The Presidential Address

Griselda in Siena

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The germ of this essay came to me as I was rereading Derek Brewer’s *Symbolic Stories* in preparation for a commemorative session at the 2010 Kalamazoo Congress, and I hope that it may stand here as a modest tribute to one of the founding members of our New Chaucer Society and a standard-bearer for humane Chaucerian criticism throughout the world. We all miss Derek’s genial presence, nowhere more so than here in Italy, a country he held particularly dear. Rereading *Symbolic Stories,* I found myself wondering why it was that so few Chaucerians had followed Derek in keeping faith with the study of the traditional folktale through the long years of poststructuralism and new historicism. Since actual historians (particularly the French *annalistes* like Jacques Le Goff and Jean-Claude Schmitt and the British cultural materialists like E. P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm) had shown themselves far from indifferent to folklore, one might have thought that the historicist turn taken by Middle English studies would have fostered a similar interest. It was a historian, after all, Judith Bennett, who reprimanded delegates to the 2006 New Chaucer Society Meeting in New York for their lack of attention to popular ballads and carols. Be that as it may, I should like to take this opportunity to pay homage to Derek Brewer’s memory by attempting a Chaucerian reading that is both folkloric and historicist, and in deference to our charming surroundings I will take as my subject *The Clerk’s Tale,* a story whose origins are rooted in the folklore of the Tuscan countryside, though in actuality I will be less con-
cerned here with The Clerk's Tale itself than with the generic story of Griselda, of which Chaucer's tale is but one early expression.

Almost everyone seems to agree that the story of Griselda began life as a folktale, but there is very little agreement as to what kind of folktale it was. To my mind, genealogical debates about whether Griselda is to be traced back to a "Cupid and Psyche" archetype, or whether it is more closely related to the "Monstrous Husband" or the "Ogre Schoolmaster" subtype, are generally rather unproductive. However, I think it is rather more useful to imagine a forerunner of Boccaccio's story being told in a fourteenth-century equivalent of the Tuscan veglia, or evening gathering around the family hearth (Fig. 1), so vividly evoked for us by the Siennese scholar Alessandro Falassi (interestingly, Falassi's epigraphs for the chapters of his Folklore by the Fireside are taken from the Decameron). The veglia attended by Falassi in the countryside around Siena in the 1970s proceeded in three stages, each concentrated on a different age group (first children, then those of marriageable age, and finally the elders). Here is his description of the final stage: "When at the end of the veglia the elders took the floor again, the tone and topic changed; the emphasis shifted to maintaining the family units, rather than the formation of couples. In general, the elders liked and were more interested in the 'stories of married people,' in which the protagonists confronted situations with which the narrators or listeners who were 'old' (that is, 'adult' with positive connotation, deriving from age and experience) had to deal regularly at that stage of their life. Consequently, toward the end of the veglia, the narrators recounted pitiful cases, the events and vicissitudes of marriage" (148). One of the stories Falassi listened to in 1974 was the tale of Pia de Tolomei, the story of a falsely accused wife with obvious similarities to Griselda's; of course Dante alluded to Pia de Tolomei's story ("Siena made me, Maremma undid me"), a fact perfectly well known to the vegliatori themselves, though there is no reason to suppose that the tale that Falassi heard had survived continuously and unchanged across more than six centuries. Nonetheless, the social dynamics of the veglia, as Falassi shows, reach deep into the traditions of the Tuscan countryside, and it is at least

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Alessandro Falassi, Folklore by the Fireside: Text and Context of the Tuscan Veglia (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980).

"Siena mi fi, disfeci Maremma" (Purgatorio, V.134).
arguable that they can tell us as much about the meaning of the story of Griselda for Petrarch's contemporaries as the far better-known remarks of his two humanist friends, the sentimentalist from Padua and the skeptic from Verona. 1

When Giovanni Boccaccio took the folktale of Patient Griselda and adapted it as the last story in his Decameron in 1353, he planted a literary time bomb that would only be detonated two decades later with Francis Petrarch's Latin adaptation of it in his Liber amantis. The explosion of Griselda texts over the next three decades is a phenomenon matched only in the medieval West by the more diffuse but, given the lower rates of lay literacy at the time, no less dramatic explosion of Arthurian texts in the half century or so following Geoffrey of Monmouth's History of the Kings of Britain (see Appendix I). Chaucerian scholarship, dependent as it has been on the solid, but outdated, work of Burke Severs, 2 and the more far-ranging, though equally outdated and rather less reliable, study by Elie Golenishtein-Koutouzoff, 3 has scarcely begun to appreciate the scope of this explosion. The work of Raffaele Morabito in particular allows us to see Chaucer as only one piece in a puzzle of pan-European dimensions. 4 What was it about the story of Griselda that made it spread like wildfire from Italy, to Iberia, France, and England in a few short years at the end of the fourteenth century? Only the Germanic, Nordic, and Slavic countries were exempt, at least in the short term; there is no evidence, for example, that Petrarch's text was known in Germany before the Council of Constance (1414–18). 5 This essay will try to provide an answer.

"Within fairytales," wrote Brewer (citing Propp), "a function can only be correctly understood when its place in the sequence is established," 6 and since, as any folklorist, including Propp, 7 will tell you, things in the folktale tend to happen in threes, when we reach the third, it is always time to sit up and take notice: the third time Rumpelstiltskin visits the queen, for instance, he finds that she has discovered his name, and the third time Jack shinnies up the beanstalk, the giant smells him out. Something similar, I shall argue, happens with the story of Griselda, with the impression that she is to be killed; (2) He has his infant son taken away under similar circumstances; (3) He produces a forged divorce document and sends Griselda home to her father; and (4) He brings Griselda back to the house to prepare it for the arrival of his new bride. Interestingly there is a tendency among readers to reduce these four to three, either by amalgamating the first two (thus the first test becomes "the removal of the children"), or, more commonly, the last two (so that the third test becomes "the divorce and second marriage"—you'll find an example of this in the Wikipedia article on Griselda). 8 But regardless of how the tests are structured in the reader's imagination, one salient fact remains: the laws of the folktale mean that the crucial test, the one upon which Griselda's fate ultimately hangs, must be the last—her return to the house to prepare it for her replacement.

There is in fact textual evidence for such a progression. Boccaccio, for instance, describes Griselda as having "great grief in her heart" [gran noia nel cuor] when her daughter is taken from her, and "deeply grieved within herself" [forte in se medesima si dolce] at the news of the divorce, but when she learns she must prepare the palace for her successor, "all these words were a knife in Griselda's heart" [queste parole fossero tutte cotelle al cuor di Griselda], 9 a phrase that evidently impressed itself upon Boccaccio's follower, Giovanni Sercambi. 10 Petrarch merely says that after the first two trials, Walter returned to testing Griselda "to the height of sorrow and shame" [doloris ac pudoris ad cumulum], 11 an ambiguous
phrase that might equally well refer to Walter himself as to the nature of his last tests, but one of his early French translators (the anonymous author of the *Le livre Griseldis*) removes this ambiguity: "Wishing to try and test his wife more than before" ["vouloir essayer sa femme plus que devant"] and Thomas III of Saluce expands on this: Walter, he says, "wished to test his wife more strongly than before" ["vouloir essayer sa femme plus fort que devant"].

Chaucer's version is generally closer to the ambiguity of Petrarch's original, but even he suggests that Walter is bent on testing his wife to the outmost prove of his corage.

A particularly graphic illustration of this progression is offered us by a series of three splendid *spallieri*, painted here in Siena by an anonymous artist (probably connected with the Ghirlandaio workshop) to celebrate the double wedding of the brothers Antonio and Giulio Spannochici in January 1494. These paintings, now in the National Gallery in London, have recently been carefully restored and their provenance thoroughly investigated.

To the left of the first panel (Fig. 2), Marquis Walter's hunting party is seen encountering Griselda, who is carrying a water pot on her head; on the far right, Walter leads her back from her father's cottage, and in the right foreground she is shown being stripped naked and rel clothed in courtly garments; the central tableau depicts their ceremonial betrothal. More interesting from our point of view are the second and third panels. In the center of the second one (Fig. 3), Walter is showing Griselda the supposed divorce document held by a figure in a red robe, presumably a canon lawyer; to the right she undresses to her shift and on the far right returns to her father's house; on the extreme left, and painted so small that at least one art historian missed it altogether, Griselda hands a child to the sergeant, while in the back ground and more centrally the same sergeant is shown carrying the...
child away. By contrast, the final panel (Fig. 4) displays Griselda’s servile role at the marriage feast prominently and in great detail. On the extreme right, Walter fetches her from her father’s house, and on the extreme left she is shown sweeping the threshold of his palace; a little to the right of this, she instructs the servants, and on the right side of the panel she greets the supposed bride and her brother, while at the right-hand end of the table she waits upon them. There are, in other words, five depictions of Griselda in her role as servant, and only one; at the left-hand end of the table, of her final reconciliation with Walter (though even here she still wears her old clothes).

For the twenty-first-century reader, however, the idea that Walter’s two last tests are more oppressive than the removal of the children is deeply counterintuitive. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s heirs, we feel instinctively that the most barbarous thing Walter does is to separate Griselda from her daughter and son; anything done afterward may add insult to injury, but it cannot in any way match the gratuitous cruelty of this initial act. Without wishing to endorse Philippe Ariès’s view of medieval attitudes to children, I might, however, point out that well-born Tuscan mothers in the trecento were quite frequently separated from their infants: for one thing, they regularly put their babies out to wet-nurses, often wet-nurses who lived some distance from town, so that they saw them only intermittently in the first two years of their lives, and for another, if a young Tuscan widow remarried (and she was often put under considerable pressure to do so by her parents), she was expected to leave her children, whatever their ages, behind with her first husband’s family. In what follows, I shall argue that not only is an overemphasis on Walter’s cruelty in removing their children anachronistic, but that it distorts the real meaning that the tale held for fourteenth-century audiences. Only by restoring the motif of the woman’s preparation for her replacement to its proper place in the hierarchy of tests can we understand why this should be.


Let us start with a twentieth-century example. Ruth Rendell, a writer who is as aware as anyone of the subversive potential of concealed folk-tale motifs, employs this one in her 1993 novel, *The Crocodile Bird*. Eve, a beautiful and talented young woman, traumatized by a brutal rape while away at college, takes a job as a housekeeper in a secluded country mansion whose owner spends much of his time traveling abroad. There, she works obsessively to bring up her daughter cocooned from the menace of the outside world. In a series of increasingly more desperate attempts to preserve this fragile sanctuary, she is driven not only to carry on a clandestine affair with the mansion's owner (less because she is attracted to him than because of her need to secure her claim on his house), but also to murder two men who, in different ways, threaten this asylum. By a clever use of the innocent eye, Rendell tells this story from the point of view of Eve's daughter, the Crocodile Bird of the title. At one point the owner writes to tell Eve that he is getting married.

On the Sunday morning while Liza was eating her breakfast, Mother said, "Mr. Tobias is getting married today. This is his wedding day."

"What's wedding?" said Liza.

So Mother explained about getting married. She turned it into a lesson. . . .

"Will they come and live here?" said Liza.

Mother didn't answer and Liza was going to repeat the question, but she didn't because Mother had gone a dark red and clenched her fists. Liza thought it best to say no more about it. . . .

And of course Mr. and Mrs. Tobias never did come to live at Shrove, though they stayed there from time to time, the first time being a fortnight after the wedding. Another letter came first. Mother read it, screwed it up, and looked cross.

"What does he mean, get a woman in to get the place ready? He knows I'll never do that. He knows that I'll clean it and that I'll clean it ready for his wife." And she said those final two words again. "His wife."26

From here, things go from bad to worse, and Eve eventually kills Mr. Tobias with a shotgun, though not directly as a result of this particular indignity.

Rendell could well have come across this motif in *The Clerk's Tale*.

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itself, but there are at least two other places where she might have encountered it. The more likely is the ballad of Fair Annie, where Annie, Lord Thomas’s long-suffering mistress, who has borne him seven sons and is pregnant with the eighth, learns that she is to be replaced by a “braw bride” for entirely mercenary reasons:

“’Tis narrow, make your bed,
And learn to lie your lane;
For I’m ga’n oer the sea, Fair Annie,
A braw bride to bring hame.
Wi her I will get gowd and gear;
Wi you nee got none.
“’But wha will bake my bridal bread,
Or brew my bridal ale?
And wha will welcome my brisk bride,
That I bring oer the dale?”

“’Tis I will bake your bridal bread,
And brew your bridal ale,
And I will welcome your brisk bride,
That you bring oer the dale.”

In performing this task, however, Fair Annie shows none of the stoic self-restraint of Griselda:

And aye she served the lang tables,
With white bread and with brown;
And ay she turned her round about,
Sae fast the tears fell down.

(62A.18)

And though the new-come bride eventually recognizes her as her long-lost sister and provides her with a marriage portion that enables her to marry Lord Thomas, it is not before the cast-off mistress has savagely cursed her own children:

Gin my seven sons were seven young rats,
Running on the castle wa,

In the late Middle Ages, the French poet Marie de France, Le Freine.

Here, too, we have a mistress preparing the house for the arrival of her lover’s bride, but the atmosphere is far less menacing. The groom, the Count of Dol, evidently still cherishes his old love but, like Marquis Walter, is forced to take a wife merely to satisfy the demands of his people; since Le Freine, a penniless orphan, can have no aspirations to this position, she apparently dresses the bed chamber for the future countess (who, like Fair Annie, will eventually turn out to be her long-lost sister) in a spirit of loving and selfless generosity. There are no bitter recriminations here, and no hints of violence. Interestingly, in Jean Renart’s retelling of Marie de France’s tale, Gaëtan de Bretagne, where the heroine is far less passive, the motif is dropped altogether as entirely inappropriate.

Each of these versions of this folktale motif has its own distinct character, but all four share one essential characteristic: the tension between the woman’s double role as loving bedfellow and dutiful servant. In the three early instances, the social pathology of this situation is underlined by its association with incest, and in the fourth by linking it with rape (Liza believes, wrongly, that Mr. Tobias is her father). Le Freine apparently embraces this discordant situation willingly, but to varying degrees the three are all forced into it by adverse circumstance—the protection of their children, the maintenance of a roof over their heads, the recognition that they lack any other means of support. Three of the four are ex-mistresses of the prospective bridegroom, with all the ambiguity of status that that role implies; only Griselda is, as she believes herself to be, an ex-wife, or, as the reader knows her to be, still legally married. This paradox, I believe, is the key to the tale’s power.

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And I were a grew cat mysell,
I soon would worry them a’.
Gin my seven sons were seven young hares,
Running oer yon lilly lee,
And I were a grew hound mysell,
Soon worried they a’ should be.

(62A.23–24)

The final, and least likely, pattern for Rendell’s Eve is Marie de France’s Le Freine. Here, too, we have a mistress preparing the house for the arrival of her lover’s bride, but the atmosphere is far less menacing. The groom, the Count of Dol, evidently still cherishes his old love but, like Marquis Walter, is forced to take a wife merely to satisfy the demands of his people; since Le Freine, a penniless orphan, can have no aspirations to this position, she apparently dresses the bed chamber for the future countess (who, like Fair Annie, will eventually turn out to be her long-lost sister) in a spirit of loving and selfless generosity. There are no bitter recriminations here, and no hints of violence. Interestingly, in Jean Renart’s retelling of Marie de France’s tale, Gaëtan de Bretagne, where the heroine is far less passive, the motif is dropped altogether as entirely inappropriate.

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her a claim to something other than servile status—a consequential family to take her side, money and belongings of her own, the status acquired as mother of his children, and finally the legal protection of matrimony itself (or at least the appearance of such protection)—so that he is at liberty to test her willingness to serve him by casting her in the most menial and invidious of roles imaginable. The tale of Griselda, particularly in the hands of skilled storytellers like Boccaccio, Petrarch, and Chaucer, is of course about many other things, but when we ask ourselves what made it a best-seller in late fourteenth-century Western Europe, why people found it a fascinating subject of conversation (as the Ménagier de Paris assures us that they did), surely the answer must lie in this startling role reversal, from marchioness to chambermaid, and the fundamental questions about the marital relationship it so dramatically raises.

Many readers, including Brewer, have noted the tension between the deeply “tradition centered” nature of the tale itself and Chaucer’s own “naturalistic” rendering of it (Petrarch himself had termed these two poles fabula and historia), but in one form or another this tension inheres in all early written versions of the story. Boccaccio’s and Petrarch’s renderings of the Griselda story, too, give a naturalistic cast to folk-tale material (after all, the marquisate of Saluce was real enough, and Thomas III, the man who held the title in Chaucer’s day, was clearly convinced that Walter was one of his own ancestors), but inevitably there are moments when such a “tradition centered” tale must frustrate normal mimetic expectations (Petrarch famously tells us that one of his readers, a man from Verona, was left unmoved by Griselda’s plight because he believed that it was “only a story” and Chaucer, in The Good Wife’s Guide, 119 (1.6:10), also may be familiar with it and be able to converse about such things as everyone else does.” The Good Wife’s Guide: A Medieval Household Book, trans. Greco and Christine M. Rose (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 119 (1.6:10).

Le roman ant du Marquis de Saluce, apparently unable to accept the central premise of the folktale, turns Griselda into thedaughter of a gentleman (named Jean-Colin) who has fallen on hard times—but rather with small troubling details that get reworked or omitted altogether. The stripping of Griselda before the wedding is one such moment. Can Walter really have exposed his future wife’s naked body to the gaze of his own followers (in presenza di tutta la sua compagnia), as Boccaccio says? Petrarch had evidently had difficulty with his original at this point, while Francesco d’Amaretto Mannelli had written that’s crazy!” (A puzz) in the margin of the manuscript of the Deamor (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 222–23. The forged letters from Rome constitute another pressure point: Can the pope really be implicated in such a shabby subterfuge? L’histoire de Griselda certainly implies that he is, since he actually appears on stage, like others, including Christine de Pisan, leave out the pope altogether. A

apparently shared by the Ménagier de Paris. A careful comparison of the various translations and adaptations of the tale reveals a number of pressure points, where early readers struggled to reconcile the details of the story with their knowledge of the way marquises and peasant girls behave in the real world. I am not thinking here of major shifts of emphasis—the way, for instance, the early fifteenth-century rhymed version, Le romanant du Marquis de Saluce, apparently unable to accept the central premise of the folktale, turns Griselda into the daughter of a gentleman (named Jean-Colin) who has fallen on hard times—but rather with small troubling details that get reworked or omitted altogether. The stripping of Griselda before the wedding is one such moment. Can Walter really have exposed his future wife’s naked body to the gaze of his own followers (in presenza di tutta la sua compagnia), as Boccaccio says? Petrarch had evidently had difficulty with his original at this point, while Francesco d’Amaretto Mannelli had written that’s crazy!” (A puzz) in the margin of the manuscript of the Deamor (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 222–23. The forged letters from Rome constitute another pressure point: Can the pope really be implicated in such a shabby subterfuge? L’histoire de Griselda certainly implies that he is, since he actually appears on stage, like others, including Christine de Pisan, leave out the pope altogether. A

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third (and my favorite) occurs when Griselda dons her old dress on her return to her father's house. Can we really believe that a woman who has borne two children (now twelve and eight) can still get into the dress she last wore when she was a slip of a girl? "The poor little dress," says Le livre Griseldis, "fitted her very badly, for the woman had put on weight and become plump" (La porre robe... d... la courv... a grant mesarie, car la femme estoit devenue grande et embarasite); the margin of Mannelli's copy contains a similar observation. One might have thought that Griselda's uncritical acceptance of Walter's final explanation of his reasons for testing her might have constituted another pressure point. Boccaccio, after all, it had prompted her ladies to censure Walter for his unwarranted cruelty, but the earliest versions all treat this scene unironically and only Le roman du Marquis de Saluce echoes Boccaccio here. For Francesco d'Amaretto Mannelli, by contrast, it provides the occasion for his most startling aside: "Go, piss on your hand, Walter!" storms his marginal Griselda, "Who'll give me back twelve years? The gallow's?"

The instance that I want to dwell on here, however, is when Griselda takes up a broom to sweep clean the palace for her replacement. Boccaccio doesn't mention the broom specifically (he merely says that Griselda sets her hand to every task just like one of the humblest maid-servants in the house—e a ogni casa, come se una piccola fantesella della casa fosse, porre la mani [X.10:52])—but Petrarch, though unwilling to sully his humanist Latin with a vulgar word like scissors (servilia instrumentum) and begins to clean the house and to encourage the others to work (ortarique alias), just like a faithful retainer (uncile in morem fidelissime). The problem here is one of social decorum: Are we really expected to believe that a marchioness would perform so menial a task in her own person? No wonder Philippe de Mézières remarks at this point, "What more can I say, to amaze the ladies of this world?"

Of the two original fourteenth-century French translations based on Petrarch, Le livre Griseldis at this point is the more oblique; Griselda is not specifically said to take up a broom, though she does engage in sweeping; "[Elle] commence a besoingnier, comme de baliser la maison [my italics]." Chaucer, however, is still more restrained (like the Catalan Bernat Metge, who was writing for the noblewoman Isabel de Guimerà), omitting all mention of the broom and leaving open the question of whether Griselda herself does any of the actual cleaning; he certainly implies that her main role is that of a supervisor who leaves the actual sweeping to her chamberers:

And with that word she gan the hous to dighte. 
And tables for to sette, and beddes make; 
And penyed hir to doon al that she myghte, 
Preyynge the chamberes, for Goddes sake, 
To hasten hem, and faste swepe and shake; 
And she, the mooste servysable of alle, 
Hath every chambr earrayed and his halle. 

(IV.974-80)

Although Chaucer's contemporary, Thomas III, Marquis of Saluce, follows Le livre Griseldis fairly closely as regards the cleaning of the house, he does respond to a second pressure point in the scene: the reason that Griselda must greet his guests in her old clothes, says Walter, is that he doesn't want to make his new bride suspicious of her. "Que diray-je plus pour les dames du monde esmerveillier?" (Golenischef-Koutozoff, L'histoire de Griseldis, 177, VI:48-49).


Bernat Metge: "E encuentren a manera de una serventa comensa de endresar lo palau... e de amonestar les altres campanyes que li aissadan." Les vies d'en Bernat Mege, ed. R. Miquel y Planas (Barcelona: Nova Biblioteca Catalana, 1910), 74 (lines 527-30).

Interestingly, three late 13th C MSS read "she gan the hous to dighte" here (instead of "to digher"). See John M. Manly and Edith Rickert, The Text of the Canterbury Tales, 8 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940), 6:357.

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The other French translation, that of Philippe de Mézières, does specifically mention the broom: he tells us that Griselda prennit les vilz instru­ments et commence à nestoyer le palays. Moreover, he omits all mention of other servants, though he does add a sentence that has no warrant in the poorest of maid-servants, it certainly seemed to all who saw her at her tasks that she was a woman of great honor and of marvelous pru­dence.

This remark is echoed in the play, L'histoire de Griseldis, thought by some to be the work of Philippe de Mézières himself, but in other respects Griselda's role is quite different:

la vierge qui vient a moy,
Veuil que tu empregnes en toy
Toute l'ordonnance et la cure;
Et tous, si comme c'est droiture,
T'obéiront en ce faisant.

("I wish you to take upon yourself all the supervision and care of the virgin who is coming to me; and everyone, as is proper, will obey you in this task"), says Walter to her, and immediately we see her taking charge of the household:

Avant, mes amis! Labourezz
A ce que tout soit nettement
Ordonné et que noblement
Recevons l'espeuse nouvelle.

(2363–66)

[Let's go, my friends! Work to get everything cleaned up so we can receive the new bride nobly!], though the stage directions do indicate that she is holding a broom in her hand at this point (tenant un balay en sa main). The Ménagier de Paris, also working from Philippe de Mézières, takes a similar line: "Then Griselda, like a poor servant girl, took

La chambre qui vient a moy, 
Veuil que tu empregnes en toy
Toute l'ordonnance et la cure;
Et tous, si comme c'est droiture, 
T'obéiront en ce faisant. 27

Not the least interesting thing about this passage is its use of personal pronouns: not only does the Ménagier speak of "your" house (vostre house) and "our" social position, but, unlike Walter, he addresses his wife throughout as vous, not tu.

I will mention just one more detail. The speech that Petrarch puts into Griselda's mouth when she learns that she is to be sent back to her father's house.

the humble implements and gave them to the household [my italics], ordering some to clean the palace and others the stables, urging the officers and the chambermaids, each to complete carefully his particular task. 38 Christine de Pisan, perhaps predictably, declines to describe the actual cleaning (though she does say that Walter puts Griselda in charge of it), but perhaps the cleverest solution of all is the verse Rondant du Marquis de Saluce's, where the "servile instruments" become the keys to the linen chest that Walter hands to his wife in order for her to have the chamber made ready. 40

To put Walter's treatment of his wife in context here, we need only to compare it with the instructions of the Ménagier de Paris to his wife:

Next, my dear [chere maire], know that after your husband, you must be mistress of the house, giver of orders, inspector, ruler, and sovereign administrator over the servants. It is incumbent upon you to require submission and obedience to you, and to teach, reprove, and punish the staff. . . . Tell dame Agnes the Beguine with her own eyes to witness them starting the work that you want completed in short order. First she must assign the chambermaids early in the morning to sweep and keep clean the entrances to your house . . . and to dust and shake out the footrests, bench covers and cushions. Next, every day the other rooms should be similarly cleaned and tidied for the day, as befits our social position.

Not the least interesting thing about this passage is its use of personal pronouns: not only does the Ménagier speak of "your" house (vostre house) and "our" social position (vostre estat), but, unlike Walter, he addresses his wife throughout as vous, not tu.

I will mention just one more detail. The speech that Petrarch puts into Griselda's mouth when she learns that she is to be sent back to her father's house.

27 Greco and Rose, trans., The Good Wife's Guide, 116 (6.8); for the French see Le Ménagier de Paris, ed. Georgette E. Bretenon and Janet M. Ferrier (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 333. The statement that Griselda gave the humble instruments to the chambermaids (les bailla aux mesqines) is a problem since chambermaids would not normally clean the stables (otablels); evidently Greco and Rose's solution is to read manage les mesqines, while Bretenon and Ferrier read tables les estables.

28 "Je veul que tu en ayes la charge et tous les offices t'obeiront." Curnow, ed., The "Livre de la Citt des Dames" 907.

father’s house includes the sentence: “I have never held myself worthy to be your—I won’t say wife, but—servant (non discam contigio, sed servitio), and in this house, of which you have made me lady, as God is my witness, I have always remained at heart a serving maid (animo semper ancilla permansis).”

In one form or another, almost every rendering of the Griselda story retains this speech, and for good reason. Not only does Walter’s treatment of his wife as a servant embody, to use a phrase coined by Tristram Coffin of the traditional ballad, the “emotional core” of the story of Patient Griselda,64 but it encapsulates, I believe, its significance for contemporaries by throwing into stark contrast two competing models of marriage—the patriarchal and the cooperative.65 or, to borrow David Wallace’s terminology (since the personal is always political), the absolutist and the associationalist.66 But having said this, we must at once acknowledge a historical irony that will surprise few modern feminists: that those Italian city-states where (male) associational forms flourished most vigorously were also the ones least likely to allow a share of governance, whether civic or domestic, to women.67

The laws of the folklore are not those of naturalistic fiction, but it would be a mistake to suppose that they bear no relation to the material conditions from which they arise.68 In the fourteenth century, as Wallace has reminded us so well, they did things differently in Italy, and readers in France and England, perhaps even in Piedmonte and Catalonia, confronted with the picture of marriage drawn by Petrarch, were clearly startled. What kind of a world can it be, they must have asked themselves, where a marchioness must set her hand to a broomstick? Let me read two quotations that may help to encapsulate this gulf between north and south. The first is from Christine de Pisan’s *Le Livre des trois vertus* (ca. 1405):

Because—like lords (though even more so)—knights, squires, and gentlemen travel and go to war, it is necessary for their wives to be sensible, and good managers, and have a clear head for business, because they spend most of their time in the household without their husbands (who are at court or abroad), so that they need to assume complete control in order to keep track of both income and possessions. It befits every woman in this position, if she has any sense, to know exactly what they take in each year and what the standard income from their lands is; and if she can, this sensible lady should speak to her husband with such sweet words and give such good advice, that they consult together and decide how to maintain a standard of living that is within their means, and certainly not one so excessive that at the year’s end they find they spend themselves owing money to their own servants or to other creditors.69

The second quotation comes from Leon Battista Alberti’s *Della Famiglia* (ca. 1432)—Giannozzo, an elderly relative of Leon Battista’s, is speaking of his early married life:

I kept none of my valuables hidden from my wife. I showed her all the treasures of my household. I kept only the ledgers and business papers, my ancestors’ as well as mine, locked so that my wife could not read them or even see them then or at any time since. I never kept them in my pockets but always under lock and key in their proper place in my study, almost as if they were sacred or religious objects. I never allowed my wife to enter my study alone or in my company, and I ordered her to turn over to me at once any papers of mine she found. To prevent her from ever wanting to see my papers or know about confidential matters, I often spoke against those bold impudent women who try so hard to find out their husband’s or other men’s affairs outside the home.70

63 The *Romant du Marquis de Saluces, whose heroine is well known, omits it altogether (Golenischeff-Koutouzoff, *L’histoire de Grisélidis*, 238 lines 543ff.), and Christine de* Pisan omits the second half [i.e. “I have always remained at heart a serving maid”].  
Of course two isolated quotations, however dramatic, prove nothing by themselves, but many social historians would agree that in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the position enjoyed by women in general, and wives in particular, differed widely between London and Paris, on the one hand, and the cities of Tuscany, on the other. To read, for example, Barbara Hanawalt’s *The Wealth of Wives: Women, Law, and Economy in Late Medieval London* alongside Christiane Klapisch-Zuber’s *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* is to find oneself moving between two radically distinct worlds. In summary, well-to-do women in northwestern Europe married later than those in southern Europe and their age at first marriage was closer to that of their spouses; they were more likely to set up an independent establishment upon marriage (as opposed to moving in with their husband’s family); their property rights within marriage (at least as regards real property) were more strongly protected in law, and their economic prospects in the event of widowhood were considerably brighter. It would be easy to attribute the manifestly lower status of Florentine wives around 1400 to the Tuscan dowry system since, as the economic historian Siwan Anderson succinctly puts it, “dowry payments . . . are consistent with a development process where women do not directly reap the benefits of modernization and men are the primary recipients of the new economic opportunities.” However, since wives were dowered in London and Paris too, things were evidently not quite this simple. One obvious difference was that London dowers were usually settled in the form of real estate (which as a consequence was far less easy for husbands to liquidate), whereas in Tuscan cities the preferred form was cash; equally important, such dowers were frequently counterbalanced by real gifts from the husband to his bride, either in the form of dower lands or jointures, both designed to guarantee her financial security in the event of widowhood. In the early Middle Ages, Lombard brides too had been the recipients of a bride-price or *Morgengabe* from their husbands, but long before the fourteenth century this custom had dwindled to a symbolic gift of clothing and jewelry—a gift that in actuality remained the property of the husband after the marriage. In London, a married woman’s rights to chattels were if anything more circumscribed than in Tuscany, though in practice Florentine nondotal assets seem to have fallen de facto, if not de iure, under the husband’s effective control. For Tuscan widows, however, prospects were far bleaker than for those in London: in what looks very like a concerted campaign to channel family assets toward male heirs, civic laws from the twelfth century onward systematically restricted the amounts that widows could customarily expect to receive from their husbands’ estates. In the margin of a manuscript of Caffaro’s chronicle for the year 1143, a vivid sketch of distraught women appears alongside an entry noting that the Genoese commune had abolished the customary right of widows to a third of their husband’s household goods; in London, by contrast, well into the sixteenth century a widow could expect to receive a third of her late husband’s goods. While Alice of Bath is free to cast about for a sixth husband, many Florentine widows would have had little other than a cloister to look forward to. But women in late fourteenth-century London would have enjoyed other rights unavailable to their Tuscan sisters: they would have encountered far fewer barriers either to inheriting or bequeathing property, for instance, essentially enjoying “the same rights to lineal descent of property as did men.” While local customs varied in detail, by and large most of the towns of northwestern Europe, including Paris, were far closer to the London model than to anything in Tuscany.

A gulf in marital customs between southern and northwestern Europe

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17 See notes 65 and 24 above.
20 See note 6 above.
rope helps explain why audiences in London or Paris were fascinated by the grotesque picture of marriage drawn by the tale of Griselda. Only the misogynistic Philippe de Mézières seems to consider Griselda "a fine mirror" (bien miroir), in which married women [les dames mariées] "will easily be able to recognize their shortcomings and their advantages and the state of their marriages." Others are clearly uncomfortable with such a reading: the Menagier de Paris for one says that he has told his wife the story, "not to apply it to you, or because I expect the same obedience from you," and apologizes that "the story contains excessive accounts of cruelty, in my opinion more than was fitting, and I don't believe that it was ever true." Chaucer, we will remember, chose to turn Petrarch's simple remark that Griselda's patience was scarcely imitable (vix imitabilis) into an assertion that it was totally unrealistic:

This storie is seyd nat for that wyves sholde
Folwen Griseldis as in hymlytere,
For it were imporrtante, though they wolde.
(IV.1142-44)

Le livre Griseldis remarks that her patience and constancy "seem scarcely possible to follow" (a paine me semble ensresponsive et possible), and Thomas III of Saluce calls her example "impossible to maintain" (comme impossible a porter); even Peter de Hailles adds that not only is it scarcely practical, but scarcely tolerable as well (six sectanda mihi parant aut toleranda). By contrast, such a gulf cannot account for the popularity of the story in its original homeland, for it is quite clear that, despite Anne Middleton's claim to the contrary, Tuscan, like Parisians, read the tale of Griselda primarily as a story about marriage. To understand how this can be, we must appeal, not simply to relative differences between northern and southern Europe, but to a fundamental change in attitudes to women and marriage that, while it first began in fourteenth-century Italy, was to spread inexorably northward over the course of the next two hundred years. Although many factors affected this change, its root cause clearly lay in the nascent capitalism of the Tuscan city-states.

It is not difficult to demonstrate this change. Throughout much of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Florence experienced a period of dowry inflation. Dante comments on it in the early fourteenth century, and though population losses in the wake of the Black Death may have slowed it somewhat, it evidently began to accelerate again early in the fifteenth century. This inflation placed a huge burden on well-to-do Florentine families and in 1425 the city set up a credit union, the Monte delle dote, whose ostensible purpose was to enable citizens to save for their daughters' weddings. David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber have argued that the social consequences of this inflation were twofold: an increase in the age difference between bride and groom (men generally marrying women ten to fifteen years younger than themselves), and a widening of the social gap between couples (men tending to marry up and women to marry down). Self-evidently, neither of these developments was likely to encourage harmonious matrimonial relationships. Even more important was the increasing commercialization of marriage as an institution; by the fifteenth century, Tuscan marriage contracts have taken on all the complexity of credit default swaps and mortgage-backed securities, a situation that worried contemporary moralists like Bernardino of Siena, still wrestling

82 "legierement pourront cognoiscre ou leurs deffaultes ou leurs bienfais ec la condicion de leur mariage" (Golenischcheff-Komouzoff, L'histoire de Griseldis, 155, Prologue, lines 64-67).
with the anachronistic notion that charging interest was a sin. Another graphic demonstration may help to show the loss of status that this entailed for married women.

In the final act of the three-act drama that constituted a well-to-do Tuscan marriage in the trecento and quattrocento (the first two acts had constituted the marriage negotiations and the formal betrothal), the bride publicly processed from her own home to the house of the groom, or, more probably, of his parents. Prominent among the objects displayed in this procession were commonly a pair of chests, now generally referred to as cassoni (other contemporary terms were cofani and forzieri), destined to furnish the new bridal chamber. In the fourteenth century, these were generally simple coffers, decorated with chivalric or heraldic motifs, but by the beginning of the fifteenth they had evolved into handsome pieces of furniture, painted on the front and sides with mythical or historical scenes, and by the sixteenth, into monumental carved chests. Just as interesting as this visual evolution, however, are the changes in the social function of these cassoni. In the fourteenth century, they were paid for by the bride's father and contained her trousseau—her clothes, linens, and jewelry (sometimes known as paraphernalia)—but by the fifteenth, the cost of providing them had begun to fall upon the groom's family and at this point their contents likewise changed. They now contained, not the bride's trousseau, but something Christiane Klapisch-Zuber calls the counter-trousseau, in her view, a symbolic survival from the days of the bride-price or morgengabe; this counter-trousseau also contained clothes, jewels, and finery (sometimes on a lavish scale), but there was one very significant difference. Unlike the trousseau, which was treated as a part of the dowry, and over which the

There can be nothing so hidden that they do not find and touch. They check everything, even seeing if the lamps have too thick a thread. There can be nothing so hidden that they do not find and touch. They check everything, even seeing if the lamps have too thick a thread. There can be nothing so hidden that they do not find and touch. They check everything, even seeing if the lamps have too thick a thread. There can be nothing so hidden that they do not find and touch. They check everything, even seeing if the lamps have too thick a thread.

new wife thus retained some measure of personal control, the husband's gifts, which constituted the counter-trousseau, "were temporary. Once they had played their role the husband could repossess them." The principle that Florentine husbands regained legal control of such prenuptial gifts after the wedding Klapisch-Zuber has astutely labeled "the Griselda complex." It is not difficult to appreciate the symbolism of replacing cassoni paid for by the bride's father and containing her personal trousseau, with cassoni provided by the groom's family and containing finery that the bride could only enjoy temporarily and under sufferance—especially since in the public procession to her new home the bride's actual trousseau was now carried in two inconspicuous wicker baskets. Where formerly brides had spent the first night of their marriage in a new bedchamber furnished with their own chests containing their own possessions, they were now provided with a forceful reminder that they owed the very clothes on their backs to their husbands. After this, do we need to be told that at least five surviving fifteenth-century cassoni are decorated with scenes from the story of Patient Griselda (Fig. 5)?

Imagine waking up after your wedding night to find yourself confronted with the image of Griselda on your bedroom furniture. The diminished status of Tuscan wives was noted by contemporaries. Where once, however circumscribed their position outside the home, wives had been undisputed rulers within it, they were now falling under the supervision of interfering husbands. "I kept for myself the tasks of going outside among men and earning money outside the home and left to my wife the care of lesser domestic matters," writes Leon Battista Alberti's spokesman, Giannozzo: "I do not know whether you will praise me for this, for I see many men who go around looking and searching in every corner of the house and allow nothing to remain hidden. There can be nothing so hidden that they do not find and touch it. They check everything, even seeing if the lamps have too thick a thread. There can be nothing so hidden that they do not find and touch it. They check everything, even seeing if the lamps have too thick a thread. There can be nothing so hidden that they do not find and touch it. They check everything, even seeing if the lamps have too thick a thread.

See, e.g., Sermo XLII (Quando licet ultra sortem), cap. 2: "Quod homo licite pacisci pro interesse damni emergentis de praesenti, ubi ostenditur quare pignus doris uxoris marito non computatur in sortem" [That a man may legitimately be bound to pay a pledge of a marital dowry to the husband is not counted in with the principal]; Bernardino of Siena, Opera Omnia, studia et cura p.p. Collegii S. Bonaventurai, 9 vols. (Florence: Quaracchi, 1950-65), 4:352-56.

For a general introduction to these cassoni, see Caroline Campbell, Love and Marriage in Renaissance Florence: The Courtauld Wedding Chests (London: Courtauld Gallery, 2009).


8 Kirshner, "Materials for a Gilded Age," 186.
STUDIES IN THE AGE OF CHAUCER

Fig. 5. The cassone illustrated here (Callmann, no. 83) was formerly in the Palazzo Serristori, Florence; it was sold at auction on May 9, 1977, and its current whereabouts are unknown. Photograph courtesy of Sotheby's.

They say there is no shame in looking after one's own affairs and that they harm no one by establishing within their homes those rules of conduct which seem appropriate to them. While conceding that "the diligent care of one's possessions is the mother of wealth," Giannozzo still can't quite bring himself to feel that this is the proper way for a man to behave. Equally striking is his insistence that his wife should keep a proper distance between herself and the servants, as if this, too, was an area where older proprieties were breaking down: "To seem very industrious, at times she would have done menial tasks, had I not immediately forbidden it," he writes (237); "I do not want you to do everything yourself. There are many things which would not be proper for you when there are others to do them" (235). Evidently Giannozzo's lesson is one that would have been lost on Marquis Walter. Even more telling is a passage from an earlier tract by Francisco Barbaro (Barbaro was a Venetian, but his De re uxoria was written as a wedding present for a Florentine friend): after attributing disorder in household affairs to the capitalistic practice of buying and selling supplies in the market rather than raising them on the home farm ("this system of acquiring food, fuel, and wine one day at a time is more appropriate to the hectic life of a traveler or a soldier than a citizen or the head of a household"), he goes on to imply that such behavior has led to the devaluation of women: "I believe that the custom of the Romans should be followed in this, lest the noblest women should be set to the most ignoble tasks, for after a treaty was concluded with the Sabines, noblewomen were protected from having to work at milling, cooking, or such servile occupations." Beneath the elegant humanist patina lurks an astute sense that the underlying cause for women's loss of status is to be sought in the vibrant commercial life of the city.

As I have said, with the relentless expansion of capitalism, the social changes first apparent in trecento and quattrocento Tuscany begin to be spread further north. When Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass seek to contextualize The Pleasant Comodie of Patient Grissill, staged in London by the Admiral's Men in early 1600, they draw on obvious parallels with Boccaccio's Italy. But we must remember that Queen Elizabeth's London was a very different place from Richard II's. "The picture of the lifestyle of women in medieval London is quite a rosy one," writes Caroline Barron, "their range of options and prospects differed only slightly from those of the men who shared their level of prosperity. But it is clear that the situation began to change in the course of the sixteenth century." It may be worth pointing out that (as Lawrence Stone has shown) in the late sixteenth century England experienced a period of dowry inflation comparable to that experienced in Tuscany a hundred and fifty years earlier. Joan Kelly's argument, first floated almost forty years ago, that in the Renaissance "women as a group, especially among the classes that dominated Italian commercial life, experienced a contraction of social and commercial options that men of their classes . . . did not," no longer appears quite so revolution-

ary, though as others, including David Herlihy, have pointed out, a similar contraction was to be experienced all over Europe, merely occurring later in the less intensely capitalized north.

If the cooperative marriage was disappearing among the city elites of late fourteenth-century Tuscany, there was one place where it must still have maintained a foothold—in the surrounding countryside. This is shown by the much earlier age of first marriage for men in rural areas than in the towns and the explanation is purely economic: "The young peasant had first to marry before he undertook the cultivation of a farm; he needed the help of a wife and eventually children. In the city the merchant or artisan had first to achieve success in his trade before taking a wife and assuming the burdens of a family [my italics]." At this social level, differences between north and south would have seemed far less marked. As Barbara Hanawalt has written of the partnership marriage of the English peasantry: "The coroner's inquests show husband and wife sitting down at table to eat together, and while the wife put food on the table, she was not acting as a servant and she did not stand behind her husband while he ate. Husband and wife walked side by side in fifteenth-century England." Under the rule of what Ivan Illich has called "vernacular gender," wives may not have been able to claim equal status with their husbands, but they still enjoyed a well-defined, independent, and respected role.

Which brings us back finally to the Tuscan veglia with which we began. Alessandro Falassi has stressed the crucial role of the "housemother" in arranging and supervising the twentieth-century veglia, and though we cannot know how her fourteenth-century counterparts might have behaved, we can at least feel fairly sure that the folklore of Patient Griselda would have done quite different cultural work in the rural farmhouses of trecento Tuscany than in its city palaces. Folktales frequently tell of unfortunate young people who marry above their station, but in this case we are not dealing with a story about the rewards of courtship but about the trials of marriage; Philippe de Mézières may have seen it as a model for wives, but for the vegliatori, especially the younger ones, it must have looked very much more like a warning. Less wish-fulfillment than cautionary tale, the story of Griselda would clearly belong to those final stages of the veglia when "narrators recounted pitiful cases, the events and vicissitudes of marriage."

One of the very few theorists to take folklore seriously is the great Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci. For Gramsci, folklore is "a 'morality of the people,' understood as a determinate . . . set of principles for practical conduct and of customs that derive from them," and it is quite capable of standing "in opposition . . . to 'official' conceptions of the world." It is from this perspective that I have been arguing for the tale of Griselda's being about a struggle between competing views of marriage (the patriarchal and the cooperative) in the late Middle Ages, despite the almost universal tendency of medieval authors themselves to treat it as an allegory of something else. As is well known, for Petrarch, and for many of his followers, the story of Griselda is really about the obedience of the good Christian to God's will, though this tendency to allegorize cannot be laid at Petrarch's door alone (Sercambi, who as far as we know had never read Petrarch's version, calls his heroine Constanza). Gramsci himself would have had no difficulty accounting for such allegorization—he would have regarded it as an expression of the kind of hegemonic thinking typically propagated by the representatives of civil society (and one could hardly ask for a better example of such a representative than Petrarch). In general, hegemonic thinking is not easy to penetrate, but its superimposition on a folkloric base here allows us a privileged point of view. I have tried to show how pressure points created by a contest between historia and fabula, between the mimetic and the symbolic, throw into sharp relief a set of deep-seated cultural anxieties in late medieval society—how, try as they might, Petrarch and his followers cannot quite paper over the brutal reality of forcing a broomstick into the hands of a marchioness.

110David Herlihy, Medieval Households, 142–43.
111Falassi, Folklore by the Fireside, 7–17.
References


Notes on the Dating of the Earliest Versions of the Griselda Story

While some early versions of the Griselda story—those of Bernat Metge (1388), Romigi di Ardino di Ricci (1399), and the play L’Estoire de Griseldis (evidently composed to celebrate the betrothal of Isabelle of France to Richard II in 1395)—can be assigned quite specific dates, the dating of others can only be deduced from manuscript evidence and internal allusions. Golenistcheff-Koutouzoff is probably right to date Philippe de Mézières’s Livre de la vertu du sacrement de mariage to 1384—89 (53), but his placing of Thomas III of Saluce’s version in the fifteenth century (134) is highly suspect, and in dating his so-called version B, Le Livre Griseldis, to early in the same century (83 n. 1), he is clearly wrong.

Since only one of the two surviving manuscripts of Thomas III of Saluce’s Livre Griseldis, 12559 (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS fonds français, 12559) contains the story of Griselda, Golenistcheff-Koutouzoff was able to argue that this story was a later insertion, but his argument ignores the fact that this manuscript can be reliably dated to the very earliest years of the fifteenth century (1401—4) and was evidently commissioned from a Paris workshop by Thomas III himself.111 If the story of Griselda was indeed a later insertion, it must nevertheless have been both a very early and an authorially sanctioned one.112 There are, however, perfectly good reasons for believing that the other manuscript (Turin, Bibliotheca Nazionale, MS L.V.6) represents the revised version, with the story of Griselda and Walter excised from an earlier draft; the Turin manuscript, for instance, is the only one to contain chapter headings (a feature, one might suppose, far more likely to be added than removed).113 That Thomas shows clear signs of discomfort at the behavior of Walter, his imagined ancestor, offers an obvious motive for him, or one of his descendants, to have had second thoughts about including the story. If this is indeed the case, we can confidently date Thomas III’s version of the Griselda story to the years 1394—96, when Thomas himself was being held prisoner in Turin.114

Golenistcheff-Koutouzoff was evidently unaware that his so-called B version, Le livre Griseldis, was used by Geoffrey Chaucer and thus must have been composed before the end of the fourteenth century. Since, however, it was also used by Thomas III of Saluce, we can safely push its terminus ad quem back to 1394. Unfortunately, The Clerk’s Tale cannot be precisely dated, but given the prominence of Philippe de Mézières’s version in the final years of the century, Chaucer’s use of the less prestigious Livre Griseldis might possibly be taken to imply a date in the early 1390s or perhaps even earlier.115

Golenistcheff-Koutouzoff assigns the Latin verse translation of Peter de Hailles to the end of the fourteenth century (115) on the assumption that the translator is to be identified with the secretary of Guy II, Count of Blois, who is named in five documents dated between 1386 and 1390 (279—81). Even if the identification itself is correct, the grounds for associating the translation with this period of his life are slim, and the only certain terminus ad quem is the date of the actual manuscript (first half of the fifteenth century).116

By contrast, we can narrow somewhat the window in which the verse Roumont du marquis de Saluce et de sa fame Grisilidys was probably composed. Although Golenistcheff-Koutouzoff assigns its unique manuscript (Bodley, MS Douce 99) simply to “the fifteenth century” (137 n. 1), it was probably copied before 1435. Its final item (immediately following the Roumont, and in the same hand) is a short prose work entitled “La Prophecie de maistre Jehan de Baisseguy.” This is said to have been composed in 1414 (fol. 98b) but seems far more likely to have been constructed retrospectively in 1429/30. One of its prophecies in particular looks uncannily prescient: in 1435 (sic), it says, “une jouvencelle chevive” will come to the aid of the oppressed provinces of Touraine and Champagne, and “recouvera la coronne de la fleur de lix” (fol. 101r). It is surely not unduly cynical to suppose that this “prophecy” must have been composed after Joan of Arc’s triumph at Orleans (in 1429), but before her capture by the Burgundians (in 1430) and her death at the hands of the English (in 1431). Indeed the “Prophecie” imagines that she is destined to rule the whole earth and will completely erase the

112 Jorga, Thomas III Marquis de Saluces: Etude historique et litteraire (Paris: Champion, 1893), believes that the Paris manuscript contains a revised text, but nevertheless one prepared by Thomas himself (83).
115 For evidence (in my view inconclusive) that Philippe might have known Le livre Griseldis or (vice versa) that Chaucer may have known Philippe, see Amy Goodwin, in Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales, I, ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), 130—34.
English from living memory ("séra syre de tout le monde & destruction le filz dou brut & toure lisle par telle maniere que de eulz ne sera jamays memoire"). Such a "prophecy" would have rung rather hollow after 1431, and it is difficult to see why anyone would have had any reason to copy it very much later in the century.
Individual adaptability is not only of the greatest significance as a factor of evolution ... but is itself perhaps the chief object of selection.

—Sewell Wright, 1932

I've been living with Chaucer at least since high school. That makes him one of my oldest friends. True, he is a network of signifiers; but while the textuality of his companionship hardly reduces what is known to philosophers as "the problem of other minds," it does mean that, in some fashion—the fashion of the signifying process—his words really do live on and in my mind. The literary friendship I feel for Chaucer is an attachment his work actively solicits, to a degree and in ways unique to his corpus but consistent both with premodern and contemporary understandings of the signifier and its role in intersubjective, hence also political and social, process. The importance of signifying to human community was not lost on premodern thinkers. John of Salisbury defends "the sciences of speech" on the grounds that they ensure "the bond of human community." 3 Richard de Bury says that Boethius's...
narrator (one of Chaucer’s most important textual companions) “beheld Philosophy bearing a sceptre in her left hand and books in her right” because “no one can rightly rule a commonwealth without books.” We share minds, and hence construct communities, primarily through speech, books, images—signifiers of all kinds. The argument of this essay is that intersubjectivity, and its transmission by the signifier, is central to the ways Chaucer’s poetry thinks about change.

Historical and Methodological Considerations

Recent psychological research agrees that the “living on” of the signifier transforms its hosts’ states of mind and body. Attachment theory, for example, links intergenerational transmission of “attachment styles” and theory of mind to the communicative practices of infants and their caregivers. The now-famous “mirror neurons” are thought to be among the chief organic processors of imitative learning and empathy. (When we see another person perform an action, mirror neurons fire in the corresponding parts of the motor areas in our own brain; i.e., when we observe an action, our brains “do” much the same thing as they would if we were actually performing it.) The firings of mirror neurons, as Brian Boyd puts it, “form the basis for the simulations that underlie our rich social cognition, [which is in turn] so central to narrative.”

The idea of mirror neurons promises to enrich enormously our understanding of the psychology of reading and writing, affect-transmission, and the “embodied” nature of our responses to Classical and medieval physicians and philosophers. Several studies have confirmed that verbal descriptions affect the motor areas of the brain in the same way that visual images do. The brains of Capuchin monkeys, for example, mirror the action of cracking open peanuts when they hear the sound thereof. These days, neuroscience

posits intimacy, not opposition, between “everyday” acts of imagination and motor activity in the material world. (The power of play to enrich experience rests on exactly this intimacy.) As Doidge suggests in The Brain That Changes Itself, the antinomy between fantasy and reality is thereby greatly reduced. If we couldn’t create castles in the air, neither could we build them in Richmond. Merlin Donald makes a similar point when he argues that our capacity to invent tools and fire depended in the first instance on our ability to imagine fictional situations.

Contemporary scientists, then, regard the intersubjectivity of “signaling” as a verifiable, material phenomenon that can be mapped in a variety of ways. Does this scientific imprimatur mean that we can now finally be assured of the power of literature to make history? It is not, for me at least, a matter of scientific truth versus humanist intuitions and speculations. Rather, the broadening of interest in “plasticity” across almost all contemporary disciplines should inspire us to ask new (or at least renewed) questions about how literary traditions are made and evaluated. (“Neuroplasticity” refers to the brain’s lifelong ability to sculpt itself through its interactions with the environment.) And if we seek, we readily find that ancient and medieval psychologies of reading and writing were highly interested in the sharing of mental experience.

Reading was, for Saint Augustine, a profoundly ethical activity, as De Doctrina Christiana amply attests. We all know that medieval educators took very seriously the persuasive power of rhetoric (hence also its power to shape minds and societies) and the moral-theological implications of memory training. Classical and medieval physicians and philosophers believed in the power of the “talking cure”—for Plato, the use of reason and language to heal disorders represented a scientific advance over the use of charms and other magical devices. Mary Carruthers underscores the intersubjectivity of reading in her book on memory. In the Middle Ages, she remarks, “Reading a book extends the process whereby one memory engages another in a continuing dialogue that approaches