Preliminary Background Research—Annotated Bibliography:


<http://colfa.utsa.edu/Chaucer/default.html>.

This website houses an extensive annotated bibliography, cataloging an enormous depth and breadth of Chaucerian scholarship from 1900-1984. Although it contains numerous topics that would be helpful to a variety of different types of study, the most useful for those beginning a literary explication of *The Canterbury Tales* are the tale-specific links, each of which, when selected, yield an individual annotated bibliography tailored to each tale. The homepage of the site also has a link back to the *Chaucer Metapage*, which is comprised of numerous other helpful links.


Ashton’s overall focus relates to the role of patience in the text, in that it serves to portray a “holy” Griselda; additionally, it is Ashton’s contention that “The Clerk’s Tale” is purposely fissured in a manner that would have allowed medieval women to hear a codified message—one hidden beneath Griselda’s self-articulation and patient silence. Ashton’s assertion is that Griselda’s almost otherworldly patience serves to mask a deeply resistant personal identity. The ensuing disconnect between womanly ideal and hidden identity depicted through Griselda’s character demonstrates a larger mimesis (i.e. a virtuous disguise utilized to covertly mask a hidden self). For Griselda, passivity, patience and obedience mask a covert defiance of social order. Furthermore, Ashton contends that Griselda’s dutiful mimesis simultaneously subverts and exemplifies the feminine ideal; her actions of patient suffering and idealized femininity combine to depict a disguise of submission, while her words/voice articulate her rebellion. Ashton concludes that ultimately, Griselda’s memetic display, i.e. her perfected feminine disguise, overshadows her more discursive self to the masculine world, but for those women who would have recognized/utilized the same disguise, her patient defiance is quite clear.


In this article, Baker seeks to further support an ongoing examination of how Chaucer was influenced by medieval ethics, and how that influence was particularly evident in his depictions of the virtuous women of *The Canterbury Tales*. Focusing on “The Man of Law’s Tale”, “The
Clerk’s Tale”, “The Physician’s Tales”, and “The Tale of Melibee”, Baker demonstrates how each “heroine” is defined in terms of the four Cardinal Virtues of fortitude, temperance, prudence, and justice, further indicating the thatic link among the four tales.


Baker rebukes James Sledd’s ground-breaking critical reversal pertaining to the “The Clerk’s Tale” (Sledd’s refutation successfully altered critical opinion by asserting that the tale could not be read as realistic fiction, but rather, as an allegorical exemplum regarding mankind’s obedience to God), citing that his argument created a grievous misuse at the hands of successive critics. Baker contends that through literary manipulation, the Clerk, as well as Chaucer himself, have become literary monsters, created through clever discursive manipulation—and the tale has become an exemplum in which Griselda’s significance is drastically restricted to one of wifely obedience, rather than universal human model. The result is problematic, for figurative analysis is used to justify a literal understanding—and understanding which places both the Clerk and Chaucer as endorsers of a hegemonic ideal of marriage, in which the husband, as God’s surrogate on earth, rules with absolute authority over his wife. Baker’s article carefully visits each critical argument which has furthered this explication of the “The Clerk’s Tale”, dismantling and disproving as she goes; she reminds her reader, as she concludes, that the tale’s most important moral is to honor a thorough, careful reading of a text, and to remember the danger of “confusing the letter and the spirit.”