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**TRACING THE EVER-CHANGING EXEMPLARITY OF GRISELDA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This work is an attempt to trace the evolution of the literary figure of Griselda, with a particular focus on the didactic or exemplary nature of this character. Beginning with Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, it then considers some of the most well-known and widespread narrative retellings by Francesco Petrarca, Philippe de Mézières, Geoffrey Chaucer and Christine de Pizan. It draws upon the current state of research into this topic to offer different perspectives on the possible ethical and moral aims of each rewriting and how details such as the choice of vehicular language, descriptive imagery, narrative framing devices and narrator's commentary impact on Griselda's exemplarity. Using a comparative approach, this study attempts to shed light on the mutable nature of said exemplum and how the act of translation can influence the ethical ends of the tale.

**Key words:** Griselda, exemplum, translation, Boccaccio

## **RESUMEN**

Este trabajo intenta trazar la evolución de la figura literaria de Griselda, con un enfoque particular en el carácter didáctico o ejemplar de este personaje. Empezando con el *Decameron* de Giovanni Boccaccio, a continuación considera algunos de las re-elaboraciones más conocidas y difundidas de Francesco Petrarca, Philippe de Mézières, Geoffrey Chaucer y Christine de Pizan. Se basa en la investigación académica actual de este tema para ofrecer perspectivas diferentes de la ética y los fines morales posibles de cada reescritura y cómo detalles como la elección de lenguaje vehicular, imágenes descriptivas, marcos narrativos y el comentario del narrador tienen un efecto sobre la ejemplaridad de Griselda. Usando un planteamiento comparativo, este estudio trata de iluminar la naturaleza mutable de dicho ejemplar y cómo el acto de traducir puede influenciar los fines éticos del cuento.

**Palabras claves:** Griselda, ejemplar, traducción, Boccaccio

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The story of Griselda is one that has fascinated readers since the Middle Ages; from the 14<sup>th</sup> century until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, over 120 versions in multiple foreign languages have been preserved (Rüegg, 2019, p. 1). With the final *novella* of Giovanni Boccaccio's celebrated *Decameron*, a feminine archetype arose that endured centuries and spread all over Europe: the patient Griselda. The source of this character is unknown, but throughout the years several reinterpretations of her story have emerged. Francesco Petrarch, in a letter to Boccaccio, translated Griselda's story from old Tuscan into Latin. Another translation by Philippe de Mézières, this time into French and derived from Petrarch's Latin text, can be found in didactic works for young women. Christine de Pizan places Griselda in her *City of Ladies* and Geoffrey Chaucer includes the story in *The Canterbury Tales*. These are some of the most famous renditions, but there are many others, including a Catalan version by Bernat de Metge.

In this work I want to trace the reception of this tale, focusing on narrative retellings, as opposed to other literary or artistic formats, principally with a comparison of the most well-known medieval versions: Boccaccio's early work and later texts by Petrarch, De Mézières and Chaucer, as well as Griselda in Christine de Pizan's *Le livre de la Cité des Dames*, which offers us a medieval female perspective.

With all of these interpretations of Boccaccio's original, I intend to explore how different authors present Griselda and, importantly, the tale's exemplum, as, "in its extant versions, the explicit "meaning" of the fable is its least stable feature" (Middleton, 1980, p. 125). I will take various factors into consideration whilst tracing this changing exemplary value, such as the language used to describe her, the contrast between her exterior tranquillity and her inner turmoil, the role of the body and humiliation, and the moral that the authors impose, explicitly or implicitly, with their presentation of the tale. Is Griselda the perfect wife or does her example transcend the confines of this feminine role? Is her behaviour imitable, or even ethical? These are questions that continue to be relevant not just in the story's original medieval context, but also when we consider the development of the archetype of the wife in Western literature and how consequently the presentation of Griselda has changed.

## 2. GRISELDA IN THE ITALIAN PENINSULA

Giovanni Boccaccio's *novella* X.10 in the *Decameron* is the earliest version of this text that we know of. His work was admired by his contemporary and friend, Francesco Petrarch, who translated it in a letter included in his *Seniles*. However, Petrarch's understanding of the act of "translation" doesn't correspond with today's concept; as stated by Horace in his *Poetic Art*, it wasn't necessary to translate a text "word for word" (Zak, 2015, p. 178).

These are therefore two texts with markedly different characteristics that serve two different functions. Critics generally highlight Petrarch's attempt to eliminate the moral ambiguity of the tale. When comparing these two versions, they must be studied within the context in which they were written, giving due consideration to various factors: their target audience, the language used, and their narrative frames, to name but a few.

### 2.1. *The Ambiguity of Boccaccio's Griselda*

The *novella* of Griselda is found at the very end of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, being the tenth tale of the tenth day, a not insignificant choice. One aspect of the modernity of Boccaccio's text is the use of a *cornice*, or a narrative frame. Studying each individual *novella* within the full context of its narrative frame is therefore key for our understanding of it. In the *Decameron*, seven young women and three young men, together making up the *brigata*, flee to the countryside during the Black Death in Florence. To entertain themselves, they choose a king or a queen each day who decides upon a theme, and each of those present tells a story relating to said theme. Boccaccio thus weaves together several narratives in the same frame, interrelating them. However, this leads to certain contradictions between them, resulting in ambiguities that interlace the whole text: "The *Decameron*'s inherent ambiguity allows for scholars to constantly debate the ever-complicated and meaningful novelle" (Williams, 2007, p. 2). This ambiguity allows Boccaccio to open a dialogue with his readers regarding the moral of each *novella*.

Although the narrator of this tale is Dioneo, whose narratives tend to offer more liberated female characters, Williams (2007) notes that this tale is perhaps the most misogynistic of Boccaccio's collection. However, the use of a particularly misogynistic concluding story could have specific function. At the beginning of the *Decameron*, Dioneo himself states that,

whilst in the villa, the women of the *brigata* should be treated the same as the men, signalling an abandonment of the gender hierarchy present in society at the time, in sympathy with the abandonment of Florence. The last tale could therefore be seen as a reinstatement of this hierarchy in preparation for re-entering contemporary Florentine society (Williams, 2007, p. 6).

As previously stated, within Boccaccio's *cornice*, each *novella* must correspond to the theme of the day, and the chosen theme on the tenth day complicates the reading of the story of Griselda: "...incomincia la decima e ultima, nella quale, sotto il reggimento di Panfilo, si ragiona di chi liberalmente ovvero magnificamente alcuna cosa operasse intorno a' fatti d'amore o d'altra cosa" (X, p. 439). If the theme of the day is magnificent behaviour, which character behaves magnificently, and should they be emulated by the reader? It could be argued that Gualtieri behaves magnificently, but it is a magnificence that is associated with "matta bestialità" (X.10, p. 487), and the narrator Dioneo explicitly warns the reader against emulating him (Goodwin, 2004, p. 54). However, we must also keep in mind that Dioneo is the only member of the *brigata* who isn't constricted by the theme of the day, having agreed to always be the last to speak in return for being able to tell a story of his choosing. Whilst he only uses this power a handful of times, the uniqueness of Dioneo's position allows for a more open interpretation of the day's theme. *Magnificenzia*, understood as munificence, is one of the eleven morals in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, as noted by McWilliam in his English translation of the *Decameron* (2003). This moral is therefore associated with wealth, hence Griselda cannot be the character who behaves "magnificently"; however, if we exchange wealth for virtue, Griselda becomes exceedingly rich (Goodwin, 2004, p. 54).

Whilst later interpretations of this story tend to concentrate on the virtue of patience, Goodwin explains how Boccaccio grants Griselda with a multitude of virtues that serve as a currency, a different type of munificence, operating within an "economy of virtue" (2004, p. 55). In the descriptions of Griselda, Boccaccio offers the reader multiple references to said virtues: she's a character that is "di persona e di viso bella", "avvenevole, tanto piacevole e tanto costumata", "obediente", "servente", "graziosa" and "benigna", a woman of "alta virtù di costei" (X.10, p. 489). A singular passage contains all this vocabulary denoting her many virtues.

An often-highlighted description of Griselda is another allusion to *Nicomachean Ethics*: “se non che anche nelle povere case piovono dal cielo de’ divini spiriti, come nelle reali di queglii che sarien più degni di guardar porci che d’aver sopra uomini signoria?” (X.10, p. 493). Throughout the text, the narrator presents Griselda as something more than a normal woman, but, in this conclusion, Dioneo elevates her to the position of a divine or celestial being (Campbell, 2003, p. 203). The narrator contrasts her virtue with Gualtieri’s “matta bestialità”, a label that originates from Dante’s *Commedia* (Battaglia Ricci, 2013, p. 80). According to Campbell, in this conclusion neither Griselda nor Gualtieri are examples for the reader to follow, and the *novella* has a different purpose: “The initial comments he makes in his conclusion suggest that the tale is not about marital relations at all but rather about the insoluble paradoxes of social hierarchy” (2003, p. 203). If this is the case, we cannot consider either of the protagonists to be an exemplum for the marital roles of husband and wife, but rather symbols used to criticise the social imbalance of power at the time.

Nevertheless, the question of whether Griselda is a character designed to be mimicked or not continues to be ambiguous, and critics have not reached a consensus on this issue. In suggesting Griselda is a divine being, Boccaccio makes her difficult to imitate. The narrator Dioneo highlights this with an innuendo in his conclusion that reminds the reader of the freer and more sexual representations of women in his previous narratives: “Al quale non sarebbe forse stato male investito d’essersi abbattuto a una, che quando fuor di casa l’avesse in camiscia cacciata, l’avesse sí ad un altro fatto scuotere il pelliccione che riuscita ne fosse una bella roba.” (X.10, pp. 493-494). *Riuscire una bella roba* has a double meaning: in a literal sense, it refers to Griselda’s lack of beautiful clothing, and, in a sexual sense, it alludes to an extramarital relationship (Tesi, 2012, p. 88). Campbell proposes that “In fantasizing another woman in Griselda’s place, Dioneo offers his audience a possible counter-narrative to the one he has just told, opening up the space that Griselda occupies in the tale to other bodies, writings and readings” (2003, p. 204). In her interpretation of Dioneo’s commentary, Campbell concludes that the introduction of an alternative, less virtuous woman confirms that it’s impossible to present Griselda as an exemplum, as her behaviour is essentially inimitable.

On the other hand, Goodwin considers that both Griselda and Gualtieri are examples for the reader in Boccaccio’s tale: Gualtieri’s behaviour is a model of what one should endure, whilst Griselda is a model that one should emulate (2004, p. 55). However, Goodwin recognises that the narrative “sets up a pattern in which Griselda is to pass her tests in conformity not to life

but to the literature on the remedial virtues whose purpose is to aid with the problems of living” (2004, p. 55). In this sense, Boccaccio uses Griselda as a model of the virtues themselves, but he doesn’t do so in a realistic way. The conclusion, especially in its references to Griselda’s divine nature and in the alternative narrative of another woman, casts doubt upon the credibility of Griselda and alludes to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* to avoid the possibility of directly imitating her (Goodwin, 2004, p. 55). Griselda is therefore a symbolic example, rather than a practical one; her behaviour and actions themselves are not imitable for the reader, yet the reader can incorporate the virtues and morals that her behaviour represents into their own lives. There are various interpretations of what exactly Griselda symbolizes: “Griselda come figura *Christi*, o *Christus pattiens*, martire e santa. O, ancora, identificabile con Maria, o con l’umanità intera [...] Griselda è anche Abramo e Giobbe” (Angeli, 2012, p. 69).

Another fundamental aspect of this tale is the role of Griselda’s body because, as Angeli notes, “cuore e corpo sono entrambi ulcerate” (2012, p. 70). Aside from incredibly cruel psychological tests, Griselda’s body is humiliated and redressed several times. When Gualtieri asks for her hand in marriage, “in presenza di tutta la sua compagnia e d’ogni altra persona la fece spogliare ignuda” and then “la fece vestire e calzare, e sopra i suoi capelli, così scarmigliati com’erano, le fece mettere una corona” (X.10, p. 489). These two actions are separate in the *Decameron* (Angeli, 2012, p. 73), underscoring her humiliation before redressing her, making it clear to the reader from the very beginning that any fortune Griselda has in becoming a marquess is marred with both physical and psychological violence.

Angeli observes that the action of redressing Griselda coincides with historic practices, as the groom would send his future wife new attire; however, it is also a metaphorical act (2012, pp. 83-84). The change in clothes represents her entry into a new family, and the inclusion of nudity highlights this transition. The act of stripping her in front of everyone “può essere giustificata appunto come rituale emblematico di una transizione definitiva da uno stato (sociale e parentale) ad un altro” (Angeli, 2012, p. 83). Baskins argues that Griselda’s nudity isn’t allegorical, nor does it represent innocence (unlike Christ’s or martyrs’ nudity), because Griselda is mortal, and as such the only reason for her nudity is humiliation and shame, whilst it is the clothing itself, rather than Griselda’s body, that represents virtue (Baskins, cited by Angeli, 2012, p. 84). However, it could be argued that the elevation of Griselda to a divine level in Dioneo’s conclusion allows for an allegorical interpretation of nudity. The



persistence of hair that is “scarmigliato” beneath her crown is a particularly interesting detail, showing a discordance with her new appearance, which supposedly reflects her noble soul. This could potentially allude to the emotional turmoil and suffering that awaits her despite this seemingly fortunate twist of fate that pushes her up the social ranking, or it could even imply the impossibility of escaping her lowly origin, in a continued critique of power structures at the time.

Griselda’s second undressing, when she must return to her father’s abode, once again demonstrates the symbolic importance of clothing. Her attire represents her status as Gualtieri’s wife and the mother of his children, and, when this is taken away from her, she requests a shift to cover herself in exchange for her virginity. This scant garment therefore “displays her nobility in a way similar to, yet crucially different from, the expensive clothing she leaves behind”, and her virtue is no longer presented in the context of her noble clothing, but “it appears as an innate quality materialised in inadequate dress” (Campbell, 2003, p. 201). The link Campbell draws between this nudity and Dioneo’s alternative narrative of another woman is particularly thought-provoking. The nudity of Griselda in this commentary, covered only by a “camiscia cacciata”, is another type of dress, not offering a naked body but instead “a female Surface to be appropriated and re-clothed [...] that invokes the absence rather than the presence of female bodies which the text has woven itself around” (Campbell, 2003, p. 204). This alternative woman is therefore a representation of the act of translation itself that “exposes the fissures in the narrative it parodies by introducing new bodies and contexts to disrupt the coherence of the established text” (Campbell, 2003, p. 201).

Griselda’s clothing isn’t her only exterior layer. Throughout the text there is a continuous contrast between her interior state and her exterior appearance. This juxtaposition is present from the beginning, as her noble interior was hidden beneath her poor appearance. In each text, Griselda maintains her exterior calm despite her pain: “come che gran noia nel cuor sentisse, senza mutar viso in braccio la pose al familiare” (X.10, p. 490). This stoicism reflects once again the elevation of Griselda above other women: “non senza grandissima fatica, oltre alla natura delle femine, ritenne le lagrime” (X.10, p. 491). Her emotional control is even more surprising when the belief that women had less hold over their emotions than men is considered. In his translation, McWilliam (2003) notes the correspondence between Griselda’s sacrifice and masculine classical and biblical figures, such as Agamemnon, Idomeneus and Abraham. However, Rüegg, in her analysis of a later work by Georg Pondo,

notes that Griselda “is expected to express and show more emotions due to female weakness [...] so her stoicism is more surprising and shocking than Abraham’s” (2019, p. 98). Griselda’s unchangeable countenance suggests that her behaviour is not imitable for most people, or at least most women, as stoicism is generally associated with masculine figures, giving a certain improbability to her character.

When looking at later versions of the story of Griselda, it is therefore important to consider the context of each text and the variations in details which can aid us in ascertaining the author’s intended moral. In Boccaccio’s case, the ambiguity of his work makes it difficult to interpret, but generally Griselda doesn’t seem to be an imitable exemplum, although it is possible that her character is a symbolic representation of virtues that could potentially be emulated.

## 2.2. Petrarch’s Allegorical Griseldis

Critics tend to agree that Petrarch, in his Latin version of the *Decameron*’s final *novella*, titled *De insigni obedientia et fide uxoria*, attempts to eliminate the ambiguities of the original text and impose a moral that aligns with his humanistic thinking. It is again important to consider the context of Petrarch’s work to better understand it, in this case four letters addressed to Boccaccio found in his *Seniles*. Petrarch eliminates Boccaccio’s *cornice*, replacing it with an epistolary structure. Although said structure could appear to be made up of personal and “spontaneous” letters, it’s critical to keep in mind that these letters were written with the intention of recompiling in *Seniles*, and consequently with greater consideration, being presented in an order that doesn’t correspond with the chronology of their writing. The translation of Boccaccio’s *novella* itself was written first and the reflections that surround it were written later.

This epistolary structure guides the reader in a more explicit way than Boccaccio’s *cornice*, offering reflections on Petrarch’s concept of translation and his writing methods. However, he doesn’t seem to have a fixed opinion of his translation, showing a certain ambivalence towards it (Goodwin, 2004, p. 50). Whilst in *Seniles* XVII.3 he regards his translation positively, in *Seniles* XVII.1 and XVII.2 he suggests the tale isn’t overly useful, and in *Seniles* XVII.4 he discards it as a futile exercise. Goodwin suggests that Petrarch uses these letters to present a “complex self-portrait”, as the first three letters are concerned with “the

characters of the author and the translator [...] and with the nature of the Griselda story” instead of the ethical value of the tale (2004, p. 51). Stefano Ugo Baldassari agrees, affirming that Petrarch is an author who works to achieve not just a complex self-portrait but an idealised one (2003, p. 33). Book XVII, containing these four letters to Boccaccio, is the final book in the *Seniles*, like the *novella* X.10. Petrarch himself highlights the importance of this position in his third letter to Boccaccio, in which he translates the story. Petrarch therefore places the text in a position of utmost importance within his work, emphasising the rhetorical power of its exemplum.

*Seniles* XVII offers a better understanding of what Petrarch understood by “translation”: as per Horace’s concept of translation, he doesn’t translate word for word. According to Petrarch’s thinking, “the imitator should transform the original into something new and valuable”; as such, it shouldn’t be an exact copy of the original text but bear a resemblance to a father-son relationship (Goodwin, 2004, p. 45). This leads to differences in the text, and the use of Latin as the vehicular language is key. However, the Petrarchan text is more of a commentary than a rival of the original and invites the reader to reflect on his concept of imitation (Goodwin, 2004, p. 45).

Petrarch establishes the difference between the *Decameron*’s audience, which is more popular and necessitates “the inclusion of lower elements”, and his own more elitist one. According to Petrarch, Latin is superior to vernacular, which he associates with the masses and with the frivolity of youth (Zak, 2015, p. 176). The change in language therefore implies a change of tone resulting in “a more serious, moral tale” (Campbell, 2003, p. 205). However, Petrarch did not abhor the use of the Florentine dialect, as evidenced by his own use of dialect in his *Canzonere*, but criticised certain elements of its audience, with its wider and more inclusive demographic reach (Foster, cited by Goodwin, 2004, p. 46)<sup>1</sup>. It must also be clarified that there wasn’t necessarily a clear distinction between Latin and Florentine texts. Parma identifies two lines of Latin translations of the *Decameron*, “elevated” and “alternative”. Petrarch’s translation of the tale of Griselda belongs to the former, whilst the latter envelops translations of more comedic *novelle* (Parma, 2003, p. 205). Latin is therefore only one aspect of this change in tone, which implies a change to a more exclusive audience,

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<sup>1</sup> This doesn’t mean all elements of the *Decameron*’s audience were beneath Petrarch’s consideration, as he himself formed part of it.

although not a completely homogenous one. Furthermore, in following this “elevated” and more humanistic line of translation, Latin, in this case, reflects the moral content of the text.

Whilst a strong ambiguity imbues the text of Boccaccio, it’s generally agreed that Petrarch tries to resolve these interpretative difficulties. Although the *Nicomachean Ethics* forms the moral basis of Boccaccio’s interpretation, Petrarch discards this reference in favour of the Holy Scripture, directly referencing James the Apostol (Goodwin, 2004, p. 63). Zak (2015) presents critics’ two principal directions regarding the moral ends of Petrarch’s translation. On the one hand, he offers a reflection into the Humanistic concept of exemplary narrative’s capability to guide its readers’ characters and behaviour. On the other hand, some critics call attention to the dogmatic nature of the story’s exemplarity and the elimination of the dialogue with the reader observed in Boccaccio’s original text (Zak, 2015, pp. 173-174). However, Zak reveals the ironies present in *Seniles XVI* when read within the context of the rest of the work. These ironies open a different kind of dialogue, between the translation and the text that inspired it, pushing the reader to reflect upon the ethical nature of the narrative (Zak, 2015, p. 175).

Petrarch presents his Griseldis as an allegorical exemplum, a “versione laica della storia di Giobbe” (Giacalone, 2015, p. 115). Whilst Boccaccio includes a range of virtues that Griselda possesses, Petrarch focuses on one in particular: constancy, “the ability to withstand the vicissitudes of fortune, fair and foul, with complete equanimity and steadfastness” (Zak, 2015, p. 178). If Griseldis is an exemplum of a good Christian faced with divine trials, we could consider Valterius as representative of God, being the one who subjects her to said trials. The repeated use of the word “dominus” when Griseldis refers to her husband supports this interpretation, as does Griseldis’ affirmation that her submission is an act of free will, and not coercion (Rüegg, 2019, pp. 60-61). Petrarch eliminates the forceful criticism of the Marquis and his “matta bestialità”, but Petrarch’s narration problematises the association of Valterius with God, swinging between praise and condemnation (Rüegg, 2019, p. 61). Rüegg highlights the ambiguous phrase “mirabilis quedam quam laudabilis doctiores iudicent cupiditas”, which is omitted in later posterior translations. She proposes that the correct reading of this phrase is that suggested by Matellotti, as an indirect question: “mirabilis quedam- Quam laudabilis? Doctiores iudicent- cupiditas” (Martellotti, cited by Rüegg, 2019, pp. 61-62). Although Petrarch doesn’t seem to judge Valterius, in the same way that a Christian shouldn’t judge God, the phrase can also be read ironically as a suggestion that

Valterius' desire to subject his wife to such cruel tests is not laudable but a sin (Rüegg, 2019, pp. 61-62).

A particularly striking element of the narration in the *Seniles* is the lack of attention on Griseldis' physicality. Petrarch emphasises Griseldis' virtue above her appearance: "la presentazione di Griselda [...], che nella novella di Boccaccio sembra suscitare inizialmente più un'infazione fisica in Gualtieri [...], in quella di Petrarca l'accento è posto sulle alte virtù di lei" (Giacalone, 2015, p. 115). Campbell notes that Petrarch's "representation of Griselda in fact bears a remarkable resemblance to hagiographical representations of some virgin martyrs, where the young saint's physical attractiveness is mentioned only to draw attention towards a more profound spiritual beauty"; when Valterius announces his plans to divorce Griseldis, she asserts that she has remained "a maid in spirit (*animo semper ancilla permansi*)" (Campbell, 2003, p. 206). In this way Griseldis is distanced from the physical realities of marriage and associated with the Virgin Mary; the concept of virginity in the Middle Ages was as much spiritual as physical, so Griseldis' affirmation of her spiritual virginity isn't surprising, although it tempers the exposure of her physical body and asserts her spiritual purity (Campbell, 2003, p. 206). Petrarch's Griseldis doesn't experience the same physical scrutiny as Boccaccio's Griselda, as she is stripped only in front of matrons, a fact that Petrarch emphasises (Angeli, 2012, p. 64). The physical realities of her body and her marriage are consistently minimised to put her purity and spiritual characteristics at the forefront.

If Griseldis is an exemplum, "the tale satisfies Panfilo's request for exemplary tales that will inspire valorous actions", and consequently fits the tenth day's theme, although the example offered isn't necessarily that of *magnificenza* (Goodwin, 2004, p. 61). Nonetheless, who should imitate her and how? It's clear that Boccaccio's Griselda isn't imitable, having been elevated to a divine level. Petrarch explicitly states that Griseldis is not an exemplum for "contemporary married women (*matronas nostri temporis*)" (Campbell, 2003, p. 207). The resolute concentration on her spiritual attributes and the minimisation of her physicality, or her feminine body, suggest that this character is an allegorical representation of the human soul without a determined gender, or, as Campbell states, "a supposedly universal model for the genderless souls of educated men" (Campbell, 2003, p. 208). In his conclusion, Petrarch stresses Griseldis' constancy as the element that his masculine and cultured readers should emulate. However, this is problematic since both Griseldis' virtue and her reward are closely

related to “the physical and social functions she performs as a woman” (Campbell, 2003, p. 207). Her obedience forms part of her marriage vows and her reward is a return to her position as a mother and wife. The attempt to separate her exemplary behaviour from her body is therefore problematic, complicating the genderless moral that Petrarch seeks to promote.

To support the exemplary value of the tale, Petrarch needs to transform the original text into something “più da *historia* che da *fabula*” (Giacalone, 2015, p. 112). He debates this distinction in his letters. *Historia* is a narration of real and verifiable events, whilst *fabula* is fiction. The plausibility of the narrated events appears to be of utmost importance to Petrarch, as a true story can serve as a model for the reader to follow (Zak, 2015, p. 187). The Petrarchan text’s *incipit* includes a detailed description of Saluzzo’s landscape that is lacking in Boccaccio’s original (Piccat, 2004, p. 338). This lends a more realistic air to the text, although Piccat (2004) establishes that there isn’t sufficient evidence as to the real existence of Griselda or Gualtieri. Petrarch explores this idea of verisimilitude in *Seniles XVII* through the description of two different friends’ reactions to the tale. The first friend, from Padua, is overcome with emotion, whilst the second, from Verona, isn’t affected at all as he doesn’t believe a woman could behave as Griseldis does. Petrarch presents his Paduan friend’s emotional reaction in a positive light whilst criticising his Veronese friend, indicating that he favours the reaction that suggests the tale is believable. However, it’s also possible that Petrarch aimed to create an *argumentum*, a narration of untrue but believable events (Rüegg, 2019, p. 56). The tale could occupy an intermediary space between *fabula* and *historia*, “in the sense of *narration fabulosa* or a pseudo-historical exemplum with an allegorical level” (Rüegg, 2019, p. 57). Overall, Petrarch attempts to emphasise the plausibility of the events he narrates so they have more weight as an exemplum, without necessarily calling them historical truth, in contrast with Boccaccio who undermines the tale’s verisimilitude with the introduction of an alternative woman.

However, Petrarch’s praise for his friend’s emotional reaction is problematic in its own way. Griseldis’ constancy is presented through a total lack of emotion. In the *Decameron*, there is a discordance between Griselda’s turbulent emotions and her unchanged exterior appearance. Petrarch, however, eliminates all references to emotional turmoil, and his Griseldis “emerges as the ultimate embodiment of the Stoic ideal of virtuous constancy, the ability to remain one and the same regardless of the vicissitudes of life”, precisely through this correspondence

between her interior and exterior states (Zak, 2015, p. 180). Furthermore, Zak highlights how Petrarch develops upon his concept of constancy in the rest of his work, associating “sorrowful laments over blows of fortune” with the feminine side of human beings and describing Griseldis in an intentionally masculine way (2015, p. 180). In the discourse that surrounds Petrarch’s translation, a debate between these two ideals of *mollities* and constancy arises, and it becomes clear that the tale of Griseldis can advance both ethical ends (Zak, 2015, p. 188). The elimination of all emotional aspects of this character results in a dehumanised figure, which also presents a problem in terms of Petrarch’s attempt to create a plausible narration to create an imitable model for his readers.

At first, Petrarch’s Latin translation can appear less complex than the original Boccaccian text that inspired it, but I believe the Petrarchan text to be complex in a different way. An in-depth discourse around the concepts of translation and imitation arises as a result of the tale. Although the moral may seem clearer, it’s also problematic when the contradiction between the moral and the admiration of the Veronese friend’s emotional reaction are considered. Furthermore, despite his attempt to present an allegorical figure as a genderless model of behaviour, it is impossible to separate the exemplar of Griseldis from her feminine body and social status.

### **3. GRISELDA’S SPREAD THROUGHOUT EUROPE**

The tale of Griselda wasn’t only successful in the Italian Peninsula, but also spread throughout Europe, spawning hundreds of versions in different European languages in narrative, poetic, and theatrical contexts. To reduce the scope of this work, I will focus on two of the most well-known narrative interpretations of the matter of Griselda, by Philippe de Mézières and Chaucer. These two texts are evidence of the story’s wide-reaching influence, but once again offer changes that impact significantly on the interpretation of the narrative and the potential its potential exemplum.

#### *3.1. Philippe de Mézières’ Figure of the Ideal Wife*

The matter of Griseldis had great success in French society, and we have preserved numerous manuscripts of two different translations into French prose, one anonymous, and one identified as the work of Philippe de Mézières, as explored in E. Golenisstcheff-Koutousoff’s

*L'histoire de Griseldis* (1933), who establishes that Philippe's is the first known translation into French. Philippe's translation is of Petrarch's text, rather than Boccaccio's: "toute les traductions françaises en prose semblent dériver de la version latine de Pétrarque et non de la nouvelle italienne de Boccacce" (Leclerc, 1991, p. 149). It forms part of *Le livre de la vertu de sacrament de mariage et du reconfort des dames mariées* (c. 1384-1389), among other texts of a similar didactic nature; Griseldis' story is found within the "tierce livre" of this text (Golenisstcheff-Koutouzoff, 1933, p. 4). Mézières titles his translation *Le miroir des dames mariées, c'est assavoir de la merveilleuse patience et bonté de Griseldis, marquise de Saluce*. This specific translation is generally thought to be the basis of a later theatrical text, with some critics arguing that Mézières himself penned this dramatic reinterpretation<sup>2</sup>.

The inclusion of the text in this particular didactic work, surrounded by other exemplary tales, and the title of the story itself make "explicit the didactic purpose of this collection of tales in relation to marriage" (Rüegg, 2018, p. 109). This establishes the importance of the text in relation to the concept of marriage in the Middle Ages in a more explicit way than in Petrarch's and Boccaccio's narratives. The spread of this tale under numerous guises, not only in medieval times but also in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, have solidified the exemplarity of Griseldis in terms of marital relations, so that "the simple mention of Griselda's name in any of its spellings [...] sufficed to evoke her story and her exemplarity", and the tale "displays women's role in marital relationships as patiently obedient to their husbands, thereby conveying culturally constructed moral values regarding the ceremony and ritual of marriage, taken as a lifelong commitment in which women are subordinate to men" (Rüegg, 2018, p. 110). Rüegg establishes that the character of Griseldis becomes the "archetype of the patient, obedient and meek- that is to say, ideal- wife, and her story a myth aimed at maintaining social order and gender hierarchy" (2018, p. 11). Whilst this doesn't seem to apply to the two earlier Italian and Latin texts, it is relevant analysing the French texts, in this particular case the work of Philippe de Mézières. Boccaccio's text is ambiguous with regard to its moral function, whilst Petrarch makes clear that his translation serves as an allegorical and, importantly, a genderless example for a good Christian. Philippe's text, in contrast, is specifically directed at "dames mariées", as observed in the title. This doesn't mean that the

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<sup>2</sup> See Frank, G. (1936). The Authorship of Le Mystère de Griseldis. *Modern Language Notes*, 51(4), 217-222.



French text is meant exclusively for contemporary married women, or that it cannot be read as a spiritual example as well, but there is an important emphasis placed on the reading of the story as a model for women to be followed literally. This is evident in its inclusion in the *Livre de la vertu du sacrement de mariage*, a text “écrit [...] à l’intention des époux chrétiens, et tout spécialement dédié aux femmes” (Loba, 2018, p. 50).

Mézières emphasises the link between his vernacular text and the Petrarchan Latin one that inspired it, claiming a personal friendship: “jadis son especial ami” (p. 358, 5). Kevin Brownlee notes how this “serves to reinforce the filiation between their two texts”, providing “an extra degree of authorization for the literary connection” (1992, p. 870). We’re faced with another act of translation which establishes an “implicit literary lineage” whilst the friendship between Petrarch and Boccaccio is substituted with that of Petrarch and Philippe, both of which lend an air of legitimacy to the translation (Brownlee, 1992, p. 870). Philippe lavishes praise upon Petrarch and his use of Latin whilst referring to his own vernacular style as “rudiment et grosement en substance” (p. 358, 18). This in itself further underscores the legitimacy of his translation by confirming the literary excellence of his source material, but his use and debasement of French vernacular could also lower the exemplum that the narrative presents to a popular, mortal level, as opposed to a spiritual or divine one.

It’s also notable that Philippe presents Petrarch not so much as a literary authority but as a religious one: he is “reassimilated into an explicitly religious context, to the explicit orthodoxy of belief and pastoral authority in the exercise of his “science” attributed to a “maister” of spiritual doctrine” (Middleton, 1980, p. 141). This emphasis on Petrarch as an “authoritative teacher” (Middleton, 1980, p. 141) in a religious sense further emphasises the exemplarity of the tale. The French text also seems to erase the ambiguity of whether the tale is *historia* or *fabula* or something in between. The authority given to Petrarch also makes it “doctrinally valid” and, “it seems, historically true as well” (Middleton, 1980, p. 141). This religious ideal reflects Philippe’s “religious and political ideals” with a focus of “sacramental symbolism” (Middleton, 1980, p. 143). Philippe de Mézières therefore considers himself a “spiritual counsellor and sage” and presents Petrarch in a similar way, lending a spiritual authority to the text with a didactic function (Middleton, 1980, p. 143). Furthermore, Petrarch “fut d’abord connu en France comme moraliste, auteur d’ouvrages de caractère doctrinal” (Golenisstcheff-Koutouzoff, 1933, p. 115). Therefore, Petrarch’s reputation in France for moralist and exemplary texts also gives an air of authority to Philippe’s translation in a

didactic sense. However, Petrarch “accommodates the story to classical rhetoric so thoroughly that he effectively de-emphasizes its setting in Christian time”, a “universalising aspect of his style” that both French authors and Chaucer disregard, supplying “Christian reference, including explicit references to the theology of grace” (Morse, 1985, p. 58).

Whilst it’s been established that Philippe’s text is a translation of Petrarch’s, once again we must keep in mind the medieval concept of translation when comparing the two works. Philippe appears to follow Petrarch’s text more closely than Petrarch followed Boccaccio’s, however there are significant changes that underline the development in moral or exemplum. First of all, not just Philippe but also other French adaptors of this tale adjust their target audience. Boccaccio addressed his tale to women, for entertainment purposes; Petrarch aims his translation at his cultured, overwhelmingly masculine audience; Philippe reinstates the original feminine audience but this time with an explicit didactic purpose. Brownlee argues that there are “two different target audiences” for Mezieres’ story, that correspond to two different levels of exemplarity: “the *dames mariées* for the literal level; and *toute ame raisonnable et devote*- or, more generally, *tou bon crestien*- for the figural level” (1992, p. 868).

We therefore have a double exemplary reading of the French Griseldis. First and foremost, the tale can be read literally and “her behaviour is a model for married women to follow in relation to their own husbands”; secondly, her exemplum can be read as “the proper relation between the soul and Christ, viewed as immortal wife and husband” (Brownlee, 1992, p. 867). This corresponds to the overarching themes of Philippe’s *Livre de la vertu du sacrement de mariage*. Sinclair identifies four main themes, each of which corresponds with one of the four books contained within this work, in the case of the third book, “les noces spirituelles entre l’homme et la femme” (1996, p. 158). However, the theme that Sinclair associates with the fourth book, “les noces spirituelles entre Dieu et l’âme raisonnable” (1996, p. 158), could also be seen as a possible reading of Griseldis’ tale. Whereas in Petrarch only the second reading highlighted by Brownlee seems to be important, for Philippe de Mézières both readings are valid. However, the first, which Sinclair identifies as the main theme of the third book, could be said to have more weight, given the context in which we find the text.

Whereas Petrarch attempts to make his text seem realistic so that it can be relied upon as a model for his readers, he never asserts that it is *historia*, and the tale seems to fall into a

middle ground between the two, as an *argumentum*. In Mézières' text, however, "in order for the figural-allegorical level to work, the literal-historical level must be true" (Brownlee, 1992, p. 869). As already noted, Mézières uses Petrarch's literary and cultural authority to legitimise the tale, and this is one way in which he insists upon the veracity of its content. However, he also asserts the "extratextual existence" (Brownlee, 1992, p. 870) of the text: "Et est dicte histoire publique et notoire en Lombardie et par especial en Pieumont et ou marquise de Saluce est repute pour vraye" (p. 358, 13-15).

The change in audience also emphasises that the didactic or exemplary element of the text is overwhelmingly intended for women. To illustrate this intended purpose, we can also consider other works which include this particular French translation, apart from *Le livre de la vertu du sacrement de mariage*, for example the anonymous *Ménagier de Paris*. This work's author "draws on a variety of sources to provide illustrative anecdotes in support of the advice he is giving his wife" (Ferrier, 1979, p. 77). The change in language to French, which Philippe considers inferior to Latin, also underscores the vulgar, as opposed to the divine, reading of the exemplar: "Sa traduction trouve donc sa juste place dans un livre rédigé en français à l'intention particulière des femmes ignorant la langue latine" (Loba, 2018, p. 50).

But this literal reading presents a problem, and that is the question of the marquis' cruelty, which Boccaccio presents as "matta bestialità". Even to a medieval audience, his behaviour seems excessive, to the point that the *Ménagier*'s anonymous author feels the need to reassure his wife "that she need not fear a life like Griselda's" (Ferrier, 1979, p. 84). In order to combat this, Mézières' narrator includes a "running commentary" not just on Griseldis' exceptional behaviour but also in which "he criticizes the motivation and the behaviour of Walter" (Brownlee, 1992, p. 871), a clear break from the Petrarchan text that may remind us of Dioneo's interjections with regards to Gualtieri's behaviour: "il peust penser que tel corage ne procedast pas de humanité, mais de cruaulté et de bestialité" (pp. 369, 10-11). Despite Philippe's attempt to present a double exemplum, this is "not sustainable", as Gautier is criticised and, therefore, he is "first and foremost a human husband", as opposed to a symbolical figure representing God; the narrative is clearly a "privileging of the literal level with regard to exemplarity" (Brownlee, 1992, p. 874).

With the aforementioned focus on Griseldis' model as a married woman, Philippe seems to reintroduce an aspect of physicality into the text that Petrarch had otherwise erased. In his initial description of Griseldis, her spiritual beauty is emphasised, recalling Boccaccio's "divini spiriti": "Et toutfois aucunes fois es povres maisoncelles la grace de Dieu habite" (p. 361, 13-14). However, he does also comment upon her physical beauty: "belle de corps" (p. 361, 16). Philippe focuses overwhelmingly on her virginity, repeating "vierge" multiple times. Whereas Petrarch asserted that Griseldis remained spiritually virginal, distracting from the physical realities of marriage, Philippe has his Griseldis ask for a shift "pour la recompensation de ma virginité que je aportay en ton palys, laquelle je ne remporte pas" (p. 372, 4-5). This re-introduction of her physicality corresponds to the shifting of focus from a spiritual to a literal exemplum and the new audience of married women.

Towards the end of the text, the narrator also directly addresses this "noble female audience" (Brownlee, 1992, p. 873): "Entendés cy, roynes, princesses et marquises, que ceste dame à son seigneur respondi" (p. 368, 10-11). Furthermore, the narrator also highlights her poverty, continually describing her as "povre", and even stating that she is not worthy of being his wife: "je congnois bien que je ne suis pas digne non tant seulement ester appelée t'espouse, mais d'estre ta povre ancelle" (p. 363, 11-13). This emphasis of her lowly status could be read on a spiritual level, in terms of a Christian's relationship with God, but I am more inclined to interpret this on a literal plane in terms of a social dynamic, as an emphasis of a wife's position with regards to her husband or even a reinstatement of class roles, given Philippe's intended audience and how this is "explicitly reestablished" when Griseldis addresses noble women, prioritising the "literal-historical" level of the exemplum as opposed to the "figural-allegorical" level (Brownlee, 1992, p. 873).

The commentary provided by the narrator also provides us with an interesting take on Griseldis' interior state, as contrasted with her unchanging exterior state. The narrator consistently comments on what Griseldis should or could be feeling, yet never asserts what her inner emotional reaction is to the trials she faces. For example, the narrator states: "O quel dolour ceste dame [...] pouvoit avoir en son cuer" (p. 368, 5-6) and "et se elle fu tourblee en son cuer et raisonnablement nulz n'en devoit doubter" (p. 370, 24-25). He establishes the interior reactions she should be having, which contrast with her exterior constancy, for example when she acts "sans souspirer ne aucun dolour monstrer" (p. 366, 9), and this constancy is highly praised as her main virtue, "la tres merveilleuse constance et

pacience” (p. 367, 3-4). Brownlee points out how the narrator’s commentary both links Griseldis more intimately with the female audience but also separates her from them. He gives the example of the comment “Qui est celui, je ne dis pas femmes qui de leur nature sont tendres et à leurs enfans amourees, mais le plus fort homme de corage qui se porroit trouver, oyans de son seul fil telle sentence, qui le peust dissimuler?” (p. 368, 7-10), which presents her response as “transcending gender distinctions” (Brownlee, 1992, p. 872).

Whilst Brownlee suggests that “the extremity of her situation serves to guarantee the truth of her words and gestures, which [...] are wholly adequate indications of her inner state” (1992, p. 872), her outward appearances do not seem to correspond with what Philippe establishes as the expected or correct emotional reaction. This calls into question the ethical value of the exemplum presented, considering that Griseldis believes that her children will be killed, and thus knowingly allows infanticide. Philippe attempts to sidestep this dilemma by making it explicit that the infanticide is Gautier’s choice, not Griseldis’: “de moy et des enfans tu es seigneur, en tes chose donques use de ton droit sans demander mon consentement” (p. 368-14-15). In this way, Philippe shifts all of the weight of these monstrous actions from Griseldis onto the marquis, absolving her of blame. This is a question, however, that becomes more ambiguous in Chaucer’s text and over which critics have argued extensively, with J. Allan Mitchell (2005) referring to this issue as an “ethical monstrosity”.

As such, Philippe confronts the matter of Griselda in a wholly different way to Boccaccio or Petrarch, adding a literal level to the exemplarity of this feminine archetype. His Griseldis is a model for contemporary married women, and the story becomes essentially didactic, despite a secondary allegorical reading that remits to Petrarch. In order to legitimise this literal exemplum, Philippe must establish the authority of the text both by referring to the reputation of Petrarch as a moralist writer and by insisting on the historical truth of the tale. The text also raises questions as to whether Gautier’s and indeed Griseldis’ behaviour, given that she allows her husband’s actions, is ethically acceptable.

### 3.2. Chaucer and the Question of Ethics

Apart from its success in French literature, the tale of Griselda crossed the channel to be included in one of the most celebrated works of English literature, Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tale*. It’s generally agreed that Chaucer’s primary source was Petrarch’s *De*

*insigni obedientia et fide uxoria*, and some agree with J. Burke Severs' (1942) assertion that *Le livre de Griseldis*, an anonymous French translation of Petrarch, was also a source. There isn't substantial evidence that Chaucer knew of Boccaccio's original rendering of the tale, however there are remarkable similarities between the two, particularly in terms of the ambiguity of Griselda's exemplarity, to the point that Leah Schwebel describes Chaucer's version as "less of a translation than a *restoration*, as it brings us closer to the Boccaccian original than Petrarch ever desired to reach" (2013, p. 275)<sup>3</sup>. The Italian *tre corone* of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio were of great influence for Chaucer, and, although he never cites the latter, it's Boccaccio "from whom he took more than from any other writer, in any language" (Wallace, 2019, p. 213).

Chaucer directly references Petrarch as his source for *The Clerk's Tale*: "Francis Petrarc', the laureate poet" (p. 245). He follows Petrarch's retelling closely, but interweaves "strands of commentary" (Raby, 2013, p. 223) through his narrator, the Clerk; multiple critics have noted how he alters the tale in a way that "does not so much change its garment as attempt to unravel the one that Petrarch has given it (Campbell, 2003, p. 208). Much like Philippe, Chaucer's Clerk begins the tale by praising Petrarch. Schwebel suggests that Chaucer was not just familiar with Petrarch's translation, but also with the letters surrounding it, and by once again translating the tale he "grafts his name onto a pre-established genealogy of poets from the position of an outsider so as to provide the illusion of an illustrious foundation for his vernacular tale" (2013, p. 287). Furthermore, she asserts that Petrarch's alterations to Boccaccio's work change its original purpose as a response to Dante's call for works written in vernacular; in doing so, Petrarch slights Boccaccio, despite his letters' outward friendliness (2013, pp. 276-277). Chaucer recognises this and "exploits the subversive potential inherent in praising as *auctor* while simultaneously altering his work" (Schwebel, 2013, p. 276). As such, we can consider Chaucer's reappropriation and alteration of Petrarch's translation as a kind of "backhanded compliment" (Schwebel, 2013, p. 288). The Clerk begins as a literary critic, altering Petrarch's "high style" (p. 245), but also begins a moral critique, ultimately questioning the ethics of Griselda's example. Chaucer's praise for Petrarch therefore doesn't just establish the illustrious source material, as Philippe does, but is also the beginning of a literary and ideological critique.

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<sup>3</sup> For further information on potential similarities between Boccaccio's and Chaucer's texts, see Harkins, J. (2013), Chaucer's Clerk's Tale and Boccaccio's Decameron X.10, *The Chaucer Review*, 47(3), 247-273.

The first significant change Chaucer performs is the act of translation itself, from Latin to the Middle English vernacular. The Host demands a tale in English: “Speake so plain at this time, I pray you / That we may understande what ye say” (p. 244). The Clerk is therefore obliged to “adapt his material for his lay audience”, despite it still being a clerical, moral tale, reincorporating “the popular listener” that had previously been excluded by Petrarch’s switch to Latin (Campbell, 2003, p. 209). This use of vernacular more closely aligns with Boccaccio’s original intent, “restoring the tale to its original function as a paragon of vernacular excellence vis-à-vis Dante’s *Il Convivio* and *De vulgari eloquentia*” (Schwebel, 2013, p. 285). Furthermore, the translation from Latin to English functions “to bolster the nobility of *his own* mother tongue”, elevating it to the status of a literary language at a time when the primary literary languages in England were Latin and French (Schwebel, 2013, p. 285). In another deviance from Petrarch, the Host explicitly asks for a tale meant for entertainment, as opposed to a didactic one, requesting that the Clerk “tell us some merry tale” and “but preache not” (p. 244). This calls into question the exemplary nature of the tale, suggesting that it no longer serves a didactic purpose as in Petrarch and Philippe, and returning to Boccaccio’s original entertainment orientated text.

This shift to English highlights two further important changes. First of all, Chaucer provides a new *cornice* for the tale; much like Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, *The Canterbury Tales* is made up of a series of spoken short stories told within a narrative frame, in this case a pilgrimage. *The Clerk’s Tale* is therefore “an oral rather than a literary ‘text’”, however, in contrast with Boccaccio’s educated *brigata*, it “is delivered to a mixed audience of both literate and unlettered pilgrims” (Campbell, 2003, p. 209). In any case, the Clerk’s audience is evidently different from Petrarch’s cultured, masculine one. The tale’s inclusion in *The Canterbury Tales*, especially from the Clerk’s mouth, marks a “geographical shift from Italy to England and thus from Italian humanism [...] to the clericalism of the English university”, which “re-establishes the boundaries of cultural authority in both geographical and ideological terms” (Campbell, 2003, p. 209). This has a knock-on effect on the moral of the tale, as we have already established how Petrarch’s Humanism moulded the exemplum presented.

Whilst Chaucer’s text follows Petrarch’s closely, we can still see significant changes in the way Griselda is presented and in the ethics of the tale. First of all, the Clerk appears to heavily emphasise Griselda’s poor upbringing in a way that Petrarch does not. Whilst we also

observed this emphasis on her poverty in Philippe's version, here it seems to serve a different purpose. Michael Raby explores how the medieval concepts of habit and habitat interact in this tale, and in particular how Griselda "attributes her fortitude not to God, as Walter does, but to her fostering", pointing out how his new, noble bride would not be able to "withstand his torments" (2013, p. 228). The description of the village Griselda comes from is embellished and her daily labours are described in detail, highlighting a possible parallel between Griselda's life in poverty and medieval monastic life, and drawing a link "between poverty and virtue" (Raby, 2013, pp. 229-234)<sup>4</sup>.

Like Philippe, Chaucer erases any reference to Griselda's spiritual virginity. Indeed, "Griselda's status as a wife acquires a more literal significance in Chaucer's text than it is given in either Boccaccio's or Petrarch's" (Campbell, 2003, p. 210). The Clerk explicitly refers to Griselda's "maidenhead", and the context of marriage therefore takes on an additional importance in Chaucer's retelling, especially towards the end of the text, encouraging a reading of the tale "as a comment on the interaction of married men and women by placing increased emphasis on the importance of gender as a filter for the story's meaning" (Campbell, 2003, p. 210). The Clerk directly addresses his audience in the tale, asking questions of both the male and female members of his audience, inviting them to pass judgement on both protagonists' actions within the context of marriage. This raises the question of whether Chaucer was promoting a specific exemplum or moral, or if he simply wanted to provide the base for a debate, much like the debate that arises amongst the members of the *brigata*.

Despite following Petrarch's narration, Chaucer inserts commentary into the text through his narrator which calls into question the ethics of the tale. The Clerk repeatedly criticises Walter's behaviour as unnecessary, "T'assay a wife when that it is no need" (p. 257), and, "with each narrative interpolation condemning Walter's actions, the Clerk moves further away from his Petrarchan source and its moral conclusion" (Schwebel, 2013, p. 294). Like Petrarch, Chaucer explicitly warns against taking Griselda as a model of behaviour for married women: "This story is said, not for that wives should / Follow Griselda in humility /

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed analysis of the link between *habitus* and *habitare*, see Raby, M. (2013). The Clerk's Tale and Forces of Habit. *The Chaucer Review*, 47(3), 223-246.



For it were importable though they would” (p. 277). However, whilst Petrarch’s Griseldis is presented in his conclusion as a genderless allegorical exemplum, “the Clerk points to the unique singularity of Griselda” (Schwebel, 2013, p. 295). Schwebel points out the similarity here with the *Decameron* (2013, p. 295); Dioneo asks “Chi avrebbe, altri che Griselda, potuto col viso non solamente asciutto ma lieto, sofferir le rigide e mai più non udite prove da Gualtieri fatte?” (X.10, p. 493). Both narrators seem to allude to Griselda’s uniqueness and therefore the impossibility of imitating her as an exemplum.

Another element that is comparable with Dioneo’s commentary is found in the *Envoy*. Boccaccio’s narrator “expresses less admiration for Griselda’s unnatural behaviour than horror at Walter’s, and so too does the Clerk, who warns women not to let what happened to Griselda happen to them in the *Envoy*” (Schwebel, 2013, p. 295). In said *Envoy*, the Clerk encourages women to act as the Wife of Bath does, another figure in *The Canterbury Tales* whose behaviour within her marriage represents a counterpoint to that of Griselda’s. This mirrors the introduction of an alternative woman by Dioneo, one who would have behaved in a decidedly different way to Griselda. The *Envoy* is highlighted by many critics to suggest that the tale is “monstrous rather than moral” (Mitchell, 2005, p. 2), calling into question the use of Griselda as an exemplum. Mitchell further suggests that the *Envoy*, among other elements, serves “to lessen our hold on which motives are ultimately determinative of meaning”, and as such “the parable is conditioned by the complex communicative context in which we find it” (2005, p. 6); much like in Boccaccio, the complexity of Chaucer makes it difficult to fixate on a singular didactic interpretation. Campbell sees the *Envoy* as an “incitement to female listeners to react against the example” the Wife of Bath sets, as encouragement to resist masculine oppression (2003, p. 212). However, in introducing the Wife of Bath as an alternative body, Chaucer reinforces negative stereotypes, establishing “another form of male, clerical authority”, and asserting a different type of masculine oppression (2003, p. 212).

However, this point of view becomes more complex when we consider two other characters’ response to the tale, as “the narrative is conveniently easy to mistake for a marital exemplum” and the Host and the Merchant “construe the narrative exactly this way” (Mitchell, 2005, p. 9). This ambiguity is further complicated by the use of “importable”, understood as “intolerable” or “unbearable”. It’s unclear whether the Clerk is saying such

behaviour would be intolerable for a husband, or for a wife, or perhaps inimitable<sup>5</sup>. There is a possibility of an exemplum applying on both a spiritual level (as in Petrarch) and a domestic level (as in Petrarch), but “without thinking any woman could succeed in both” (Mitchell, 2005, p. 10). However, despite this possible spiritual level, the Clerk repeatedly draws attention to Griselda’s status as a “wife”; “her virtue *is* her wifhood- before he ever gets to the part where he says wifely patience is not really the point” (Mitchell, 2005, p. 11).

Regardless, if Griselda is an example, it is not clear whether she is a positive or negative one, and Mitchell raises the possibility of the tale being a critique of medieval marriage (2005, p. 12), as the Clerk’s repeated criticism of Walter suggests. Within the marriage, she has “no real choice” (Mitchell, 2005, p. 12), however we must also consider the moral responsibility of Griselda herself in this situation; the vow Walter asks of her is demanding, “but it is made much more so by Griselda herself; unconditional assent to her cruel husband represents the terms she largely invents for herself” (Mitchell, 2005, p. 13). By obeying her husband so completely, she becomes complicit in her own humiliation and what she believes to be infanticide, a fact that doesn’t sit comfortably with modern or medieval audiences. This leads Mitchell to suggest that “importable” could perhaps mean that her behaviour is unethical; her obedience could even be considered a form of idolatry, a type of blasphemy that arises elsewhere in Chaucer’s work (2005, p. 15).

On the other hand, Ashton (1998) presents Griselda’s complete submission as camouflage or protection. She describes the ideal of a medieval woman as “a valorization of enclosure, withdrawal, [...] a closing down or concealment of emotion, ideals that might be used to confound others and provide a protective covering beneath which lies an undisclosed self-identity” (Ashton, 1998, p. 233). With her vow of obedience, “all responsibility for his actions is placed upon her husband” and she is presented as “holy and patient” (Ashton, 1998, p. 233). Her “mimesis” therefore hides her interior state, explaining her seemingly unmoveable countenance and perhaps solving a previously explored issue: if her interior state does not correspond to her outward appearance, then it is difficult to consider her a true

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<sup>5</sup> Mitchell explores the ambiguity of the word “importable” in detail in Mitchell, J. A. (2005). Chaucer’s “Clerk’s Tale” and the Question of Ethical Monstrosity. *Studies in Philology*, 102(1), 1-26.

exemplum of patience; if these two states coincide, it calls into question her humanity, adding to the ethical dilemma that Mitchell raises. Her silence “is her pain” and “an emotional trauma articulated only when her children are eventually restored to her, and, even then, only briefly” (Ashton, 1998, p. 237). Griselda is therefore presented as holy but, more so, her patience is a defence mechanism which perhaps spoke to her feminine audience in a different way: “Her perfect femininity so overshadows the ambiguous nature of her discourse that the masculine world fails to hear its full import, but to those who might have recognised themselves in the depiction of her ideal meekness a different truth is spoken” (Ashton, 1998, pp. 237-238).

Lynn Shutters presents us with another frame for Griselda’s exemplarity, that of pagan women, looking to Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women* as evidence for his interest in pagan wifely exemplars and interpreting Griselda’s virtue “not only in Christian contexts [...], but also within pagan ones” (2009, p. 62). As we have seen, “Griselda’s extreme willingness to fulfil Walter’s will [...] fits uncomfortably with late medieval ethics and religious morality” (Shutters, 2009, p. 64), as already noted by Mitchell’s label “ethical monstrosity”. However, this extreme devotion to her husband has parallels in female figures of antiquity, who were often drawn upon in medieval discourse, despite the seemingly sinful limits of their devotion, such as suicide. Petrarch also compared Griselda “to Portia, Hypsicratea, and Alcestis, pagan women whose deaths resulted from their devotion to their husbands” (Shutters, 2009, pp. 66-67). In Chaucer’s pagan examples in *Legend*, “feminine virtue is performative”, through acts of suffering “for or on account of their husbands or lovers”, and therefore “feminine suffering requires cruel men” (Shutters, 2009, p. 71). As such, Shutters proposes that Chaucer used these pagan characters as a “soft source” whilst writing *The Clerk’s Tale*, which could help illuminate the roots of the ethical ambiguity presented in the text, as it “lays bare the multiple traditions and values informing late medieval concepts of female virtue” (Shutters, 2009, p. 77). The same could perhaps be said of Boccaccio, who also explores both virtuous and wicked pagan women in *De claris mulieribus* (Shutters, 2009, p. 78). Whether Chaucer considered these women to be a realistic exemplum remains unclear, bringing us back to Mitchell’s exploration of what “importable” means. Shutters points out that, like the pagans of *Legend*, Griselda is situated in the distant past, and this “temporal distancing can operate either to bury Griselda’s undesirable mode of virtue-as-suffering in a distant past, or to suggest that the virtuous woman no longer exists” (Shutters, 2009, p. 75). This seems to be

supported by the *Envoy*, which pronounces Griselda dead and buried in Italy; it is therefore difficult to consider her as an exemplum, at least for contemporary wives.

It's clear how Chaucer carries out a kind of "restoration" on the Matter of Griselda, returning to the moral ambiguity in the original text after Petrarch's and Mézières' transformations of her exemplarity. Whilst Shutter's pagan argument sheds light on the "ethical monstrosity" described by Mitchell, it remains unclear whether Griselda can be taken as an exemplum in any sense, whether literal or allegorical, given the extremity of Walter's and her own actions, which Chaucer seems to acknowledge and play upon throughout the text.

#### 4. CHRISTINE DE PIZAN'S DEFENCE OF WOMEN

Until now, we have only seen Griselda from the perspective of male authors, but it's important to also highlight the contribution of Christine de Pizan in this tale's development in *Le livre de la cité des dames*. Christine is the foremost example of a "scrittrice di professione attiva in ambiente urbano e non tra le mura di un convento" (Caraffi, 2004, p. 573). She established herself as "a contemporary "canonical" writer in the French vernacular" through the "construction of an explicitly female-gendered authorial persona" (Brownlee, 1995, p. 244). Christine was of Italian origin and drew frequently upon Italian writers, yet she was based in the French court and as such wrote her version of Griselda in the French vernacular. Phillippy points out how, from Dante's perspective, a writer Christine would have been familiar with, writing in a "foreign vernacular" could constitute blasphemy through a "rejection of God's natural order"; however, in Christine's case, her adopted tongue "emphasises the unnaturalness of male language toward and for women" and Christine "inveighs blasphemy against women" in a revision of Dante's stance (1986, pp. 173-174).

As Evans states with regards to Christine's retelling's relation to Chaucer's, "its primary value is that it permits a "feminist" rebuttal of the tale by a contemporary of Chaucer" (2002, p. 118)<sup>6</sup>. Christine's work begins with a rejection of misogynistic literary tropes, specifically with a critique of the presentation of women in the popular *Roman de la Rose*. In response to

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<sup>6</sup> Whether or not we can identify *Le livre de la cité des dames* as a feminist or proto-feminist text has provoked much debate, however for the purposes of this work we can consider Christine's text to be a rebuttal or critique of overtly masculine literary tradition from a female point of view that seeks to defend women, but within the constraints of her Medieval context, as Laurenzi (2009) points out, "sin cuestionar la lógica del sistema y del poder patriarcal" (p. 302).

her laments, three allegorical figures, Reason, Rectitude and Justice, appear and instruct her to construct a utopian city, using noble women as both building blocks and inhabitant. She is, in effect, creating “un proprio canone, basato sulla riscrittura della storia, della tradizione e del mito, e nel nome della differenza di genere” (Caraffi, 2004, pp. 573-574). Griselda is included in the second section of this work as “the first of her exempla of women’s constancy and strength of firmness of character” (Rüegg, 2019, p. 8). Christine therefore presents us with a catalogue: “overtly moral and didactic, catalogues typically consist of exempla [...], marshalled to illustrate virtues and vices” (Shutters, 2016, p. 279). As such, we can immediately establish that Christine’s Griselda has an exemplary value, however, this new feminine perspective adds a different level of nuance to her exemplarity.

The structure of a catalogue of female figures derives directly from Boccaccio’s *De mulieribus claris*. “Three quarters of Christine’s exempla come from Boccaccio” (Phillippy, 1986, p. 170), and he was undoubtedly a huge influence for Christine; however, many critics point to how Christine systematically undermines Boccaccio’s text. For example, she “undermines the principles of selection employed by Boccaccio” by presenting both pagan and Christian women, whereas Boccaccio opts not to include Christian women (Brownlee, 1995, pp. 245-246). Christine inevitably focuses on different aspects of figures and narratives than Boccaccio, in essence, “correctively rewriting Boccaccio’s *De mulieribus*” (Brownlee, 1995, p. 247), and as a result includes other source material, including the *Decameron*. However, she carries out a “recontextualization” of stories from the *Decameron* that “dramatically changes their status as exempla”, as Brownlee notes with regards to *Decameron* IV.1 and IV.5 (1995, p. 254). Whilst Boccaccio is an important source, Christine carries out an important “revision and correction of his views on women and their capabilities” (Phillippy, 1986, p. 168).

In the case of *Decameron* X.10, however, a type of recontextualization has already taken place via Petrarch and later Philippe de Mézières, and, whilst Christine had undoubtedly read Boccaccio’s original text, she draws upon these translations instead as her primary source material. It seems that Philippe’s interpretation of the text better fit her aims: “the explicitly exemplary function, the emphasis on the tale’s truth and imitability, and the Christianization of the allegory to reflect the relationship of the soul to God [...] begin to explain Christine’s reasons for using his translation” (Phillippy, 1986, p. 185). The influence of Petrarch’s

translation is also apparent in how both Philippe and Christine “pudicamente nascondono la nudità della giovane ai vassalli” (Angeli, 2012, p. 75).

However, Christine does not follow Mézières’ translation faithfully, as it is evident that she is “eager to present Gualtieri as an example of men’s tyranny and inconsistency [...], suggesting that she had Dioneo’s condemnation of Gualtieri in her mind as she wrote” (Phillippy, 1986, p. 186). Christine’s condemnation of the marquis is particularly important with regards to the exemplarity of the tale. Her aim throughout the *Cité des dames* is to disprove not only stereotypes about women, but also to ascertain the deplorable behaviour of men. According to Christine, women “are inferior to men by custom rather than by nature”, underlining her desire for women’s education, and the *Cité des dames* provides education “in the secular virtues and in their own capabilities” (Phillippy, 1986, p. 177). Griselda therefore serves as an example that women are not, by nature, “lacking in constancy” (p. 150). The immediate precedent to Griselda’s story consists of examples of emperors guilty of inconstancy, and, in the case of Tiberius, Recitude asks: “Wasn’t he more guilty of inconstancy, changeability and immorality than any woman ever has been?” (p. 152). Griselda is, therefore, “the first example of a woman whose firmness of character proves wrong those male thinkers who accuse women of changeability or inconstancy or claim that this is part of their essential nature” (Rüegg, 2019, p. 105). She is not a figure used to “promote the image of an obedient, patient wife”, in the way Philippe does, “but rather to prove that women are not by nature inconstant” (Rüegg, 2019, p. 151).

This is where the novelty lies in Christine’s retelling: rather than using Griselda as a means of oppression, encouraging wives to be submissive, Griselda in la *Cité* represents a counterpoint to the common trope of women being inconstant or fickle. In the same vein, Gualtieri is an example of how “the ordering of reason over the appetites in the rule of the husband over the wife has been perverted by the unnatural tyranny of husbands over wives” and the tale therefore “displays not only Griselda’s triumph, but also Gualtieri’s failure” (Phillippy, 1986, p. 186). We are still however presented with the dilemma of whether such extreme constancy as shown by Griselda is ethical. This could perhaps be explained by the fact that Griselda and other tales from the *Decameron* that Christine revises present women who “ought not to be imitated, for such treatment ought not to occur” (Phillippy, 1986, p. 191). Christine turns to the *Decameron* as a supplementary source text “partially because *De Claris Mulieribus* provides few examples of men’s mistreatment of women, while the tales she selects reflect

this mistreatment and thus belong in a text which is concerned with eradicating the abuses of women on all levels” (Phillippy, 1986, p. 191). The possible extreme outcome of infanticide in the *Cité* isn’t the result of Griselda’s constancy, but of Gualtieri’s abuse. The women who appear in the tales taken from the *Decameron* are “good things used badly by men, according to Christine” (Phillippy, 1986, p. 176), absolving Griselda of any blame.

As well as eliminating the reading of Griselda as an exemplum of the ideal wife, it could also be argued that Christine eliminates Petrarch’s allegorical reading of Griselda as a genderless soul confronted with God’s tests. Her critique of Gualtieri makes clear that such tests are not reasonable, calling into question the association of Gualtieri with God. Christine “elimina però ogni commento riferibile al ruolo figurale della protagonista” and “propone una nuova moralità”, denying the “prospettiva cristiana” (Villa, 2003, pp. 679-680). Furthermore, it’s clear that Christine’s Griselda cannot be interpreted as genderless, as the defence of women is at the very heart of the *Cité des dames*; Griselda is used precisely to illustrate *women’s* capacity for constancy.

In Christine’s text, we don’t see any reference to Griselda’s interior state, apart from when she was reunited with her children and “fainted from happiness” then “bathed them with tears of delight” (p. 160). The closest Christine comes to referencing Griselda’s unhappiness is a general comment that hearing that her children would be killed “would strike grief into the heart of any mother” (p. 157). Shutter explains how both Christine and Boccaccio “promote a volitional model of marital affection characterized by will and performance” and interprets Christine’s advice to women as “based on a performative model of emotion” (2016, p. 285). A wife’s actions in this medieval context should therefore be driven by the emotion of “marital affection”, and the “proper performance” of acts of “conjugal care, obedience, and devotion” require this emotional level; therefore, “a wife’s virtuous performances provide an unambiguous index of her interior, emotional state” (Shutters, 2016, pp. 286-287). In simpler terms, acts and behaviour were considered a reflection of a wife’s emotional attachment to her husband. Shutters states that the *Cité* isn’t consistent in the portrayal of “marital affection”, however I believe that these arguments can be applied to Christine’s Griselda; her unwavering obedience and constancy is a reflection of her interior state of “marital affection” towards her husband, rather than being a mask for her grief. Griselda’s actions in themselves reflect the interior emotion of affection for her husband. However, it’s difficult to explain the lack of any physical manifestation of grief that, according to Christine, any mother would

feel in Griselda's circumstances. There seems to be a discordance between grief and constancy that problematises each different rendering of the tale.

In Christine's *Cité des dames* we find ourselves presented with a subversion of the previous versions of the matter of Griselda; she snubs the original Boccaccian source in favour of Petrarch and Mézières, but we can still see the influence of her reading of the *Decameron* in her criticism of Gualtieri. But, most importantly, she turns the exemplarity of Griselda on its head; she is no longer a figure of an ideal wife, nor a genderless allegory, but evidence of women's potential for constancy and a strong critique of tyranny on the part of husbands that takes advantage of these female virtues.

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In each version of the tale of Griselda that we have seen, the plot and main narrative events remain largely the same. However, the narrative frame, the narrator's commentary and details in descriptions all evolve with each new writer, and these changes inevitably have an effect on the exemplarity of Griselda. Whilst Boccaccio's original isn't clearly didactic and doesn't offer an obvious exemplum, Petrarch transforms Griselda into an allegorical figure with a specific didactic purpose for his educated masculine audience with regards to the virtue of constancy. Petrarch's Griseldis is then transformed once again by Philippe de Mézières, and her exemplarity shifts from a spiritual, genderless level to a literal level, with the exemplum overwhelmingly aimed at contemporary wives. Chaucer, despite the lack of evidence for his reading of Boccaccio's original, carries out a restoration of Griselda, reverting back to the ambiguity of the tale that seems intended to spark debate amongst his audience, much in the way Dioneo's telling does amongst the *brigata*. And finally, we are presented with a medieval female perspective that rebels not just against Boccaccio's original, by shunning it in favour of the Latin and French translations as a primary source, but also against Philippe de Mézières' and Petrarch's, using Griselda as an illustration of women's capacity for constancy, despite negative stereotyping, and as a critique for men's tyranny.

Questions, of course, remain. The sheer extremity of Griselda's obedience and its potential consequences present the audience with an ethical dilemma that is difficult to come to terms with, as is her lack of emotion that at times seems monstrous or dehumanising. This seems to be the most interesting aspect of the matter of Griselda; she is a somewhat contradictory



character who forever generates discussions as to the possibility of her exemplarity and the ethics of her actions, and in tracing the evolution of this exemplarity in the hands of different writers, I hope to have shed some light on the fluctuating and shifting nature of it.

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### Declaració d'autoria

Amb aquest escrit declaro que soc l'autor/autora original d'aquest treball i que no he emprat per a la seva elaboració cap altra font, incloses fonts d'Internet i altres mitjans electrònics, a part de les indicades. En el treball he assenyalat com a tals totes les citacions, literals o de contingut, que procedeixen d'altres obres. Tinc coneixement que d'altra manera, i segons el que s'indica a l'article 18 del capítol 5 de les Normes reguladores de l'avaluació i de la qualificació dels aprenentatges de la UB, l'avaluació comporta la qualificació de "Suspens".

Barcelona, a 17 de juny de 2021

Signatura: