest class. She simultaneously fulfills the queenly role of intercessor. In response to Walter's inquiry about her own daughter, masquerading as his new wife in his final test, Griselda offers these words:

O thyng biseke I yow, and warne also,
That ye ne prikke with no tormentynge
This tendre mayden, as ye han doon mo;
For she is fostred in hire norissynge
Moore tenderly, and, to my supposynge,
She koude nat adversitee endure
As koude a povre fostred creature. (CIT 1037-43)

Here Griselda asserts the underclass's sheer strength, while also shielding her daughter (unbeknownst to her) from Walter's absolute and tyrannical tormenting. Where Janicula failed to exercise familial authority strong enough to protect Griselda, Griselda wields class-based experience. Her lived political authority is powerful enough to unmask Walter's bogus *authoritee*, his forged papal annulment documents, and to redeem familial authority, if inadvertently. Griselda's words force Walter to drop his charade, and the Clerk claims that everyone lives happily ever after. However, he begins his envoy by declaring Griselda every bit as dead and buried as Petrarch is. Griselda's death gives the Clerk full liberty to interpret her legacy, which he expounds as proof that wives must have the authority to govern and to speak

out proudly. Indeed, as he insists, feminine voices and control will contribute to the “commune profit” (CIT 1194). Via the envoy, Griselda’s story becomes a largely negative example that asserts the authority of women and of all the classes that comprise political communities.

Transformation

We should question whether any living happily is possible here after all, but this essay’s scope turns us now to four major questions of authority, freedom, and sovereignty as well as some suggestions for comparison with related characters and situations from the *Canterbury Tales*.

1. The *Clerk’s Tale* troubles familial, political, and written authority by critiquing the ways that family, state, and church institutions intersect. Walter essentially usurps all authority for himself: Griselda’s familial authority over her children and Janicula’s over Griselda, the people’s political authority to approve their sovereigns, and the Church’s written authority over marriage. Arendt suggests that there is no authority without reliable hierarchy. Might Walter’s horded power be understood as legitimate authority in a *Canterbury Tales* context? Compare Walter with Arthur of the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, Arveragus of the *Franklin’s Tale*, Virginius of the *Physician’s Tale*, and Melibee of the *Tale of Melibee*. How do these masculine characters make decisions and wield their power? How do their governing styles and their tales’ outcomes reshape the question of horded power and legitimate authority?
2. In hoarding power, Walter appears to abolish freedom at least temporarily. Does he? If so, might Griselda redeem freedom with her pointed admonition of Walter’s bogus marriage? How does Walter use the language of freedom in each section of the *Clerk’s Tale*? Compare Walter’s sense of freedom with freedom as it appears in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* and the *Franklin’s Tale*.
3. As noted above, the *Wife of Bath* begins her prologue by juxtaposing *auctoritee*, written authority, and experience, which I suggest we read as lived authority. How does the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue* and *Tale* relate these distinct forms of authority with class? Might Griselda offer her experience as evidence that lived authority outperforms all other authority (familial, political, written)— or perhaps that lived authority is impervious to the forces that would abolish both class and freedom with fear? Compare the *Wife of Bath* and the *Clerk* on the roles class should play and ultimately play in political community.
4. Beyond Arendt’s, which critical theories of sovereignty and authority can you relate to those we find in the *Clerk’s* tale or in other pilgrims’ tales? Spend a little time researching late medieval ideas of sovereignty such as those laid out in the following fourteenth century treatises: Dante Alighieri’s *De monarchia*, Marsiglio of Padua’s *Defensor Pacis*, and Jean of Paris’s *De potestate regia et papali*. Alternatively or in addition, you might consider more recent concepts such as those Thomas Hobbes offers in *Leviathan* (1651), Frantz Fanon presents in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), or those Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri explicate in their *Empire* trilogy (2000-2009). How do these ideas complicate Chaucer’s views? How might Chaucer complicate these ideas? What values or ethics are at stake in the various theories you are examining? How do fictional representations of such political concepts compare with their representations in plainly expository and theoretical writing?

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Notes:

[1] In Robert P. Miller, *Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 136-52.

[2] Particularly helpful on the *Clerk's Tale's* political nature are Grudin and Scala (pp. 123-52).

[3] For more on sovereignty in the *Canterbury Tales*, please see Nakley (especially pp. 368-79), Green, and Thomas. Let us note that Boccaccio presents Walter's people's desire for his marriage simply and briefly, while Petrarch emphasizes their community's hierarchical structure, authority, and eloquence. Chaucer's significantly more extensive treatment of the people's agency hinges on political language including sovereignty.

[4] I include expressions like *oute of drede*, yet exclude expressions and images that suggest widespread social and personal fear in this count.

[5] For an alternative reading of sovereignty in this tale, please see McClellan.

[6] On the noise and character of the masses, see Ganim and Yager. Yager's reading registers an important moral distinction between Chaucer's uses of *folk* and *peple*, despite the fact that both words indicate masses.

[7] By the end, even the Church is superfluous. However, Scanlon suggests that the hierarchies that Water's rule maintains are at the heart of the common good from the beginning, as they ensure authoritative order. Scanlon, 186-91.



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