

## "'It it be your will': Sadomasochism in Chaucer's 'The Clerk's Tale'"

Michelle Danner, Widener University

Scholars and students have found "The Clerk's Tale" of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* disturbing. Grisolde's unwavering assent to Walter's increasingly cruel demands, including the "murder" of her own children, contradicts so strongly with the pasted-on "happily ever after" ending that audiences are left cringing at the thought of such a couple even existing, let alone continuing. Many have tried to reconcile the actions of this bizarre pair by ascribing them allegorical status: Walter is God to the Abraham/Job/Mary/Jesus-like Grisolde. The one-to-one correspondence necessary for such a reading, however, does not exist; Chaucer's afflicting of pathos and horror on the audience prevents this. A reading which aligns astonishingly well with Chaucer's Walter and Grisolde, however, has largely been overlooked, perhaps because of its own disturbing nature. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Chaucer, undoubtedly unintentionally, weaves into his tale subtle nuances of sadomasochism both taken to the extreme and gone awry.

Few scholars have examined "The Clerk's Tale" in regards to its connotations of sadomasochistic relationships. Those who have appear to misunderstand them. Walter cannot be detached and assuring his own freedom through bondage with a glory-seeking, self-deprecating Grisolde (Paris) any more than Grisolde can be victimized by Walter's sadistic, Oedipal-obsessed tyranny (Cramer). These readings are legitimate, but not sadomasochistic. Sadomasochism requires acute attention to be paid to the desires and well being of the participants, particularly the masochist. If the sadist cannot or will not recognize when the masochist is in genuine, unpleasurable pain, the relationship is not sadomasochistic. Likewise, to be "tyrannical" one party must force their will over the will of the other non-consenting party. Consent is central to sadomasochism; without it, there is no relationship. A sadomasochistic reading, then, entails understanding the dynamics of the power exchange, and the choice to act in an extreme situation for the sake of pleasure (Weeks, 237). Such an understanding justifies the extremes Grisolde and Walter push their relationship to.

A tyrannical interpretation of Walter, whose testing of Grisolde reflects his own neurosis, be it a desire to escape the inescapable death his subjects reminded him of (Miller, 221) or to transform Grisolde into an instrument, incapable of resistance (223), contradicts Chaucer's description of him. While Walter seems irresponsible, preferring the joys of hunting to lordly duties (IV 80-1), and detests the idea of marriage (a type of 'servage' [147]), still he bows to the will of his people. If he

were a tyrant, not only would his people balk at the idea of approaching him for fear of their safety, but also Walter would make good on that fear—probably through imprisonment and execution.

Walter's search for his own bride, outside the sphere of nobility, has been presented as a negative reflection on his character.

Walter seems to know immediately that the only way he can tolerate marriage is to wed a woman far beneath him. If he married the kind of woman his people have in mind, he would have to consider her wishes and be careful of offending her family.

(Paris, 83)

If Walter is a sadist, however, his prudence stems from a different source. As participants in a "fringe" variant of sexuality, sadomasochists struggle to find suitable partners interested in giving or taking pain (Santilla et al., 40). Since fourteenth-century Italy would have no SM clubs to aid in his struggle, Walter therefore must seek out a prospective partner through his own careful observation. Noble women, bred to be not only beautiful and demure but also to be tender and expect gentle treatment (like his daughter at the tale's end), would be unlikely to express or understand masochistic desires.

Grisolde, however, does. She is stranger to neither toil nor responsibility. She spins, minds the sheep, and cooks (IV 223-7) in addition to caring for her father and keeping his "lif on-lofte [flourishing]" (229). Adding to the burden is her supernaturally virtuous nature. Grisolde never squanders her time on play or drinking, never expresses lust, only reverence and obedience to her father. Beneath this mature exterior, however, seethes desire.

But thogh this maide tender were of age,  
Yet in the brest of hir virginitee  
There was enclosed a ripe and sad corage.

(218-20)

Often equated to an unnatural maturity, these same lines can be seen as indicators of sexual desire. In Middle English, "ripe" and "corage" have sexual connotations linked to a blossoming sexual readiness. Suppressed then, under her obedience and responsibility, desire burns a quiet hole in Grisolde's virginity. Walter sees her "virtue" (238-45) as not just her goodness but also her sexual readiness—something entirely ignored by his sexually blind people. A combining of responsibility with desire draws Walter's attention, however, and in her he "espyes" the virtues of a budding masochist.

Walter's proposal to Grisolde is only surprising outside the

sadomasochistic reading. Inside it, it is essential. Partners voluntarily enter into a contract with the sole goal of mutual pleasure (Weeks, 240). Terms are negotiated and boundaries set, with both parties (and particularly the masochist) providing communication about their desires and limitations (Bannon, 54-56). Only after mutual agreement does the masochist relinquish power over her/himself to the sadist (Weeks, 238). This exchange is precisely what Walter is searching for when he bares his desires.

'I sey this, be ye redy with good herte  
To al my lust, and that I freely may,  
As me best thinketh, do yow laughe or smerte,  
And nevere ye to grucche it, night ne day,  
And eek whan I sey "ye", ne sey nat "nay",  
Neither by word ne frowning contenance?  
Swere this, and here I swere our alliance.'  
(IV 351-7)

To be consensual, there can be no secrets, so Walter reveals everything: not only does he expect obedience from her in both word and expression, but also he reserves the right to purposefully hurt (smerte) her whenever he pleases during their marriage. Grisolde must agree to please him with her pain—a steep price many would refuse. Yet, she doesn't.

She seide, 'Lorde undigne and unworthy  
Am I to thilke honour that ye me bede.  
But as ye wol yourself, right so wol I.  
And heere I swere that nevere willingly  
In werk ne thoght I nil yow disobey,  
For to be deed, thogh me were looth to deye.'  
(358-64)

Had Grisolde repeated the original conditions alone, readers could assume fear of lordly repercussions drove her agreement. But the condition she adds—"In werk ne thoght"—does not diminish the possibility of pain; it increases it. Grisolde is willing to not only align her outer most expressions but also innermost thoughts to Walter's demands for the promise of the pain he can provide her, the pain she therefore wants. Satisfied with her pure agreement, Walter seals their pact ('This is inogh, Grisilde min' quod he;" [365]) and wastes no time in administering a low-level of pain: the stripping of her clothes. Her silence at the ritualistic transformation from peasant girl to lady, in front of everyone, is her acceptance of the humiliation and the bargain.

From her agreement, however, arises a serious problem. Grisolde

emphasizes she will not only align her actions, but also her thoughts and will to his wants. She will, essentially, fuse their two wills into one: Walter's (Collette, 74). In sadomasochistic relationships, this is dangerous; two wills are necessary to keep the relationship safe and stable. The power exchange is temporary, based on the masochist's trust in the skill of the sadist to recognize his/her pleasure, limitations (Weeks, 238), and respond accordingly (237). Masochists have to communicate when limitations are reached or broken. They will often use safe words--words agreed upon prior to the beginning of the relationship that will slow, change, or stop the actions of the sadist—to guide their sadist away from what is unpleasant or frightening to them (Bannon, 56). By refusing in word, action, and thought to defy Walter's will, Grisolde annihilates the boundaries Walter needs in order to keep from seriously damaging her. Boundlessness explains the extent to which Walter goes to prove her "sadsnesse." Prior to their first child, the Clerk assures the audience the testing of Grisolde is not an uncommon occurrence: "He hadde assayed hire inow before,/And fond hire evere good;" (IV 456-7) He also insinuates that Walter's testing was not unwanted. Because Grisolde has suppressed her boundaries, however, he's forced to continue finding more and more gruesome ways to "test" her—leading to the fiasco of the children. The first trial goes well enough. His lies about the whisperings of the people, demanding the blood of Grisolde's base child, have their desired effect: nothing. She still swears "Ther may nothing, God so my soule save,/Liken to yow that may displese me;/Ne I desire nothing for to have/Ne drede for to lese, save oonly ye." (505-8) Walter leaves with hidden gladness because Grisolde is true to her initial promise. His gladness is short-lived. After the sergeant reports her reaction to his test, "Somwhat this lord hadde routhe in his manere," (579). Why does Walter show the smallest drop of pity? Grisolde did exactly as she promised: allowed her baby to be carried off for slaying at his command. It is as if he cannot believe she actually went through with it; he has to see for himself she remains unchanged (598-602). Grisolde defied what Walter apparently thought might have been the limit: infanticide. Now he must plot again, and the Clerk begins uses "tempt" instead of "test."

Miller has commented on the use of 'tempt' instead of 'test' as an example of Walter's tyranny.

...he wants Grisilde to pass his tests and so to prove her obedience, which is truncated way of imagining her proving her love for him....the idea of tempting some-one to do something ordinarily implies that in some sense we want them to do it; while for Grisilde to succumb to Walter's temptations would be for her to fail his tests...in some sense he does want her to fail,...for if Walter were to break through...and she were to fail his

tests,...it would turn out that she had been suffering under his commands  
(Miller, 226-7)

In sadomasochism, however, Grisolde's consensual suffering of pain is a given. Walter doesn't want her to fail because he needs proof of her suffering for enjoyment; he needs proof for her safety. The first trial draws to his attention how far he has come without encountering resistance. His pleasure at knowing he is causing desirable pain is suddenly tainted. Walter leaves the second temptation with a heart full of "gret plesance" (IV 672) only to be struck again with the iron-will of her obedience. Had he married a monster? "He wolde have wend that of som subtiltee,/And of malice, or of cruel corage,/That she hadde suffred this with sad visage."  
(690-3)

Walter knows, however, that cruelty is not the cause of Grisolde's apparent indifference; she loves her children. The wills are the source. "For which it semed thus, that of hem two/Ther nas but o wil, for as Walter leste,/the same lust was hir plesance also." (715-7)

Walter is trapped. Until she defies him, demands him to stop, Walter cannot break away from his role, and in spite of his constant observations, he cannot find any cracks in her facade. His schemes become more elaborate and complicated as he attempts to force her resistance. When he banishes Grisolde with intent to "marry" his daughter, pleasure has disappeared entirely. Her humiliation, another stripping, cannot bring him pleasure because he cannot be sure he is doing her pleasure by causing it. Walter can only inwardly panic as he walks away, "wente...for routhe and for pitee."  
(893), knowing that he is quite possibly succeeding so well he will ultimately lose her under the combination of their wills.

Walter's failings as a sadist derive from his inability to recognize the subtle, and not so subtle, cues Grisolde constantly presents. While she swore to obey in word, action, and thought, the unusual ambiguity of her responses to Walter's demands nevertheless draw a curious correlation with safe words. The first trial elicits the subtlest safety cue. She assures him not only is his will still hers, unalterable, but also that he may do with them both as he wishes. "My child and I, with hertly obeisance,/Been yours al, and ye mowe save or spille/Your owene thing; werketh after youre wille" (501-03). Her repetition of his command causes a pause in action, as if she expects him to truly realize what he is asking, and recant. Unfortunately, her attempt is too subtle. Grisolde only presses that infanticide, and all its responsibilities and consequences, are his decisions and his alone (Ashton, 233). She is hoping Walter will recognize the magnitude of his demands, and her inherent disapproval because of the love she has for her daughter. Readers can assume, by "semed", that

Grisolde is far from “nought amevd.” (IV 498-500) Walter cannot make such assumptions, so he fails to see. And Grisolde must beg forgiveness from the daughter she couldn’t save. (555-60)

To prevent the second death, Grisolde is not so subtle. Outright refusal is against the rules: she reminds him again that the decision to slay their children was made by him alone, since her will is his (Ashton, 233).

Sarcasm, however, apparently is not. “Thogh that my doghter and my sone be slein-/...I have nat had no part of children tweine/But first siknesse, and after, wo and peine.” (IV 648-51) There is something undoubtedly snide about her words. Walter knows Grisolde loves her children (690, 695) and yet she assures him they’ve brought her nothing but sorrow—because of him. Grisolde’s comment about death (“For wiste I that my deeth wolde doon yow ese,/Right gladly wolde I dien” [664-5]) is also surprising: Walter asking her to kill herself would destroy the relationship they both desire. He cannot achieve pleasure from giving pain if he has no one to enjoy receiving it.

By the time Walter publicly rejects her for the daughter she thinks is dead, Grisolde is bitter, her scathing words are only thinly veiled. The memory of her slain children is conjured a third time through the image of her naked womb, and blatant disapproval laces her use of “dishoneste” to describe her humiliation. Disrobing now, however, is negotiable, instigated by Grisolde; she cannot take back all her dowry, and requests compensation. “Wherfore in gerdon of my maidenhede,/Which that I broghte, and nought again I bere,/As vouchethsauf to yeve me to my mede/But swich a smok as I was wont to were,” (883-6) Her demand for a change to his command is veiled just enough to stay within the limitations, still too veiled for a full stop. There is also the curious mentioning of her status as wife. “Remember yow.../I was youre wife.” Firmness permeates the lines, an invisible finger jabbing Walter to seriously consider exactly what he is about to do. Grisolde is more than just a wife; she is his wife, who desired his peculiar form of love, a thing which lowly status doesn’t diminish.

Grisolde stresses her status as Walter’s object of desire in her final, most obvious show of disapproval. Walter calls her to him, “as it were in his pley” (1030). She ignores his distress about the situation—the forced pretense of pleasure—and attacks.

‘O thing biseke I yow, and warne also,  
That ye ne prike with no tormentinge  
This tender maiden, as ye han don mo;  
For she is fostered in hir norissinge  
Moore tendrely, and to my supposinge,  
She koude nat adversitee endure

As koude a povre fostred creature.'

(1036-43)

"Norissinge" is the reason Walter refused noble women in the first place.

There is no one like Grisolde among court ladies, who find pleasure in pain. If Walter marries this new girl, he cannot enjoy himself as he wants. Her daughter cannot, and will not, endure the "torment" he expresses love with. Grisolde can, and will. Sacrificing her is sacrificing everything he sought.

Faced with blatant disapproval, given with "glad cheere and no malice at al" (1045), Walter finally understands. His "offence" (1046) against Grisolde is not the pain, but his blindness, his inability to recognize and act upon her disapproval. Ever was Grisolde patient with him, "sad and constant as a wal" (1047) and "continuinge [maintained]" (1048) her role, pointing out his transgressions in the most appropriate manner for the game. And he failed her.

"This is inogh, Grisilde min,' quod he." (1051) This is the only repeated line in the entire tale, and its reemergence marks the end of the game. Its predecessor, also spoken by Walter directly after Grisolde's promise, thrust them into their roles; here, it pulls them away. They are free to embrace their personas outside of sadomasochism. Walter showers her with gentle affection, and Grisolde awakens her emotions. The magnitude of her response (two swoons and copious tears) demonstrates how long she's clung to her role without completion. Neither fear nor desire crossed her face—two emotions she clearly expressed prior (280, 358)—because of her obedience to the rules of the game. Now, with her role of masochist complete Grisolde can reap the cathartic benefits of expressing her suffering before rejoining her children and her husband, calm, composed, and satisfied (Weeks, 238-9).

Grisolde's unwavering submission to Walter's increasingly harsh demands resists the popular readings. Something is still so unsettling about the tale when it's considered either an allegory or a tale of tyranny. Yet, all the pieces fit into the mold of sadomasochism. Grisolde desires pain, and Walter desires administering it; their relationship is based on mutual pleasure. Problems only arise when Grisolde refuses to communicate the breaching of her boundaries, because it would breach the terms of their contract. With Walter's failure to notice her displeasure, he has no choice but to force them both to the very edge. They break free from their roles just in time to enjoy their happily-ever-after. Chaucer, then, may have been tapping into something still true, and difficult to understand let alone accept. With consent, pleasure can be found in pain, but like all relationships, S/M has rules that must be followed, or disaster will emerge.

## Works Cited

Ashton, Gail. "Patient Mimesis: Griselda and the Clerk's Tale." *Chaucer Review* 32(1998): 232-38.

Bannon, Race. *Learning the Ropes: A Basic Guide to Safe and Fun S/M Lovemaking*. San Francisco: Daedalus Publishing Company, 1992.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. "The Clerk's Tale." *The Canterbury Tales*. Ed. Jill Mann. London: Penguin Books, 2005.

Collette, Carolyn P.. *Species, Phantasms, and Images*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001.

Cramer, Patricia. "Lordship, Bondage, and the Erotic: The Psychological Bases of Chaucer's 'Clerk's Tale'." *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 89(1990): 491-511.

Miller, Mark. *Philosophical Chaucer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Paris, Bernard J.. "'The Clerk's Tale.'" *Imagined Human Beings: A Psychological Approach to Character and Conflict in Literature*. New York: New York University Press, 1997.

Santilla, Pekka et al. "Sadomasochism." *Sex and Sexuality: Sexual Deviation and Sexual Offenses*. Ed. Richard D. McAnulty and M. Michele Burnette. Westport: Praeger Perspectives, 2006.

Weeks, Jeffrey. *Sexuality and its Discontents*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985.