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Disturbing Virtue:  
Representations of the Submissive Woman

by

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## ABSTRACT

My thesis focuses on the representation of the virtuous, submissive woman in pre-modern literature, and specifically the heroines of four canonical, male-authored works: Geoffrey Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* (the story of 'Patient Griselda'), Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Utilising psychoanalytic theories of gender formation, I argue in my Introduction that the figure of the submissive woman, though situated on the 'good' side of the Eve/Mary binary that has defined women in Western cultures for centuries, is nonetheless an expression of male fear and vulnerability in the face of a feminine Other. As demonstrated by the heroines of my chosen texts, through the excessiveness of her performance—the deliberate assumption of prescribed gender roles that Luce Irigaray describes as mimicry or mimesis—the virtuous, submissive woman gains a paradoxical and challenging power to expose and disturb (at least for a time) the apprehensive patriarchal structures that seek to control her.

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## EPIGRAPH

All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others. All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their nature, to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections. And by their affections are meant the only ones they are allowed to have—those to the men with whom they are connected, or to the children who constitute an additional and indefensible tie between them and a man.

John Stuart Mill

*The Subjection of Women* (1869)

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction: Virtue, Power and the Feminine Other

[W]oman is at once Eve and the Virgin Mary. She is an idol, a servant, the source of life, a power of darkness; she is the elemental silence of truth, she is artifice, gossip, and falsehood; she is healing presence and sorceress; she is man's prey, his downfall, she is everything that he is not and that he longs for, his negation and his *raison d'être*. (143)

The character of 'woman' as outlined here by Simone de Beauvoir (in her now classic 1949 study *The Second Sex*) describes a contradictory binary that has been a primary marker of the feminine in Western culture for centuries. Canonical Western literature and mythology work to faithfully (re)produce a vision that alternately (or often simultaneously) deifies and disdains women. The force and longevity of this dualistic construction of the feminine speak to the effectiveness of its function in establishing patriarchal dominance and addressing male fears—containing and controlling female behaviour through the employment of an aggressively critical misogyny and/or a more seemingly benign gallantry. Eve most famously embodies the 'bad' femininity which troubles the structures of patriarchal control: in Genesis, Eve is the friend of man and the joy of Eden, but she is also susceptible to forbidden desires, the source of evil, and the embodiment of Satan. The story of Eve demonstrates male fear about female duplicity, about women's power to evade knowledge, to rebel, disobey, or desire beyond patriarchal allowances. As Tassie Gwilliam notes, "To accuse a woman or a book of hypocrisy, duplicity, and disguise is to pick up a double-edged sword; although the

accusation seems primarily to denigrate and devalue women, it also attributes to the woman the power to repel investigation and penetration" (21). Eve and figures like her, who act out (and are usually punished for) their excessive or uncontained desires, perform as relatively clear explorations of male fear, and their study as such has a lengthy critical history.<sup>1</sup> Mary and other 'virtuous' women, though, are often viewed I think less complexly as patriarchal ideals—foils for Eve figures (as the common binary suggests), salves for insecure male psyches, and role models for all good women. But, as some recent criticism (Hansen, Eagleton) has explored, the virtuous woman can also function as a disruptive site, and one that, like its less 'pure' counterpart, works to express and address male fears.

It is, in fact, the sharp contrast between the good and the bad woman which leads Freud, in "A Special Type of Object Choice Made by Men" (1910), to "study the developmental history of the two complexes [described by Freud as the mother and the whore] and the unconscious relation between them, since we long ago discovered that a thing which in consciousness makes its appearance as two categories is often in the unconsciousness a united whole" (*Psychology of Love* 54). Beyond offering a patriarchal culture convenient and effective methods with which to secure and disempower women, the extremes of her depravity and her divinity in this conventional Eve/Mary binary points also to the "united whole" of woman's categorisation as 'Other.' The function and role of the Other in defining/creating subjectivity has long been a topic of philosophical inquiry. Jessica

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Beauvoir's *Second Sex*—specifically the chapter "Dreams, Fears, Idols"—, Katherine Rogers *The Troublesome Helpmate* (1966), and Gilbert and Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), to mention three texts from different moments in post-war feminism.



Benjamin credits Hegel, in his *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, with formulating the classic statement about the dilemma of the subject's unavoidable dependency on another person for recognition (47). Hegel opens the fourth chapter of *The Phenomenology*—"Independence and Dependence of Self-consciousness: Master and Servant"—by asserting that "[s]elf-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that, and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it *is* only by being acknowledged or 'recognised'" (399). This relationship between self and Other is explored specifically in terms of gender by Beauvoir who, in "Dreams, Fears, Idols," writes that the role of Other is necessary to the male subject who seeks to assert himself: "the Other, who limits and denies him, is none the less a necessity to him: he attains himself only through that reality which he is not, which is something other than himself" (139). Beauvoir also describes the paradoxical "terror" that the Other, created by and relied upon by the male subject, generates simply as a result of the unknowable, unreachable alterity that, by definition, constitutes otherness (169).

Psychoanalytic theory, with its emphasis on the unconscious and its investment in sexuality and familial relationships, provides some of the most detailed explorations of women and otherness. According to the psychoanalytic model, gender formation, or at least the recognition of gender difference, begins in young children during the Oedipal crisis. As defined by Freud, the Oedipal crisis occurs when the young child, who has been enjoying a passionate love for, and feeling of connection to, the mother, recognises that he or she is not what the mother desires. It is the intrusion of the father (who *is* what the mother desires)

into the relationship between mother and child that begins their separation—this separation being a necessary step in the child's development into a gendered and autonomous being. For the young boy, the Oedipal crisis brings with it a 'castration complex.' The boy recognises that the mother has no penis, which suggests to him that she has been castrated. Though at this stage the child does not necessarily realise that all girls and women are without penises, it is this frightening "lack" which becomes a key factor in the definition of woman as Other: "We know," Freud writes, "to what a degree depreciation of woman, loathing of women, and a disposition to homosexuality are derived from a final conviction of women's lack of a penis" ("Supplement" 174). With the recognition of his mother's missing penis comes the young boy's fear that he himself will be castrated as punishment for his feelings of rivalry with his father. Despite this fear of his father, in order to be defined culturally as 'masculine,' the boy must align himself with him, a need which in turn necessitates the boy's acceptance of his own symbolic castration as well as the repression of his desire for his mother and all she represents. The pain and loss that this repression entails initiates the formation of the unconscious, and also establishes the father as the boy's 'super ego' or social conscience.

As many psychoanalytical theorists have noted, the requirements of achieving a 'masculine' identity within patriarchal culture have a high emotional price: the boy must dissociate himself from all that is 'feminine'—though that femininity constitutes half of his potential self. A girl's original sense of unity with the mother does not encounter the same strong sense of difference and taboo

experienced by boys: the young girl must learn that she is a separate subject, but she can continue to define herself as female (and in this way remain connected to the mother). Because girls are not required to so completely define themselves against their feelings of 'primary oneness' with their mother, psychoanalysts of the Object Relations school specifically depict the acquisition of 'maleness' as being more conflictual and more problematic for men than the acquisition of 'femaleness' for women. The young boy must make a break from both the mother and her gender, must define himself as a individual as well as not-female. Nancy Chodorow describes the need for denial, in men and boys, of feminine identification and feelings which are experienced as feminine (dependence, relational needs, emotions generally). Chodorow also offers insight into the patriarchal categorisation of woman as Other, arguing that boys and men "come to emphasise differences, not commonalties or continuities, between themselves and women, especially in situations that evoke anxiety, because these commonalties and continuities threaten to challenge gender difference or to remind boys and men consciously of their potentially feminine attributes" (13). In "The Taboo of Virginity," Freud's theorising about what generates male fear of women would seem to lend credence to Chodorow's feminist interpretations of his discussion of gender formation. He writes,

Perhaps this fear ["primitive" man's dread of woman] is founded on the difference of woman from man, on her eternally inexplicable, mysterious and strange nature, which thus seems hostile. Man fears that his strength will be taken from him by woman, dreads

becoming infected with her femininity and then proving himself a weakling. . . . There is nothing in all this which is extinct, which is not still active in the heart of men today. (76)

Freud points here to the mysterious and “infectious” power that femininity holds for the masculine subject—but, through acknowledging male fear of female hostility, he also indicates the relationship of dependence that exists between men and women. This issue of dependence is key, for as psychoanalysts have argued, the differences between boys’ and girls’ acquisition of gender identity in relation to their mother leads to an imbalance in their dependency on each other as adults. Rosalind Minsky explains,

Ultimately, though men and women need each other, men’s need for woman is greater than woman’s for men because men need to gain access, in phantasy at least, to their primary identity. This is situated at the positive, angelic end of their binary phantasy of women as either angels or whores. It is this sense of vulnerability or dependency on women for access to their primary emotional identity that is consciously denied in the patriarchal ideal of ‘masculinity’. This dependency, coupled with envy, is likely a major reason for men’s need to control women and for women’s cultural oppression in general. (70)

The necessity, for men, of repressing and defining themselves against the femininity represented by their mother, while at the same time depending upon that femininity to reconnect them to the phantasy of unity and wholeness that is

lost during the Oedipal crisis, leads both to the idealisation of women and to their denigration.

According to the post-structural models of psychological development theorised by Jacques Lacan, the intrusion of the father into the relationship between mother and child during that crucial Oedipal crisis also represents the child's entry into language (the realm of the Symbolic). And in fact, the father of Lacan's system does not necessarily or only find embodiment in a paternal male figure: the dividing force between mother and child is rather 'the name of the father,' a powerful legislative force which is symbolised by the phallus (Lacan 67). It is through the child's acceptance of, and entry into, the systems of difference which construct both gender identity and language, Lacan argues, that the child regains some of that precarious sense of self which the separation from the mother threatened.

Lacanian notions of language and subjectivity, with their foundations in the phallus and the male body, have been criticised by feminists because they seem to suggest that only boys can achieve the status of a human subject. Though male subjectivity is crucially undermined by the fact that it is based on a boy's acceptance of his symbolic castration by 'the name of the father,' a girl loses all sense of the validity of her own body and being since she lacks the legitimising primary signifier, the phallus (Minsky 153). Because discourse is fundamentally phallic, it becomes impossible for women to overcome their definition as lack—women are thus barred from ever occupying a place of positive agency in the Symbolic realm. And as Minsky writes, woman's lack does not end here: "In Lacan's

world, where no one has a genuine identity, woman represents a double lack—her own lack of the valued phallus, and as a projection of the male lack produced by his symbolic castration by his father. So women are doubly powerless” (162). Woman’s position, in the Lacanian system, involves an otherness that moves beyond physical and/or cultural difference and situates itself in the very foundations and formations of language. But despite the obstacles that Lacan’s theories present to imagining the possibility of a positive female agency, feminists have utilised the anti-essentialism of his position to deconstruct conventional notions of gender difference, and appropriated his theories of language and male subjectivity to construct or imagine methods for women to reappropriate or at least disrupt patriarchal discourse.

Though, according to Lacan’s description of the Oedipal crisis, the mother, and the femininity she represents, remains Other—a marginalised entity within systems of both gender and language—the feminine still functions as an essential and necessary object in the creation of male subjectivity. In her discussion of the work of Julia Kristeva, Toril Moi describes the male dependence on the feminine that functions specifically within the Symbolic realm:

If patriarchy sees women as occupying a marginal position within the symbolic order, then it can construe them as the *limit* or borderline of that order. From a phallocentric point of view, women will then come to represent the necessary frontier between man and chaos, but because of their very marginality they will also seem to recede into and merge with the chaos of the outside. . . . It is this position that has enabled male culture sometimes to vilify woman as representing darkness and chaos, to view them as Lilith or the Whore

of Babylon, and sometimes to elevate them as the representatives of a higher and purer nature, to venerate them as Virgins and Mothers of God. In the first instance the borderline is seen as part of the chaotic wilderness outside, and in the second it is seen as an inherent part of the inside: the part that protects and shields the symbolic order from the imaginary chaos. (*Politics* 167)

As with the discussion of gender difference above, woman's role of Other in the Symbolic contributes to the binaristic good/bad representation of femininity. Women are simultaneously feared and relied upon—a position of power that contributes to male feelings of vulnerability and hostility, and therefore to their desire to control and contain femininity.

In "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine" Luce Irigaray acknowledges the difficulty or impossibility of toppling the phallocratic order. Instead, she envisions a way in which that order can be modified by women, who can start to "disconcert" an exclusively masculine representation from an "outside" that is exempt, in part, from phallocentric law (*Reader* 118). Such disruption is not possible (at least in an "initial phase") through overt confrontation, Irigaray argues. A direct feminine challenge to the condition of oppression necessitates embracing the speech of the masculine subject, and such speech in itself perpetuates the denial and marginalisation of women—through asserting the primacy and singularity of maleness that Irigaray describes as "sexual indifference" (*Reader* 124). Instead of such confrontation then, Irigaray advises that women deliberately assume or perform the 'feminine' role which is assigned to them. Through an exaggerated mimicry of feminine behaviours, Irigaray hopes, a

woman can attempt to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse and direct attention to the place where patriarchal men project their phantasies (of woman as angel, mother, little girl, whore), without allowing herself to be simply reduced to those roles. Women must, Irigaray writes, “through repetition-interpretation of the way in which the feminine finds itself determined in discourse—as lack, default, or as mime and inverted reproduction of the subject—show that on the feminine side it is possible to *exceed* and *disturb* this logic” (*This Sex* 75-6). Through the playful exaggeration Irigaray describes, the male phantasies that inform patriarchal discourse—which are supposed to remain hidden—can be made visible and their destructive power unveiled.

Irigaray's method, as has been pointed out by other feminist critics (such as Moi), is a risky one, potentially functioning merely to reinscribe women in the role that they are attempting to subvert. While not here pursuing the effectiveness of Irigaray's notion of mimicry for modern feminists, I am interested in its implications for the study of pre-modern women. The “disturbing excess” that Irigaray advises is an exuberant, playful, and poetic engagement with patriarchal determinations of femininity. My thesis, though also forwarding the disruptive power of a deliberate assumption of prescribed gender roles, concerns itself with an exploration of how Irigaray's “playful” mimicry and excess can perform in the opposite direction: with a powerful but often tragic seriousness.

In her article “The Bonds of Love: Rational Violence and Erotic Domination” Jessica Benjamin discusses a subject's dependence on another person for recognition (Hegel's formulation) as it has been articulated by psychologists.



Though the manner in which this dependence plays itself out between men and women has been discussed above, Benjamin's particular focus on the subject's need for *reaction* from the Other is especially significant given the traditional Christian patriarchal dictate that the female role is one of silence, obedience and chastity. Benjamin writes that "[t]he effect we have on something or someone is a way of confirming our reality. If our acts have no effect on the other, or if he/she refuses to recognise our act, we feel ourselves to be powerless" (47). An impervious Other is clearly threatening, but Benjamin also describes the difficulty that the contrary response can generate:

if we act in such a way that the other person is completely negated, there is no one there to recognise us. Therefore it is necessary that, when we affect an other, she/he not simply dissolve under the impact of our actions. The other must simultaneously maintain her/his integrity, as well as be affected. So, for example, if the mother sets no limits to the child, if, in effect, she obliterates herself and her own interests and allows herself to be wholly controlled, she ceases to perform the role of an other. (47-48)

Because of the dependency that the subject has on the Other, because, as Benjamin points out, the Other must both be affected by the subject and maintain her/his integrity, a woman's exaggerated commitment to (mimicry of) obedience and submission has disturbing implications for men. Tales of the passively subordinate woman—a common figure in pre-modern literature—make evident these implications.

Importantly, traditional notions of female virtue are fundamentally linked not only to chastity and submission, but to suffering. It is the connection between virtue, suffering, and submission which provides women with the opportunity for an excessive obedience and self-abnegation that can become threatening to the patriarchal status quo. The links between conventional notions of virtue and suffering are implicit, especially in the case of women: the Virgin Mary demonstrates her divine goodness not only by her acceptance of the will of God (becoming a vessel for His child), but also by her silent witness of the torture and loss of that child. Her heart, it is prophesied at the time of Jesus' birth, will be pierced with sorrow (Luke 2:35), and it is this pain, and her passive endurance of it, that defines her virtue and secures her mythological place. It is through suffering that the virtuous woman must *prove* her virtue—since patriarchy demands of women not independence or agency, but rather obedience (which is not an independently measurable quality), she must be tested. In *Clean Maids, True Wives, Steadfast Widows*, Margaret Hallissy makes an observation about physical chastity that is applicable to a broader discussion of female virtue. She writes, "In the formulaic tale of chastity preserved, the heroine is defined by what she does not do, morality consists of *refraining from*. All other decisions or actions are eliminated" (26). Due to the subservience that patriarchy demands, chastity/morality/virtue can function, in the good woman, only as reactionary values. And in order to "refrain from," there must be pressure to commit, to act, to give way. The virtuous woman needs a trial; to prove her goodness she must be

given the opportunity to resist her own self-interested impulses and desires as well as any male interests or desires that are not sanctioned by patriarchal rule.

Women, then, cannot be afforded trust; any 'good woman,' if she remains untested, can be feared as a woman merely untempted, an Eve as yet unapproached by the serpent. Beauvoir describes this situation in relation to a mythologised figure of womanly virtue and wifely obedience, Patient Griselda, writing that "Even before any suspicion arose, Griselda was subjected to the most severe tests; this tale would be absurd if women were not suspect in advance; there is no question of demonstrating her misbehaviour: it is for her to prove her innocence" (89). The best demonstration of innocence, as the story of Patient Griselda illustrates, is the willingness to suffer for the sake of a patriarchal moral code. Hallissy elaborates on the implications of this connection between suffering and virtue, writing that "[i]f virtue consists in accepting suffering, and vice in the pragmatic avoidance of suffering, it is only a short step to the notion that the greatest virtue lies in soliciting opportunities for suffering, even the obstinate refusal to avoid needless suffering" (26-7). This definition of virtue, however, works against patriarchal control, for as the powerful status of the Virgin Mary and other saint/martyr figures demonstrates, excessive suffering brings with it a certain kind of power.

In *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (1992), Elaine Tuttle Hansen, in her discussion of Chaucer's version of the Griselda story, argues for the paradoxically subversive possibilities inherent in this patient wife's complete submission to patriarchal oppression. Hansen writes that through her embracing of "female

virtue" Griselda can "escape or at least lay bare the operation of male tyranny by exceeding . . . its enunciated limits" (203). As she argues, Griselda

attains certain kinds of power by embracing powerlessness . . . she is strong, in other words, because she is so perfectly weak. . . . the Tale reveals that the perfectly good woman is powerful, or at least potentially so, insofar as her suffering and submission are fundamentally insubordinate and deeply threatening to men and to the concepts of power and gender identity upon which patriarchal culture is premised. (190)

According to Benjamin's description of the subject's need for the Other, Griselda's type of complete and perfect obedience prevents her tyrannical husband from obtaining the recognition he needs. Through the excessiveness of her submission, Griselda ceases to function in her proper role as Other. And through performing so successfully the role her patriarchal culture has assigned to her, Griselda also disturbs the stability of the strict gender differences that function to define and reinforce 'masculinity'—exposing the tyranny upon which patriarchal structures depend to palliate their fear of and dependence on women.

The recognition of the possibility of power in passive obedience adds exciting depth and complexity to a character-type frequently perceived as one-dimensional, and has important implications for other texts that present, as their subject, the virtuous woman. Taking the figure of Patient Griselda as the starting point for this work, I have addressed her form of power as it is utilised by the heroines of three other canonical texts: Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* and *Clarissa*,

and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Pamela, Clarissa, and Tess are all double characters whose stereotypical female virtue, like Griselda's, is both contained within patriarchal dictates of female behaviour and potentially subversive to those dictates. Though Hardy's novel was first published in 1891, almost one hundred and fifty years after *Clarissa*, and more than half a millennium after Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* (the latest and most popular English version of the Griselda story), these temporally diverse works seem to me to share—along with the literary and cultural fame of their suffering heroines—many thematic elements, including their concern for issues of obedience, suffering, virtue, and justice, and an interest in the relationships of class and gender. The similarity of the reception to the heroines of these novels demonstrates the ambiguity of the submissive woman: divided critics focus either sympathetically on a heroine's beleaguered virtue, or suspiciously upon her disguised self-assertion. As this variety of critical response demonstrates, the power of the suffering woman is complex and paradoxical. This thesis explores primarily the operation and function of that power within my chosen texts, making the connection between (the seemingly antithetical) 'subversive' and 'containing' versions of female selfhood integral to an understanding of the works and characters in question, as well as to broader issues involving the representation of virtuous women.

Despite their disruptive potential, the power of a Griselda, a Clarissa, or a Tess is always attenuated. While a reader may appreciate the subtle threat that a suffering woman represents to patriarchal authority, s/he must also be disturbed by the terrible cost of these women's silence. They endure mental and physical

abuse, and, as a reward for that endurance, ultimately accept either (re)union with a tyrannical, abusive husband (in *Griselda* and *Pamela's* case) or the more common fate (of *Clarissa* and *Tess*): an exalted, mythologising death. Not only does the type of 'mimicry' practised by the heroines of my chosen texts run the risk of simply reinscribing stereotypical patriarchal definitions of femininity, it is directly and unavoidably damaging to the women who exercise it as a method of gaining power—in no way can it be viewed as offering oppressed women a healthy or productive method for addressing their subjugation. Their form of power is, at best, a sly way of self-assertion in a hopeless situation. But what makes this situation more complicated is the fact that even that sly power, as damaging and personally ineffectual as it is, can also be viewed as a male construct. It is through a patriarchal fear of and belief in female duplicity—arising from the masculine subject's sense of dependence upon and vulnerability to women—that the suffering woman gains her power. And it is because of the male subject's disbelief/fear of a truly 'good' woman that these disturbing, powerfully anti-patriarchal women exist, that they are written.

My chosen texts are stories about women written by men—stories (and men) whose feminist and/or anti-feminist politics have long been a subject for discussion and debate. But though my investigation will view these texts' strategies of gender specifically in the context of their male authorship, my goal is neither to champion nor expose any of my chosen male authors' (or texts,' for that matter) feminism or anti-feminist attitudes. Though factors (like an author's gender and race) regarding a text's production cannot be ignored or dismissed, a focus on an

individual author's politics or 'intentions' can become limiting, or at least, I think, not very interesting. My thesis does not address texts as transparent windows (or even windows merely in need of expert cleaning) onto any single 'real' person's political standpoint or opinions, but rather it attempts to acknowledge the cultural complexity of the texts in question. As Moi argues, "the author still provides one strand in the weave of the text, one voice among the multiplicity of voices of the text. . . . the author can no longer be the *only* source of meaning, the origin of all sense in the text" (*Feminism* 103). With this view in mind, the questions I explore throughout this thesis revolve around the implications of the representation of the virtuous women for (primarily) feminist readers, not the implications of that representation as it will specifically affect Chaucer/Richardson/ Hardy Studies.

The avoidance of a narrow focus on the writers as individual men is an attempt to acknowledge the constructedness of masculinity, and the unavoidable implicatedness of each of these texts in that construct. I try, in my approach, to study these canonical texts as products of a system of patriarchy (which limits and defines and constructs 'masculinity' in the same way it does 'femininity'), of class, and of certain historical periods (which are also, of course, constructions of their own time and of ours). My chosen authors *are* all male, and I am interested in the relationship between the male author and his female creation, as well as the psychology that creates/has created such women. But my primary interest is in the representation of a certain type of figure in canonical Western literature. The Eve/Mary binary has incredible and lasting power, and the suffering women on whom I focus, Griselda, Pamela, Clarissa, and especially Tess, have endured

culturally and obviously continue to resonate somehow for both male and female readers. My problem, then, and my starting place, is that of the representation of a specific type of female character—and though my study traverses centuries and a variety of texts and authors, I am less interested in the historical changes or textual diversity of the figure of the suffering woman than I am in an examination, in the chapters that follow, of how each of my chosen texts represents or offers insight into her paradoxical, disruptive power.



## CHAPTER 2

### Griselda: The Obedient Wife

Medieval attitudes towards women were particularly polarised, with Eve set clearly against Mary, the sensual deceiver against maternal purity, rebelliousness against meekness (Mann 1). In medieval culture a woman's virtue was her most important quality, and that virtue was defined not only through physical chastity, but also through speech and deportment—and specifically through a woman's verbal and behavioural response to male authority figures (her husband, brothers, father, or any other adult males of or above her class). As dictated by the rituals of exchange which, until the recent past, have transported women from father to husband as property, a medieval woman's primary duty lay in obedience to her male 'protector.' The specific duties, roles and relations between husband and wife, man and woman, were keenly discussed issues in the Middle-Ages, and 'the woman question' is certainly apparent as a topic of interest in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, which contains the stories of two of the more famous exemplars of medieval womanhood, including the starting point for my study of suffering virtue, Patient Griselda.

The *Canterbury Tales* is made up of a group of stories that are linked through a larger framing narrative: a group of travellers (on a pilgrimage to Canterbury) telling tales in order to pass the time. The separate stories in *The Canterbury Tales* are connected by dialogue between the travellers, and in the case of Chaucer's version of the Griselda story, the *Clerk's Tale*, this dialogue works to introduce immediately the issue of female obedience and male authority that

will be explored in the tale proper. The narrator of Griselda's tale, the Clerk, is chastised by the group's host, Harry Bailey, for being so quiet and meek, and is commanded to tell "som mery tale" (9). The Clerk's response establishes an intriguing connection between his situation and his heroine's:

"Hooste," quod he, "I am under youre yerde;  
Ye han of us as now the governance,  
And therfore wol I do yow obeisance,  
As far as resoun axeth, hardily. (22-25)

This interchange between the host and the Clerk prefigures the study of relationships of dominance and subservience that will be explored to such an extreme in Chaucer's tale of Griselda and her tyrannical husband. The Clerk here places himself in a position that is similar to Griselda's (or any medieval wife's): he is under the host's "yerde"<sup>2</sup> and governance, and therefore owes him "obeisance." However, the Clerk's response to Harry Bailey does present limitations to "obeisance" that he will pay his host, and in this he is very unlike his chosen protagonist. As a 'good' medieval woman and wife there is no limitation to Griselda's dutiful obedience—her "resoun" is totally superseded by her husband's desires.

In the Griselda story, a Marquis, urged by his people to marry, chooses a young peasant girl as a bride. The Marquis questions the peasant girl (Griselda), and asks her if she will be an accommodating and obedient wife; Griselda

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<sup>2</sup>Yerde—a rod, wand of authority; a stick carried by a shepherd/herdsman; a stick used to punish; a symbol of authority; under the rule or discipline of ("Yard" *OED*)—seems a very apt phallic signifier.

promises that she will, and they marry. Griselda takes her place as Marchioness, performs superbly as both wife and political mediator, and is much beloved and admired by the people and her husband. Still, early on in their marriage, the Marquis decides to test his wife's patience. He pretends to have both their children killed as infants (blaming this on his subjects' dissatisfaction with the children's 'low' ancestry) and eventually tells Griselda that he wants to remarry. He unceremoniously strips her of her title and goods and sends her back to her father's house wearing only a shift. All of this Griselda endures without complaint or recrimination, and indeed she continues to behave with submissive devotion to her husband. Eventually, the Marquis calls Griselda back from her father's to help prepare his house for the reception of his new bride (actually the couple's adolescent daughter who has been raised, with her brother, elsewhere). Griselda endures even this trial with dignity and wishes the Marquis and his lovely new bride happiness. Witnessing this ultimate demonstration of selflessness, the Marquis reveals the true identity of his new bride to Griselda, and she is happily reunited with her children and her husband.

Patient Griselda is notable, as J. Burke Severs points out in *The Literary Relationships of Chaucer's Clerkes Tale*, in that she engaged the attention of three major literary figures of the fourteenth century: Giovanni Boccaccio and Francesco Petrarch, as well as Geoffrey Chaucer (3). Though the basic plot of the tale is shared by Boccaccio, Petrarch, and Chaucer, the differences of emphasis in the story as it is dealt with by these three canonical authors offers some insight into the character of Griselda, and specifically her significance as an archetypal figure in the

representation of suffering female virtue. Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1353) includes, as its final story, the first written incarnation of the Griselda tale. Boccaccio's sources for the tale (which is probably of folk origin<sup>3</sup>) are a question for debate among critics. Dudley D. Griffith and W.A. Cate forwarded an influential theory in the early 1930's that located the origins of the Griselda tale in the Cupid and Psyche myth, while more recent criticism traces the story to a Greek-Turkish tale titled "The Patience of a Princess" (Benson 880). The literary history of the tale after Boccaccio becomes much less difficult to trace—Griselda's story, as evidenced by its popularity, exerted a considerable influence on the imagination of its medieval audience. Petrarch's 1373 prose version (in Latin) of this narrative, titled *A Fable of Wifely Obedience and Devotion*, proved quite influential, and a number of other translations and adaptations of his version, including a stage play, appeared throughout France and Italy throughout the latter part of the fourteenth century (Bronfman 16-17).

In *The Decameron*, Boccaccio's (disapproving) emphasis is on the tyrannical Marquis (Salter 37). At the close of Griselda's trial, Gualtieri (the Marquis) provides Griselda and the crowd of people who have witnessed their final reconciliation with the motivation of his testing, which he says had a "pre-established goal." Gualtieri's explanation to Griselda clearly illustrates the suspicion with which he views women: "I wanted to teach you how to be a wife, to show these people

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<sup>3</sup>Boccaccio explicitly states in the conclusion to the *Decameron* that his fictions, like most medieval writers', are not original, and defends himself from hypothetical criticisms of them: "But suppose that I was both the inventor and the scribe (which I was not), I say that I am not ashamed that they are not all good, because there is no one, save God alone, who can do everything well and perfectly" ("Conclusion" 639).

how to know such a wife and how to choose and keep one, and to acquire for myself lasting tranquillity for as long as I was to live with you" (377). But the moral provided at the tale's end by Boccaccio's narrator is less flattering to Gualtieri. The narrator concludes, "What more can be said here, except that godlike spirits do sometimes rain down from heaven into poor homes, just as those more suited to governing pigs than to ruling over men make their appearances in royal palaces" (378). Boccaccio keeps the focus of his story on tyranny, and on the abuses of power that power brings, and while he demonstrates his sympathy with Griselda's suffering, his story does not explicitly concern itself with the common, particular, and pervasive gender imbalances that marriage can bring to women. Boccaccio's primary concern seems to be political and social equality, and his narrator even goes so far as to suggest rather flippantly that Griselda would have been justified in acting with an (Eve-like) independent self-interest similar to that which is practised by the Marquis: "It might have served Gualtieri right if he had run into the kind of woman who, once driven out of her home in nothing but a shift, would have allowed another man to shake her up to the point of getting herself a nice-looking dress out of the affair!" (378). Even here, though, Boccaccio's focus remains on the Marquis being punished or at least humiliated, and not on the pathos of Griselda's situation.

In contrast, Petrarch's overtly Christian version of the tale eschews Boccaccio's bawdy realism. Petrarch does, however, shift the emphasis of the tale to Griselda, endowing her trial by the Marquis (Walter) with a high moral significance it does not possess in the *Decameron* (Muscatine 191). Griselda

becomes, in Petrarch's tale, a symbol of human humility, and Walter's trial of her represents the suffering that humans must often endure at the hands of an enigmatic divine will. The suffering woman, and specifically the relationship between husband and suffering wife, is, as this version of the Griselda tale demonstrates, a likely candidate for investigations into general (i.e. masculine) power relations in a state-governed Christian society. A woman's relationship to patriarchy mirrors that between 'man' and God, or man and the state. As with Boccaccio's interest in (masculine) tyranny in general, Petrarch's allegorical emphasis, even though it is directed towards Griselda, moves the focus of the tale back to men—and this time, with more disturbing implications.

Since Petrarch focuses on the patient suffering of Griselda as an exemplum of human abjection before God, and the Marquis functions as the representation in the tale of that God, the critical depiction of the Marquis's cruelty that we see in *The Decameron* is, understandably, considerably weakened. Petrarch's 'translation'<sup>4</sup> incorporates only the first half of Boccaccio's narrator's final moral comment on the characters of the Marquis and Griselda. During the introduction and description of Griselda in the story, Petrarch echoes Boccaccio's remarks about her, writing that "as the grace of Heaven sometimes visits the hovels of the poor, it chanced that he [Janicola] had an only daughter, by name Griseldis, remarkable for the beauty of her body, but so beautiful a character and spirit that no one

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<sup>4</sup> Petrarch describes his translation of the story in a letter to Boccaccio: "Not neglecting the precept of Horace in his Art of Poetry, that the careful translator should not attempt to render word for word, I have told your tale in my own language, in some places changing or even adding a few words, for I felt that you would not only permit, but would approve, such alterations" ("Two Letters" 390).

excelled her" (380). The moral for the Griselda tale provided by Boccaccio's narrator ("that godlike spirits do sometimes rain down from heaven into poor homes, just as those more suited to governing pigs to ruling over men make their appearances in royal palaces"), which gains in significance through its placement at the closure of the narrative, also importantly partners the description of Griselda as possessing a godlike spirit with a denunciation of Walter's moral suitability for occupying a position of authority. In Petrarch's version, however, Boccaccio's remarks about Griselda and Walter are stripped of their more subversive implications. With the second half (the Walter half) of Boccaccio's character summary omitted, Walter is allowed to remain secure morally, in his alignment with the divine will of God, and politically, in his role of astute social elite who recognises and tests Griselda's rare wifely qualities. From both standpoints Griselda's suffering, in Petrarch's version, becomes a trial that is sanctioned in the tale as a suitable means of determining her eligibility for an elevated social, moral, and spiritual position. Petrarch's moral at the end of the tale furthers this reading:

This story it has seemed good to me to weave anew, in another tongue, not so much that it might stir the matrons of our time to imitate the patience of this wife—who seems to me scarcely imitable—as that it might stir all those who read it to imitate the woman's steadfastness, at least; so that they may have the resolution to perform for God what this woman performed for her husband.

(388)

Petrarch's conclusion, consistent with his alterations of Boccaccio's tale generally, remains religious and abstract, keeping the focus on Griselda's supreme virtue while refraining from critiquing the abuses of the Marquis.

Most commonly included amongst the *Canterbury Tales* (written 1387) influentially labelled the "marriage group" by George Lyman Kittredge, Chaucer's version of the Griselda story functions, in part, as a response to the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*. The other famous medieval woman of the *Canterbury Tales*, the Wife of Bath (Alison) presents an intriguing opposite for the patient, submissive wifely behaviour of Griselda—and in fact, the two characters quite faithfully represent the Eve/Mary extremes of behaviour that delimit the archetypal female Other. Though the Wife is frequently regarded as more positive (or at least active) presentation of female power and agency, as Elaine Tuttle Hansen convincingly argues, Alison and Griselda are in fact two sides of the same coin, "able to see themselves and speak for themselves only in terms provided by the dominant language and mythology of their culture" (32). Both Alison and Griselda are strong female characters who are constrained by a patriarchal culture, which demands that they be silent and submissive. The Wife (literally and figuratively) fights back, and attempts to re-interpret and challenge those oppressive patriarchal authorities, but she unfortunately has little with which to do battle. Her primary weapon is traditionally female: her speech. But not only does her verbal prowess immediately align her with Eve (who convinced Adam to eat of the apple), her language itself is that of her oppressors, and she, like all women, is unable to escape or claim it. All the Wife's 'virtues' (what seem like virtues to a modern audience, at least:



independence, cunning, strength, pragmatism, physicality) have already been categorised and vilified by a wealth of anti-feminist satire (Crane 117). Hansen writes of the Wife of Bath's ultimate defeat that "her attempts to meet specific arguments [during the wife's prologue, when she is defending her behaviour against the 'auctoritee's'] are self-defeating efforts to pin down and triumph over that generalised, mystifying, and hence invincible hostility that she meets from all sides" (30). As Irigaray discerns, a woman like Alison, who attempts to mount a direct challenge to her oppressors, is destined to lose—the patriarchal culture which contains (and has created) her and the language she uses is simply too powerful and pervasive.

Griselda and Alison are parodies of women: Alison functions to fulfil the perfect, boisterous, irreverent, sexual, greedy anti-feminist stereotype of unchecked female desires and passions, and Griselda functions to fulfil the perfect, selfless, patient submissive exemplum of ideal female behaviour. Patriarchal structures are threatened by *both* of these representations of the female Other, and both these excessive mimickings of femininity, not merely from "feminists" like Alison. The wife may be undermining male authority through laughter (though we see in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* that this is a hard attitude to maintain in the face of constant oppression; the wife is finally reduced to ineffective cursing), but Griselda poses a more fundamental and dangerous challenge. She plays by and embraces patriarchal rules. Chaucer followed Petrarch's version<sup>5</sup> of the Griselda tale closely when he crafted the *Clerk's Tale*, though he also relied on an anonymous French

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<sup>5</sup> Critics agree that Chaucer probably did not read Boccaccio's version of the Griselda Tale (Bronfman 17).

translation of Petrarch's version (Severs 33-37). While critics agree on Chaucer's sources for the *Clerk's Tale*, and generally agree on its technical sophistication, the tale's readers frequently offer conflicting interpretations about its significance, and specifically its moral/political position. In his version of the Griselda story, Chaucer expands, at all levels, upon the small moments of realism and pathos found in his sources. As Elizabeth Salter writes, Chaucer's "most consistent and most dramatic modifications of the Latin and French texts are designed to appeal—in what is, perhaps, a typically late-medieval way—to our sense of 'pathetic realism'" (50). Chaucer's Griselda has more occasions of direct speech than in previous renditions, and she is generally described in more 'human' terms; her thoughts, emotions, and the mundane personal details of her life are highlighted. Also, in his description of Griselda's superior qualities, Chaucer makes a significant deviation from his Petrarchan source. Petrarch tells his readers that "the vigor of manhood and wisdom of age lay hidden in [Griselda's] bosom" (380), and his Walter perceives in her a virtue "beyond her sex and age" (380). Petrarch's attribution of Griselda's superiority to the fact that she possesses 'masculine' virtues is congruent with his emphasis on Griselda as representative of 'human' (i.e. male) subordination to divine will. Importantly, though, Chaucer's Griselda is presented less as a woman endowed with typically masculine virtues, and more as a person possessing, to a rare degree under any circumstance, virtues that are congruent with (and possibly even more commonly found in) women (Hansen 199). Walter has chosen Griselda because he appreciates "hir wommanhede,/ And eek hir vertu, passynge any wight/ Of so yong age" (239-41).

Regardless, however, of which gender Griselda's virtue is seen to represent, the fact of her womanhood destines her for punishment. Griselda fulfils her role as wife and aristocrat in her superior way—in a manner that *should* give Walter no cause to doubt her—even patiently accepting (what she thinks to be) the murder of her first child at his command. But these displays of 'virtue' clearly do not satisfy her husband, and indeed seem only to goad him to assail his wife further.<sup>6</sup> The Clerk, when describing Walter's abduction of his second child, the couple's "gracious and fair" (613) two-year-old son, interrupts his tale to denounce Walter's behaviour. "O needles was she tempted in assay!" he cries, "But wedded men ne knowe no mesure,/ Whan that they fynde a pacient creature" (622-3). This assertion by the Clerk is a disturbingly astute reading of the power dynamics of the relationship between Griselda and her husband. According to the Clerk, Walter is not testing Griselda in order to have her patience and virtue proven. Griselda's virtue and her patience in themselves bring about her punishment. As Hansen explains, "the root of the word 'virtue' itself, from the Latin for 'male person,' signals what the *Clerk's Tale* subsequently affirms: a *virtuous woman*, the stuff of folk tales and saints' legend, is a contradiction, a semantic anomaly, a threat to the social order and to the stability of gender difference and hierarchy" (190-91). The virtuous woman who is seen as displaying 'masculine' characteristics excites male fear and aggression by suggesting that the differences between men and women are insignificant (or at least less significant than they need to be in order for the

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<sup>6</sup> In her psychoanalytic reading of the Clerk's Tale, Patricia Cramer suggests that Walter's seizure of his children "may symbolize the father's co-optation of origin when the mother's ability to give birth as well as her powerful influence during early infancy are replaced by the child's rebirth into a gender identity prescribed by a fathered society" (497).

male subject's gender definition)—by failing, that is, to perform satisfactorily as feminine Other. But equally threatening to male subjectivity is the virtuous woman whose superiority is seen to be rooted in her femininity, since this women can represent a frightening, unknowable, *excessive* Other who, as Moi has described, begins to merge with the "chaos" of the "outside."

Chaucer's Walter is a much less abstract figure of power than the Marquis who appears in his sources: his faults are presented as representative of typical masculine behaviours, behaviours that make a reading of him as a figure for divine will quite difficult. Just as Chaucer characterises Griselda's virtue as an exemplary representative of ideal female qualities, Walter's tyranny, in the *Clerk's Tale*, becomes representative of common male behaviour. Specifically explored are Walter's desire for power and control as they are manifested in class and gender relationships—as well as his fear of intimate relationships with women. The theme of Chaucer's *Tale* begins to resonate early on in the tale throughout the repetition of key words and phrases. Introducing the Marquis, the Clerk tells us that Walter rules over the Italian district of Saluzzo, as his elders have done before him, and that "obeisant, ay redy to his honde/ Were all his liges, bothe lass and more" (66-67). The Clerk praises the young Marquis' youth, beauty, "curteisy," and honour, and he assures us that Walter is wise enough to govern (or "gye"—guide) his country (74) but he also informs his audience of young Walter's faults:

I blame him thus, that he considered noght  
In tyme cominge what mighte him bityde,  
But on his lust present was al his thoght,

As for to hauke and hunte on every syde;  
 Wel ny alle othere cures leet he slyde,  
 And eek he nolde-and that was worst of alle-  
 Wedde no wyf, for noght that may bifalle. (78-84)

Chaucer's tone in this description of Walter's flaws is slightly more critical than either Boccaccio or Petrarch (at this point in the tale); his Walter is described as a more self-willed and self-indulgent hedonist than either of his earlier incarnations.<sup>7</sup> The language of this passage makes few concessions to Walter, and does little to obscure the fact that his behaviour is worthy of censure. In this way, Chaucer's version of the tale does more to prepare the reader for the extreme cruelty of Walter's future behaviour—while also introducing the important information of the Marquis' unwillingness to "wedde."

Chaucer's description of tyranny (unlike Petrarch's) remains solidly rooted in the individual reality of social and marital (rather than allegorical or Godly) power. The exchange, early on in the tale, between the Marquis and his "obeisant liges" is interesting in both its description of the marital union, and in its presentation of Walter 'testing' his subjects in a way that prefigures his trial of Griselda. The brave and cautiously discreet group who approach the Marquis with their request are shrewd in their description of marriage. They plead, "Boweth youre nekke under

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<sup>7</sup> Boccaccio says that Gualtieri, who is merely a first born son among the various marquises of Saluzzo, "having no wife or children, spent his time doing nothing but hawking and hunting, and never thought of taking a wife or having children—and this was very wise on his part" (371). Petrarch describes his Walter, who is the "first and greatest" of the marquises of Saluzzo, as "a man blooming with youth and beauty, as noble in his ways as in his birth; marked out, in short, for leadership in all things,—save that he was so contented with his present lot that he took very little care for the future. Devoted to hunting and fowling, he so applied himself to these arts that he neglected almost all else; and—what his subjects bore most ill—he shrank from even a hint of marriage" (378-9).

that blisful yok / Of soveraynetee, noght of servyse, / Which that men clepe spousaille or wedlok" (113-115). A clear paradigm of hierarchical power is invoked here, and "wedlok" is defined as a relationship of dominance for the nervous Marquis. Walter's choice in a bride makes that domination more assured and unimpeachable, and also allows him to test the loyalty and submission of his people. Rejecting the offer of his subjects to find him a suitable bride from the best family in the land, the Marquis discourses on the origin of goodness—which he says comes from God, not from lineage (157)—and demands (on their "lyf") that whatever woman he chooses to wed should be worshiped as if she were an emperor's daughter (168). Walter's phrasing of this demand to his people presages the oath he will extract from Griselda:

And forthermoore, this shal ye swere: that ye  
 Agayn my choys shul neither gucche ne stryve;  
 For sith I shal forgoon my libertee  
 At your requeste, as ever moot I thryve,  
 Ther as myn herte is set, ther wol I wyve. (169-73)

In a choice that is both politically and personally astute, Walter's "herte is set" on the young peasant girl Griselda, who, as he must imagine, can do little to challenge his "libertee."

In her work *Chaucer and the Politics of Discourse*, Michaela Paasche Grudin describes the character of Walter's speech throughout the tale: "Walter's speech," she writes, "remains hidden, and its authority thus naked and arbitrary. Walter withholds explanations" (94). Shrewdly, Walter's orchestration of the claiming of

Griselda as his wife is a simultaneously secretive and public act. Pushing the faith and loyalty of his subjects, while also avoiding any opportunity for debate/censure regarding his choice, Walter refuses to reveal the identity of his bride until the day of his wedding (a strategy he will also employ regarding his second 'wife'). On that day, though, the "richely arrayed" Marquis marches with all his invited guests into the unsuspecting Griselda's town. Upon their arrival (the surprise of which also serves the function of totally overwhelming the poor family), Walter makes a show of asking for Janicola's acceptance of him as a son-in-law, though the fulfilment of his will is never in question. "[A]l that liketh me, I dare wel seyn" he remarks to Janicola, "It liketh thee" (311-12). And Walter is not mistaken in his supposition. Janicola demonstrates the honest paternity of Griselda's obedience, and once again we observe the 'proper' behaviour of a subservient: "'Lord,' quod he, 'my willynge / Is as ye wole, ne ayeynes youre likyng / I wol no thyng'" (319-21).

Walter's proposal to Griselda is made with the same assurance that she will obey his desires, and her response to him is a more elaborate version of her father's self-abnegating assent:

She seyde, 'Lord, undigne and unworthy  
 Am I to thilke honour that ye me beede,  
 But as ye wole youreself, right so wol I.  
 And heere I swere that nevere willyngly,  
 In werk ne thoght, I nyl yow disobeye,  
 For to be deed, though me were looth to deye.' (359-364)

Walter is satisfied with this response, and silences Griselda with a casual and proprietary, "This is ynogh, Grisilde myn" (365). Griselda is now his, answerable "to al [his] lust" (352), the first of which is to have her stripped "right theere" (374) of all her "olde geere" (372) and re-dressed in the finery provided by the Marquis. As his bride, his property, Griselda has been claimed and re-made by Walter, and the effect is profound: "Unnethe the peple hir knew for hire fairnesse / Whan she translated was in swich richesse" (384-85). Walter's transformative power rests not only in his gender but in his class, and (in a power-dynamic that will be mirrored in all of the 'couples' studied in this work) his choice of a lower-class bride. This choice circumvents some of the few checks that a patriarchal society does place in the way of a tyrannical husband: namely the fear of angering or alienating his wife's family. Griselda's peasant status, and specifically the inequality of her father (who, as is made explicitly clear, is as much a subject to the Marquis as his daughter) and her husband, makes her particularly vulnerable, and highlights the danger and isolation experienced by all women within patriarchal social and legal codes. And Walter takes full advantage of the power his social position gives him. He prepares Griselda for the "death" of her first child by informing her (falsely) that his subjects have been complaining about serving the heir of a peasant—a manipulative psychological tactic that tests her love and loyalty at the same time that it reminds her of her subservient, dependant status.

Griselda is not without a degree of power in their relationship, however. While Chaucer highlights the (in Walter's case, terrible) 'humanity' of his main characters, he also adds resonance to the biblical allusiveness of the tale, and



specifically, he aligns Griselda, and her form of virtue, more explicitly with the holy suffering of Jesus, Mary, and Job. The second part of the *Clerk's Tale* sets up a clear and immediate distinction between Griselda's (or her father's) humble poverty and the Marquis' authority and wealth (Martin 142), a distinction that will continue to be invoked at key moments throughout the poem. Retaining the remark about God's grace visiting the hovels of the poor (which Petrarch adapted from the concluding moral of Boccaccio's tale) Chaucer adds a specific and overt biblical allusion to his introduction of Griselda. He reminds us that "hye God somtyme senden kan / His grace into a litel oxes stalle" (206-207), and through one small detail (the "oxes stalle") links Griselda both with Mary and her son.

Griselda is indeed a rare person: she has attracted the attention of the Marquis though the virtue that is evident to him even in passing "As he hunting rood paraventure" (234). It is Griselda's rare form of virtue, and her capacity for a martyr-like suffering, that will (at least temporarily) incapacitate Walter. In her expression of obedience to Walter (above) Griselda describes the excessive degree of submissiveness that she will adopt in their marriage. She promises him, "But as ye wole youreself, right so wol I." In this early assertion of the singleness of their wills, Griselda indicates the method by which she will thwart and disturb Walter's attempts to assert his control over her—in essence, by refusing to function as Other within their marriage. As Catherine Cox writes, Griselda "manipulates by acquiescing, thereby illustrating the antifeminist topos of the duplicitous woman even as she suggests an attempt at personal empowerment in the face of oppression" (71). Griselda's virtue, in a patriarchal society, demands some type of

trial for it to be validated. But in the face of her testing by Walter, Griselda's continued patience and submission merely invite more testing, a longing for some reaction, since (according to Benjamin's formulation) Griselda fails to maintain the integrity that Walter needs for the recognition of his subjectivity. Griselda, in her negation of her own will and her assumption of Walter's, also fails to demonstrate the feminine difference and inferiority that can allow Walter to comfortably define his masculinity. Griselda's assumption—her performance, her mimicry—of the obedience that patriarchy (and Walter) demands from her frustrates Walter's desire to receive acknowledgement of his power, his agency, and his control, while also serving both to highlight and expose Walter's tyranny and vulnerability.

Walter's third test of Griselda (after her unwavering acceptance of his 'murder' of their two children) unfolds in an identical reversal of their wedding day, but in this instance, the suffering Griselda has already endured, and the obedience she as demonstrated, makes her power more overt than was possible when she was first selected by the Marquis as his bride. Calling her before him in "open audience" (790), Walter renounces her, telling her that the people clamour for him to take another wife. In a supremely cutting dismissal of her years of devotion and commitment, Walter concludes "And thilke dower that ye broghten me / Tak it agayn, I graunte it of my grace. / Retourneth to your faders hous" (807-808). Griselda's excessively modest response draws attention to the differences between them, and, though she is literally discussing material wealth and status, her remarks also serve as reminder of Walter's moral decrepitude and his exploitation of her vulnerable position. She admits, "bitwixen youre magnificence / And my

poverte no wight can ne may / Maken comparsion" (815-817). Griselda also, while professing her unshaken love of the Marquis, draws attention to his betrayal of her (and possibly of God's will):

my lyf ther wol I lede:

A widwe clene, in body, herte, and al.

For sith I yaf to yow my maydenhede,

And am youre trewe wyf, it is no drede,

God shilde swich a lordes wyf to take

Another man to housbonde or to make.

And of youre newe wyf, God of his grace

So graunte yow wele and prosperitee! (835-42)

Griselda addresses Walter's suggestion that she contributed nothing to their union, returning to the day of their marriage (crying "O gode God! how gentil and how kynde / Ye seemed by youre speche and youre visage" 852-3) and reminds Walter, as she does in the quotation above, that "To yow broght I noght elles, out of drede, / But feyth and nakednesse and maydenhede" (865). This 'dowry' list is not insignificant, and serves to make clear the loyalty and selflessness with which Griselda has served her husband, as well as highlight the innocence which she has lost.

Chaucer also emphasises the religious depth of Griselda's suffering in this section: she paraphrases Job as she strips off her gown, crying "Naked out of my fadres hous . . . I cam, and naked moot I turne agayn" (871-2). Truly martyr like, Griselda demands only a shift in lieu of her lost years and lost virginity, and departs

for her father's house with a retinue of weeping followers. Job is again invoked, explicitly this time, at the conclusion of this section, when the Clerk discourses on Griselda's supreme humbleness, claiming that no man (not even Job) can be "half so trewe / As wommen been" (937-38). Judith Bronfman specifically describes Griselda's suffering at these moments as a version of Christ's suffering: "Like Christ before his tormentors, she strips off her clothing to an undergarment; like Christ, she is followed by a weeping crowd of supporters as she returns to her father's house; like Christ, she is silent. Her return from her father's house, like Christ's Resurrection, is in two parts: one humble, the other glorious" (40). Walter cannot provoke a response from this Christ-like Griselda he has created; she eludes him. Throughout her trial Griselda is completely submissive and self-less—she does not betray any emotion that Walter can take advantage of or name as rebellion.

The combination of Chaucer's heightening of the level of his heroine's suffering to biblical proportions, and his grounding of the relationship between Walter and Griselda in the realm of everyday marital relations, produces a tale that becomes strangely conflicted. Critics have discussed the problem of the 'double' and contradictory tendencies of Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* at length. Salter writes that "The *Tale* is constantly pulled in two directions, and . . . the human sympathies so powerfully evoked by the sight of human suffering form, ultimately, a barrier to total acceptance of the work in its original function" (50). Though the "human" touches add to his story's effectiveness, Chaucer's emphasis on Griselda the *woman* (and Walter the man) works to undercut the effectiveness of Griselda the religious symbol. Indeed, due to his presentation of Walter as typical authoritarian

husband, even his emphasis on Griselda's supreme virtue, linked as it is with powerful religious precedents, works against reading the tale as a moral exemplum: Griselda's perfect goodness makes Walter's tyranny unbearable, and simply provokes anger in a reader (at Walter *and* Griselda). But still, of Walter's decision to test his extraordinary wife, who has demonstrated all the qualities that a Marquis could desire in a partner (she not only proves expert in all the duties of "housewifery," but becomes famous for her wise and mature ability to settle social/political discord) the Clerk says "Ther fil, as it bifalleth tymes mo" (449). Griselda's situation, the Clerk shockingly suggests, is a common one. In a significant departure from the versions of the tale written by Boccaccio and Petrarch, Chaucer's Griselda's virtue may be holy, but her suffering is pathetic, and most importantly, overwhelmingly domestic.

Perhaps directly as a result of what Salter describes as the Tale being pulled in "two directions," Chaucer's audience has historically had difficulty 'reading' and/or responding to his Griselda. Indeed, the *Clerk's Tale* is not only a source of consternation for critics and/or readers, it also generates dislike—and in fact, as Bronfman suggests, the *Clerk's Tale* may be the most disliked of all the Canterbury Tales (3). Modern readers and critics, especially, are not sure how to react to Chaucer's heroine. While medieval audiences were uncomfortable with Walter's cruelty, they seem to have had no difficulty in admiring Griselda, only in believing that such extreme patience could exist (Middleton 1980). From the nineteenth century onwards, however, readers have found it difficult to give Griselda the sympathetic approval that the tale demands (Morse 54). Charles Muscatine begins

his discussion of the *Tale* by remarking that “The Clerk’s Tale has been very little appreciated, much condemned, and almost never analysed” (191), and modern readers, especially modern female readers, seem to find Griselda’s extreme patience insufferable. In 1972 Ian Robinson discussed the negative reactions of some of his students: “Some people cannot tolerate the emotions of *The Clerk’s Tale*. I find especially when discussing Chaucer with undergraduates that young women can rarely forgive or forget that Griselda fails to stand up to her husband in the proper way” (164). Lynn Sharon Schwartz’s novel *Disturbances in the Field* describes a similar reaction from a group of graduate students at Columbia University. The women in the group find Walter “unspeakable,” but Griselda is “mortifying”—a “gauntlet tossed down from the fourteenth century” (qtd. in Bronfman: 3). Priscilla Martin also asserts generally that “the Tale always produces considerable indignation in the classroom” (148). This negative reaction to Griselda is understandable: she is completely submissive to her husband’s authority, repeatedly allows herself to be humiliated by him, and even consents to (what she thinks to be) the murder of her children out of an active desire to be obedient to him.

Griselda’s patient acceptance of the death of her children is especially troubling to modern readers, and it has been read not merely as the act of an insufferably obedient and dependant woman, but as a determined self-interestedness. Griselda faces these suspicions partly due to the fact that she reaps material rewards (social status/power, a rich husband, fine clothes) due to her complete obedience to Walter’s whims. One critic complains that “In Griselda’s

largely dispassionate relinquishing of the children, we see a mother offering up her children in order that she might retain her own status as wife, a startlingly self-interested strategy depicted as a gesture of valorised submissiveness" (Cox 70). Similarly, in his article "The Real *Clerk's Tale*, or, Patient Griselda Exposed," which focuses on Griselda's religious, rather than maternal negligence, Donald H. Reiman accuses Griselda of "idolatry" in that she "completely surrenders her moral freedom and disobeys God's law to follow the whims of a fellow creature" (363). Sherwin Cody, an early twentieth-century anthologist who included the tale of Griselda in his collection, also focuses on the "shrewdness" of Griselda, but with more sympathy than these later critics:

One cannot help the suspicion that Griselda was deeper than she seemed, and knowing more of her husband's nature and purposes than appears in the story, was acting a diplomatic and exceedingly shrewd part in refusing to be provoked. Viewed in this light, she is a striking example of the power of modesty and non-resistance to give dignity, and finally authority and power, to one from the lowliest social rank. (qtd. in Bronfman 43)<sup>8</sup>

Cody's comments here are insightful in that they both recognise the power that Griselda wields by "refusing to be provoked," and also place that power in the social and historical context in which it functions—since Griselda's culture *requires* her submission to Walter, both in terms class and gender. Griselda's "dispassionate relinquishing" of her children is a result of patriarchal power relations that place

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<sup>8</sup> From Sherwin Cody, *A Selection from the World's Greatest Short Stories*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed. (1902; Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co. 1913), 40.

women firmly in a hierarchy that locates her duty primarily as that of wife: husbands, in this scheme of things, come before children, before God even, since a husband mediates God's will for his 'subjects.' Margaret Hallissy asserts that Griselda "is as excessive in her way as Walter is in his" (69), and James Sledd writes that "Walter or Griselda, either or both, may be desperately wicked, and their actions improbable or impossible" (227). Griselda is, of course, shockingly excessive, improbable, impossible, and even wicked, but how else can she effectively counter these traits in Walter? Griselda must meet Walter's extreme tyranny (masculinity) with an equally extreme submission (femininity).

Through Griselda's totally submissive responses to her cruel, testing husband (which match and confront the excess of his trials), she performs the mimicry or mimesis—that deliberately exaggerated gender behaviour suggested by Irigaray—which subverts and therefore empowers (Chance 252). Cruel husband or not, Griselda, like the other suffering women I will discuss in this thesis, is suspect precisely because of the power she accrues through this selfless, impossible virtue. Because of Griselda's explicit connections (in Chaucer's version) with Job, and implicit ones with Christ and/or Mary, she becomes, at least to some readers outside the tale, a force of righteous goodness—even of revenge. As Jill Mann points out, "woman's patient suffering elevates her to a type of Christ, with the addition that, like Christ, it is a *powerful* suffering. The motto of the Franklin's Tale — 'patience conquers' — is confirmed and deepened [in the *Clerk's Tale*]" (146). Griselda's servile return to her husband's house to help prepare for his remarriage, which allows her one more opportunity to demonstrate her capacity for patient



suffering, is as (as Bronfman writes) much glorious as humble. In yet another replay of their dialogue on their wedding day, Griselda must correctly answer the Marquis' question in order to be re-"translated" into his wife. When asked by Walter before the assembled guests what she thinks of his new bride, Griselda praises her beauty and wishes them prosperity, but also cautions Walter regarding his treatment of her:

O thyng biseke I yow, and warne also,  
 That ye ne prikke with no tormentyng  
 This tendre mayden, as ye han don mo;  
 For she is fostred in hire norissyng  
 Moore tendrely, and, to my supposyng,  
 She koude nat adversitee endure  
 As koude a povre fostred creature. (1037-43)

Griselda reminds her audience of the "tormentyng" she has so patiently suffered at Walter's hands, and she also makes a (proud?) distinction between her ability to endure that adversity and this well bred maiden. Most significantly though, I think, Griselda's warning clearly suggests that her own trial was unwarranted. That such tormenting could be repeated with this young woman indicates that Walter's trials have been not triggered by their (Walter and Griselda's) specific situation, or Griselda's specific failings, but are merely Walter's way of behaving like a husband and a man. As in the versions of the tale written by Boccaccio and Petrarch, Chaucer's Walter is given an opportunity to offer an explanation and defence of his actions. Walter explains to Griselda and his people, "I have doon this dede/ For no

malice ne for no crueltee,/ But for t'assaye in thee thy wommanhede" (1073-75). Walter's specification that he has been—and somehow without malice or cruelty—simply testing Griselda's "wommanhede," which is original to Chaucer,<sup>9</sup> again focuses our attention on the domestic, marital sphere, and specifically on gender relations. Griselda's warning to Walter regarding his new wife was a necessary one—Walter himself admits that Griselda's femaleness alone brought on her trial.

Walter must now be satisfied with the verdict of that trial, carried on, he tells Griselda, "Til I thy purpos knewe and al thy wille" (1078). The Clerk's tale, and Griselda's trial, ends then with Griselda's reward for her unimpeachable "purpos" and "wille": her reunion with her children, and her reinstallation as Walter's wife. Ian Robinson, in his discussion of the tale, finds fault with this conclusion, and specifically with Griselda's reward. He writes,

the quality of Griselda's patience would not have been impaired if the tale had ended with her retirement to obscurity and Walter's second marriage—which is why I see the specifically Christian happy ending as a weakness. The value of Griselda's response to adversity is not proved because it is at last rewarded, the value lies in the thing itself (167).

Robinson's criticism of the "happy ending" of the *Clerk's Tale*—unnecessary, he argues, if the point of the tale is to demonstrate the superior quality and value, in

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<sup>9</sup> Compare with Petrarch's Walter's much more convincing and seemingly "beneficent" description: "I am curious and given to experiments, but am not impious: I have tested my wife, not condemned her; I have hidden my children, not destroyed them" (386).

itself, of Griselda's patience—seems very sound, and therefore suggests a reading of the tale that complicates the meaning and purpose of that ending. For the *Clerk's Tale* documents Walter's trial as much as it does Griselda's, and he is just as (if not more) relieved at its conclusion as his wife. Jill Mann specifically argues for the importance of the *Tale's* close in any examination of Griselda's character. She writes, "the most obvious testimony to Griselda's strength is the tale's ending . . . For it is not Griselda who gives way under the pressures of her trial, but Walter . . . the story does not simply illustrate the virtue of patience; it shows that patience *conquers*" (152-3). Walter, unable to endure Griselda's elusive passivity, must put an end to her suffering, must cease his insistent attempts to force a reaction from her, since her ability to deny him that reaction gives her a power over him that is intolerable. Paradoxically, it is by obeying him completely, and suffering so submissively, that Griselda avoids Walter's domination, and it is this subtle insubordination to which Walter puts an end. The "happy ending" of the *Clerk's Tale* is necessary, therefore, not to reward Griselda's patience, but to contain her power.

Of course, though we can read her as conquering Walter through her perfect patience, Griselda pays a terrible price for her absolute and/or evasive submission. It is, as Hansen says, "punitive and self-destructive" (190). Both the Wife and Griselda present a sad commentary on the plight of oppressed women—any position that can be conceived of in a patriarchal society seems to undermine, in some way, women's power. The Wife of Bath disempowers herself by fulfilling anti-feminist stereotypes, but the conclusion of the Clerk's tale, as Hansen points

out, becomes a final and necessary disempowering of Griselda (193). Walter may have been conquered by Griselda's enactment of the type of mimicry and excess advocated by Irigaray, but when he recognises this fact, he merely has to call an end to his trial of Griselda in order to regain his control. Walter silences Griselda with a familiar declaration of possession, and a reassertion, finally and tragically effective, of his control: "This is y-nogh, Griselda myn" (1051). With these words, Griselda's performance as submissive, obedient, and suffering wife, which has functioned to paradoxically expose Walter's tyranny, comes to an end.

Griselda's mythological status has been assured, however, and the *Clerk's Tale* does not conclude without further commentary on her power. Like Boccaccio and Petrarch, Chaucer includes a moral for the tale, or rather, several morals. The Clerk includes Petrarch's religious summation:

This storie is seyde nat for that wyves sholde  
 Folwen Grisilde as in humylitee,  
 For it were inportable, though they wolde,  
 But for that every wight in his degree,  
 Sholde be constant in adversitee  
 As was Grisilde; therfore Petrark writeth  
 This storie, with which heigh stile he enditeth.

For sith a womman was so pacient  
 Unto a mortal man, wel moore us oghte  
 Receyven al in gree that God us sent. (1145-51)

While pointing out the connections between Griselda's patience and the constancy that should be shown by "every wight" in the face of divine will, this Petrarchan conclusion also notes that it would in fact be "inportable" if wives mimicked

Griselda's behaviour. And indeed, the Clerk continues in the Tale to reassure his listeners that such mimicry is highly unlikely. The Clerk 'complains' that "It were hard to fynde now-a-days / In al a toun Grisildis thre or two" (1164-65), and insists that any woman so tested "now-a-days" would give way under the strain. The Clerk further cautions, "No wedded man so hardy be t'assaille / His wyves pacience in trust to fynde / Grisildis, for in certein he shal faille" (1180-82). Such a failure, though, as the Tale proper has demonstrated, would in fact be welcome—empowering husbands like Walter (and the patriarchal culture which creates and encourages them) by proving their suspicions and fear of women well founded. Recalling once again the Wife of Bath and "al hire secte" (1171) the "Envoy" to the *Clerk's Tale*, which the Clerk presents as a method of lightening the mood, is a mocking song that advises wives to adopt a more aggressive, verbal, and manipulative stance with their husbands—a stance that, paradoxically, is much less threatening to the patriarchal status-quo. "Folweth Ekko" he advises wives at one point, "that holdeth no silence, / But evere answereth at the countretaille" (1189-90). The Clerk here recognises Ekko's disruptive power—but by strangely attributing that force to women like the Wife of Bath, he perhaps attempts to undermine or disguise its potency, which comes not from disagreement or contradiction, but from a strict repetition and reiteration of patriarchal values. This echolaic power is clearly best demonstrated in the disturbing, perfect mimicry of Patient Griselda. And despite the Clerk's assurances to his audience, that Griselda-like power (as the following chapters will explore) is not quite yet "deed . . . and buried" (1177-78).

### Chapter 3

#### Pamela & Clarissa: The Rewards of Virtue

The heroines of Samuel Richardson's influential eighteenth-century novels, *Pamela* (1741) and *Clarissa* (1748) strongly parallel Griselda and Griselda's form of power. Both Pamela and Clarissa embrace the discursive codes of a patriarchy which oppresses them, presenting and performing a vision of femininity that, in its submissiveness, has been found disturbing and distasteful to modern critics (Eagleton; Van Ghent). But, paradoxically, both heroines have also been celebrated (and condemned) for their assertive, effective manipulations of that patriarchal discourse (Fielding; Warner; Eagleton)—demonstrating, as I will argue in this chapter, the force that the type of mimicry advised by Irigaray has to disturb patriarchal control. Griselda functions and finds power primarily in the role of perfect wife; she is defined (and defines herself) almost completely through that role; her (unwarranted) trial illustrates her position as feminine Other, and demonstrates the fear and vulnerability experienced by men within a marital union. Pamela and Clarissa also perform as the Others of their patriarchal economy. However, their power, and their otherness, is born of their position as 'virginal' objects of sexual desire: they pose a threat both to the men who desire them, and to the larger social sphere which seeks to control and commodify them. Perhaps because of these differences, and perhaps also due to the broader scope allowed by Richardson's narrative, Pamela and Clarissa (who are also constrained by their culture's determining gender roles, but who variously function as daughters, friends, lovers, and—thanks in part to an emergent puritan individualism—relatively

independent moral agents) are able to embody a slightly more vital and active form of defiance through submission.

Pamela and Clarissa share in Griselda's powerful cultural iconicity. They achieved a cult-like status with Richardson's contemporaries: church bells apparently rang in an English village when it was learned that Pamela had married, and the novel, which was recommended from the pulpit, spawned operas, dramas, poems, parodies, translations, continuations, imitations, paintings, engravings, and even a fan, decorated with "the principle Adventures of her Life, in Servitude, Love, and Marriage" (Eaves & Kimple xviii). The publication of the first volumes of *Clarissa*, which is considered by most critics to be Richardson's 'masterpiece' and by some to be the finest novel in the English language,<sup>10</sup> prompted imploring (even threatening) requests from concerned readers that the novelist avert the tragedy of his heroine's death (Keymer 202). Terry Eagleton comments on the power and impact of Richardson's novels, writing that "[s]uspended between fact and fiction, Richardson's characters come to assume the ambiguous aura of myth, that symbolic realm so utterly paradigmatic that we can never quite decide whether it is more or less 'real' than the empirical world" (Eagleton 6). The mythological, symbolic "realm" that Pamela and Clarissa occupy is one, like Griselda's, of suffering and virtue, but it is also one of love and seduction—that powerful archetypal drama of the betrayed (or potentially betrayed) woman.

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<sup>10</sup> Harold Bloom calls Richardson's second novel exactly that, and finds Clarissa herself "the most persuasive instance of a kind of secular saint, a strong heroine, in the entire subsequent history of the Western novel" (*Richardson* 1).

Richardson's first novel, *Pamela*, most closely mirrors the key plot elements of the *Clerk's Tale*: in both, a young, socially insignificant woman is pursued by a powerful man, undergoes severe suffering at his hands, and, after enduring her trials with success and 'virtue,' is finally accepted by that man as the perfect wife. Like Griselda, the beleaguered Pamela has little defence or protection against the trials of her 'Master': she is young, poor, a servant, and a woman. But despite her seemingly insurmountable inequality with the treacherous Mr. B, Pamela does exert considerable power in the novel—so much power, in fact, that from the moment the novel was published, she has been attacked as a scheming, artful baggage, well aware of the enticing prospect she presents to her wealthy young master as she lies sprawled at length on the floor (in a faint) or blushes in her country-maiden attire. Pamela's virtue, and the material gains it brings her (the incredible feat, as a serving girl, of marrying an aristocrat) have attracted a suspicious derision that far surpasses the few critical queries into Griselda's morality. Most famously, Henry Fielding's 1741 parody of *Pamela*, *An Apology for the Life of Mrs. Shamela Andrews*, sets out to expose the hypocrisy of Pamela's virtue. Readers are informed on the title-page that this is a work "In which, the many notorious FALSEHOODS and MISREPRESENTATIONS of a Book called *PAMELA*, Are exposed and refuted; and all the matchless ARTS of that young Politician, set in a true and just Light" (2). Fielding's disparagement of *Pamela* has been so effective that, as Margaret Doody complains, it is too often treated as the last word in Richardson criticism (14). Jina Politi, in *The Novel and Its Presuppositions*, discusses Fielding's attack of *Pamela* as being a manifestation of class prejudice. Fielding's censure, she



writes, "is based on the prepossession that disinterested morality, if practised at all, can only be practised by the leisured class. When a member of the lower classes appears to practice disinterested morality this can either be seen as 'enthusiastic' religious lunacy, or as dissimulation at the service of self-interest" (92). Politi's observation regarding the scepticism that greets lower-class professions of morality can be widened to include all of womankind. Because of the male fear and dependence that work to define woman as Other, she is always subject to the suspicion that she practices "dissimulation at the service of self-interest." Fielding's parody, as much as it reflects gender and class insecurities, also points to the very real capacity of the submissive woman to thwart and manipulate oppression. For paradoxically, in cases of the apparently 'virtuous' woman, the translation of male fear and suspicion into testing and trial works to empower the woman who suffers that trial without faltering.

Irigaray asserts that, at least as an initial phase in women's resistance to their marginalisation and exploitation in the discourse of patriarchy, they "must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus begin to thwart it" (*Reader* 124). Pamela is perhaps the most successful of the women in the study in performing this form of mimicry, and thus the most open to the questioning of her 'sincerity.' In a patriarchal society authoritative discourse is not usually available to, or in the best interests of, women, and especially lower-class women. However, Richardson's heroine's understanding and manipulation of the complex and hierarchical relations of power that operate within a patriarchal culture provide her

with a clear advantage in the novel, especially over her single-minded pursuer. Even though her society privileges males, wealth, and mastery, through embracing the patriarchal social conventions that should disempower her—through her highly developed (or internalised) sense of social propriety, and her ability to convincingly articulate, defend, and advance her ‘proper’ social views—Pamela manages to use her poverty, subordination, and especially her femininity against Mr. B, and circumvent the subservience to him that her gender and low social position would normally demand. Pamela’s advantages in Richardson’s first novel are linked most clearly to language; her adept use of both the written and the spoken word—in the service of her own interpretation of patriarchal ideology—greatly assists in her ultimate triumph over Mr. B. Pamela (and *Pamela*) spends a great deal of time exploring language,<sup>11</sup> and challenging, through her mimicry of them, the definitions of social situations and obligations that are provided by Mr. B and other characters.

Like Walter, Mr. B is empowered by his aristocratic social standing, but he is also elevated through his role as employer, or ‘Master’—a status that Pamela takes very seriously. In fact, it is the excessive respect that Pamela has for ‘degree’ and ‘greatness’ that buttresses her vocal critiques of Mr. B. In order to warrant her respect (and obedience), Pamela insists that her social ‘superiors’ must act accordingly, and she is quick to comment when B or his peers sway from established patriarchal class and gender hierarchies. In a letter to her parents

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<sup>11</sup> Most of the action of the epistolary *Pamela* is verbal; other than Mr. B’s several “attempts” of Pamela, her abduction by Mr. B, and her voluntary return to him, the novel’s movement and plot are propelled by the writing of letters and oral arguments.

which describes the first time B offers “Freedoms to his poor Servant” Pamela wonders at aristocrats who “put it into the power of their inferiors to be greater than they” (36), and during a later ‘attempt’ she assures Mr. B. that “[he] cannot be [her] Master; for no Master demeans himself so to his poor Servant” (181). This reminder of class hierarchy is repeated by Pamela throughout her ordeal as an excuse for the resistance, anger, and recriminations she directs towards Mr. B. In a provocative reversal, her position as servant becomes her defence—there are rules, a language, a distance that should inform relations between a Master and a Servant, and when Mr. B. ignores his ‘Master’ discourse, Pamela is able to justify her abandonment of the discourse of servitude.

Pamela’s adept mimicry and manipulation of the discourse of patriarchy manages to save her even in moments of threatened violence—because such physical assaults rarely, in Richardson’s first novel, transcend discourse. In three out of Mr. B’s four ‘attempts’ of Pamela, he refers to his behaviour as if it remains at a verbal level. He calls his fondling in the summerhouse “a few kind words” (39) and in both bedroom scenes, when he slips into bed with Pamela and Mrs. Jervis/Mrs. Jewkes, he absurdly requests to be allowed to “but expostulate a Word or two” (67) with Pamela (he only requests “one Word” during the Jewkes attempt). Ruth Perry asserts that, for Mr. B, “Possessing [Pamela] sexually is identified with possessing her thoughts, her words” (131). Acknowledging this connection, Mr. B’s inability or failure to execute his plans and conquer Pamela sexually can be explained by his inevitable impotence during their linguistic exchanges—for Mr. B is always the loser in his verbal battles with Pamela. Early on in the novel, Pamela

confronts Mr B, in a scene that is typical of their interactions prior to his reformation:

Why [she asks], if I have done amiss, am I not left to be discharged by your Housekeeper, as other Maids have been? . . . why should you so demean yourself to take Notice of me? . . . why should I not be turn'd away, and there's an End of it? For indeed I am not of Consequence enough for my Master to concern himself and be angry about such a Creature as me.

Do you hear, Mrs. *Jervis*, cry'd he again, how pertly I am interrogated by this sawcy Slut? Why, Sauce-box, says he, did not my good Mother desire me to take care of you? And have you not been always distinguish'd by me, above a common Servant? Does your ingratitude upbraid me for this?

I said something mutteringly, and he vow'd he would hear it. I begg'd Excuse; but he insisted upon it. Why then, said I, if your Honour must know, I said, That my good Lady did not desire your Care to extend to the Summer-house and her Dressing-room.

Well, this was a little sawcy, you'll say!—And he flew into such a Passion, that I was forced to run for it; and Mrs. *Jervis* said, It was happy I got out of his way" (63).

In scenes in which the triumphant Pamela is *not* able to escape and leave her persecutor seething, Mr. B does manage to silence her through the abandonment of all pretence to reason and language—when he attempts to overpower her physically. Even in these instances, though, Pamela's silence is not capitulation. Instead, at moments of physical peril, she falls into 'fits,' and *Pamela* documents a succession of these faintings, stupors, vapours, and a steady stream of sobbing and weeping and wailing. Pamela's performance of this 'helpless' femininity is her last defensive recourse, and her emotional outbursts occur at moments when her usual pertness seems ineffectual. These outbursts prove effective against the not-utterly-ruthless Mr. B, who is unwilling to take advantage of a 'defenceless' woman. For instance, while Mr. B, with the help of Mrs. Jewkes, accosts Pamela in her bed,

Pamela “faints quite away,” and, when she awakens, demands of Mr. B what she has “suffer’d in this Distress.” Mr. B, she relates, “most solemnly, and with a bitter Imprecation, vow’d, that he had not offer’d the least Indecency; that he was frighten’d at the terrible manner I was taken with the Fit: That he would desist from his Attempt; and begg’d but to see me easy and quiet, and he would leave me directly, and go to his own Bed” (177).

Pamela’s fits seem a more effective defence against tyranny than Griselda’s stoic endurance, though both recourses eventually bring the heroine’s suffering to an end (and with Mr. B, Pamela is admittedly dealing with a far less effective tyrant than Griselda’s Walter). In fact, Griselda’s and Pamela’s strategies function in an interesting reverse parallel: Griselda submits meekly (‘femininely’), but endures/suffers heroically (‘masculinely’), while Pamela resists heroically, but endures/suffers meekly and emotionally. This parallel points, possibly, to the necessary balance that a virtuous woman must find between resistance and submission: in order for her to *remain* a virtuous woman (rather than a rebellious abomination) while she struggles and suffers she must continue to be defined as feminine, and thus continue to demonstrate some form of powerlessness—she must continue to play, at some level, the role of Other.

One of the most significant differences between *Pamela* and the *Clerk’s Tale*, and perhaps one of the reasons that Pamela is able to defend and assert herself in a way that is impossible for Griselda, is that Pamela’s trials occur *before* the wedding between her and Mr. B, rather than *after* it, as was the case with Chaucer’s heroine. Pamela, unlike Griselda, has not sworn eternal obedience to

Mr. B's smallest desire or command, and she makes it clear throughout the novel that Mr. B's ideology and power are not the authorities to which she owes ultimate obedience. Indeed, because in the larger context of the novel Mr. B's trial of Pamela is one which *requires* her to rebel (rather than acquiesce) in order for her to remain virtuous, the struggle for power which we witness between Mr. B and Pamela can become much more overt than Griselda's subtle recriminations to Walter. It is thus not female obedience specifically to the law of a husband which is tested in Richardson's novel; Pamela's submission (at least for most of *Pamela* 1) is not to the actual figure of Mr. B, but to a much broader patriarchal system.

While Pamela has a great respect for the upper classes, and desires to serve and obey her new master (Mr. B) with the same dedication she served his mother (her deceased mistress), her duty to Mr. B does not extend to parting with her virtue, despite the various stratagems and arguments employed by him to convince her otherwise. As an unmarried eighteenth-century woman, the authority figure to whom Pamela owes allegiance remains her father, and the Christian values taught to her by her good peasant parents (Doody 16). Though Mr. B seems to represent a power and position equivalent to that occupied by Chaucer's Walter, he does not perform the role of Pamela's rightful judge, nor is he even the true author of Pamela's trial. Instead, Mr. B is the 'temptation' offered to Pamela to test her obedience to her father, or her Father, or her many cultural fathers, Richardson included. In defending her sexual refusals of Mr. B, Pamela highlights the distinction between their discursive codes: his as tempter, and hers as moral defendant. "I had better be thought artful and subtle" she insists, "than be so, in

his sense" (40). And similarly, she writes: "This I suppose, makes me such a sawce-box and Boldface and a Creature; and all because I won't be a Sawce-box and Boldface indeed" (73). What Mr. B offers (or attempts to thrust upon) Pamela is everything that a patriarchal society trains women to disavow, and simultaneously everything which that society fears characterises femininity itself: the duplicity, self-interest, and uncontained sexual appetite that threatens the stability of masculine identity and patriarchal control. Mr. B represents an illicit sexuality, not sanctioned by marriage. He offers Pamela, a common young peasant girl likely destined for servitude and relative poverty, a life of ease and even luxury as his mistress. But in order to be 'rewarded' or validated in a patriarchal culture, Pamela must reject all that Mr. B promises her in favour of innocence, piety, and obedience. Pamela is thus compelled to separate patriarchal dictates regarding female behaviour from the primary locus of patriarchal power in her life, Mr. B. This separation is a key factor in Pamela's empowerment, for she manages, through actively embracing the codes which demand women's submission, silence, and obedience, not only to defeat Mr. B's attempts to objectify her as both his property and outlet for his sexual desire, but also to exercise her own desire for personal, social, and sexual recognition in a culture which vilifies such self-assertion in women generally, and specifically in lower-class women.

Perhaps in preparation for his eventual occupation of his authoritative role in Pamela's life, Richardson has Mr. B acknowledge, at some level, the power of Pamela's moral language, and the propriety of her insistence that she does not owe *him* compliance. Mr. B's counter-attacks against her religious/moral defences

are always less than adept—unlike *Clarissa's* Lovelace, Mr. B is not a true proponent of an alternative 'libertine' social or moral code. Mr. B does not argue against Pamela, he merely grumbles that she is lying—she is artful. He can attempt to dismiss Pamela's discourse as "unfashionable jargon" (71), but cannot deny its potency. Mr. B's discourse, however, also possesses an influence that Pamela can never wholly avoid. Pamela, though precociously thwarting the bumbling Mr. B during their intimate encounters, can never truly escape the force of his position as man and master. Mr. B reminds Pamela's father of this force when he scolds Mr. Andrews for doubting his word: "Pr'ythee, Man" he demands, "consider a little who I am; and if I am not to be believ'd, what signifies talking?" (93). Mr. B's social status affords his discourse such power that he can assert that to deny the Truth of his language is to rob speech of meaning. And despite her frequent impertinence, Pamela must bow to his discursive authority, especially when there are other people to witness their interchanges. When challenged by Mr. B in front of other servants, Pamela can only respond: "It is for You, Sir, to say what you please; and for me only to say, God bless your Honour!" (74-75). Pamela must, at all times, convince those around her that she remains a fundamentally good servant as well as an obedient woman; she must be observed to be submissive and dutiful in all but exceptional circumstances—in circumstances which, according to patriarchal dictates, demand her rebellion. For despite her success in her dealings with Mr. B, it is only the fact that he occupies a role not sanctioned by patriarchal authority, and the fact of her trial by him (or a more general patriarchal system), that affords her the opportunity to assert her integrity and independence. Pamela's



employment of the patriarchal codes that demand her obedience empower her only while Mr. B offers her the opportunity to suffer in their defence. Like Griselda, once her situation no longer provides her with that opportunity, once her trial is over, Pamela's disruptive behaviour is curtailed. The conclusion of Pamela's tale, like Griselda's, is thus disturbing in that it demonstrates that the tyrannical, abusive man need only put an end to his trial in order to regain any lost power, or in Mr. B's case, to be re-established as moral and social authority figure.

Terry Eagleton calls *Pamela* a "sickly celebration of male ruling-class power" (37), and Pamela does, necessarily, become a sycophant of patriarchal discourse once her pretext for rebellion is removed. Indeed, she has always been working within patriarchal structures—and it is only through her identification with Mr. B and his patriarchal power that her virtue has been able to triumph over his transgressive desires. With Mr. B's transformation into a loving and respectful suitor, Pamela loses all pretence for independence or agency. During her engagement to Mr. B, Mrs. Jewkes suggests that Pamela should no longer be addressing her fiancé as 'Master.' Pamela responds (must respond?), "that is a Language I shall never forget. He shall always be my Master; and I shall think myself more and more his Servant" (257). Pamela, in becoming Mr. B's wife, *will* become more of a Servant to him than she was when employed as his maid: he will become the patriarchal authority to whom she owes primary obedience. In the *Clerk's Tale*, Griselda's story ends (for us as readers) with the reunion of her family, but *Pamela* includes a more detailed exploration of its heroine's relationship with Mr. B after the couple is finally in accord (are married). By the end of the novel, Mr.

B possesses Pamela in every sense, and while professing to being her student in moral discourse, he quickly begins to assert control over her social and marital conduct. Over the last hundred pages of the novel, Mr. B offers Pamela a series of “injunctions” regarding her behaviour as his wife, and makes clear his new, unimpeachable role. After Pamela compliments him on his own observing of the “lessons” he has given her, Mr. B responds astutely,

if I do not always . . . so well pursue the Doctrines I lay down, my *Pamela* must not expect that my Imperfections will be a Plea for her Non-observance of my Lessons, as you call them; for, I doubt, I shall be half so perfect as you; and so I cannot permit you to fall back in your Goodness, tho’ I may find myself unable to advance, as I ought, in my Duty. (312)

Mr. B, as husband, is now in a position to deny Pamela the source of her earlier rebellions against him—her insistence that if he failed to behave as a ‘Master’ should, she need not restrain herself and/or obey as a good servant. Trapped by her role as “perfect” wife, Pamela can only exclaim, “O dearest, dear Sir . . . have you no more sweet Injunctions to honour me with? They oblige and improve me at the same time!” (309).

Margaret Doody describes the ‘happy ending’ of *Pamela* as a generic convention, and points herself to the connections between Richardson’s heroine and Chaucer’s. She writes, “The triumphant reversal is in keeping with the folk-tale tradition, like Griselda’s joyful reunion with the marquis in the castle from which she has been cast out, when she is stripped of her rude array and dressed in cloth of gold” (64). But the “triumphant reversal” of Pamela’s conclusion, like Griselda’s, is

complicated. Pamela has won: she gets the man, the riches, and the social status. She defeats Mr. B's attempts to reveal her as a material, pragmatic, sexual being—her virtue has been tried and proven. But the reversal that takes place at the conclusion of both *Griselda's* tale and Pamela's also marks the sad reinstallation of these women in the role of subordinate to the men they have been battling.

The tragedy of Richardson's second novel, *Clarissa*, is far more overt than that which tinges *Pamela's* closure. Criticised for his material rewarding of Pamela's virtue with status and wealth, and for suggesting that a reformed rake would be a suitable husband, Richardson in *Clarissa* narrates a tale that adheres to a more strict Christian value system: no obvious material rewards for Clarissa's virtue, and no reconciliation between Clarissa and her pursuer, the diabolical but charming Lovelace. Female submission to patriarchal ideals of femininity is carried, in Richardson's second novel, to its furthest extreme. A 'fallen' woman, Clarissa dies to preserve and prove her virtue. Clarissa is also defined by her seemingly endless capacity to forgive, and (in the case of her family) even defend, her oppressors. In his work *The Rape of Clarissa*, Terry Eagleton describes Richardson's heroine in terms similar to those used by Hansen to describe *Griselda*: "the impossibly ideal nature of Clarissa's virtue is indeed beyond realism, a kind of grave parody of official moral ideology which, by pressing it to an intolerable extreme, begins to betray something of its corrupt reality" (77). The parody of *Clarissa* will be the gravest yet encountered, and still, in part because of this fact, it will also afford its heroine an agency and independence that has been unachievable for either *Griselda* or *Pamela*.

The epistolary form of *Pamela*—which, due to the fact that only the heroine's letters<sup>12</sup> are available to the reader, adds to a reader's suspicion regarding Pamela's attitude towards Mr. B—is developed in *Clarissa* to include the voices of multiple letter-writers. Clarissa's identity is presented and explored in exhaustive detail in the novel, offering readers a complex character portrait that is not possible with Pamela's univocal narration. The various perspectives offered by this group of correspondents eliminates the awkward necessity of having the heroine herself communicate her many superior qualities to the reader, and Richardson is able to demonstrate rather than proclaim Clarissa's virtue. Within this structure, Clarissa's faults and/or flaws can also be presented and acknowledged (even exaggerated by Clarissa and/or her family) without jeopardising her status as exemplar. And, it is made clear, Clarissa Harlowe *is* exemplary. In the list of "Principle Characters" that Richardson provides at the beginning of the novel, she is described as "a young lady of great delicacy, mistress of all the accomplishments, natural and acquired, that adorn the sex, having the strictest notions of filial duty" (37). Like Chaucer's Griselda, Clarissa and her virtues are presented by Richardson as typifying (the best of) her sex, and, like Griselda, her virtue and her womanhood will be put on trial. Clarissa's virtue, though, distinguished from Pamela's rustically earnest system of values, is born of a rational, sophisticated, and educated morality. Clarissa is beautiful, charming, elegant, dignified, charitable, and devoutly religious. She is well read, and (to say the least) an accomplished writer, as well as a proficient needleworker, musician, and singer. These accomplishments, however,

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<sup>12</sup> Richardson does include occasional letters from Pamela's parents, Mr. B, and some minor characters, but Pamela's version of the tale is essentially the only one to which a reader is privy.

work against her, and her severe trials reflect both the power of her accusers and her own stature as a heroine. In the first letter of the novel, Clarissa's friend Anna Howe commiserates with her family situation (Lovelace has slightly wounded Clarissa's despicable brother), but she also implicitly acknowledges the fate of the 'good' woman. "How must such a virtue suffer on every hand!" Anna exclaims. "Yet it must be allowed," she continues, "that your present trial is proportioned to your prudence" (40). Even more explicitly, Anna suggests that Clarissa has drawn her trials upon herself by "excelling all [her] sex" (40).

Clarissa's trial, is, from the outset, much more complicated than Pamela's, and the adversaries she battles are more numerous and far more formidable. Clarissa's virtue, even previous to Lovelace's entry into her life, has disrupted the patriarchal status quo and provoked enmity from her family. The Harlowes, wealthy but untitled, have ambitious aspirations: they (specifically Clarissa's father and brother) hope that by bestowing all familial monies and property on James, Clarissa's only brother, he will accumulate enough public significance to be awarded a peerage (77). Clarissa's grandfather, however, affected by his granddaughter's matchless duty to him and general extraordinariness (53), abandons all convention to leave his estate in Clarissa's control. Her grandfather's clear preference incites jealousy in her siblings and fear (of her unprecedented power and independence) in her father—the family must ensure that James's aspirations are protected and Clarissa's ascendancy and frightening agency constrained. Thus, though the primary characters in *Clarissa* are all of a similar (high) social degree (unlike either *Pamela* or the *Clerk's Tale*) the issue of class is still

a significant one in the novel. Lovelace, from Clarissa's father and brother's perspective, is a dangerous and unwelcome suitor: not only does his superior breeding and status infuriate James, Lovelace's family's nobility, if linked with Clarissa, might encourage other Harlowe relations to will their estates to her. Despite her family's aversion, however, Clarissa's exceptional beauty and virtue have attracted Lovelace's attention, and, to her misfortune, he will not be rebuffed.

Clarissa's family seeks to control and appropriate her through marrying her to the uncouth but wealthy (and untitled) Mr. Solmes. Lovelace also seeks to define and delimit Clarissa's virtue, but the focus of his attention is Clarissa's sexual purity. Clarissa's position as a shining representative of an emerging bourgeois ideology also intensifies Lovelace's interest in her: his desire to effect her ruin is partly a result of the enmity he bears the middle class and its moral superiority (I.Watt 221). Most obviously, however, it is Clarissa's femininity which Lovelace seeks to control. As Martin Price discerns, "In his treatment of Clarissa, it is impossible to separate the sexual excitement Lovelace finds in her resistance to him from the moral excitement he finds in her virtue. He must prove to himself that she is only a woman" (278). To be "only a woman" in a patriarchal culture is to function as a desire-inspired phantasy for male consumption—but this phantasy can become threatening if it refuses to perform its assigned role of Other. Clarissa, by thwarting all of Lovelace's attempts to master her, reveals or exposes the lack which defines his masculinity. Lovelace complains to his friend Belford,

Now indeed do I wish from my heart that I had never known this lady. But who would have thought there had been such a woman in

the world? Of all the sex I have hitherto known, or heard, or read of, it was *once subdued, and always subdued*. The *first* struggle was generally the *last*; or at least the subsequent struggles were so much fainter and fainter, that a man would rather have them than be without them. (904)

Clarissa, even after having the physical 'sign' of her chastity stolen from her by Lovelace, will not abandon her role as virtuous woman to take up that desired by Lovelace: that of whore.<sup>13</sup> The frustrated Lovelace is unable to incorporate her body into his; he is, as Gwilliam writes, "unable to define femininity as his own wholly subsidiary fantasy" (109).

Like Pamela, Clarissa is a young woman who falls under the control of a man who is neither her father or her husband and, like Pamela, it is her physical virtue which is most threatened by that control. Lovelace, though, does not share Mr. B's respect for feminine 'frailty,' or his aversion to force, and Clarissa, either before or after her rape, has no supportive, loving Andrews family to whom to flee should she manage an escape.<sup>14</sup> This difference is important, for, as in *Pamela*, despite the fact that the plot seemingly spins around the relationship between heroine and 'lover,' *Clarissa* documents a woman's relationship with, and submission to, a primarily paternal (not marital or even pre-marital) patriarchal

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<sup>13</sup> This desire of Lovelace's is made especially clear in the scene in which Sally (a prostitute at Mrs. Sinclair's) arouses Lovelace through her mimicry of Clarissa (1217).

<sup>14</sup> Mrs. Harlowe, in allowing her daughter's happiness to be sacrificed rather than disagree with her husband or son, demonstrates a Griselda-like loyalty to patriarchal authority. Clarissa recognises the dynamic that exists between her parents, and complains to Anna Howe, "it is my opinion that had she been of a temper that would have borne less, she would have had ten times less to bear than she has had. No commendation, you'll say, of the generosity of those spirits which can turn to its own disquiet so much condescending goodness" (54).

power. But while Pamela's father, despite his (and his morality's) influence over his daughter, suggests no equivalent to Chaucer's Walter, with his creation of Mr. Harlowe Richardson effectively represents the force of a tyrannical patriarchal authority.

Clarissa is distinguished from Pamela (and Griselda) by the complexity of her psychological self-evaluation. She struggles (like a good puritan) with her conscience, seeks out those aspects of her personality or emotions that she finds unacceptable or unbecoming, and attempts to vanquish them. This struggle is an essential aspect of Richardson's novel, for Clarissa, unlike Pamela or Griselda, does have one acknowledged flaw, and she makes one fatal error. At no time does Griselda disobey or openly question the desires/actions of the Marquis, and while Pamela does defy Mr. B, her obedience to her parents (and her religious duty) is always complete. Clarissa, though, introduced to us at a time of upheaval in her family, is for the first quarter of the novel in contention with them regarding her choice (or lack of choice) in a marriage partner. While a woman's chief duty and virtue in the eighteenth century remained obedience to father and/or husband, the issue of parental control over a daughter's choice of a husband was a topic for debate. Terry Eagleton suggests that Richardson writes at a transitional point, "where a growing regard for the free affections of the subject deadlocks with a still vigorous patriarchal tyranny" (16). If the general eighteenth-century trend was towards the rights of women in choosing their husbands, *Clarissa*, Eagleton continues, "would suggest that older patriarchal attitudes were still lethally active" (16). Though defined through her "strict notions of filial duty," Clarissa nevertheless



sets herself in strong and vocal opposition to her father's preferred suitor, Mr. Solmes. In a pleading letter to her uncle, Clarissa sketches the serious consequences of marriage for the eighteenth-century woman:

To be given up to a strange man; to be engrafted into a strange family; to give up her very name, as a mark of her becoming his absolute and dependent property: to be obliged to prefer this strange man to father, mother—to everybody: and his humours to all her own—Or to contend, perhaps, in breach of a vowed duty for every innocent instance of free will: to go no-whither: to make no acquaintance: to give up acquaintance—to renounce even the strictest friendships perhaps; all at his pleasure, whether she think it reasonable to do so or not. Surely, sir, a young creature ought not to be obliged to make all these sacrifices but for such a man as she can approve. If she *is*, how sad must be the case!—how miserable the life, if to be called *life*! (148-9)

Clarissa's trial begins with her family, as her father demands obedience to his wishes. And despite her passionate resistance, the Harlowes insist that their daughter will marry Solmes. Clarissa relates a scene between herself and her mother that makes explicit virtue's need for testing: "I said, I hoped I had so behaved myself hitherto that there was no need of such a trial of my obedience as this. Yes, she was pleased to say, I had behaved extremely well; but I had no trials till now. And she hoped that now I was called to one, I should not fail in it" (95).

The struggle created in the Harlowe family due to the opposition between a daughter's right to approve of her husband and a father's right to dispose of his children according to his own desire is brought to a halt by Clarissa's escape. She is 'tricked' (this is her error) into running away with Lovelace, the one man whose

interest in Clarissa did not find familial approval, and indeed who (because of Clarissa's supposed preference for him) was a significant and motivating factor in her family's desire for her marriage with Solmes. For the remainder of the novel, though engaged in a profound struggle to preserve her 'self' against the machinations of Lovelace, Clarissa's primary concern is to make amends with her family, and specifically her father. As Lois E. Beuler writes, even after her rape the wrong which Lovelace has done her is ultimately of secondary importance: "Clarissa does not need justice performed upon Lovelace; she needs judgement performed upon her. And who should judge? . . . her father . . . because it is he whose authority she acknowledges and whom she has disobeyed" (79). When reconciliation with her family begins to seem unlikely, if not impossible, Clarissa's concern is to at least receive their blessing before she dies. And when even this gesture is denied her, the book of correspondences and other writings which Clarissa compiles, *Clarissa* itself, becomes her final, after-death attempt to have her case heard before her family: "It behoves me" she writes, "to leave behind me such an account as may clear up my conduct to several of my friends<sup>15</sup> who will not at present concern themselves about me" (1173).

As with Griselda and Pamela, Clarissa's power is generated through the extremity of her submission—it is that extremity which pushes her submission beyond patriarchal control, infusing her actions with the subversity and disruption that characterise the mimicry advocated by Irigaray. It is Clarissa's complete adherence to patriarchal codes regarding sexual chastity, and her desire to be validated by her father, that provides her with the strength and ammunition to

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<sup>15</sup> Throughout the novel, Clarissa frequently refers to her family as her "friends."

defeat (though not convert) Lovelace. But it is after her rape, after she has escaped from Lovelace and turns her attention to death and her family's role in that death, that Clarissa becomes most powerful. Clarissa's rape acts, in fact, as an effective symbol of her martyrdom. It becomes a type of punishment for her father, whose wholly material and authoritarian values forced Clarissa into such a dangerous communion with Lovelace. Eventually, Clarissa's father must be made to bear the burden of his daughter's lost innocence, and Clarissa's noble suffering will become a forceful, and even fatal, reproach.

While the huge popularity and lavish praise of *Pamela* was coupled, from the time of its publication, with often virulent criticism, *Clarissa's* reception has been more consistently positive. Dr. Johnson's remark that "there is always something which [Clarissa] prefers to the truth" (qtd. in I. Watt: 228) may be oft quoted, but prior to the criticism of the twentieth century, both novel and heroine escaped relatively unscathed, if sometimes neglected. Unlike her serving-girl sister, Clarissa is rarely accused of a scheming self-interest, though she may be studied as a self-deceiving, sexually repressed figure. Generally, readers have followed Richardson's claimed intention and read *Clarissa* as a Christian tragedy (though from the time of publication, to Richardson's dismay, his readers have also demonstrated a tendency to fall victim to Lovelace's charms). Critical readings that focus on Clarissa's status as victim present her as an innocent sufferer who is too good for the world in which she finds herself. With the nobility of a martyr or saint, she is seen as eschewing the fleshly world in favour of a divine communion with God. On a moral level, she is felt to be beyond recrimination, and her forgiveness of her persecutors is a sign of

an enlightened and truly humble spirit. In his introduction to the novel, Angus Ross writes, "She becomes, like Job, whose words she constantly quotes, the type of Christ, and takes on herself the sins that men (and women) have committed against her" (25). Donald Wehrs calls her death "an assertion of the superiority of spiritual values, of her 'true home,' to the values of any social system" (774). In *A Natural Passion*, Margaret Doody assesses Clarissa's final repentance as "complete," and argues that Clarissa has "to a superlative degree the virtue of patience." Her death, according to Doody, is "an example of holy dying" (169-70). And though Clarissa's suffering may be less spiritually grand in Terry Castle's reading, her innocence remains unquestioned. Castle compares Clarissa's response to her ordeal with that of a victim of political oppression/colonisation, writing that Clarissa exhibits "self-condemnation, demoralization, vast anomie of the spirit. Lacking consciousness of the sources of her suffering, she internalizes guilt" (26).

Clarissa, though, like the other submissive women in this study, has not escaped without censure. This censure comes, in part, from the fact that the distinction between fiction and reality, between action and language is blurred and complicated by Richardson in both *Pamela* and *Clarissa*. Richardson presents his novels as truth—these are real letters (though this "editor" pose is less thorough in *Clarissa* than *Pamela*). But the novels also serve a larger didactic purpose. Richardson hopes that *Pamela* and *Clarissa* will instruct and convince their readers. Within the novels, both heroines are ostensibly writing a 'true' account of the events of their lives. Still, like Richardson, the heroines' purposes are also didactic. Clarissa's 'book' will tell her story and vindicate her in the eyes of her family and

friends, while also serving as a warning to other young girls in her situation. Pamela admits that she is writing partly for herself (and even primarily for herself towards the end of the novel), in order to be able to look back and judge her actions—though her letters also serve her well when they are read by others, convincing both Mr. B and his family of her virtue and strength. Richardson's heroines clearly recognise the power of effective/affective writing. At the end of the novel (and her life) Clarissa still has hopes that though *she* has failed, her 'story' will be able to reform Lovelace:

And who knows but that the man who already, from a principle of humanity, is touched at my misfortunes, when he comes to revolve the whole story placed before him in one strong light, and when he shall have the catastrophe likewise before him; and shall become in a manner interested in it: who knows but that from a still higher principle, he may so regulate his future actions as to find his own reward in the everlasting welfare which is wished him by his Obligated servant, CLARISSA HARLOWE? (1177)

Ironically, Pamela and Clarissa's understanding of the importance and potential impact of their writing sparks a reader's distrust. Each is too aware of her role, too aware of her audience. With Pamela, her honesty becomes questioned. As Marie-Paule Laden has articulated, "The dichotomy between Pamela's acute linguistic consciousness and her repeated professions of artlessness and innocence is, of course, problematic" (74). Mr. B frequently calls his pursuit of Pamela a romance, a novel, or a story, and he also recognises Pamela's role as author of their narrative.

He even attempts to use her authorship against her: "You have given me a Character, Pamela" he warns, "and blame me not that I act up to it" (181). Despite Mr. B's sly intention to remove responsibility for his actions from himself, there is a certain truth to his assertion. Every character in *Pamela*, including Pamela, has a part to play, and both Mr. B and Pamela are aware of this fact. Even beyond the narrative conventions of Pamela's story, everything that happens in the novel, everything that is narrated by Pamela, functions positively (and blatantly) to reinforce her identity. This is attributable to more than the didacticism of Richardson's prose: any description of the self is always creative, is always a manufacturing of identity. In this way, and similarly in both *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, the heroine's role of author, of manufacturer, leaves her open to criticism.

Though Pamela and Clarissa repress feelings for their 'lovers,' Clarissa's self-deceit becomes less of an issue than Pamela's for Mr. B, since Clarissa's motives in hiding them are not usually construed as a scheming attempt at social gain. Far more damaging to Clarissa's virtuous, heroic stature is the way in which her professions of a generous forgiveness juxtapose with her awareness of the power of her story and letters to wound her family. For *Clarissa* is not just a tragedy, as was acknowledged by Richardson himself. Pestered by readers who wanted his novel to end happily, Richardson defended himself in the postscript to its last volume:

God by revelation teaches us he has thought fit to exercise mankind; whom, placing here only in a state of probation, he hath so intermingled good and evil as to necessitate them to look forward for

a more equal distribution of both. The history, or rather the dramatic narrative of CLARISSA, is formed on this religious plan. (1495)

After quoting Addison and Rapin, whose expression of Aristotelian views of tragedy Richardson uses to counteract his audience's desire for "poetic justice,"<sup>16</sup> he continues,

These are the great authorities so favourable to the stories that end unhappily: yet the writer of the History of Clarissa is humbly of the opinion that he might have been excused referring to them for the vindication of his catastrophe, even by those who are advocates for the contrary opinion; since the notion of poetical justice, founded of the modern rules, has hardly ever been more strictly observed in works of this nature, than in the present performance. (1498)

Richardson utilises each of these oppositional designs (unhappy ending vs. poetical justice) to defend the death of Clarissa. Tragedy is part of a divine plan, he argues in the postscript; it is unavoidable but also morally uplifting; misfortune and death befall the good and evil alike. But to counter his readers' complaints about Clarissa's misfortunes, Richardson also reminds his readers that her virtue receives the highest Christian reward, and that those who have done her wrong are punished. Richardson's "poetic justice" adds complexity and paradox to the tragic

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<sup>16</sup> That characters' fates should be determined according to "poetic justice"—meaning that the 'good' were properly rewarded and the 'bad' were punished—was a popular dramatic and literary convention during the eighteenth century. For example, as Tom Keymer notes, "In the late seventeenth century and for much of the eighteenth, Shakespeare's *King Lear* was supplanted by Nahum Tate's notorious revision of the play, which brought it into conformity with contemporary desires and expectations by '*making the Tale conclude in a Success to the innocent distressed Persons*'. The apocalyptic original was barely tolerable to the audiences of Richardson's day" (199).

*Clarissa*: the noble Clarissa and her allies triumph, and the malicious and base suffer.

Clarissa, like Pamela, asserts and defines herself through her letters and letter writing, but also through a final act of independent rebellion that the happy Pamela is not forced to perform. In Richardson's second novel there is no joyful reunion between the heroine and the author of her trials, and no final reinstatement of any (mortal) patriarchal figure as Clarissa's master. In this way, *Clarissa* can be read as presenting a more radical vision of virtuous female agency than is achieved in either the *Clerk's Tale* or *Pamela*, though the manner in which Clarissa avoids the inevitable subjugation to male power demanded in a patriarchal society is through wholly escaping that society—by dying. Clarissa's patience, her forgiveness, her self-reliance, and finally her graceful expiration, elevate her to angelic status, and yet each of these traits serves to vilify her persecutors. Martyrdom has its own nemesis—and there is a fine line between selflessness and self-promotion. Through her death Clarissa is revenged, and a reader cannot help but find aspects of her death "deeply enjoyable, with an eye to their devastating effects on Lovelace and the Harlowes" (Eagleton 75). It is the "comedy" of *Clarissa*, its happy ending, that opens Clarissa up to a type of criticism similar to that directed towards Pamela (or even Griselda), and taints her suffering with accusations of strategy and self-interest. Clarissa's death would seem to make such accusations flimsy, if not absurd, since, unlike Griselda or Pamela, she accrues no material gains through her attachment and submission to patriarchal codes. But Clarissa's victory is, in some ways, more complete and thorough than that achieved



by either Pamela or Griselda: Clarissa never stops suffering, and so she is never (completely) reabsorbed by the patriarchal structures which oppress her. And, by implication, her oppressors also continue to be thwarted, continue to lose. Clarissa makes a choice to submit herself to an immortal 'Father' rather than to the wishes of either her true father, or the several possible 'husbands' who force themselves or are forced upon her. Brigitte Glaser points out the benefits of Clarissa's devout Christianity at the time of her death. "Finally," she writes, Clarissa "accepts as her real and only family God as the heavenly father, who holds absolute authority over her, and Jesus Christ as her celestial husband. In so doing, she is able to elude once and for all her oppressors. This strategy, moreover . . . provides her with the opportunity to be submissive and assertive at the same time" (112).

How a reader perceives Clarissa's choice (her death), whether it is viewed as defensive or aggressive, determines how *Clarissa* will be read. But what is most damaging to Clarissa's position as innocent, submissive sufferer is the fact that the rewards and punishments of Richardson's "poetic justice" seem to be meted out *by Clarissa herself*. In his 1979 work *Reading Clarissa*, the deconstructionist critic William Warner presents Richardson's heroine as a deceptive and cunning "artist" (26) who "dies so that she may produce the book that will guarantee her triumph" (76). "Clarissa," he writes, "has always had an ability to dominate others through a display of passive virtue" (4). In Warner's reading of the novel, Clarissa imposes her self-serving reading of events upon the other characters in the book, and, in collusion with Richardson, upon the unwary reader. Warner says of the pen-knife scene (pages 949-952), during which Clarissa's threats to stab herself unnerve and

un-man the scheming Lovelace, that it “gives us an early example of how Clarissa appropriates others for her own meaning and purpose. A book will try to make this transient victory a permanent condition” (75). Warner’s reading, which focuses primarily on the struggle that takes place between Clarissa and Lovelace, highlights the way in which Clarissa’s illness and death defeat her adversary. Richard Hannaford, in his 1993 article “Playing Her Dead Hand: Clarissa’s Posthumous Letters,” insists, similarly to Warner, that Clarissa is “a seriously troubled heroine” (80), whose “ordinary self is one that is fatally undiscerning and spiritually perilous” (82). He compares the “verbally aggressive” Clarissa to “the heroine as often otherwise interpreted” and concludes that we must “suspect her reliability as an unerring guide to moral truth” (82-83). Addressing directly the notion of “poetic justice” in the novel, Hannaford submits that “It is Clarissa and always Clarissa who avenges” (97).

The type of deconstructionist reading practised by Warner and Hannaford has been (rightly) attacked by feminists as misogynistic and historically simplistic.<sup>17</sup> And Warner and Hannaford do seem to overlook the obvious dilemma that a ‘player’ who must die to win is trapped in a cruel game; that it is not the Clarissas of the world who establish the rules; and that any power that Clarissa asserts must be viewed in relation to the power afforded to her family and Lovelace by a patriarchal culture. However, these readings do demonstrate the real and significant power that Clarissa wields in the novel. Lovelace himself recognises and

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<sup>17</sup> As Valerie Grosvenor Myer writes, Warner “has brought down on his head the wrath of so many feminists that baiting him is no longer worth while” (11).

describes the effects of Clarissa's 'Christian' forgiveness of him. When she is on her deathbed he writes,

[H]er desire of revenge became stronger in her than the desire of life, and now she is willing to die as an event which she supposes will cut my heart strings asunder. And still the more to be revenged puts on the Christian, and forgives me. But I'll have none of her forgiveness! My own heart tells me I do not deserve it! And what is it but a mere verbal forgiveness, as ostentatiously as cruelly given with a view to magnify herself, and wound me deeper! (1346)

Clarissa's forgiveness, and her revenge, does not limit itself to Lovelace. Many characters in the novel, including Clarissa herself, are aware of the double-edged quality of her 'saintly' behaviour. Clarissa has been desperate to receive her family's exoneration prior to her approaching death, and yet she writes, "somehow I think that, were they cheerfully to pronounce me forgiven, I know not whether my concern for having offended them would not be augmented: since I imagine that nothing can be more wounding to a spirit not ungenerous than a generous forgiveness" (1119). Clarissa professes that it would potentially be more troubling to her guilty conscience to have her family's forgiveness than to die without it. Still, despite (or perhaps because of) Clarissa's insight into, and imagination of, the troubling aspects of a "generous forgiveness" she persists in "wounding" the spirits of her family. Clarissa composes a series of letters that will be delivered to her family and friends posthumously, letters which Hannaford views as "shocking" compromisers of "the picture of a Clarissa purified of all resentment" (85).

Hannaford deconstructs her letters in an attempt to reveal her “doubly oriented speech”—and calls attention to the cutting recrimination that frequently underlies Clarissa’s magnanimity. As Hannaford discerns (80), in her letter to her father Clarissa surely wounds him by remarking that by the time he reads it he “will (as [she] humbly presumes to hope) have been the means of adding one to the number of the blessed” (1380). In her letter to her sister, Clarissa rather unsubtly makes a distinction between her own generosity and loyalty and Arabella’s cruelty and pettiness: “Thus, my Arabella! my only sister! And for many happy years, my friend! Most fervently prays that sister whose affection for you no acts of unkindness, no misconstruction of her conduct, could cancel” (1375). And Clarissa innocently pleads to her uncles that they do not “let it be a matter of concern that [she] is cut off in the bloom of youth” (1376). Clarissa’s friend Belford and her cousin Morden are aware of the paradoxical nature of her final epistles. On his first perusal of them, Belford comments,

They are all calculated to give comfort rather than reproach, though their cruelty to her merited nothing but reproach. But were I in any of their places, how much rather had I that she had quitted scores with me by the most severe recriminations, than that she should thus nobly triumph over me by a generosity that has no example? (1371)

Morden actually witnesses the successful effect of Clarissa’s will and final letters upon the Harlowe family, and remarks “How wounding a thing, Mr. Belford, is a generous and well distinguished forgiveness. What revenge can be more effectual and more noble, were revenge intended, and were it wished to strike remorse into

a guilty or ungrateful heart!" (1422). As Terry Eagleton writes, and as these characters seem to acknowledge, "Clarissa's impeccable moralism and conformism simply twists the dagger a little deeper in the very social order of which she was so fine a flower" (76).

Clarissa's performance (her submissive, Christian "nobility" and generosity), as excessive as it is, ultimately proves effective. Clarissa manages to expose/punish her oppressors, and, for the most part, escape from censure herself—a fate inconceivable for the woman who practices a more overt or direct form of self-assertion. Even Lovelace, after his castigation of the revenge implicit in Clarissa's martyrdom, retracts his depiction of Clarissa in fear that he will "blaspheme," telling Belford that he is "ashamed of his ramblings" (1347). Morden too counteracts his insight into the effect of Clarissa's final letter to her family with the assertion that, despite her effectiveness, revenge is not Clarissa's intention. Instead, Morden insists that her motives "were all duty and love" (1422). Modern critics have also interpreted Clarissa's final letters, which are perhaps the most obvious in their intent to wound others and vindicate their author, as evidences of withdrawal or defeat. Terry Castle reads *Clarissa* as documenting a progressive silencing and disempowering of its heroine, and says of Clarissa's final communications that "Unlike those she has written before (or tried to write), Clarissa's letters, those to her family and Anna, for instance, now seem purposely self-defeating and ambiguous structures (127).

Like Pamela's, though, Clarissa's success and her revenge are fundamentally limited, for despite my contention that she escapes censure and re-appropriation in

a way Griselda and Pamela are unable to, Clarissa does ultimately bow to patriarchal authority. As Dorothy Van Ghent writes, Clarissa fulfils cultural precepts regarding ideal, non-threatening female identity: "Clarissa" she argues, "returns 'to her Father's House' as the perfect daughter, the model of all daughters. The novel offers the symbolic formula for such perfection: Clarissa is the sexless daughter, the dead daughter" (60). And while Clarissa's family may be tortured by guilt at her death, she cannot escape the scope of their judgement. Clarissa's "comic" revenge remains inescapably tragic. In this way, true to Lovelace's axiom, most aspects of Richardson's novel have "[their] black and [their] white side" (1031).

Unwittingly, Richardson himself outlines a basis for the "black" and the "white" readings of his heroine's behaviour (and specifically the novel's conclusion—her death) in his novel's postscript. To satisfy a reader's indignation at Clarissa's treatment, Richardson must clearly illustrate that his protagonist is revenged. He must have her family wracked and tortured with guilt—must punish them with her death. Clarissa herself though, can be read as wielding the instruments of torture, and her role as self-avenger calls into question the validity or honesty of her role as sufferer. Richardson recognises and attempts to counter this perception, but clearly not all readers have been convinced by the text's repeated assertions that Clarissa's intentions are selfless—that the pain she inflicts upon her enemies is accidental, or at least not pre-meditated. Richardson's "tragic while poetically just" readings of his novel cannot help but problematise each other. As with *Pamela*, the reader of *Clarissa* is presented with a heroine who is lionised as a paragon of virtue and innocent suffering, but who spends the novel using that

virtue and suffering to expose and thwart the controlling desires of the patriarchal society she claims to honour. It is this paradoxical power of the submissive and suffering woman that Richardson begins to uncover in his postscript to *Clarissa*: her ability to submit to and subvert the code that oppresses her. Clarissa's "tragic" death is thus simultaneously her re-integration into patriarchal culture, her reward, and her ultimate revenge.

## CHAPTER 4

## Tess: Acting Her Part

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is undoubtedly the most widely read and popularly enjoyed of my chosen narratives, and Tess herself has been called "one of the most memorable woman characters in all of literature" (Stave 102). Like the stories of Griselda, Pamela, and Clarissa, however, Hardy's novel has also generated a mixed critical response that begins prior even to the novel's publication, and that continues, with different emphases, in studies of his work today. Most nineteenth-century critiques of *Tess* focus with moral outrage on the infamous subtitle of Hardy's novel: the assertion that his heroine—whose 'career' includes falling prey to an ambiguous seduction/rape, living as a man's mistress (twice), the conception of a child out of wedlock, deceit, and eventually murder—is "A Pure Woman". The censure of his contemporaries had an effect upon Hardy and his novel: to counter concerns regarding the suitability of his heroine as a protagonist, Hardy was forced to alter significant details of his work (which was first published, after a number of editors rejected the story due to its theme/protagonist, as a magazine serial) to ensure its suitability for a 'family' audience.<sup>18</sup> This bowdlerisation was reversed to some degree when Hardy ultimately presented the tale in novel form, but *Tess* remains a particularly unstable text. The first published (magazine) version is known to have been unwillingly

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<sup>18</sup> Hardy removed the scenes of the seduction/rape in the Chase, and Tess's baptism/burial of her infant, and published them elsewhere as short stories. A particularly telling and oft-cited example of the type of change enforced upon Hardy through his choice to publish in a magazine, is the scene in which Angel carries the milkmaids over a flooded portion of road—in the magazine version, Angel's too-physical embrace is altered to a more chaste wheelbarrow ride.



corrupted by Hardy, and yet his later editions become a mixture of recovery of the earlier versions of the story and Hardy's reaction and response to criticism already levelled against the text and its heroine.<sup>19</sup> Like Richardson's *Clarissa*, then, *Tess* appears in a series of quite differing author-generated editions, but, unlike Richardson's text, it is much more difficult to locate a 'first edition' of the novel.<sup>20</sup> Beyond the interesting problems that a textual history of this sort poses to modern scholars, the divergent critical response and resultant revisionist activity of both Richardson and Hardy points, I think, to the complexity and contradiction that is an essential aspect of their suffering, powerful heroines.

Critiques of Hardy's most famous heroine were not put to rest with the end of the Victorian era: as Judith Mitchell writes, the novel has continued to occasion "voluminous critical debate" (192) around issues of the nature of Tess's 'purity,' her status as victim/seductress/fool, and the sexual politics of Hardy's work and heroine. Tess's character and situation, like that of Griselda, Pamela, and Clarissa, produces critical interpretations that range from hagiographic celebrations to suspicious denunciations. With Hardy's novel, these positions are perhaps best represented by Irving Howe's seminal 1967 reading of *Tess* (in his work *Thomas Hardy*), and Laura Claridge's compelling 1986 article "Tess: A Less than Pure Woman Ambivalently Presented." Howe's piece valorises Tess as "a standard of

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<sup>19</sup> Like Richardson, it appears that Hardy performed alterations in his text that explicitly act to strengthen the position of his heroine, as well as the author's desired 'interpretation' of his creation. (Evelyn Hardy points out another interesting connection between Hardy and Richardson, writing that "As a boy Hardy had been employed by the village girls to write their love-letters for them in Richardsonian fashion. Thus, as William Archer puts it, the 18th-century had 'trained for Clarissa, Hardy for Tess'" 238.)

<sup>20</sup> For my study, I have chosen (the Penguin reprint of) the commonly accepted and widely available 1912 *Wessex Novels* edition as a reference.

what is right and essential for human beings to demand from life" (111). She is a "martyr" (66), who is an "absolute victim of her wretched circumstances" and also "ultimately beyond their stain" (64). Most importantly and endearingly though, Tess is simply, for Howe, a "natural girl" (131). In direct opposition to such romanticising, Claridge perceives Tess as a heroine who "does not, in the end, deserve the full sympathy that the thrust of the [novel's] dominant narrative demands" (325). Tess is an "assertive, shrewd young woman" (326), a "victimiser" (332) who "knows what she is about" (330). Claridge argues that Tess fails Angel, and specifically Alec, whose murder demonstrates in her "an inner spiritual poverty" (336). In their polarity, and beyond this, even in the language they choose to describe Tess, these readings echo critical responses to Griselda, Pamela, and Clarissa.

Hardy's "Pure Woman" exists in complicated relation to the themes of submission and subversion discussed in earlier chapters: Tess demonstrates a passivity that links her more closely to Chaucer's Griselda than to either of Richardson's protagonists, while at the same time she effects a revenge against (at least one of) her persecutors that far surpasses, in its directness, Pamela's 'pertness' or Clarissa's subtle epistolary machinations. In this way, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* works particularly clearly to expose the danger and harm that the Eve/Mary binaristic categorisation represents for women, with Tess functioning in either or both roles at various moments (and with various men) in the novel. Also, within the context of this thesis, Tess's performance as feminine Other, her excessive passivity and submission—while always evident, and always acting to expose the

destructive power of her patriarchal culture—do not evidence the degree of disturbing, subversive force possessed by Griselda, Pamela, or Clarissa until that point in the novel, about half-way through, when Tess marries Angel Clare.

Each of the heroines in the present study encounters a range of patriarchal authority figures (or patriarchal tests): be they familial (usually represented primarily by the father), sexual (the seducer), marital (the husband), or moral (religion/God). However, with Hardy's novel the connections between these loci of power, and between their human/ideological representatives and the heroine, becomes more disparate and multifaceted. The *Clerk's Tale* focuses primarily on Griselda's relationship with her husband—though her father does function as a more benign precursor to the tyrannical Walter. *Pamela*, though focusing on a pre-marital couple, is also most concerned with the relationship between subservient female and male master, and with the learned female obedience (like Griselda's, it has a paternal source) capable of turning seducer into husband. The overtly tragic *Clarissa* strengthens/makes apparent the oppressive force of familial patriarchal power, and so pits its heroine against both father and lover (with God/Jesus occupying final, distant father/husband roles). In *Tess*, Hardy furthers Richardson's complex presentations of patriarchy and individuates the forces that work against his heroine. Most importantly for Tess the roles of 'lover' and 'husband' are played by different (and unlike in *Clarissa*, corporal) men. This division means that, along with presenting an insightful study of a lower-class family as it functions within a patriarchal system, Hardy's novel is able to explore the themes and implications of a

woman's obedience to her husband (Griselda's triumph), as well as her (failed) defence against an unwanted lover (Clarissa's tragedy).

Like Griselda and Pamela, Tess comes from a class lacking in social distinction. The description of lower class families encountered in the *Clerk's Tale* and *Pamela* (Griselda's father Janicula and the Andrews), however, are idealistic and distant portraits of humble, virtuous poverty. Though Chaucer and Richardson may point to the exploitation of that poverty by the aristocratic class, the lower class families themselves remain relatively unscathed or at least uncorrupted by the system which contains and oppresses them. This celebration of Janicula and the Andrews is understandable given the fact that in both the *Clerk's Tale* and *Pamela*, the family/father is seen as the root of the daughter's virtue. Tess's virtues however, like Clarissa's, are not easily attributable to familial inheritance. Tess's father is not the poorest man in the poorest village—and in fact as a 'haggler' he belongs to a dying rural class a step above the common day-labourer—but he is a "slack-twisted fellow" (74), lazy and fond of drink, and Tess's mother is merely "an additional [child], and that not the eldest, to her own long family of waiters on Providence" (76). But despite any discrepancies between parents and child, the first sphere of patriarchal authority in (or to) which each of our heroines is asked/shown to demonstrate her perfect submission is that of the family. Tess is no exception to this pattern: Hardy's novel describes her as a dutiful (if occasionally exasperated) daughter—although, unlike our previous heroines, in the Durbeyfield home Tess's primary duty becomes one of caretaking rather than obedience. Hardy's narrator tells us that as Tess matured, she

became humanely beneficent towards the small ones [her many brothers and sisters], and to help them as much as possible she used, as soon as she left school, to lend a hand at haymaking or harvesting on neighbouring farms; or, by preference, at milking or butter-making processes, which she had learnt when her father had owned cows. (76)

Beyond demonstrating her nurturing, familial virtue, a daughter within a patriarchal structure must also function in a larger, social role: she must marry, and so create the bonds between men that cement a community. This marital transaction takes place, in some form, in each of the works in this study, with the fatal consequences for a daughter who fails to submit to her patriarchal imperative highlighted in *Clarissa*. Tess also runs afoul of the rules of patriarchal exchange, but her compliance with and/or resistance to patriarchal/familial dictates is less clear-cut than Clarissa's path of resistance and (at least formal) repentance.

The complexity of Tess's story is partly a result of her character and situation, but it also is a result of her relationship with, and Hardy's characterisation of, her family. *Clarissa* and *Tess* are the only works that actually present a detailed account of the life or education of their heroines within the family complex (regardless of its status). In Richardson's novel, his heroine's wealthy but untitled family, and particularly its male members, are aggressive and domineering in their quest for power—and with a disturbing ruthlessness, the Harlowes are willing to utilise the marriageable Clarissa as a commodity in that quest. Hardy's novel does present a similar commodification of the young Tess by her family, but the quest for social

power as it is performed by the Durbeyfields is devoid of the malicious selfishness displayed by the Harlowes. In *Tess*, the low social position of the Durbeyfields transforms their manipulation and/or positioning of their daughter, making it as much a sign of their own exploitation by systems of rank and gender as a comment on the victimisation of Tess (and young women generally). The Durbeyfields simply don't have enough authority or self-interest to make effective, Harlowe-style tyrants. Tess's father is a particularly ineffectual, even parodic, patriarch, one whose child-like satisfaction with the idea of his (newly discovered) ancient social prestige serves only to increase his lassitude and general lack of participation in his family or community. Jack Durbeyfield is willing to wait for recognition—for his d'Urberville relatives to call and pay their respects—and through resignation, lethargy, pride, or pure social naiveté (the text does not seem to suggest that it is through a respect for/love of Tess) he is unwilling to use his most marketable asset, his daughter, to his own advantage. Tess's mother demonstrates a more shrewd, or at least more engaged, understanding of the workings of her society: it is she who suggests that Tess "claim kin" with the nearby d'Urberville relations, and it is she who recognises the social (and, with luck, eventually monetary) value of Tess's youthful, voluptuous beauty. She explains to her husband that their daughter, upon introducing herself to an elderly, wealthy d'Urberville woman would "be sure to win the lady — Tess would; and likely enough 'twould lead to some noble gentleman marrying her" (65). Joan's romantic dream for Tess is not wholly idealistic: after dressing up her obedient, passive daughter in order to emphasise her lush figure and sending her off in a gig

with Alec d'Urberville, Mrs. Durbeyfield does experience some slight misgivings. However, as the narrator explains, "Joan Durbeyfield always managed to find consolation somewhere" (93); and so she rationalises to her husband: "Well, as one of the genuine stock, she ought to make her way with 'en, if she plays her trump card aright. And if he don't marry her afore he will after. For that he's all afire wi' love for her any eye can see" (93). This speech is telling as it demonstrates Joan's innocence regarding lust and sexuality, as well as her simplicity as regards matters of class. Most poignant, however, is Joan's final remark to her husband. When asked by Jack if by "trump card" she means Tess's "d'Urberville blood," Joan retorts, "No, stupid; her face — as 'twas mine" (93). Joan has intuited and attempted to grasp, for herself and her daughter, the restricted source(s) of power allowed women in her culture: the allure of the sexual object. This Eve-like allure will, admittedly, attract the attention of Alec d'Urberville (*and* Angel Clare, though he is less overt about acknowledging its effect on him), and, coupled with Tess's Mary-like 'freshness' and innocence, will introduce her to experiences and relationships usually denied to lower-class women. Still, the limits of the type of power imagined by Joan are demonstrated by the meagre rewards of her own "trump card," and the fate which any discerning reader will expect for her daughter. Again, despite the fact that by sending her daughter to the d'Urbervilles' Joan Durbeyfield acts in a traditionally paternal role, her lack of power in her society, or at least her severely limited avenues in which to express that power, distinguishes her from the agents of patriarchal authority we have seen working against the heroines discussed earlier in this study.

However limited their authority, though, to remain virtuous Tess must display her submissiveness to her parents, and this she does. Tess, her mother knows, is “tractable at bottom” (65). And despite his lack of involvement in the family, Jack Durbeyfield retains some control over his daughter. When Tess resists visiting the d’Urbervilles Joan turns to her husband for support: “‘Durbeyfield, you can settle it,’ said his wife, turning to where he sat in the background. ‘If you say she ought to go, she will go’” (74). It is the same when Joan prepares Tess for her move to Trantridge, telling her it would be better if she put her “best side outward”: “‘Very well; I suppose you know best,’ replied Tess with calm abandonment. And to please her parent the girl put herself quite in Joan’s hands, saying serenely—‘Do what you like with me, mother’” (89). This same calm, abandoned tractability will also characterise Tess’s relations outside the family, though as her tale and life progress Tess’s submission begins to redound more and more upon the culture which requests it of her.

In the fifth-edition preface to *Tess*, Hardy introduces the novel as one “wherein the great campaign of the heroine begins after an event in her experience which has usually been treated as fatal to her part of protagonist, or at least as the virtual ending of her enterprises and hopes,” and continues, “there was something more to be said in fiction than had been said about the shaded side of a well-known catastrophe” (37). The first third of Hardy’s novel chronicles Tess’s “catastrophic” relationship with Alec d’Urberville. This plot has obvious connections to *Clarissa’s* (and *Tess* and *Clarissa* share many plot elements: the scheming family, the search for titles, the charismatic rake, the rape), but Hardy allows Tess a ‘rally’



after her rape/seduction that is denied Richardson's pious heroine. Despite this significant difference, Hardy and Richardson similarly explore the themes of female sexuality and desire through the relationships their heroines have with their seducers/rapists—detailing the simultaneous attraction and revulsion their protagonists feel for these men, as well as the guilt for and repression of those feelings. Clarissa and Lovelace's involvement is, however, complicated by the fact that Clarissa struggles both with sexual attraction and with love for the intelligent, sensitive, and charmingly wicked Lovelace, while Tess's relationship with Alec revolves, at least on her part, more definitely around the ambiguities of her burgeoning sexual desire.

Tess's desire for Alec, like Clarissa's for Lovelace, is communicated subtly to the reader, and is never explored as a conscious emotion—though Hardy is much more explicit and direct in his acknowledgement and depiction of that desire than Richardson. We have, for example, the first meeting of Tess and Alec—that often remarked-upon afternoon of strawberries and roses:

he stood up and held [a strawberry] by the stem to her mouth.

'No—no!' she said quickly, putting her fingers between his hand and her lips. 'I would rather take it in my own hand.'

'Nonsense!' he insisted; and in a slight distress she parted her lips and took it in.

They had spent some time wandering desultorily thus, Tess eating in a half-pleased, half-reluctant state whatever d'Urberville offered her. . . . then the two passed round to the rose trees, whence he gathered blossoms and gave her to put in her bosom. She obeyed like one in a dream, and when she could affix no more

he himself tucked a bud or two into her hat, and heaped her basket with others in the prodigality of his bounty. (81)

Tess's relationship with Alec is marked from this, their first encounter, by a dreamy or trance-like passivity on Tess's part, and though she will come to regard him with greater suspicion and a more pronounced resistance as the novel progresses, her interactions with Alec will continue to be characterised, at some level by her "half-pleased, half-reluctant" responses to his pursuit of her.

In the character of Alec, Hardy personifies one side of the historic debate about the 'nature' of woman, and when Tess is defined by d'Urberville (or by patriarchal society in general) as a sexual object, a "crumby" (83) "cottage girl" (96), she demonstrates (as in the scene with her mother), a strong capacity for capitulation, for abandon, for obedience. The second meeting between Alec and Tess (their ride in his gig) confirms his control over her, and though in this case Tess's resistance is more spirited, Alec succeeds in giving her what the narrator calls "the kiss of mastery" (96). With scenes such as these Hardy maps the inevitable progress towards the sexual 'climax' of *The Chase*. On that fateful evening with Alec in the woods Tess is particularly submissive. She has been placed in a position of gratitude to him, both for rescuing her from the suddenly aggressive company of the Trantridge village women, and for his revelation of his kindness to her struggling family. Tess is further chastened when her "impulsive" push of Alec as he attempts to embrace her almost causes him to fall off his horse. The narrator's description of Tess's ambiguous response to Alec's request that he may treat her "as a lover" demonstrates the difficulty of her position: "She drew a quick pettish

breath of objection, writhing uneasily on her seat, looked far ahead, and murmured, 'I don't know — I wish — how can I say yes or no when — "' (116). Tess's position as woman, and as social inferior, prevents her from asserting any strong objections to Alec's advances. When Alec deposits her in a nest of leaves in the woods while he perfunctorily attempts to ascertain their exact whereabouts, Tess is teary but passive, and on Alec's return she is silent, sleeping, and hardly discernible: she is "a pale nebulousness at his feet, which represented the white muslin figure he had left upon the dead leaves" (118). Tess is representational, a barely physical object, a "figure", a "blank" text upon which Alec will trace his "coarse pattern" (119) in a gesture that has been repeated, even by Tess's own ancestors (the narrator reminds us), throughout the course of history.

Hardy, however, even in this scene does not cast Tess as total or unproblematic victim: as with Tess's unformulated response (above) to Alec's request that they behave like lovers, the details of that evening in *The Chase* are left deliberately ambiguous.<sup>21</sup> Though Clarissa may question herself and her hidden feelings for Lovelace, it is made clear that she *was* drugged during her rape, leaving little room for doubt regarding her 'innocence' in the matter. But Tess's catastrophe has been read differently by critics—as either rape *or* seduction (Brady). Less debatable, though, is the fact that after the night in *The Chase* Tess lives for several weeks with Alec as his mistress. As she herself explains, "[s]he had

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<sup>21</sup> Despite evidence that Hardy's revisions of the novel worked towards making Tess's virtue and Alec and Angel's villainy more clear, Hardy also made changes that added to the ambiguity of the scene in *The Chase*: in particular, (as J.T. Laird discusses, 178-9) early versions of the novel include Tess being fed a drink by Alec as they ride (a closer mirroring of Clarissa's rape). But Hardy eliminated this aspect of the event in later versions of *The Chase* scene, allowing Tess a greater degree of responsibility and agency at this moment.

dreaded him, winced before him, succumbed to adroit advantages he took of her helplessness; then, temporarily blinded by his ardent manners, had been stirred to confused surrender awhile: had suddenly despised and disliked him, and had run away. That was all" (130). In this way, Hardy attributes to Tess a desire and an agency in her relations with Alec that complicates her role as victim.

In the prelude to that fateful event in *The Chase*, the narrator says that Tess "abandon[s] herself to her impulse" (113) when she escapes with Alec. Her decision to accept his offer of "aid and company" at this time, when she has refused it in the past, is explained by the narrator as the result of that offer coming "at the particular juncture when fear and indignation at these adversaries could be transformed by a spring of the foot into a triumph over them" (113). Kristin Brady writes of this moment that "[a]ssertion and retreat, independence and submission are possible simultaneously in [Tess's] acceptance of Alec's offer" (172). This fine observation is, I think, well applied to the majority of Tess's actions, responses, and decisions throughout the novel, and can be witnessed in her relationship with her parents, Alec, and ultimately with Angel Clare. At the time of her 'rape,' Hardy's heroine can be read as a victim of Alec's sexual experience and social advantage, or she can be read as slyly, even radically, exercising her own desire and sexuality<sup>22</sup>. In the same way, when Tess leaves Alec after her short time living as his mistress, her return home can be read as her awakening from the daze that his power exercised over her, or a more callous termination of her desire/need for him.

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<sup>22</sup> Rosemarie Morgan makes a passionate argument for Tess as a "sexually vital consciousness" (84), and insists that it is the "combination of sexual vigour and moral rigour that makes Tess not just one of the greatest but one of the strongest women in the annals of English literature" (85).

However she is characterised in these early stages of her life, Tess is clearly resilient, and despite her passivity she demonstrates strength at many moments throughout the novel. In *Women and Sexuality in the Novels of Thomas Hardy*, Rosemarie Morgan discusses the scene in which Tess, requested by Alec for one last kiss before she leaves, passively offers him her cheek. Highlighting the performative aspects of Tess's submission (utilised to even greater effect in Tess's later dealings with Alec and Angel), Morgan writes that "there is, in passive resistance of this kind, deliberate, conscious rebellion and considerable self-control. Authentic passivity exerts no such self-control" (95). Tess's admirable self-control and independence can also be witnessed in her return to her parents, her decision to bear her child alone, and even more significantly, to raise it (for the duration of its short life) openly in her village. Tess, unlike Clarissa, conquers her fears and/or qualms about re-entering her community as a functioning and equal member: "Was once lost always lost really true of chastity, she would ask herself. She might prove it false if she could veil by-gones. The recuperative power which pervaded organic nature was surely not denied to maidenhood alone" (150). The familiar plot of the fallen woman, as explored so fully by Richardson, is allowed, in Hardy, a "happy" ending. Most radically, this happy ending is not the traditional conclusion witnessed in *Pamela*. Tess will continue on with her life alone and independent; she will abandon Alec as Clarissa rejected Lovelace, but she will push convention even further. Tess chooses not only to reject the one socially accepted (though still

partial) redemption of the fallen woman, marriage with her seducer/rapist, she also manages (at this point, at least) to avoid the more noble fate of embracing death.

Tess demonstrates her recuperative powers when she falls in love with Angel Clare. But unfortunately, confronted with Tess's threatening femininity both Alec and Angel seek to contain and define her. Just as Alec views and desires Tess as a sexual object, as pure *woman*, Angel will characterise Tess as spiritual femininity, as *pure* woman (though despite these unsubtle distinctions Hardy does allow both men some complexity and depth in their attraction to his heroine). "[W]hat a fresh and virginal daughter of Nature that milkmaid is!", Angel exclaims on first seeing Tess (176). In her way, Tess does resist, or attempt to resist, Angel's de-individualising characterisation of her. The narrator writes,

She was no longer the milkmaid, but a visionary essence of woman — a whole sex condensed into one typical form. [Angel] called her Artemis, Demeter, and other fanciful names half teasingly, which she did not like because she did not understand them. 'Call me Tess,' she would say askance; and he did. (187)

However, as in her experiences with Alec, Tess's powers of self-definition ultimately lack the force that social and literary history lend to her male counterparts. In her dealings with Angel, Tess appropriates the only power it seems possible for her to grasp, and again allows herself, with an excessive passivity, to be defined by a powerful male figure in a relationship that resonates with the Griselda plot. And

Angel is an intellectualised version of Walter, galloping/hiking through the village and recognising, as only an aristocrat/gentleman can, the superior virtues of a young country maiden.<sup>23</sup> In the face of Angel's discursive power, Tess can attempt to demur, but as Irigaray notes about any direct confrontation with patriarchal power, it is difficult to succeed when the very language we use enforces women's marginality (*Reader* 124). Ultimately, Tess allows herself to be defined as Angel sees her, and indeed, embraces, much more fully than she ever did Alec's, Angel's vision of her and the world. Even before their marriage, Tess accords Angel a divine power, and her desire to please and be obedient to him is boundless. Angel is "Godlike in her eyes" (246), it is "as if she saw something immortal before her" (257). The language of devotion used by the narrator to describe Tess's attachment to Angel calls to mind Griselda's assertions of total obedience to Walter. The narrator tells us that Tess's "one desire, so long resisted, [was] to make herself his, to call him her lord, her own — then, if necessary, to die" (278).

Tess's patriarchal trial begins earlier than Griselda's—on her wedding night, when she finally gathers the courage to tell her husband of her past experiences: her sexual relationship with Alec and the birth/death of her child. Beyond his shock and despair at finding that the woman he has idealised as a vision of virtue and simplicity has a history that is very real and very human, Angel begins to suspect Tess: for if she is not one type of woman, she must be another. As Tess herself recognises, after her confession Angel "looked at her as a species of impostor; a

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<sup>23</sup> Tess's class position is, in fact, particularly complex. As Penny Boumelha writes, Tess combines "decayed aristocratic lineage, economic membership of the newly-forming rural proletariat, modified by an education that provides her with a degree of access to the culture of the bourgeoisie" (117).

guilty woman in the guise of an innocent one" (299). Angel suspects Tess, as he suspects all women, and he is not the only one to read her in this way: Tess becomes, even for some modern critics, an agent of destruction to 'innocent' male bystanders. As Jean Jacques Lecercle writes, Tess "is a victimiser as well as a victim." He continues, "we are tempted to reverse the usual description and show that Tess destroys Alec's life . . . and brings pain and sorrow to Angel—it is she who forces him into emigration, with the subsequent illness and suffering" (5). Tess's failure to tell Angel about her past before their marriage has also been criticised. H.M. Daleski argues that "it is the essential cause of her tragedy, for it is an irreparable error and leads, in the end, to her murder of Alec and her execution" (154). Tess, whose resemblance to the women in a pair of ancestral d'Urberville portraits hung in their honeymoon lodging has already been pointed out, is explicitly linked to them by Angel as he considers following his grieving wife into her room: "In the candlelight the painting was more than unpleasant. Sinister design lurked in the woman's features, a concentrated purpose of revenge on the other sex" (305). Sinister design, revenge, and the other sex: Angel here expresses the fear of women, of the unknown Other, that has informed centuries of anti-feminist discourse.

The aftermath of Tess's confession is contained within (begins) the section of Hardy's novel entitled "The Woman Pays." It is in this section that Tess's time of trial truly begins, but it is also through her "payment" that she becomes truly tragic, and most powerful, in her suffering. Like Griselda, Tess accepts her husband's desires without recrimination or self-interest. She does not attempt, even though the



narrator says that such an attempt might have been successful, to make Angel take pity on her or dissuade him from separating from her. Tess's words to Angel echo and repeat those spoken by Griselda. Angel asks Tess, "And if I order you to do anything?" and Tess dutifully replies, "I will obey like your wretched slave, even if it is to lay down and die" (300). She also asserts: "I have no wish opposed to yours," which Angel knows "to be true enough" (310).<sup>24</sup> Tess accepts without reservation Angel's moral and marital authority, telling him "You know best what my punishment should be" (324). The narrator describes Tess's supreme patience and humbleness:

She took everything as her deserts, and hardly opened her mouth. The firmness of her devotion to him was indeed almost pitiable; quick tempered as she naturally was, nothing that he could say made her unseemly; she sought nought her own, was not provoked; thought no evil of his treatment of her. She might just now have been Apostolic Charity herself returned to a self-serving modern world. (312)

As we have seen in Griselda's story, these words and behaviours, as meek and obedient as they seem, prove dangerous or at least discomforting to the men who exact them. While dismissing Tess's despairing talk of suicide, Angel tells her that "[i]t is nonsense to have such thoughts in this kind of case, which is rather one for satirical laughter than for tragedy" (303). This "satiric" attitude, however, is not one

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<sup>24</sup> Compare with Griselda's: "Lord, undigne and unworthy / Am I to thilke honour that ye me beede; / But as ye wole yourself, right so wol I. / And heere I swere that nevere willyngly, / In werk ne thoght, I nyȝt yow disobeye, / For to be deed, though me were looth to deye" (359-364).

which Angel is capable of adopting himself, though such an attitude would work in his favour. Instead, the tragedy of the situation is allowed to grow, and Tess's status as sufferer, as well as her opportunity for martyr-like behaviour, grows with it.

Tess, like Griselda, journeys back to her father's house, but unlike Griselda she cannot stay there until recalled by her husband. Instead, and to Angel's continuing discredit, she must journey onward into further misery. Having left her family home, Tess quickly runs out of money. She refuses, though, to let either her parents or Angel's know of her reduced circumstances. A certain pride has characterised Tess from the beginning of the novel (as in her shame at her father's behaviour, her discomfort with her mother's scheme regarding the d'Urbervilles, her choice not to tell Alec about her child etc.), and it now prevents her from asking her parents or Angel's family for assistance. The narrator writes, "the same delicacy, pride, false shame, whatever it may be called, on Clare's account, which had led her to hide from her own parents the prolongation of the estrangement, hindered her in owing to his that she was in want after the fair allowance he had left her" (347). Angel's behaviour, his "punishment" of Tess, provides her with an opportunity both to submit and to assert her own virtue while she protects his. During her time at the sublimely desolate Flintcomb-Ash, this disturbing, excessive patience becomes more than a minor feature in Tess; as the narrator writes, "it sustained her" (360). Her physical toil in that grim place cannot but be a recrimination to Clare. Tess and the reader (and Angel when he learns of it) must recognise what he has driven her to, what he has failed to protect her from, and

must admire her silent, uncomplaining acceptance of those extremes. Tess's passionate letter to Angel works similarly to (and again echoes) Griselda's speeches to Walter: "I do not mind having to work" she writes bravely, but continues, "How silly I was in my happiness when I thought I could trust you always to love me! I ought to have known that such as that was not for poor me" (417).<sup>25</sup> Tess writes this letter to Angel out of fear of Alec and his renewed pursuit of her: "save me from what threatens me!" she concludes. This letter, and the hardship in which Alec finds her, furthers Angel's responsibility and culpability for Tess's eventual demise. All of Tess's actions, while they perfectly perform and mimic dictates regarding female marital behaviour, incriminate Angel and the patriarchal values he represents. Tess's reunion with Alec becomes both a sign of her incredible physical and emotional distress (distresses from which Angel has not spared her) as well as a further passive or submissive acceptance of Angel's earlier assertion that Alec, as her first (and, until the end of the novel, her only) sexual partner, is her 'true' husband.

Like the dual plots of rape and marriage that function in Hardy's novel, the conclusion of Tess's story and life suggests parallels to that of both Clarissa and Griselda. Like Griselda, Tess is ultimately reunited with her husband, but, like Clarissa, she also avoids (or at least delimits) that union, and is thoroughly revenged upon her oppressors. Tess's revenge upon Alec is the most obvious and dramatic in the novel, and is satisfyingly extreme compared to the actions of our

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<sup>25</sup> Compare with Griselda's: "O goode God! How gentil and how kynde / Ye semed by youre speche and youre visage / The day that maked was oure mariage! / But sooth is seyde — algate I fynde it trewe, / For in effect it is preeved is on me — / Love is noght oold as whan that it is newe" (852-857).

previous heroines. Laura Claridge focuses with particularly severe criticism on the renewal of the relationship between Alec and Tess, faulting Tess for her lack of “charity” towards her reformed seducer. And indeed, Tess appears to be the cause of Alec’s resumption of his old life-style, as well as his loss of faith—though what remains unclear is how innocent Tess is in that effect upon him. Claridge asserts that it is Tess’s refusal to believe or accept the transformation that Alec has effected upon himself, rather than merely her physical presence, which directly causes his “backsliding”. She writes, “Tess continues to define Alec only as sexual threat until he resumes, almost in response to her expectations, his role as predator” (335). As uncomfortable as I am with Claridge’s characterisation of this situation, which seems to overlook Tess’s history with Alec (her justifiable anger and suspicion), as well as the imbalance of their social power, Claridge nonetheless discerns and affords Tess a power and agency here which are often overlooked. Though in their second encounter Tess is once again vulnerable to Alec’s advances, she can also, once again, be read as expressing self-interested desires in that encounter. Not only does Alec represent a purely physical relief to Tess’s desolate existence, as well as a convenient and graphic symbol of Angel’s wrong to her, in the renewal of their relationship, Alec is forced to play the role assigned to Tess early in the novel. For, like Tess, Alec will be tempted from a state of social and spiritual grace, and like Tess, he will eventually lose his life for his trespass.

Tess will have her revenge on Alec, but as in *Clarissa*, the lover (the rapist, the seducer) is not the primary oppressor of the tale.<sup>26</sup> (This is even more true in

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<sup>26</sup> Morgan notes, “Significantly, the fallen woman is rendered dumb, mute, and prone, not by the seducer but by the lawful husband” (109).

Hardy's novel than it is in Richardson's: Tess *did*, after all, recover from her time with Alec. She had healed, moved on, and even found herself blissfully in love.) As Clarissa must revenge herself on the primary patriarchal power in her life, her family, and Tess must do the same: which, for Tess, means to revenge herself upon Angel, the author of her trial. Tess's patient acceptance of all that Angel decrees as punishment for her, as stated above, works to subtly undermine and critique his power and moral authority. But Tess's subversion of Angel, unlike Griselda's of Walter, does not end there. Tess becomes what Boccaccio's narrator calls another "kind" of woman (than Griselda): "the kind of woman who, once driven out of her home in nothing but a shift, would have allowed another man to shake her up to the point of getting herself a nice-looking dress out of the affair!" (378). The power of Tess's performance is such, however, that even her re-establishment of herself as Alec's mistress becomes a fulfilment of her husband's will. After their marriage Angel asks Tess, "How can we live together while that man lives? — he being your husband in Nature, and not I. If he were dead it might be different" (313). Not only has Angel described Alec as Tess's true husband, he has also characterised Tess as an impure and deceitful woman; Tess, by returning to Alec, becomes exactly the person her husband has described.

With her murder of Alec, Tess is effectively revenged upon them all: Alec, Angel, and the culture which created them and her. But this revenge is only possible because Tess still retains her passivity and submission—because Tess's shocking murder of Alec can also be viewed as an act of obedience to Angel. Tess's murder of Alec is taken, by many critics and readers, to be her triumphant revenge

against him, but it is Angel who has done Tess the most harm. For her revenge against him, Tess fulfils his will with submission so extreme that Angel himself is forced to submit before the power of her inhuman display. But not only is Angel forced to acknowledge the pain he has caused her, admit that he was wrong to doubt her, and accept her back as his beloved spouse, but this prudish, righteous man must accept as his wife a woman who is, at last, truly criminal. And even beyond this, he must acknowledge that it is he (not Alec) who has forced her beyond the pale of both the law and Christian society: she has done this through love of him. Angel recognises that Tess has given up the pretence of moral agency or independence when he first finds her again (living with Alec as his mistress). Angel discerns that “[h]is original Tess has spiritually ceased to recognise the body before him as hers—allowing it to drift, like a corpse upon the current, in a direction dissociated from its living will” (467). That body, given over to Alec and the view of women which he represents (and to which Angel assigned her), will merely change hands after the murder. Tess stabs Alec with the breakfast carving knife<sup>27</sup> and runs after her husband, explaining, when she catches up to him, what she has done:

I have killed him . . . I owed it to you and to myself, Angel. . . . for the trap he set for me in my simple youth, and his wrong to you through me. . . . You didn’t come back to me, and I was obliged to go back

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<sup>27</sup> Alec’s blood, staining the ceiling below, is said to give its white surface the appearance of a “gigantic ace of hearts” (471)—suggesting, with a macabre irony, not only the failure or non-existence of romance between Alec and Tess, but also the final play of the card-game invoked by Mrs. Durbeyfield during the couple’s first acquaintance (“she ought to make her way with ‘en, if she plays her trump card aright”).

to him. . . . will you forgive me my sin against you, now I have killed him? I thought as I ran along that you would be sure to forgive me now I have done that. (474)

In her discussion of the contradictions and “faults” of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* Laura Claridge focuses on this act (Tess’s murder of Alec), and writes, “rather than the inevitable act of a manipulative, maltreated hero, instead it appears, while certainly not unmotivated, as *unnecessary* by now. Tess could run away with Angel without killing Alec” (335). Beyond questioning the necessity of the murder for Tess and Angel’s re-union, Claridge points out also that “*Alec does not deserve to be killed*: deserted, yes, though by now we might still flinch at what could be interpreted as injustice. After all, [unlike Angel] . . . Alec’s affection . . . despite its possessor’s inadequacies, had been unwavering” (335).<sup>28</sup> Claridge’s reading is discerning, for despite many critics’ tendency to view Alec and Angel as two-dimensional figures, and Alec especially as an over-determined, melodrama-ish villain, Alec is not “diabolically evil” (as he is called by Jane Marcus, 91). Not only does Alec seem to struggle genuinely with his feelings for Tess, Angel is as much to blame for their (Tess and Alec’s) renewed sexual intimacy, and for the tragedy of Tess’s life, as Alec. But, like Ian Robinson’s view that the happy ending of the *Clerk’s Tale* is a “weakness” (167), Claridge’s criticism of Tess’s murder of Alec suggests the possibility that it functions in a manner overlooked in her reading. Tess’s murder of Alec is not (primarily) an act of vengeance against him, or even a way of ensuring

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<sup>28</sup> Lynn Parker also views the murder of Alec as a blight on Tess’s character, writing that it “exposes the extent of her degradation or ‘stain’ which began with her sexual experience” (280).

that Angel will accept her as his wife: Tess murders Alec in order to avenge herself on Angel.

If Tess had not killed Alec, but had merely deserted him and returned to her husband, Angel would have retained his authoritative, Walter-like role in their relationship. And indeed, through his noble forgiveness of her, Angel himself would be able to assume (or continue in) the powerful role of suffering, patient, martyr-like spouse. Without the murder, Tess, like Griselda, would ultimately be silenced—reduced to tearful gratitude and continued submission. As it is, Tess is beyond forgiveness; her actions are so extreme that she ceases to be held responsible for them. As Angel recognises, Tess's "affection for himself . . . had apparently obliterated her moral sense altogether" (475). This obliteration of self, of moral independence, is exactly what a patriarchal society, which argues for the necessity of women's obedience and submission to men—because of women's moral and intellectual inferiority—demands. But Tess, in acting so completely according to those patriarchal dictates, and in proving them so completely true, offers Angel nothing to grasp or use against her.

Tess recognises, however, that the performative force of her murder will not over-awe Angel indefinitely: "considering what my life has been," she tells Angel, "I cannot see why any man should, sooner or later, be able to help despising me" (481). Through the murder of Alec, Tess insures her own death—and guarantees that she will avoid the subjugation that awaits her should she remain with her husband (or any man). Tess's death, however, like Clarissa's, is as much recuperative as it is rebellious. Through dying, Tess fulfils one final request of her



husband's. On the night of their 'honeymoon' (after Tess's confession) the sleepwalking Angel carries his bride to an empty coffin in a ruined Abbey-church, repeatedly murmuring "Dead, dead, dead!" over her sheet-shrouded form. Angel, at this moment, also expresses his stifled affection for Tess: "My poor, poor Tess—my dearest, darling Tess!" he intones over her 'corpse,' "So sweet, so good, so true" (318). Angel's dream, his fantasy, is a familiar one in a patriarchal culture so threatened by femininity: the purest, dearest, safest woman, be she daughter or wife, is a dead one. And Tess will obey her husband's unspoken (or unconsciously spoken) desire—she will die—but on her own terms.

As Patricia Ingham writes, "Like all fallen women [Tess] dies; all she has really been able to choose is the particular form of her death. Murder and execution as the only available expression of autonomy speak for themselves as to the real limits of agency for a fallen woman" (89). Tess's revenge and escape, like Clarissa's, cost her her life, and though indeed tragically limited, as in Clarissa's case the mythologised status which death provides also acts as a final assertion of self. J. Hillis Miller writes about the dead in Hardy's work, asserting that "In their last narrow rooms they find not imprisonment but, paradoxically, an unchained freedom and airy openness" (223). Through her death, Tess achieves even more than this final "freedom." She may not leave behind a 1500 page manuscript attesting to her virtue, but she does ensure that she will not be forgotten: through a (seemingly successful) suggestion that her husband unite with her younger sister,

'Liza-lu—whom the narrator describes as a "spiritualized image of Tess"(488).<sup>29</sup> With 'Liza-lu functioning as an ever-present reminder of his wife's sacrifice for him, her awful obedience to him, and the wrongs done to her, Tess not only avoids becoming despicable in Angel's eyes, her status as martyr is assured endurance.

During their courtship, when Tess expresses some regret about her minimal education, Angel offers to instruct her in any course of study she would like, and specifically mentions history. Tess, however, has no desire to learn more about this subject: "what's the use of learning that I am one of a long row only — finding out that there is set down in some old book somebody just like me, and to know I shall only act her part" (182). Tess's despair is warranted, for she has little choice but to play the part a patriarchal culture assigns to women. But, as Hardy's novel also demonstrates, through acting her part particularly well the tight constraints of a pervasive, binaristic, and fear inspired discourse of femininity can (though for a short time, and at the highest personal price) be disturbed and disrupted.

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<sup>29</sup> And in pairing her sister and husband Tess also compromises Angel's ethics, for as Penny Boumelha notes, 'Liza-Lu and Angel's is a "de-eroticised relationship that nevertheless contravenes socially constituted moral law far more clearly than any of Tess's, since a man's marriage with his sister-in-law remained not only illegal but also tainted with the stigma of incest until the passing of the controversial Deceased Wife's Sister Act (after several failed attempts) in 1907" (125-6).

## CHAPTER 5

## Conclusion: Disturbing Virtue

Feeling guilty about her happiness on her wedding night, Tess compares herself to the other Talbothays dairymaids who are in love with Angel: "They were simple and innocent girls on whom the unhappiness of unrequited love had fallen; they had deserved better at the hands of Fate. She had deserved worse—yet she was the chosen one. It was wicked of her to take without paying. She would pay to the utmost farthing; she would tell, there and then" (290). Like Clarissa, and, in different ways, the rest of the heroines studied, Tess indeed pays "to the utmost farthing" for being "the chosen one." And though it is difficult as a reader to reconcile the tragedy of the string of 'corpses' that conclude my chosen texts with the disruptive power of their heroines' slyly rebellious performances, it is perhaps even more difficult to satisfactorily define or explain that performance. Griselda, Pamela, Clarissa, and Tess do manage, for a time, to thwart and elude the tyrannical forces that seek to contain them, but the question still remains: do they ultimately represent a form of agency that can have any appeal to feminists?

It is a male fear of the female Other which both demands the 'virtuous' behaviours exhibited by characters like Griselda, Pamela, Clarissa, and Tess and simultaneously causes such behaviours—subservience, obedience, selflessness, submission—to be suspected as duplicity. And these women are not only the products of a general patriarchal fear, but of specifically male-authored texts. In one sense, any power wielded by these characters can be viewed as the result and sign of the duplicity that a paranoid patriarchal culture has always insisted upon as

an essential aspect of femininity. But, on the other hand, that power *is* disruptive, and though the heroines may not be able ultimately to escape the force of patriarchal authority, they can be read as triumphing over their adversaries. Like the heroines they present, then, the narratives examined in my study can be viewed as both subversive and containing. In *The Stone and the Scorpion*, Judith Mitchell writes that "In their representations of women, [Hardy's novels] function both as indignant condemnations of the ideological misdeeds of patriarchy, and—ironically, paradoxically—as formidable examples of such misdeeds themselves" (162). Hardy has been particularly criticised for his portrayal of Tess—despite exposing the harm and damage done by an idealisation of women (and the sexual double standard), the narrator of the novel, it is frequently pointed out, is also as guilty of eroticising and 'othering' Tess as Alec or Angel (see Boumelha 120). Ellen Moers catalogues the many stereotypical feminine roles assigned to Tess in the novel, and finds her, in the end, "a fantasy of almost pornographic dimensions, manipulated with clearly sadistic affection" (100). But it is not just Hardy who is open to criticism for his "sadistic," delight in an "almost pornographic" fantasy-heroine: all of the works and authors of my study inevitably become implicated, like their fictional tyrannical patriarchs, in the cruel trials and suffering endured by their closely scrutinised protagonists. In part, the fascination with femininity that is evidenced in the eroticisation of the heroine—clearly present in both Richardson and Hardy's works, and even subtly present in Chaucer's portrayal of Griselda—is generated by a male subject's desire to learn more of himself, to access the

repressed feminine half of his identity. Tassie Gwilliam describes this aspect of fascination as it manifests itself in Richardson's fiction:

The insistence on exposing and penetrating female bodies—of finding what exists beneath the surfaces applied by art, culture, or nature—engages the question of sexual difference in its radical sense; the female body is often probed or viewed for the information it is presumed to contain about the male body. At times it seems that Richardson's novels are fragments of an immense epistemological quest to 'know' women, to define women's bodies, and to establish the meaning of femininity. (4-5)

While this type of pursuit can challenge dominant patriarchal discourse through its attempt to recover or access the culturally delimited feminine, it is not necessarily a feminist activity—the male author, while questing to 'know' women, may not be seeking gender equality (Claridge & Langland 3-4). And in fact, the intense scrutiny, viewing, and "probing" of femininity can function simply to reinscribe or reinforce gender difference, to further the exoticisation and otherness of woman. Dorothy Van Ghent describes the more negative effects of Richardson's own "almost pornographic" (Moers) study of femininity, writing that "The womanly quality which Richardson has made attractive in these images [of Clarissa] is that of an erotically tinged debility which offers, masochistically, a ripe temptation to violence" (49).

Like Van Ghent, Harold Bloom comments on the masochistic elements of the submissive heroine, but Bloom also acknowledges the reader's own

participation in that masochism. He asks "Is it admirable, that, by identifying with [Tess], the reader takes a masochistic pleasure in her suffering? Aesthetically, I would reply yes, but the question remains a disturbing one!" (*Tess* 7). This question, and the reality that, like a text's author, we as readers are also participants in the suffering of a heroine, is indeed disturbing. But what is most disturbing to a feminist reader is the fact that, as Bloom points out, much of such a text's pleasure is directly related to, if not entirely a result of, the suffering of its heroine. And though many readers have strongly negative reactions to the tales of Griselda, Pamela, Clarissa, and Tess, many readers (myself included) find them, and their suffering, powerfully compelling. The same desire to know and penetrate the mysterious, feminine Other (a desire that can be felt by both men and women, since both genders are constructed by a patriarchal discourse that keeps women and femininity on the margins) can help account for the cultural resonance of these texts, and the fascination they continue to hold for readers and critics.

Bloom's assertion that our pleasure in the text (of *Tess*) is born out of our masochistic pleasure in suffering cannot be ignored, but these narratives, as my thesis has discussed, do offer a reader who identifies with the heroine other forms of satisfaction. For though we may be enjoying witnessing and participating in the suffering of the submissive heroine, part of our pleasure surely is generated through our recognition, at whatever level, of the disruptiveness of that submissive performance. We enjoy, in fact, their revenge. At the same time, however, that revenge is disturbing in its covertness, and acknowledging its presence can help explain the negative reactions of many readers and critics. For as I pointed out

above, these heroines are, essentially, the duplicitous women that a patriarchal culture both creates and longs to expose, and a reader can thus despise them either for their duplicity (like Fielding's attack on Pamela) or for their complicity (like students' hostile responses to Griselda). Griselda, Pamela, Clarissa, and Tess are also both fascinating and frightening in the excessiveness of their performances—the lengths they will go to in order to submit and/or escape. This excessiveness is not only threatening to their male oppressors, but can also disturb the stability of a reader's notion of what 'virtue' means—whether that reader seeks to dismiss the virtuous woman as a patriarchal dupe and an icon of anti-feminism, or longs to celebrate her ideal purity, goodness, and selflessness.

The playful mimicry Irigaray imagines as performing an empowering disruption of patriarchal discourse is meant to productively assist in the development of alternative spaces in which women can exist and be recognised—it cannot therefore be satisfying or fully realised as a purely defensive strategy. And modern women are possibly in a position to be able to, if not abandon entirely this "first stage" of dissent, at least experience the power of an excessive, mimetic performance of femininity in a way that can push beyond death as its ultimate form. But despite such obvious social and political limitations, readers of the *Clerk's Tale*, *Pamela*, *Clarissa*, or *Tess* are confronted with a form of agency—the submissive woman's power—that not only disturbs patriarchal structures, but disrupts conventional beliefs about the way one should and can dissent. It is for this reason, I think, that the character is (or should be) of interest to modern readers. Women and female characters today continue to play prescribed feminine

roles, with various degrees of tragedy or triumph concluding their performances. And though the figure of the submissive, suffering woman seems to become less common in Western culture over the progression of time (one critic claims Tess as the last of her type<sup>30</sup>), she remains an entrenched feminine trope—I especially think of Harlequins and other popular romance forms—too often trivialised, attacked, or over-simplified. It is important, then, to attempt to explore and understand the power and appeal of this figure, and what she signifies for both men and women in a contemporary patriarchal culture. For as Griselda, Pamela, Clarissa, and Tess illustrate, the virtuous woman represents a disturbing and challenging force.

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<sup>30</sup> George Watt, 166.



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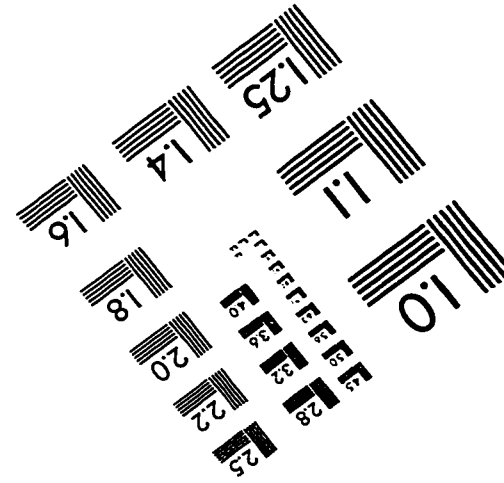
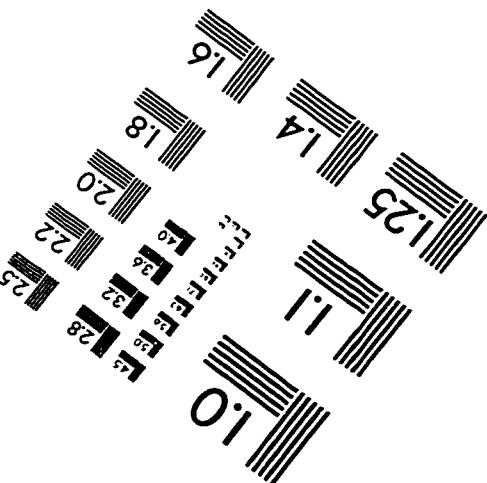
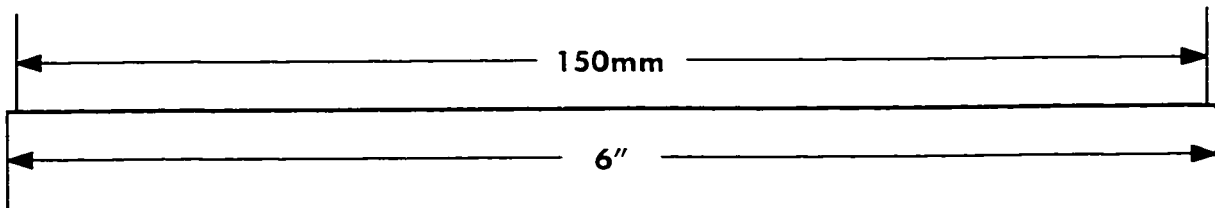
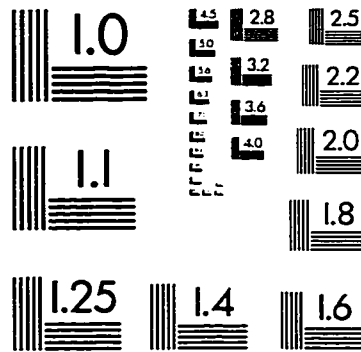
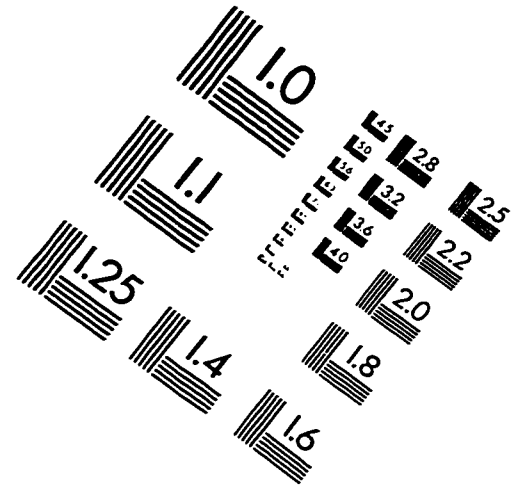
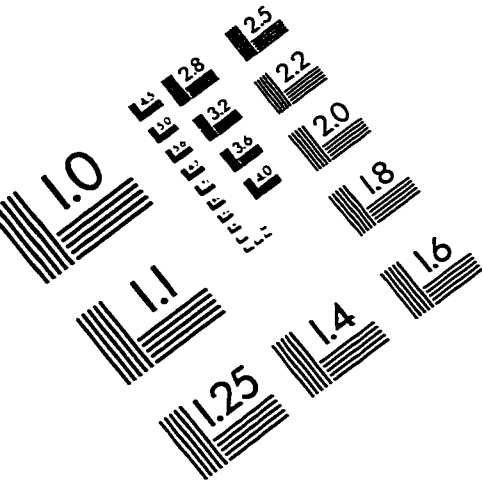
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