

# *Trouthe Is the Highest Thing*



by Robert B. Waltz

**Revised Edition**

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*To*

Barbara Edson and Mathea Erickson Bulander  
*who gave trouble without even knowing what it was*

*and to my parents*

Dorothy and Frederick Waltz

*and*

Aurora Adams

*who kept me going just long enough*

*My trouthe: An Autistic's Pledge to a Special Friend*

*To be honest with you, and to strive to be honest with myself.*

*Not to try to be more than I am, but neither to be less.*

*To always behave with gentleness.*

*To forgive, and learn by forgiving.*

*To be silent and listen when you need someone to hear.*

*To speak when you need someone to speak.*

*To trust you, and to be trustworthy.*

*To never do less for you than I can do.*

*To ask no more of you than you can give.*

*To think of you as well as myself.*

*To respect you as well as myself.*

*To admit my mistakes, and make amends, and strive to do better.*

*To help when you need help.*

*To be there when you need me.*

*To be a true friend to you in every way I can.*

*This is who I strive to be. This is my pledge. This is my life. This is my trouthe.*

# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments .....	1
Preface.....	2
Introduction .....	3
The Canterbury Romances: Chaucer's Tales of Trouthe .....	8
The Clerk's Tale.....	8
The Knight's Tale .....	13
The Wife of Bath's Tale .....	18
The Franklin's Tale .....	26
The Other Romances — And Other Writings .....	34
The Highest Thing?.....	39
It's Only Fiction, Right? .....	44
Dramatis Personae .....	63
Catalog of Chaucer's Works .....	67
Approximate Chronology of Chaucer's Major Works .....	71
Bibliography.....	72
Index .....	77

## List of Illustrations

Burne-Jones: "Dorigen of Bretagne Waiting for the Return of Her Husband" .....	<i>Cover</i>
Woodcut of Travelers on Pilgrimage .....	12
Richard Pynson's woodcut of The Knight.....	17
Image of the Franklin from the Ellesmere manuscript .....	33
Manuscript illustration of the Wheel of Fortune .....	41
The Ellesmere manuscript, copied by Adam Pinkhurst, showing the Canon's Yeoman and a correction to the title of his Tale .....	54
Manuscript copy of the poem "Truth" .....	62

## Acknowledgments

All non-fiction authors include acknowledgments. Like most others, I have many debts. But my chief debt is an odd one: I owe Elizabeth and Patricia Rosenberg for teaching me what *trouthe* is. The word is Chaucer's, but I learned to understand it from them. I know Dorigen's dilemma; I have felt Griselda's pain. I could not have written this book without the Rosenbergs. To them it should be dedicated, save that I have already dedicated books to them.

There seems to be a tendency for Chaucer scholars to be folk song scholars as well. So I also wish to thank to my Ballad Index colleagues, David Engle, Ed Cray, Ben Schwartz, Paul Stamler, and Don Nichols. I would also thank Wendy M. Grossman and Kamakshi Tandon. And my parents, who kept me going as this work was written. Ben, David, and my father also proofread the work.

I also owe credit to J. R. R. Tolkien and his biographers, for showing that there are others who still seek *trouthe*. Tolkien's motto, like mine, was the tag from the *Franklin's Tale*, "Trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe"; when I first read the line with understanding, it was world-changing for me.

And, of course, I owe even more to Geoffrey Chaucer.

I should note that I am not a Chaucer scholar; most of my understanding is derived from the many scholars cited in this work. I'm not an expert on autism (including the kind formerly known as Asperger's Syndrome), either, except in the sense of having lived it. But I *am* an expert on *trouthe*, for having lived with *it*, and I recognize it in Chaucer's work. I can only hope that is justification enough for writing. And that Chaucer scholars will accept that I have pitched this paper primarily at people who are not Chaucer experts, because, while I want to make a point about Chaucer, I want even more for everyone to understand *trouthe*.

As this book will show, the work of John Stevens was largely responsible for my realizing that the emotion of loyalty and devotion that I felt was the same as Chaucer's *trouthe*. I do not know Stevens, who was a very old man before I even came across his book, but I owe him much. I suspect, if he had felt *trouthe* as I feel *trouthe*, there would be little need for this book, because he would already have written it.

The cover illustration is from Wikimedia Commons, and shows Edward Burne-Jones's image of "Dorigen of Bretagne Waiting for the Return of Her Husband" (1871). The internal image of the Wheel of Fortune and those of the Knight and the Franklin are also from Wikimedia. The other images of Chaucer manuscripts are from the Digital Scriptorium. The image of a pilgrimage is not from a copy of Chaucer; it comes from a reproduction of Richard Pynson's 1511 printing of the *Pylgrymage of Sir Richarde Gylforde*.

Today, Middle English is, if not a closed book, at least a very dimly lit volume for most readers. Different authors have handled this in different ways. In this book, I have chosen to print Middle English in the text (the Chaucer texts being from *The Riverside Chaucer*), with "translations" in the footnotes. My goal in these translations — which are often inspired by the *Riverside* glosses — is to convey the "feel" of the texts rather than to supply the most accurate translation.

## Preface

Our greatest virtues are our emotions.

That is, a virtue is something we hope to have and to perform — it is something we want to feel. So, for instance, one may strive to be brave. Bravery is thus a virtue which one attempts to display. This is a good and noble thing. But some people simply *are* brave. For them, there is no hesitation. Being inherently brave may not be as noble as a person *forcing* himself to be brave, but it is probably more deeply felt.

In other words, a brave man *feels* bravery as an emotion but *displays* it as a virtue; a kind woman *feels* kindness but *displays* kindness as a virtue.

Bravery when no one is looking, kindness when there is no one to remember — these are not “rational” acts. Yet people do them every day. To give a drink to a dying man in a desert, to stand up for what is right when you could just “go along to get along” — these are virtuous acts, but people do them because their emotions bid them to. *The virtue is the emotion.*

This article is about a virtue — *trouthe*, which Geoffrey Chaucer once declared “the highest thing that man can keep.” But although regarded as a virtue, it also is an emotion. Today, *trouthe* does not seem to be a virtue people feel — but when I first read of it, I knew that this was “my” virtue, as bravery and obedience are the crucial virtues of a soldier or compassion and learning the great virtues of the cleric.

And I rather suspect that Geoffrey Chaucer, too, felt *trouthe* as an emotion. It is the central theme of *The Franklin’s Tale*, one of the most delightful of *The Canterbury Tales* — but in more subtle forms it seems to motivate all the Canterbury Romances. In them, *trouthe* works itself out in almost the same way that *wyrd* (fate) was seen in the Old English epics. How could anyone write such tales who did not feel the draw of this emotion?

I cannot prove this. I am autistic; my emotions are abnormal. Most people do not seem to feel *trouthe*. Did Chaucer feel it? Was Chaucer autistic? We cannot know.

This article is not intended to add significantly to Chaucer criticism. Most experts would agree that Chaucer valued *trouthe*; from the standpoint of the literary critic, all I am doing is arguing that he valued *trouthe* even more than most critics think. My argument, instead, is that this is a real virtue which was expressed by Chaucer, and more strongly than we realize today.

Virtues go out of date. “Chivalry” is dead. It seems *trouthe* is, too. Perhaps the end of feudalism, which was based on ties of loyalty, and the rise of capitalism, made it less useful. I do not know. I certainly can’t bring it back. But I hope to let others see a noble emotion in a new light.

I am not an artist, but I am autistic, and I truly need a muse to think creatively — or even to live a proper life. The idea of this book — that Chaucer’s *trouthe* was the same emotion that I feel toward my muses — came when I had a muse, but was written after my muse friends had abandoned me. So the writing is not what it should be. I can only hope that you will be able to understand my message anyway — and perhaps help other autistics whose needs are like mine.

# Introduction

*Magna est veritas, et praevallet.*<sup>1</sup>

The words are from the book called 3 Esdras, and are no longer considered canonical by the Roman Catholic Church. And they are only a translation anyway, the Latin Vulgate version of the Greek book known as 1 Esdras, itself an expanded and modified translation of the Hebrew book of Ezra. But they are in the Bible that Geoffrey Chaucer knew. Today we would translate, “Great is truth, and it prevails.”

But what is truth? The question is Pontius Pilate’s,<sup>2</sup> but simple as it sounds, different societies give slightly different answers. There is “truth.” There is “The Truth.” And, in Middle English, there was *trouthe*.

*Trouthe* is the same word as Modern English “truth.” But continuity of meaning doesn’t necessarily suggest that a word has the same meaning now as in Chaucer’s time! Take, for instance, the verb “doubt.” It used to mean “I am convinced” — a usage still familiar, for instance, in the King James Bible. Now it means “I am *not* convinced”!

*Trouthe* has not changed as dramatically as that. In Chaucer’s time as in ours, it *could* mean “something that is factually verifiable.” But it is better to think of it as (at least) two words — words we now know as “truth” (something correct and real) and “troth” (a pledge of constancy).<sup>3</sup> And because those words are themselves rich and full of meaning, it took on a very great constellation of secondary meanings not found in the Modern English versions of the words:

“*Trouthe*”... means at least four things [to Chaucer].... The first three meanings, which shade into one another are:

- (1) *trouthe* as a “troth,” a pledged word, the promise you give another person;
- (2) *trouthe* as integrity, the truth to your own inmost self;

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<sup>1</sup> 3 Esdras 4:41. The reading *magna est veritas, et praevallet* does not appear to be original. It is the reading found in the Catholic Church’s Clementine Vulgate, as well as in the Vulgate copies made in Paris in the thirteenth century, but the first hand of the great Codex Amiatinus reads *et* instead of *est*, and the Paris manuscript Q omits the word *est* altogether. The critical edition of the [Vulgate](#), p. 1917, also omits the word. But Chaucer would have known late Bible copies, so chances are that “*magna est veritas, et praevallet*” were the words Chaucer encountered.

<sup>2</sup> John 18:38: “quid est veritas”; [Vulgate](#), p. 1692.

<sup>3</sup> Definitions of *trouthe* include the following:

[Howard](#), p. 65: “‘Truth’ (better, ‘troth’) was your ability to make good all vows and obligations owed in a hierarchical world — to God, to your overlord, to all oaths you have made, to your lady, to your vassals.”

[Burrow/Turville-Petre](#) (text modified to spell out the sources they cite): “**treuthe, trouthe** *n.* pledge [*Peterborough Chronicle*], justice [*Piers Plowman*, *St. Erkenwald*], integrity, honesty [*Piers Plowman*], **treothes** *pl.* pledged [*Peterborough Chronicle*] [OE *trēowþ*].”

Tolkien’s glossary in *Sisam* has “**Treuthe; Trouthe, Trowthe** [Gower]; **Trawþe** [Gawain-poet]; **Truth(e)** [*Gest Hystoriale*]; *n.* truth [*Gest Hystoriale*]; (personified) [*Piers Plowman*]; fidelity [Gower]; faith, (plighted) word, troth [*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Piers Plowman*, *Confessio Amantis*]; compact [*Sir Gawain*]; honesty [*Piers Plowman*]; equity [*The Pearl*]. [OE *trēowþ*].”

(3) *trouthe* as loyalty, the bond of dependence that keeps society stable and united....  
[4] Behind these shifting connotations lies, finally, a much deeper concept. In Chaucer, “trouthe” is a philosophical and religious term for the ultimate reality, the “universal.” It is this final, transcendental Truth which gives the lesser “truths” (of human fidelity and integrity) their validity.<sup>4</sup>

Or, as E. Talbot Donaldson put it, “it has the moral meaning of ‘integrity’ and the philosophical meaning of ‘reality...’ [I]t is perhaps permissible to identify the quality with everything that is godlike in man.”<sup>5</sup>

It is the sort of pledge that wishes  
To hold togider at everi nede  
In word, in werk, in wille, in dede.<sup>6</sup>

It is this virtue, not our pedestrian facts, to which Chaucer refers when he makes his amazing statement “Trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe.”<sup>7</sup>

This is an extremely strong and an extremely interesting assertion on Chaucer’s part. And it isn’t just a passing comment; the whole *Franklin’s Tale* is about *trouthe*, and as we shall see, it plays a role in the other Chaucerian romances as well.

I wonder if Chaucer meant this as a practical demonstration. There is reason to think that Chaucer doubted the value of poetry in society — *The Parson’s Tale* (which is in prose) directly attacks story-telling in verse, and there are other instances of Chaucer seemingly questioning what he was doing.<sup>8</sup> How else to justify his work if not by using it to make a case for a high form of virtue? And how better to make that case than by producing brilliant romances about it? “When we talk about such words [as the nobler virtues], we find ourselves in heated, convoluted discussions that come to no conclusion: we define them best by telling stories.”<sup>9</sup> It appears that that is just what Chaucer did with *trouthe*.

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<sup>4</sup> Stevens, pp. 64-65. Dr. David Engle points out to me that this same constellation of meanings is associated with the German word “treue.”

<sup>5</sup> ChaucerDonaldson, p. 1127.

<sup>6</sup> “To hold together at every need [situation], In word, in work, in will, in deed.” *Amis and Amiloun*, lines 151-152; cf. Gervase Mathew, “Ideals of Knighthood in Late-Fourteenth-Century England,” Fox, p. 69.

<sup>7</sup> “Trouthe is the highest thing that man may keep.” *The Franklin’s Tale*, line 1479.

<sup>8</sup> Bisson, pp. 25-27.

<sup>9</sup> Howard, pp. 65-66.



Chaucer's Prioress wore the motto "amor vincit omnia," "love conquers all,"<sup>10</sup> which we tend to think of as the key belief of romance. But just as the Prioress seems to fall a little short of her vocation,<sup>11</sup> so does her motto. Love does *not* conquer all for Chaucer. We see this in the vision of Venus's temple in *The Parliament of Fowls*; much of the imagery there is of blighted, disastrous, ugly love<sup>12</sup> — and what attractive love there is is usually the faithful sort. An even more extreme example of the imperfection of love is *Troilus and Criseyde*, which is so masterful an examination of failed passion that some have suggested that it was Chaucer's last word on romantic love.<sup>13</sup> Yet Chaucer returns to the theme of love in the *Canterbury Tales* — and still doesn't show it succeeding. Consider *The Knight's Tale*, in which there are three love relationships: Palamon and Arcite, Palamon and Emelye, Arcite and Emelye. *Two of the three fail*. If love conquered all, then either Palamon or Arcite would have stepped aside for the other, or Emelye would have chosen and the one who was not chosen would have accepted. Neither happened.

Nor do medieval romances in general involve the theme of love conquering all. Love themes in the romances are common but by no means universal.<sup>14</sup> "The conflict between... loyalties or their testing was to provide both the psychological tension and the plot of most fourteenth century romances."<sup>15</sup> What we see instead in the romances is a restoration of what "ought to be." Much of the power of romance, indeed, derives from this striving to *make things right*; it is why many even in our cynical modern world still admire the romances of writers such as J. R. R. Tolkien (who deserves much of the credit for reviving the medieval-type romance)<sup>16</sup> and J. K. Rowling.

One well-known and noteworthy feature of the *Canterbury Tales* is that it contains a mixture of story types. In most cases, Chaucer writes standard tales of whatever type he is using — brilliant

<sup>10</sup> *The General Prologue*, line 162. Note that Latin "amor" is a somewhat ambiguous word, since — unlike "caritas," commonly used to render the Greek word *agape* — it is often used of romantic love. It may well be that Chaucer is using it here ironically, of a nun who thinks a little too much of the secular world — but this point is disputed; ChaucerNorton, p. 465. It is certain that there was a tendency in Chaucer's time to blur the distinction between religious experience and the feelings of ordinary love, and this blurring is perhaps most evidence in the romances; Stevens, chapter 6, "Religion and Romance," especially p. 135; also p. 138, which explicitly cites *Troilus and Criseyde*.

<sup>11</sup> ChaucerNorton, p. 464, notes that Prioresses — who after all already lived in a consecrated community — were not supposed to go on pilgrimages. And many have observed that she seems somewhat less demure than fits her station.

<sup>12</sup> ChaucerBrewer, p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> ChaucerDonaldson, p. 1129; also quoted in Benson, p. 44.

<sup>14</sup> Waltz, p. 5. Stevens, p. 84, notes that even the Tristan legend, usually considered a pure love tale, is not always so; "far from being a great love-story, Beroul's telling of the legend seems to stress other idealisms, idealisms in fact which I see as being more apposite to the condition of Man Alone than the condition of Man in Love."

<sup>15</sup> Gervase Mathew, "Ideals of Knighthood in Late-Fourteenth-Century England," Fox, p. 69. Mathew, p. 72, goes on to suggest that French romance, and Chaucer, were by this time moving past this sort of loyalty. But while the other romances may have been changing, Chaucerian irony seems to be much more prevalent in his other writings than in his romances; in the romances, he (mostly) held to the old virtues..

<sup>16</sup> Howard, p. 442, points out that Tolkien's success has made Chaucer more understandable to modern readers than he had been before the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, and Stevens, p. 9, observes that Tolkien's work is one of several that have collectively eliminated the need to justify the romances.

examples, but not atypical ones. The romances are an exception. “It is as if Chaucer, who seems so much at home in the fabliau, the miracle of the Virgin, and the saint’s life, felt less easy with the very genre which we regard as most characteristic of the period, the knightly romance.”<sup>17</sup>

I don’t think this is quite right. The Host called on his tellers to balance depth of meaning and pleasure — “Tales of best sentence and most solace.”<sup>18</sup> We shouldn’t expect all the parts to yield the same moral; “the method of the work is not additive.”<sup>19</sup> Rather, the different genres allow us to experience different feelings; by telling many types of tales, Chaucer keeps everyone interested.<sup>20</sup> For fun, Chaucer has the fabliau, “short comic tales in verse, dealing mainly with sexual or other advantages won by tricks and stratagems”<sup>21</sup> — *The Miller’s Tale*, *The Reeve’s Tale*, and so forth. But — it seems to me — Chaucer wants the romances to do something more, and hence made them much more complex than most romances before him. What makes him a genius is not that he makes his romances more complex but his ability to do so without making them obnoxiously long. Chaucer was certainly able to write a romance; *Troilus and Criseyde*, the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* and *The Franklin’s Tale* clearly show that! And these are among his most-loved tales, and seem to be among the stories which he has given the most attention.

Some might object that Chaucer would not have included so many other tale-types if he intended his romances to present a unified theme. Of course, it might be that Chaucer wasn’t deliberately portraying a theme, simply that his definition of a romance involved certain characteristics. But I don’t think we need such a qualification. Great writers will mix elements of many types in their works — as Shakespeare might put some comic relief in a tragedy, or Mark Twain would make a serious point in a funny tale.

It seems to me that the real difference between Chaucerian and other romances is not some alleged defect in the Chaucerian romances but the fact that Chaucer was trying for more. Sometimes, at least, the goal of a romance is to educate,<sup>22</sup> and Chaucer wanted to teach. The

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<sup>17</sup> J. A. Burrow, “The *Canterbury Tales* I: Romance,” [Boitani/Mann](#), p. 109.

<sup>18</sup> “Tales of greatest significance [the best lessons] and most solace/pleasure/fun.” *The General Prologue*, line 798; for the significance, see [Bisson](#), p. 40.

<sup>19</sup> [ChaucerNorton](#), p. 471.

<sup>20</sup> This principle — of ornamentation or even, one might say, of distraction — is known to every teller of folktales. Most tales have some sort of lesson or moral. This lesson can usually be expressed in a sentence, and the plot can be summarized in two or three. But no one would listen to that. It is the surrounding detail that keeps our interest and attention. Consider, for example, “The Three Little Pigs.” We can summarize the whole plot by saying, “Three pigs built three homes. Two built hastily, of straw and of sticks. The third took more time and built a strong home of stone. A wolf was able to knock down the homes of hay and sticks, and eat the two pigs. It could not break the home of stone; so that pig lived. Moral: Do the work you need to do.” But do *you* care about this telling? No, you listen because of the two foolish pigs enjoying themselves, and the Big Bad Wolf huffing and puffing, and the conversations along the way.

<sup>21</sup> [Burrow/Turville-Petre](#), p. 288.

<sup>22</sup> [Bisson](#), p. 131.

ideals in many romances are pretty low — in *Gamelyn*,<sup>23</sup> for instance, we in essence see a younger son fight his way into an inheritance with brute strength and massive ignorance.<sup>24</sup> Even the love romances produced before Chaucer are often pretty feeble. The one of Chaucer's tales that resembles a standard romance is *The Squire's Tale*, which is unfinished. It looks as if Chaucer wanted to use the romances to show the triumph of something greater than mere force or even ordinary love. And that something seems to be *trouthe*. It is *trouthe* that conquers all; each of the stories Chaucer tells is of how *trouthe* somehow came to be set aside, and how in the end *trouthe* triumphs.

"*Trouthe* is exalted again and again in [Chaucer's] works, positively as the Knight's principle virtue and, in the *Franklin's Tale*, as the highest contract that man may keep, and negatively as the quality that Criseide most offends."<sup>25</sup>

But why is *trouthe* so important? To me at least, it matters because it is a genuine virtue. To paraphrase Stevens in his summary, it is fidelity, it is responsibility, it is truthfulness, it is being what one *ought* to be. This is certainly an emotion I have felt — and toward more than one person. This feeling seems to be hard for some people to understand. I think Chaucer felt it, though. Else he would not have written as he did. The following chapters try to examine just how *trouthe* is revealed in the completed Canterbury romances.

**Note to Readers:** If you are not a Chaucer scholar, or are not overly familiar with the *Canterbury Tales* and Chaucer's other works, note that the [Dramatis Personae](#) at the end of this book (page 63) gives short biographies of most of the major Chaucerian characters cited here, while the [Catalog of Chaucer's Works](#) (page 67) describes the major works of Chaucer discussed below.

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<sup>23</sup> A tale, ironically, preserved only in certain manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales* ([Sands](#), p. 154), where it is used as a substitute for the truncated *Cook's Tale* ([ChaucerRiverside](#), pp. 1121, 1125). But *Gamelyn* is closely related to the tales of Robin Hood; if Chaucer had chosen to use it, it would surely have been the tale of the Yeoman. Contrary to some editors, though, I do *not* think Chaucer would have used *Gamelyn*, at least in anything like its current form. Even Chaucer's most bitter tales — e.g. the *Merchant's Tale* — often revolve around a clever trick, as May tells January that her adultery was all to bring back his sight. *Gamelyn* is simply too mindless for Chaucer.

<sup>24</sup> [Sands](#), pp. 154-155. [Stevens](#), p. 83, declares that *Gamelyn* is "for all the world like a good TV western." The description is apt, although I'm not so sure about the "good" part. Stevens, pp. 81-83, mentions *Bevis of Hampton* as another romance of "the fantasy of the rippling biceps."

<sup>25</sup> [ChaucerDonaldson](#), p. 1127.

# The Canterbury Romances: Chaucer's Tales of *Trouthe*

## The Clerk's Tale

Most discussions of *trouthe* in Chaucer start with *The Franklin's Tale*, because it is built around the question of how *trouthe* is to be met. But I am inclined to start in another place, with that most extreme of romances (so extreme that many refuse to regard it as a romance<sup>26</sup>), *The Clerk's Tale*.

We may summarize *The Clerk's Tale* as follows: Walter the marquis is urged by his followers to take a wife. He agrees, but insists on choosing her himself, in his own time, rather than submit to an arranged marriage to some noble lady. In due time, he locates Griselda, the poor daughter of a peasant. He keeps her existence a secret until the very day he has set for his wedding, when he raises her up and — after extracting a promise of obedience — marries her. They have a daughter and a son.

But he is resolved to test her. First he takes away her daughter, implying that the child will be killed. Then he takes away her son, again claiming the boy will die. Then he degrades her. Then he declares (using forged letters from the Pope as his excuse) that he will take another wife, and insists that Griselda serve the new bride. The bride he produces (as he knows but Griselda does not) is their own daughter, who has been brought up in a foreign household. Griselda is thus made to wait on a girl the age of her daughter. And Griselda does it.

At this, Walter finally relents, and admits that he has been testing her (in Boccaccio's version, "Griselda, it is time now for you to reap the fruit of your long patience, and it is time for those who have considered me cruel, unjust, and bestial to realize that what I have done was directed toward a pre-established goal, for I wanted to teach you how to be a wife!"<sup>27</sup>). Their children are alive; they are in fact present with him; Griselda is restored to her place as Walter's wife, and all ends happily.

Happily except for the post-traumatic stress Griselda feels, anyway, and the shock the children feel upon being reunited with birth parents they never knew. Even the song that follows the tale says that such a result is not really possible in the time when the tale is told:

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<sup>26</sup> J. Burke Severs, "The Tales of Romance," *Rowland*, p. 272. As a matter of fact, I omitted it from the list of romances in my own *Romancing the Ballad*. Not having studied Chaucer's motives at that time, I omitted *The Clerk's Tale*; after all, it has none of the hallmarks of typical romances — no magic, no big special cause, no larger-than-life characters. In hindsight, I think I was wrong; *The Clerk's Tale* is a romance, but of a special, uniquely Chaucerian kind.

<sup>27</sup> *Decameron* MusaBondanella, p. 141.

Grisilde is deed, and eek hire pacience,  
And bothe atones buried in Ytaille....<sup>28</sup>

It is a dark, dark narrative, very hard for moderns to read. I always stall in trying to finish it; I can't take the brutality. Many treat the Clerk's Tale as a horror story, and James Sledd's *The Clerk's Tale: The Monsters and the Critics*<sup>29</sup> has only partly changed that. Walter is a sadist, and Griselda is a masochist, and she should have abandoned him long before the tale ended. The story goes back to Boccaccio's *Decameron* (Chaucer made much use of Boccaccio as a source); Petrarch translated it into Latin, and this is likely Chaucer's direct source.<sup>30</sup> Boccaccio's other stories for Day Ten of the *Decameron* seem to have been intended to instruct, sometimes with a sledgehammer<sup>31</sup> — but what is he trying to teach here? The problem is so extreme that some have tried to excuse it by maintaining that the tale is a sort of rationalized version of the Cupid and Psyche myth,<sup>32</sup> an hypothesis which "explains" the situation but gives no reason for why actual human beings to do such a thing. Others try to write it off as an allegory,<sup>33</sup> though it is not clear how this actually helps (and Chaucer doesn't seem to have liked allegory much anyway, as we shall see below). It is no excuse to say, as George Lyman Kittredge did a century ago, "Whether Griselda could have put an end to her woes, or ought to have put an end to them, by refusing to obey her husband's commands is *parum ad rem*. We are to look at her trials as inevitable, and to pity her accordingly, and wonder at her endurance.... We miss the pathos because we are aridly intent on discussing an ethical question that has no status in this particular court."<sup>34</sup>

It may have no status, but it *is* an ethical question. "In the Tale of Griselda the moral positives seem to be confused, and there appears to be a lack of real motive and purpose in the actions and thoughts of the characters."<sup>35</sup> "[G]iven a tale of inhuman cruelty and of endurance equally inhuman, how can the author make it believable in human terms?"<sup>36</sup> Why did Chaucer, who was unusually modern in his rejection of the sort of rigid Augustinian harshness common in the medieval mind, tell such a tale? Why did he even, it has been suggested, make Griselda's suffering

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<sup>28</sup> "Griselda is dead, and also her patience, And both together buried in Italy." *The Clerk's Tale*, lines 1177-1178. It is not clear whether this is to be the Clerk's epilogue or Chaucer's; the point is that this was the way the world used to be — evidently it's a standard account of the "good old days." (Great. The Good Old Days were the days when men were sociopaths and no one cared....) Howard, p. 445, suggests that the song cancels all that has gone before — but, in another sense, it attests that the event is something that could actually happen, somewhere, once upon a time.

<sup>29</sup> Reprinted in Wagenknecht, pp. 226-239.

<sup>30</sup> Many argue that Chaucer, in addition to using Petrarch and/or Boccaccio, had before him a French version of the tale. Haldeen Braddy, "The French Influence on Chaucer," Rowland, p. 145; ChaucerRiverside, p. 880. But this French version, assuming it has been correctly identified, itself derives from Petrarch.

<sup>31</sup> DecameronMusaBondanella, p. 161.

<sup>32</sup> James Sledd, "The Clerk's Tale: The Monsters and the Critics," Wagenknecht, p. 229; compare ChaucerDonaldson, p. 1080, who calls it "a moralized version of a very old folk-story about the mating of a mortal woman with an immortal lover whose actions are controlled by forces entirely incomprehensible to her human mind."

<sup>33</sup> Robert P. Miller, "Allegory in the Canterbury Tales," Rowland, p. 337.

<sup>34</sup> George Lyman Kittredge, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," Wagenknecht, p. 189.

<sup>35</sup> Hoy/Stevens, p. 52.

<sup>36</sup> ChaucerDonaldson, p. 1081.

more extreme than in his sources?<sup>37</sup> On its face, “we are asked... to tolerate an intolerable tyrant, and to admire a dolt.”<sup>38</sup> Why? What does *Chaucer* see in the tale of Griselda?

The answer is probably found in the way Walter and Griselda came to be married. Walter, when he wed Griselda, had asked her to be a loyal wife:

“I seye this: be ye redy with good herte  
To al my lust, and that I frely may,  
As me best thynketh, do yow laughe or smerte,  
And nevere ye to grucche it, nyght ne day?  
And eek whan I sey ‘ye,’ ne sey nat ‘nay,’  
Neither by word ne frownyng contenance?  
Swere this, and heere I swere oure alliance.”<sup>39</sup>

In other words, Walter calls on her to obey him absolutely, not just in deed but in word and appearance. What is her response?

But as ye wole youreself, right so wol I.  
And heere I swere that nevere willyngly  
In werk ne thought, I nyl yow disobeye....”<sup>40</sup>

In other words, he has asked of her an extreme vow — and she gives an even stronger vow than is asked of her. She gives *trouthe* to the extreme.

Much of the problem here, I think, come about because Griselda is Walter’s wife. In Chaucer’s time, men expected to lord it over their wives, so Walter was considered to have the right to be abominable to Griselda. Critics think the tale is about the marriage. But it isn’t. We can only understand it if we realize it is about the vow.

The vow is not Chaucer’s invention; it is in Petrarch, his probable source, where Griselda says “I know myself unworthy, my lord, of so great an honor [as to marry the ruler of the land]; but if it be your will, and if it be my destiny, I will never consciously cherish a thought, much less do anything, which might be contrary to your desires; nor will you do anything, even though you bid me to die, which I shall bear ill.”<sup>41</sup>

In her sufferings, Griselda offered a mantra that maintains her *trouthe*:

“I have,” quod she, “said thus, and evere shal:

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<sup>37</sup> James Sledd, “*The Clerk’s Tale*: The Monsters and the Critics,” *Wagenknecht*, p. 231.

<sup>38</sup> James Sledd, “*The Clerk’s Tale*: The Monsters and the Critics,” *Wagenknecht*, p. 232.

<sup>39</sup> “I say this: are you ready, with good heart, To [obey] all my desire, and whatever I freely choose, As I think best, whether it causes you laughter or hurt, And never to begrudge it, night or day? And also, when I say ‘yes,’ you do not say ‘no,’ either by word or frowning countenance? Swear this, and here I swear our alliance.” *The Clerk’s Tale*, lines 351-357.

<sup>40</sup> “But as you yourself will/wish, just so will I, And here I swear that never willingly, *in work or thought*, will I disobey you.” *The Clerk’s Tale*, lines 361-363. Italics added; it is vital to realize that she won’t even *think* of questioning.

<sup>41</sup> *Miller*, p. 143.



I wol no thyng, ne nyl no thyng, certayn,  
But as yow list.”<sup>42</sup>

Her next sentence accepts the killing of her two children because it is his command: “I have noght had no part of children tweyne.”<sup>43</sup>

It is sometimes said that Griselda’s actions parallel the submission of a good Christian to God — indeed, this was Petrarch’s justification.<sup>44</sup> She is casting herself as a second Job (a comparison also made by the Clerk himself).<sup>45</sup> But even if we ignore the fact that this perverts scripture,<sup>46</sup> surely the logical flaw here is obvious. God is, in Christian doctrine, assumed to be the fountainhead of good; momentary trials are endured in hopes of earning, or becoming capable of receiving, a reward. But neither we nor Griselda have any reason to think Walter is such a source of good. “[T]he woman Griselda, unlike the man Job, never curses Walter, for to do so would be to give up the integrity for and through which she lives.”<sup>47</sup>

What does it say that Chaucer, like Boccaccio but unlike Petrarch, “is critical of Walter’s ‘tyranny,’”<sup>48</sup> yet still tells the tale? Indeed, the *Clerk’s Tale* stands closer to its sources than any other romance he uses; why not fix it, as he improved the *Knight’s Tale* or the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*?

Chaucer knows the situation is dysfunctional. Walter, in wedding Griselda, has asked too much — and Griselda has responded by giving even more than was asked. It is an unstable situation — and the instability quickly reveals itself as Walter goes out of control and Griselda sits there and takes it. Walter, with his request, has violated *trouthe*. Griselda, with her extreme *trouthe*, accepts and accepts and accepts, until the situation is so lopsided that it must be resolved. And it *is* resolved, with the right balance of things restored. All because Griselda kept her *trouthe* even when tested beyond what most of us could endure.

E. Talbot Donaldson had much to say on this topic.<sup>49</sup> I can’t quote all of it, but Donaldson contends that Chaucer adopted a “daring plan” to keep Griselda human. “In the first place the virtue he endows her with is not really the traditional patience which often suggests... a kind of monumental passivity, but rather constancy. Unlike patience, which can be ascribed to a dumb animal, constancy demands that its possessor be fully aware of the cost of what he is doing even while he continues to do it.” “The value Griselda places upon Walter does not blind her to the many other values of life; but of her own volition she has made constancy to him supreme.”

<sup>42</sup> “I have,” said she, “said thus, and always shall: I will nothing, nor omit nothing, certainly, Except as you list.” *The Clerk’s Tale*, lines 645–647.

<sup>43</sup> “I have never had any part of two children.” *The Clerk’s Tale*, line 650.

<sup>44</sup> Henry Barrett Hinckley, “The Debate on Marriage in *The Canterbury Tales*,” *Wagenknecht*, p. 220.

<sup>45</sup> *Corsa*, p. 151.

<sup>46</sup> Job, in the Bible, involuntarily loses all he has and complains about it vociferously; Griselda voluntarily renounces what is hers and doesn’t utter a peep. She may have *thought of herself* as a Job, but she didn’t act like one. A much better analogy is to the book of Genesis, and Abraham’s near-sacrifice of Isaac: Abraham is called upon to kill his heir — and he is prepared to do it.

<sup>47</sup> *ChaucerDonaldson*, p. 1083.

<sup>48</sup> *PearsallChaucer*, p. 109.

<sup>49</sup> *ChaucerDonaldson*, pp. 1081–1083.

“While Walter remains the visible symbol of the vow Griselda made him, it seems less Walter than the vow itself that Griselda is thinking of.” “It is Griselda’s perfectly human integrity — her *trouthe* — that she and the reader prize above all.”

The Middle Ages had a very different view of Griselda from what we have today. She was praiseworthy, not crazy. Petrarch wrote to Boccaccio: “My object in thus re-writing your tale was not to induce the women of our time to imitate the patience of this wife, which seems to me almost beyond imitation, but to lead my readers to emulate the example of feminine constancy, and to submit themselves to God with the same constancy as did this woman to her husband.”<sup>50</sup>

To them, *trouthe* was real. Especially, perhaps, to Geoffrey Chaucer. Fortunately, the rest of what he had to say on the topic was not so unpleasant.



*Travelers on Pilgrimage*

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<sup>50</sup> Miller, p. 138.



## The Knight's Tale

The first of the *Canterbury Tales* is also among the longest and most leisurely. As befits a member of the conservative English gentry, it is set, more or less, in the ancient Greece of Theseus, although the characters are all essentially medieval.

Interestingly, there is good reason to think that Chaucer wrote the tale before starting the *Canterbury Tales* in general; he refers to it in the prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*.<sup>51</sup>

The tale — which eventually became the basis for *The Two Noble Kinsmen*<sup>52</sup> — is elaborate, but the plot comes down to this: Arcite and Palamon are cousins and blood brothers who have vowed always to love and support each other. When their city of Thebes is overthrown they are captured by Theseus, who imprisons them. While in prison, they both see Emelye, Theseus's sister-in-law. Both eventually manage to gain their freedom — and both try to pay court to Emelye. And to fight over her.

At this point, Theseus intervenes. He orders them to come back in a year with a hundred men each and battle over Emelye — the winner, obviously, gets her. Much is made of their preparations, and the noble warriors they gather, but the point is the fight. Although it is a real contest, the tournament rules are such that men need not die; if someone is seriously wounded, he is removed from the combat — an important point, because it means that Palamon or Arcite could lose the battle and yet live.

Before the fight, each of the primary characters prays. Arcite prays to Mars for victory in the combat;<sup>53</sup> Palamon prays to Venus that he will win Emelye; Emelye prays to Diana to remain free of either but, if she must be wed, to wed the one who truly loves her.

Both Arcite and Palamon fight well and are wounded. After much gore, Palamon suffers the first serious wound; he survives but loses the battle. But Arcite, although the victor in the battle, falls from his horse and is mortally wounded. He has won, but he cannot claim his prize. At the end, he makes peace with Palamon, telling Emelye to marry him and be happy; he will be a good husband.

So all prayers are answered: Arcite was victorious in battle, Palamon wins Emelye, and Emelye wins a good husband. But the fellowship of Arcite and Palamon, which seemed the point of the story at the start, has ended.

The *Knight's Tale* is most likely loosely based on Giovanni Boccaccio's *Il Teseida delle nozze d'Emelia*,<sup>54</sup> but Chaucer has been unusually free with the source; only about a third of the lines

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<sup>51</sup> PearsallChaucer, pp. 151-152, and cf. note 61 below.

<sup>52</sup> Anderson, p. 248.

<sup>53</sup> Corsa, p. 105, writes, "I moot with strengthe wyne her in the place/ ... Thanne help me, lord, tomorwe in my bataille ... and do that I ... have victorie' (l. 2399-2405). [I.e. 'I must with power win her in this place ... so help me, Lord, tomorrow in my battle ... and make it so that I have victory.'] By the time his prayer is over it sounds suspiciously as if he wants victory even more than he wants Emily."

<sup>54</sup> ChaucerRiverside, p. 826.

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