An Error of Constancy:
Subverting Morality through the Cardinal Virtues in Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*

By

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To my mother, Pegg L. Chirhart.

For you and because of you.
ABSTRACT

In Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale*, the clerk’s depiction of Griselda’s unearthly obedience seems to provide an example of virtue for every individual to emulate when faced with tremendous adversity. Despite appearances, however, the clerk’s narrative yields a decidedly different message upon closer examination, one in which Griselda’s unbending constancy subverts not only her virtuous façade, but the larger framework of morality imposed by the Church. Ultimately, the *Clerk’s Tale* appears to reflect Chaucer’s larger questions regarding the efficacy, clarity and achievability of constancy as a human virtue, as well as a changing perception towards an institution deeply vested in the unconditional fixedness of its catechesis.
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“But for that every wight, in his degree,  
Sholde be constant in adversitee  
As was Grisilde...”  
*(Clerk’s Tale, 1145-47)*

As Chaucer’s clerk attempts to end his tale, it is safe to say that the audience would have certain expectations as to the outcome of the clerk’s narrative contribution. Intriguingly, however, it is as the clerk attempts to provide guidance towards the “correct” meaning of the tale that many of the most significant analytical issues within the text begin. The audience’s expectations for closure and tangible literary meaning sink under the weight of looming unanswered questions and ambiguous axioms, all which conspire together to complicate and undermine the generally anticipated outcome of the *Clerk’s Tale*. While scholars tend to agree that achieving a concrete conclusion regarding the meaning of the tale is impossible, it is this vast fertile terrain of possibility that makes this tale so irresistible. And so here we begin, at the intersection of Griselda’s troubled character within the tale, and the clerk’s problematic instruction which frames the tale.

The epigraph to this essay is what really provides the foundational predicament on which the remainder of this analysis rests. It is through working backwards from the clerk’s instructive advice to his listeners that we can begin to see perhaps what Chaucer is up to in the text. This is a profoundly interesting passage, in that the clerk interprets Griselda’s experiences in the story not as advice for “wyves” to “folwen”, but for “every wight”... for all; and that all should be as constant in the face of adversity as Griselda when faced with her calamitous situation. But here the question arises to be addressed in this essay: what if constancy is not Griselda’s virtue, as the
tale and the clerk would purport, but rather, that which renders her character a failure? What if it is Griselda's constancy in the face of adversity which ultimately unmakes the *Clerk's Tale*?

As carefully as the clerk constructs Griselda's virtue as a wife and woman, and as tenderly and lovingly he portrays her as a mother to her children, it is in her maternal moment of responsibility that we see Griselda fail. This failure of motherhood eventually destabilizes the clerk's attempt at a balanced, restorative ending, rendering his proclaimed guidance problematic at best, and arguably invalid. It is clear, then, that the tale, like Griselda, is not the perfected example it is held up to be by the clerk. Rather, the lingering inconsistencies seem to reflect Chaucer's unwillingness to allow his tale to succumb to the categorization of a simplistic edifying example of Christian virtue. The *Clerk's Tale* instead reflects an unwillingness to operate within the clear-cut world of absolutes—a world in which the purely innocent are oppressed by the purely evil; where good always triumphs over evil; and where virtue is always rewarded over vice. Chaucer forces his audience to consider the otherworldly, virtuous behavior of his protagonist against the backdrop of their ordinary, human world. And since the tale is not tethered to divine intervention and absolute justice, Griselda is left to flounder in the murky waters of earthly existence. As a result, her obedient, perfected façade of absolute constancy collapses under the awareness that a morality contingent upon the extremes of absolutes is neither achievable nor realistic to flesh and blood individuals—and that an institution vested in the proliferation and maintenance of such unrealistic standards has less than altruistic motives for those it seeks to control.

Ultimately, then, the *Clerk's Tale*, through its depiction of the problematic nature of constancy, provokes a questioning of the hierarchal structures of obedience as enforced by the Church. By undermining the validity of the Cardinal Virtues (specifically fortitude, which is