

Navigating and Owning Obedience: Reassessing Friedrich Halm's *Griseldis*

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ABSTRACT

This article critically reappraises the drama *Griseldis* (1835), the successful first play of the today largely forgotten Viennese playwright Friedrich Halm. I argue that the comparison between this play and its possible main source, Petrarch's *A Fable of Wifely Obedience and Devotion*, offers insights into the reconceptualization of obedience in the nineteenth century. Concretely, I suggest that the most significant changes in Halm's version serve to make obedience visible as an expression of individual agency, and thus to justify obedience's role within a liberal ideology. This reading departs from the older scholarly opinion that saw in Halm's play simply a critique—rather than a complex reinterpretation—of obedience.

Over the last two decades, several larger publications on the work of Gustav Freytag appeared, rescuing the author of *Soll und Haben* (Debit and Credit) from near-oblivion.¹ These scholarly works acknowledge the importance of understanding the formal and political features of the nineteenth century's most popular German writer of fiction for our grasp of that period. However, Freytag is by far not the only vastly popular author of the nineteenth century who has been neglected by critics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In this article, I focus on the Viennese writer Friedrich Halm (1806-1871), one of the most successful Austrian playwrights from 1835 to the end of that century.² Perhaps the most striking sign of his esteem in the nineteenth century is the fact that Halm's bust

was one of only nine to be placed above the new Burgtheater in Vienna when it opened in 1888.³ Moreover, by the end of the nineteenth-century, Halm had entered into the—at the time—rather narrow curricula of British German studies.⁴ Today, Friedrich Halm's plays have long disappeared from the European stage. No major publisher has his works in print, and the academic discussion of his works remains scarce.⁵

Halm, however, is important not only because he was once popular, but also because his work is characterized—through the decades and through a range of different genres—by a prolonged interest in the concept and literary representation of obedience.⁶ It is because of Halm's popularity that his thinking on obedience can serve here, I argue, as an important paradigm of how obedience was conceptualized in the nineteenth century more broadly.

Concretely, I argue that Halm's work stages a redefinition of obedience. Halm moves away from an older understanding of obedience as a response to an overwhelming exterior force that needs to be navigated in some way. Halm seeks to replace this older notion of obedience with one that is more deeply tied to the identity of the individual. Halm's obedient subjects affirm an authority that is accepted as legitimate and they express their own agency through their obedience to the accepted authority. Instead of navigating obedience, individuals now own it as part of their identity. The result is highly ambivalent: while the new model of obedience seems to grant greater agency to the individuals who freely adopt obedience as part of their identity, it also tends to gain a totalitarian hold over the individuals who are now tightly bound to their obedience by their own identity.

To illustrate this shift in the concept of obedience, I focus in this article on the way in which Friedrich Halm rewrote the late-medieval Griseldis tale—the story of a wife

whose obedience is tested by her husband. In Petrarch's *A Fable of Wifely Obedience and Devotion*⁷ (written 1373, first printed 1470), the emphasis is on the various ways in which Griseldis achieves minimal concessions from her husband while proving her obedience to him. Griseldis, in other words, cleverly navigates an obedience that is demanded of her as a wife.

In Halm's successful first play, *Griseldis: Dramatisches Gedicht in fünf Akten* (Griseldis: Dramatic Poem in Five Acts), which was performed 86 times in the Burgtheater between 1835 and 1868 and which was translated into various European languages,⁸ the title character's agency is both expanded and minimized in comparison to Petrarch. On the one hand, the concessions that Griseldis obtains from her husband are systematically brushed aside. On the other hand, she leaves her husband at the end of the play after learning that the test of her obedience was merely part of a frivolous wager into which her husband had entered. Strikingly, however, Halm's Griseldis explains the separation from her husband by claiming her lasting obedience to the ideal that she held of him. Leaving her imperfect real husband, she remains obedient to her ideal husband. While Halm's play is conventionally viewed as supplying Griseldis with a greater agency (anticipating women's emancipation later in the nineteenth century), I argue that the concept of obedience that Halm introduces does not allow for any such simple conclusion. In leaving her husband, Griseldis both realizes her freedom and remains bound by the obedience that she owns. Where Petrarch's Griseldis expresses her agency in the small concessions that she obtains while being obedient, Halm's Griseldis expresses her agency through her obedience to the ideal husband. The shift in the concept of obedience that is exemplified

in Halm's *Griseldis* is, I suggest, of crucial importance to German intellectual and political history, legitimizing obedience as part of a liberal ideology.

Petrarch's *A Fable of Wifely Obedience and Devotion*

Franz Grillparzer reportedly commented on the upcoming premiere of Halm's *Griseldis* by saying that he wished that such a universally known subject matter be able to speak to the audience.⁹ Halm himself cites this comment in a letter to his mentor Michael Enk von der Burg with a considerable degree of frustration.¹⁰ Apparently, he felt that Grillparzer did not sufficiently appreciate that a play's success depended largely on the specific treatment of the subject matter, not on the subject matter itself. Indeed, Halm's treatment of the *Griseldis* tale is remarkable, as he takes great liberties with the story as it appears in Boccaccio's *Decameron* and in Petrarch's *A Fable of Wifely Obedience and Devotion*, particularly in the already mentioned significant changes to the ending. It is precisely because of these liberties that performances of Halm's play provoked discussion, not just in Vienna, where it premiered,¹¹ but also in other places where it was subsequently staged. Commenting on a performance in the German theater in Tallinn (then Reval) sometime between 1838 and 1840, the English traveler Elizabeth Eastlake, for instance, wrote, "the dénouement is the theme of all conversation, and parties run high for and against its moral."¹² Moreover, the French critic Saint-René Taillandier wrote praisingly in 1846 that Halm had managed to alter the medieval tale in a way that allowed it to speak to the nineteenth century—a comment we will need to come back to.¹³

Indeed, Halm changed some of the plot elements decisively and also transferred the story's setting from medieval Northern Italy to the fictional lands of King Arthur (or Artus,

as he is called in German). We need to review these plot changes to understand how, as a product of these changes, the underlying concept of obedience also changes. In the following, I limit my comparison to the version by Petrarch and do not look at that by Boccaccio or others. There are three reasons for this. First, Petrarch's version popularized the Griseldis tale throughout Europe, and for many centuries, Petrarch's was the most prominent Griseldis tale. Second, the fact that Halm called his title character, following Petrarch, Griseldis—rather than Griselda, as the name appears in the *Decameron*—suggests that Halm had Petrarch's version in mind when writing his play (this choice is, oddly, not reflected in the English translation of Halm's play that I use in this article). Third, in Petrarch's version the Griseldis story is presented as an independent text, rather than as part of a complex network of stories as is the case in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, on which Petrarch's tale is based.¹⁴ It is thus easier to compare Halm's text with Petrarch's, as we do not have to take into consideration how the text's appearance is shaped by the collection of stories of which it is a part. That being said, it should be stated that the textual evidence from Halm's play and his published letters provide no clear identification of his source. Moreover, the fact that, as a young man, Halm had translated the Griselda novella from Boccaccio's *Decameron* into German certainly points us away from Petrarch.¹⁵ The choice of Petrarch thus remains to some extent open to debate.

Petrarch opens his story with a scene of obedience that contains, in a nutshell, the structural pattern that the story then repeats many times over and that defines what it means to be obedient: someone is tasked to do something, and that person acquiesces while also obtaining some concession. The marquis Walter, we are told, is pressured by his subjects to marry. What they ask of him is that he “should take thought of marriage and bow [his]

neck, free and imperious though it be, to the lawful yoke; and that [he] should do this as soon as possible.” (292) Walter’s response to his subjects’ demand to “bow his neck to the lawful yoke” is characteristic of what obedience means throughout this story. For at the same time that he readily ‘bows’ to their demand, he also gains the concession that the choice of his partner be entirely up to him. Obedience, in Petrarch’s story, comes in tandem with the plea for a concession. Griseldis, too, whenever she faces a new demand by her husband, achieves some concession while submitting to his will.

These concessions, I argue, are crucial markers both of an older concept and an older employment of obedience. My underlying assumption here is that obedience, in order to be recognizable as obedience (and not just as passive automatic submission), must, paradoxically, also point to some freedom of the obedient man or woman. Obedience requires some marker of a free agency to be recognized as such. What differs, however, between different contexts is how this freedom, which is a necessary part of obedience, is represented and conceptualized. And in this regard—this is the central thesis of this article—we can see striking differences between Petrarch and Halm. Whereas Petrarch relies on the demand for concessions to show that his characters remain free agents (and therefore also legitimate obedient subjects), for Halm, the characters’ very obedience becomes an expression of their agency—a problematic concept that I analyze in more detail in the second part of this article.

In Petrarch’s story, Walter makes use of the concession that he has obtained from his subjects by marrying the daughter of the poorest inhabitant of a poor village within his domains. What draws Walter to this young woman is that she embodies obedience to the utmost. Seeing her, Walter notices that she “discharged all the offices of filial obedience

and affection” (295). It deserves mention in this context that, in Petrarch’s *A Fable*, obedience is not necessarily thought of as a specifically female virtue (as some of the reception history suggests, in which Petrarch’s story was recast into a manual for happy marriages¹⁶). Indeed, Petrarch opens his story with a scene of male obedience—the obedience that Walter owes to his subjects. Moreover, Petrarch does much to dissociate Griseldis’s obedience from her gender. The narrator stresses in the very paragraph in which Griseldis and her obedience are introduced that “the vigor of manhood and the wisdom of age lay hidden in her maiden bosom” (294-295). Finally, Walter, we are told, “perceived in her a virtue, beyond her sex and age” (295).

Of course, there is, even in this negation, still a clear sense of gender present (by essentially implying that obedience is not a common trait of young women). Nevertheless, I argue that the main impetus here is to dissociate the discourse on obedience from the specific relation between men and women. This sense that obedience is, at least in part, dissociated from gender relations is confirmed by the reading directions that Petrarch gave in a letter to Boccaccio. Here, Petrarch clarifies that he wishes his tale to be read as a religious allegory about the submission to God:

My object in thus-re-writing your tale was not to induce the women of our time to imitate the patience of this wife, which seems to me almost beyond imitation, but to lead my readers to emulate the example of feminine constancy, to submit themselves to God with the same courage as did this woman to her husband.¹⁷

While these reading directions alone certainly cannot entirely dissociate the discussion of obedience in Petrarch's story from a discourse on gender, they do at the very least caution us against reading obedience in this story exclusively or primarily with an eye to gender relations. Halm, I submit, while introducing a very new concept of obedience, follows Petrarch in this respect. For Halm, too, the tale of Griseldis motivates a general discussion of obedience beyond the particularities of gender.¹⁸

Setting this question aside, what is important in Petrarch's story is that Griseldis, in each incident, proves her obedience at the same time that she demands a small concession in return. In the course of the story, we thus see the initial structure, which is introduced when Walter bows to the yoke of marriage but demands free choice of whom to marry, recur four times.

Why Griseldis has to prove her obedience in the first place remains, incidentally, rather unclear in Petrarch's story.¹⁹ From the outset, Griseldis shows herself as a perfect wife, and Petrarch does little to motivate the ordeals to which her husband suddenly exposes her after years of marriage. All we are told is that, at some point, Walter was "seized by a desire more strange than laudable [...] to try more deeply the fidelity of his dear wife" (299).

In the first test, Walter has one of his servants sent to Griseldis and demand that she surrender to him her first-born daughter, apparently to give her up forever. Interestingly, the servant apologizes for his brutal demand, referring in his defense to the order that he must obey:

Spare me, my lady, and do not lay to my blame what I am forced to do. You are right knowing, and you understand what it is to be subject to a master; nor is the harsh necessity of obedience unknown to one with so much sense, though inexperienced. (300)

The servant's speech strikingly contrasts with that of Griseldis, who readily accepts the order (not blaming "the harsh necessity of obedience") while managing to arrive at some concession:

Go, and whatever our lord hath laid upon you, see that you perform it. One thing I beg of you: take care lest beasts or birds tear her [the daughter's] little body, and this, only if no contrary orders have been laid upon you. (300)

Griseldis remains subordinate and does not demand of her lord's servant any disobedience, but by negotiating for her daughter to be protected from wild animals she cleverly navigates a room for action within the confines of obedience. It is for Griseldis possible to act even while obeying the commands that she receives.

The crucial point here, however, is not simply that Griseldis *also* acts while being obedient, but that her minimal actions are a precondition for her obedience. It is because she remains in some minimal respects master of her destiny that her obedience remains recognizable as such. The same is not true for Walter's servant, who simply gives in to the pressures to which he is exposed. The "harsh necessity of obedience" to which he appeals

is indeed a necessity that bereaves him of humanity (of human freedom), and as such his “harsh necessity” is contrasted with Griseldis’s (true) obedience.

As if to insist on these different valences of obedience and mere submission, Petrarch repeats the instance of the sacrificed daughter almost verbatim when Griseldis is asked to give away her son. Again, the same servant asks for her child while claiming the “necessity of obedience” (302), and again Griseldis submits to the demand while asking him to protect her child from wild animals.

A little later, Griseldis is subjected to another test; this time her husband sends her away from his palace, stating his intention to remarry. Griseldis has to leave, and she has to return everything that Walter ever gave her. As Griseldis had entered the marriage dressed in clothes that she had previously received from her future husband, this would leave her with nothing except her naked body. Once more, Griseldis obeys, while also uttering a small demand:

Wherefore if it please you—but not otherwise—I pray and beseech you, as the price of the maidenhood which I brought hither and do not take hence, bid me keep one shift, out of those I have been wont to wear, that I may cover therewith the belly of her who was once your wife. (306)

Griseldis’s demand for one piece of clothing to cover her nudity is, to be sure, so modest that it seems to serve more to underscore her obedience than to qualify it. But perhaps this is the point. Petrarch manages in this story to explore the ways in which agency and obedience become *almost* indistinguishable. The complete identity of obedience and

agency, however, remains the distinguishing trait of Halm's Griseldis. In Petrarch's version, there is always still a small formal difference between the acquiescence to a demand and the performance of freedom through the counter-demand for some concession.

The fact that Griseldis's agency and obedience are closely tied to each other (without becoming identical) is made even clearer in the final test to which Griseldis is subjected. At Walter's new, staged wedding, he not only demands of Griseldis to be a servant, but also asks her to approve of his new wife: "What think you, Griseldis, of this bride of mine? Is she pretty and worthy enough?" (309) Griseldis's response deserves close attention:

"Surely," said she, "no prettier or worthier could be found. Either with her or with no one, can you lead a life of tranquility and happiness; and that you may find happiness is my desire and my hope. One thing, in all good faith, I beg of you, one warning I give you: not to drive her with the goads with which you have driven another woman. For since she is younger and more delicately nurtured, I predict she would not be strong enough to bear so much." (309)

Certainly, this final test is not one of obedience in the same way as in the previous instances. There is no direct command that Griseldis is asked to obey. However, in Walter's question, there is an implicit command for Griseldis to suppress her own feelings for the sake of her former husband. She has to approve of a new marriage that must be painful to her. In Griseldis's response, we see, once more, the characteristic combination of obedience and the demand for a concession. She approves of the new wife (and thus shows

her obedience to the implicit command), and she asks for a concession, namely not to test the new wife as severely as Walter tested her. On the surface, one could read Griseldis's demand as a sign of utmost selflessness, of her readiness to submit herself entirely to the wellbeing of others. Free of any ill will, she wishes the best to her former husband and cares sincerely for his new wife. But there is more to say about this scene. It is important not only that Petrarch once more includes some request, thus stressing again the connection between Griseldis's obedience and her agency (represented in her ability to ask for and obtain concessions)—moreover, read closely, there is also something surprisingly subversive in Griseldis's humble request to spare the new wife. By asking that the new wife not be submitted to the same ordeals, Griseldis, to some extent, makes it impossible for Walter to remarry. For how could he then ever be sure that his new wife is just as obedient as Griseldis? There is thus also some ambiguity in Walter's reaction to Griseldis's response. Immediately after hearing Griseldis's words, he ends her trial, exclaiming: "It is enough, my Griseldis! Your fidelity to me is made known and proved; nor do I think that under heaven there is another woman who has undergone such trials of her conjugal love." (309) At the risk of subverting the intended meaning of this scene, one can say that Griseldis, while appearing obedient, has made clear to Walter that he has little other choice than to take her back as his wife—provided that he wants the most obedient wife. Through the humble plea for milder treatment of the new wife, Griseldis thus demonstrates her efficient agency, regaining her husband.

The essential point in all of this is not only that Petrarch's story insists on freedom as a necessary ingredient of true obedience (as opposed to the mere submission of the servant), but also that this freedom is always represented and realized aside from

obedience, in the numerous concessions that accompany almost all instances of obedience in this story. This changes fundamentally in Halm's version, in which Griseldis's freedom is consistently represented to be realized in her obedience, not aside from it.

Halm's *Griseldis: Dramatisches Gedicht in fünf Akten*.

Petrarch's *A Fable of Wifely Obedience and Devotion* had a significant impact on European literary history.²⁰ This is true also for Germany, where Heinrich Steinhöwel's translation of Petrarch's story saw no fewer than fourteen editions between 1471 and 1500,²¹ and where, for instance, Hans Sachs wrote a comedy based on the tale.²² By the eighteenth century, however, the productive reception of the Griseldis story had largely abated.²³ In the Age of Enlightenment, the tale of obedience ostensibly could not count on much popularity, and for writers around 1800, the rather extreme character portrayals of tyranny (Walter) and obedience (Griseldis) seem to have lost their appeal.²⁴ The fact that Petrarch's story also shows in rather nuanced ways the ties between obedience and agency went unnoticed.

Given the ceasing interest in the medieval tale, the immediate and lasting success of Halm's play is, at least at first sight, surprising and invites the question of how Halm changed the Griseldis plot to make it speak to the nineteenth century.²⁵ For even though the popularity of Halm's play in Vienna has likely much to do with the main actress, Julie Rettich (the play succeeded only upon its second performance, when Rettich assumed the role of Griseldis),²⁶ the wide international reception must be understood as an effect of the play itself.

The established explanation for the success of *Griseldis* is that Halm managed to re-popularize the old tale by endowing Griseldis with a greater agency. In a recent survey of the transformations of Griseldis throughout history, Mario Zanuchi, for instance, describes Halm's play as the culmination of a century-long development in which Griseldis learned to speak with her own voice and to defy her husband.²⁷ In a similar way, Peter Skrine called Halm's *Griseldis* an "early feminist play"²⁸ and argued that the ending of Halm's play, in which Griseldis leaves her husband, prefigured the ending of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879). In both plays, Skrine writes, we see a wife's "awakening sense of [her] own identity."²⁹ Luigi Reitani further underscored the essence of Skrine's reading by linking Halm's play to a cultural shift towards women's emancipation in the nineteenth century.³⁰

In the assessment that Halm endows Griseldis with a greater agency, modern scholars echo statements by the play's nineteenth-century critics. In an 1846 review article on Halm's early plays, the French critic Taillandier, for instance, explicitly applauds Halm for granting Griseldis a stronger assertion of her own rights:

One must thank Mr. Halm for the noble thought that he has so ably brought to the stage. The Griseldis character is now complete; resignation is no longer degrading itself to complete surrender of right and will. The Middle Ages could not demand more of Griseldis. Today her humility appears – Thank God – much more sublime, blended with such pure dignity.³¹

Taillandier's essential claim is not only that the medieval Griseldis is entirely submissive, whereas Halm's retains her own right and will, but also that these two characters are representative of their respective age. Taillandier thus embeds his reading of Halm's play in a broader narrative of historical progress towards greater individual freedom.

We have, of course, ever since Benjamin, Adorno, and Foucault, become suspicious of such narratives of historical progress, and I argue that the changes that the Griselda tale undergoes from Petrarch to Halm do much to underscore this suspicion. Concretely, I contend that Taillandier underestimates the agency of the medieval Griseldis (as we see her in Petrarch's story) and that he, in a way that is characteristic of the nineteenth century, overestimates the agency granted to Halm's Griseldis.

This is not to say that Taillandier misread Halm's intention. Halm most likely saw in his Griseldis the embodiment of an ideal of (strong) existence. Otherwise his dedicatory poem to the Princess Sophie of Bavaria, the Austrian Emperor Franz Josef's mother, would be hard to account for. In this poem, Halm portrays Sophie as the real incarnation of his fictional Griseldis.³² Rather, I argue that Halm himself misunderstood the implications of his own ideal. The way in which Halm presents Griseldis does not reduce her obedience; what Halm does, instead, is to reinterpret her obedience as agency.

In the following, I analyze four major changes that Halm implemented and suggest that they all serve to locate Griseldis's agency more firmly *within* her obedience. For Halm, in other words, Griseldis does not retain her freedom in those acts that she accomplishes aside from her obedience; instead, her very obedience becomes the greatest expression of her freedom. The four aspects that I discuss in the remainder of this article have to do, first, with the changed motivation of Griseldis's husband's cruel acts; second, with the

introduction of competing authorities that each vie for Griseldis's obedience; third, with the removal of the concessions that we see in Petrarch's story; and, fourth, with the explanation of why Griseldis leaves her husband.

To be clear, my interpretations in the following are based on the printed version of Halm's play (published in 1837), not on the text performed on stage. It is the published version that likely reflects more closely the intentions of the novice writer Halm (rather than that of the theater practitioners in the Burgtheater and of the censors, who, as a rule, were stricter with stage manuscripts than with the printed texts³³), and it is through the published text that Halm reached a wider audience beyond Vienna. It should be noted, however, that a review of the extant stage and censorship manuscripts also has not revealed differences that would have a significant impact on the present interpretation.³⁴

The first difference between Petrarch and Halm that merits commentary is that Halm does much to better motivate the ordeals that Griseldis faces. Given the expectations of modern audiences for psychological consistency, Halm likely understood that he could not simply claim, as Petrarch does, a sudden "desire more strange than laudable" to justify these ordeals.³⁵ Indeed, Halm's entire first act of his five-act drama serves to explain the behavior of Griseldis's husband. What Halm constructs here is, in some sense, a classic tale of tragic hubris. Griseldis's husband boasts of his wife's obedience, and this boasting sets the stage for his fall at the end of the play.

To review this first act in some more detail, we have to recall that Griseldis's husband is in Halm's version the Arthurian knight Percival. In Halm's play, the knight Percival is an outsider to the Arthurian court, a rough warrior, disdainful of the glamorous court culture. Unsurprisingly, the courtiers are baffled at Percival's choice of so lowly a

wife as Griseldis (Griseldis's father is, in Halm's play, a charcoal burner) and react with mockery to Percival's justification of his marriage. As Percival explains to Queen Ginevra, when he first encountered Griseldis, he was struck by her chastity, modesty, piousness, and obedience. Obedience is the final virtue mentioned by Percival, and it is Griseldis's obedience that fully confirms him in his intention to marry her: "Gehorsam ist sie auch, sagt' ich mir selber,/ Und mancherley erwägend kehrt' ich heim." (32) ('She is obedient too!' I said; and, lost/ In diverse musings, bent my steps tow'rds home. [24])

When Queen Ginevra joins her ladies-in-waiting in ridiculing Percival for his choice of bride, Percival aggressively insults the queen: "Eh' Gift und Dolch und Pest und eklen Aussatz,/ als Deines Namen Klang!" (35)³⁶ (The dagger, poison, leprosy and plague/ Were sweeter greeting than thy hateful name! [27]) Justifying (and extending) this outburst against the queen, Percival claims that, according to merit, Ginevra would have to kneel before Griseldis: "Ging's nach Verdienst und Recht auf dieser Erde,/ So wäre, die du schmähtest, Königin,/ und du, du knietest vor dem Köhlerkind!" (39)³⁷ (Went it on earth by virtue and desert,/ She, whom thou scorn'st, would be thy Sovereign,/ And thou, Ginevra, kneel before Griselda! [31])

In vain, the magnanimous King Artus attempts to resolve the tension. He offers to forgive Percival his insult against the queen and the institution of monarchy, provided that Percival recants. Percival, however, refuses to do so. In this situation, Ginevra tempts Percival with a wager. She promises to kneel in front of Griseldis if Griseldis proves her exceptional submission to her husband by freely giving up her child and by leaving her husband and returning to her previous poverty at his command. Although warned against

accepting this wager by both Tristan and Artus, Percival haughtily accepts it, thus exposing his wife to considerable hardship.

Locating the motivation for the behavior of Griseldis's husband in pride³⁸ has several important consequences. More than simply supplying Halm with a justification for an otherwise incomprehensible form of behavior, it allows Halm to dramatize more easily the entire story of Griseldis, which, as critics have pointed out, otherwise poses significant challenges to playwrights due to its lack of conflict.³⁹ Halm recasts the relatively flat story of Griseldis in the tragic form of a hubris plot: at the very moment that the hero wants to show his greatest power, he fails as a result of his proud overreaching of his own human limitations.

However, over and above the functions of pride for the structure of the entire play, the inclusion of the hubris plot also affects the concept of obedience in this play. For it points us to the fact that Griseldis's obedience is, paradoxically, not at the direct disposal of Percival himself. Percival believes to have unchecked command over Griseldis, but as the end of the play confirms, this is not the case—and by framing the story of Griseldis in the form of a hubris-plot, we are, from the outset, prepared for this outcome: according to dramatic conventions, the proud expectations will necessarily be disappointed. Although Griseldis is obedient to Percival, it remains very much *her* obedience; this obedience is nothing that Percival can test and command at his own will. Obedience shows itself in appropriate situations, but it cannot simply be tested as the obeyed person wishes. By thus placing obedience in the domain of the obedient person, Halm imbues obedience with some degree of agency.

Halm's tendency to associate obedience itself with agency becomes clearer in the second significant change that he introduces, namely the multiplication of authority figures. Whereas Petrarch's tale limits itself largely to the portrayal of Griseldis's obedience to her husband, Halm's play features a conflict between different instances of authority that all—justifiably, in some limited sense—demand obedience of Griseldis. Specifically, Griseldis finds herself torn between the demands of her husband and those of her parents, especially her father, Cedric. Halm devotes the long first scene of the second act to this conflict—the very first scene in which Griseldis appears on stage. As we learn in this scene from a conversation between Griseldis and her servant Ronald, Cedric scorns his daughter for the ways in which she has preferred her husband over her parents. Concretely, Cedric blames Griseldis for the fact that when both Percival and Griseldis's mother were sick, Griseldis stayed with her husband, not seeing her mother before her death. Moreover, as Percival chased his father-in-law out of his castle, Griseldis remained silent, protesting only with her muted tears.

The introduction of this conflict between paternal and spousal authority serves several purposes. Firstly, this conflict allows once more to dramatize the obedient character of Griseldis. The conflict is thus a plot device, a formal necessity of the drama to represent this character. However, this dramatization of obedience has also significant consequences for the concept of obedience. By showing Griseldis's obedience to her wifely duties as the result of a necessary decision between husband and parents, Griseldis's obedient behavior becomes interpretable as a free act. This is different from Petrarch's story, in which Griseldis's (and Walter's) agency consists not in their obedient behavior, but in the concessions that they secure while being obedient.

It is therefore only fitting that these concessions, which are of great structural importance to Petrarch's text, are consistently omitted in Halm's play—and this is the third change to the Griseldis tale that I wish to discuss here. This omission of concessions is already apparent in the initial exchange between Griseldis's future husband and his subjects. Percival, like Walter in Petrarch's story, is pressured by his subjects to marry. However, he never directly accedes to this demand, and consequently he also does not have to ask for permission to choose his wife himself. Instead, Percival spontaneously revokes his aversion to marriage when he encounters Griseldis.

More significantly, Halm also cuts the plea for a concession in the scene in which Griseldis is asked to hand over her child. Unlike Petrarch's Griseldis, Halm's does not ask to have the child protected from wild animals. However, Halm makes up for this omission by adding a prolonged scene in which Griseldis protests the demand to give up her child. From expressing disbelief to contemplating resistance, Griseldis explores different avenues that would allow her to keep her child. Only when she is told that keeping her child would put her husband at risk does she surrender it. Again, Halm's innovation in this sequence permits several interpretations. To a nineteenth-century audience, it would have appeared psychologically improbable, morally problematic, as well as dramatically unsatisfactory that a mother abandons her child as willingly as Petrarch's Griseldis does. In staging Griseldis's conflict, Halm manages to show a psychologically more realistic portrait of a more likeable character at the same time that he gains a dramatic exchange for this potentially so undramatic subject matter. However, another important implication of Halm's change is that, once more, Griseldis's obedience becomes readable as an *act*—

resulting from deliberation and contrasted with alternative forms of behavior. Her agency lies not in asking for concessions, but in the obedient behavior itself.

With much consistency, Halm also removes the concession in the scene in which Griseldis is sent away by her husband with nothing else than what she had brought into the marriage.⁴⁰ In Petrarch's story, as noted above, Griseldis is dressed by her husband even before entering his home, thus bringing nothing herself into the marriage—a fact that in some sense necessitates her request to keep at least one piece of clothing when she is sent away. Halm, by contrast, changes the story so that this demand is no longer called for. In his play, Griseldis enters the marriage with a wool dress and an apron of her own, and she can thus simply accept the dismissal and leave in her old clothes. Instead of asking for concessions, Griseldis acquiesces to an order that, in her eyes, comes just as much from her husband as it comes from God. Lifting her eyes to heaven, Griseldis utters “Der Herr gebiethet, und die Magd gehorcht.” (86; The Lord above/ So wills it, and his Handmaiden obeys. [78]) No concessions are asked for.

Perhaps the most significant way, however, in which Halm recasts the meaning of obedience in this play consists in the different ending that he finds for the tale. Rather than returning to her husband as Petrarch's Griseldis does, Halm's Griseldis leaves her husband when she finds out that her obedience was merely being tested in a frivolous wager. As discussed, the fact that Griseldis abandons her husband after finding out that her plight was due to a “Fastnachtspiel” (131) (Shrovetide Mask [123]) has routinely been read as an increase of Griseldis's agency—reflecting the burgeoning emancipation of women in the nineteenth century. However, looking more closely at the explanation as to why Griseldis abandons her husband may lead one to recognize that she does not simply remove herself

from the jurisdiction of conjugal authority. Quite to the contrary, Griseldis refuses to return to her husband precisely because she wants to hold on to the “göttergleichem Bild” (137) (God-like image [128]) that she previously held of her husband:

Ich kann nicht mit dir gehen, Hand in Hand,
Wenn Herz vom Herzen nüchtern sich gewandt,
Ich kann's nicht, Percival! Es hängt mein Leben,
Die Achtung meiner selbst, mein letztes Streben
An meiner Träume göttergleichem Bild,
An deinem Bild! – O laß es mich bewahren,
Wie's hell und funkelnd meine Seele füllt. (137)⁴¹

I could not wander hand in hand with thee,
And feel that heart was coldly turned from heart.
I could not, Percival. — My self respect —
My life — its closing scenes— all, all must rest
Upon the God-like image of my dreams —
Rest on thy image; let me then preserve it,
Sparkling and bright, as now it fills my soul. (128)

To be sure, Griseldis's refusal to unite with her husband is done in the name of “self respect” (Achtung meiner selbst); but this self-respect is identified with her dependence on the divine image of her husband. Critics who wanted to see in Halm's play merely a

moment of increasing individual freedom and of female emancipation have not paid sufficient attention to this enduring authority of the ideal husband. In some sense, Griseldis's refusal to be with her husband is the ultimate confirmation of his previous authority. Griseldis's agency does not consist, as is the case for Petrarch's story, in the freedom to act (however minimally) outside of obedience; instead, up to the very end and including the decisive refusal to be with her husband, Griseldis's actions are always *obedient* acts. Griseldis's departure from her husband is in line with her previous (obedient) behavior, not a rupture with it.

In sum, the main tendency of Halm's play is not to reduce Griseldis's obedience, but to reinterpret obedience as agency—a conceptual move that potentially hinders us from exploring, with Petrarch's Griseldis, the wiggle room for agency outside of (but not necessarily against) obedience. The fact that critics have hitherto failed to see this problematic aspect of Halm's play, lauding it instead as a harbinger of emancipation, might be a sign of how deeply the historical reinterpretation of obedience as agency, which is exemplified by Halm's drama, has shaped our modern system of values.

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¹ New monographs include: Christine Achinger, *Gespaltene Moderne: Gustav Freytags 'Soll und Haben.'* Nation, Geschlecht und Judenbild. Würzburg: Königshausen

und Neumann, 2007; Alyssa A. Lonner, *Mediating the Past: Gustav Freytag, Progress, and German Historical Identity, 1848-1871*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2005; Larry L. Ping, *Gustav Freytag and the Prussian Gospel: Novels, Liberalism, and History*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2006.

² Kurt Vancsa states that Halm “was, besides Bauernfeld, the most successful author for the Burgtheater after Grillparzer’s largely accusatory departure from the stage.” Kurt Vancsa, “Friedrich Halm (1806-1871): Ein Beitrag zur Erhellung des Epigonen-Problems,” *Jahrbuch für Landeskunde von Niederösterreich*. Neue Folge. 37 (1965-1967): 302-316, 311.

³ The other writers are Calderon, Shakespeare, Molière, Lessing, Goethe, Schiller, Hebbel, and Grillparzer.

⁴ An index of Halm’s acceptance within British university curricula is the inclusion of his play *Griseldis* in the series *German Classics* of the Clarendon Press: *Halm’s Griseldis*, ed. C.A. Buchheim. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894. In the English-language preface, Buchheim states his positive experience with Halm’s play in the classroom in rather hyperbolic terms: “I determined to prepare an edition of Halm’s *Griseldis* for English readers, more especially after the suitability of a text-book in classes had been practically and successfully tried by myself and a number of my colleagues. The play riveted the attention of the readers from the very beginning, and the interest in it never flagged for a moment. Indeed it was generally admitted that more impressive reading could hardly be found.” (*Halm’s Griseldis*, vi).

⁵ I discuss scholarship on Halm’s play *Griseldis*, which is at the center of the present article, further below. For a—only slightly outdated—overview of the literature on Halm in general, see Vancsa, “Friedrich Halm,” 315-316.

⁶ The present article focuses solely on Halm's first play, *Griseldis* (first performed 1835). Similar arguments could, however, also be made for the comedy *Verbot und Befehl* (Prohibition and Command, first performed 1848) and the novella *Das Haus an der Veronabrücke* (The House by the Verona Bridge, written 1862-1864).

⁷ I follow Robert Dudley French's translation: Robert Dudley French, *A Chaucer Handbook*, 2nd edition. New York: Widener, 1947. 291-311. Further citations in the text. Petrarch based his tale on the last novella in Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

⁸ Luigi Reitani, "Griseldis am Artushof: Friedrich Halm: *Griseldis: Ein dramatisches Gedicht* (1835/1837)." *Die deutsche Griselda: Transformationen einer literarischen Figur von Boccaccio bis zur Moderne*. Ed. Achim Aurnhammer and Hans-Jochen Schiewer. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010. 223-228. 224. Halm's first English translator called *Griseldis* "one of the most popular Dramas which has lately appeared on the German stage." Ralph A. Anstruther, "Preface." *Griselda: A Dramatic Poem in Five Acts*. By Friedrich Halm. Trans. Ralph A. Anstruther. London: Black and Armstrong, 1840. v-xiv. v. In a note dated September 16, 1836, the actor Carl Ludwig Costenoble called *Griseldis* the commercially most successful play in the Burgtheater at that time. Carl Ludwig Costenoble, *Aus dem Burgtheater: Tagebuchblätter 1818-1837*. Wien: Carl Konegen, 1889, 294.

⁹ How widely known the *Griseldis*-tale and its origins really were around 1835 remains unclear. An interesting anecdote in this respect is that an early review of Halm's play in the *Allgemeine Theaterzeitung* claims that the "basic idea came probably from a *Volksbüchlein*." Moritz Gottlieb Saphir, "Ehevorgestern, am 30. December, zum ersten Male: 'Griseldis.' Romantisches Drama in fünf Acten." *Allgemeine Theaterzeitung und*

Originalblatt für Kunst, Literatur, Musik, Mode und geselliges Leben 29.2 (2 January 1836): 6-7, 7. Focusing on the *Volksbüchlein*, the reviewer, Moritz Gottlieb Saphir, was apparently not aware that the story of Griseldis was originally popularized through the works of Boccaccio and Petrarch.

¹⁰ *Briefwechsel zwischen Michael Enk von der Burg und Eligius Freih. von Münch-Bellinghausen (Friedrich Halm)*. Ed. Rudolf Schachinger. Wien: Alfred Hölder, 1890, 34.

¹¹ Saphir's favorable review in the *Allgemeine Theaterzeitung* remarks especially on the ending of the play. See Saphir, "Ehevorgestern," 7. Reportedly, Ludwig Tieck spoke highly of Halm's play in general, but was not satisfied with the ending—he wanted to see Griseldis and her husband united. See Costenoble, *Aus dem Burgtheater*, 288.

¹² Elizabeth Rigby Eastlake, *Letters from the Shores of the Baltic*. 2nd edition. 2 vol. London: John Murray, 1842. 251.

¹³ Saint-René Taillandier, "La Poésie dramatique à Vienne." *Revue des deux Mondes* 16 (1846): 170-186, 179.

¹⁴ On the differences between Boccaccio's and Petrarch's versions, see, for instance, Mario Zanuchi, "Stoische Philosophin – christliche Dulderin – brave Gattin: Die europäischen Metamorphosen von Boccaccios Griselda." *700 Jahre Boccaccio: Traditionslinien vom Trecento bis in die Moderne*. Ed. Christa Bertelsmeier-Kierst and Rainer Stillers. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2015. 193-220. 196-209.

¹⁵ Faust Pachler, *Jugend und Lehrjahre des Dichters Friedrich Halm*. Wien: Selbstverlag [Druck Ludwig Mayer], 1877. 50.

¹⁶ In the European reception from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, Petrarch's story was understood, against Petrarch's explicit remarks to the contrary, as a guide to

marriages, admonishing wives to be obedient. See Zanuchi, “Stoische Philosophin,” 209-214. See also Renée Ward, “Giving Voice to Griselda: Radical Reimaginings of a Medieval Tale.” *Studies in Medievalism* 26 (2017): 87-116, esp. 104.

¹⁷ *Petrarca, The First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters: A Selection from His Correspondence with Boccaccio and Other Friends, Designed to Illustrate the Beginnings of the Renaissance*. Ed. James Harvey Robinson and Henry Winchester Rolfe. New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1909. 194.

¹⁸ This could be shown through the parallels between the discussion of obedience in this play and in other texts by Halm that have male protagonists. It should be noted, however, that the reception of Halm’s *Griseldis* has certainly emphasized gender. The translator of the first English edition of the play, for instance, writes in his dedication that Halm’s *Griseldis* is “intended to portray the perfections of that [female] sex.” Friedrich Halm, *Griselda: A Dramatic Poem in Five Acts*. Trans. Ralph A. Anstruther. London: Black and Armstrong, 1840. Further citations in the text.

¹⁹ On the psychological inconsistencies in Petrarch’s story, also compared to Boccaccio’s version, see Zanuchi, “Stoische Philosophin,” 207.

²⁰ Zanuchi, “Stoische Philosophin,” 209-214.

²¹ Zanuchi, “Stoische Philosophin,” 211. The rich reception history of the *Griseldis* tale in Germany is analyzed in the volume *Die deutsche Griselda: Transformationen einer literarischen Figur von Boccaccio bis zur Moderne*. Ed. Achim Aurnhammer and Hans-Jochen Schiewer. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010.

²² Sachs’s comedy is entitled *Ein comedi mit 13 personen: die gedultig und gehorsam marggräfin Griselda* (A Comedy with Thirteen Characters: The Patient and

Obedient Margravine Griselda). Sachs likely knew not only Steinhöwel's translation of Petrarch, but also a translation of the *Decameron*. On Sachs's *Griselda* see Michael Dallapiazza, "Hans Sachsens comedi: die gedultig und gehorsam marggräfin Griselda." *Die deutsche Griselda: Transformationen einer literarischen Figur von Boccaccio bis zur Moderne*. Ed. Achim Aurnhammer and Hans-Jochen Schiewer. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010. 143-151.

²³ To be sure, the European reception of the Griseldis tale did not stop completely with the beginning of the eighteenth century. On the early-eighteenth-century Griseldis plays by Zeno and Goldoni, for instance, see Janet Levarie Smarr, "Marriage Politics?: Dramatizing Griselda," *Mediaevalia* 34 (2013): 221-239. As noted above, it is not easy to assess how widely the Griseldis tale was known in the early nineteenth century.

²⁴ Dieter Martin, "Griseldis in der klassisch-romantischen Ballade." *Die deutsche Griselda: Transformationen einer literarischen Figur von Boccaccio bis zur Moderne*. Ed. Achim Aurnhammer and Hans-Jochen Schiewer. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010. 183–201. 183.

²⁵ Already in 1819, Otto Heinrich von Loeben published the novella *Markgraf Walther und Griseldis*, which, however, does not appear to have had a strong resonance. See Mario Zanuchi, "Griseldis im Zeitalter der Restauration: *Markgraf Walther und Griseldis* (1819) des Otto Heinrich von Loeben." *Die deutsche Griselda: Transformationen einer literarischen Figur von Boccaccio bis zur Moderne*. Ed. Achim Aurnhammer and Hans-Jochen Schiewer. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010. 204-220.

²⁶ *Briefwechsel zwischen Michael Enk von der Burg und Eligius Freih. von Münch-Bellinghausen* (Friedrich Halm), 36. Conversely, *Griseldis* appears to have contributed much to Julie Rettich's renown. Costenoble notes that her performance of *Griseldis* turned

her into the most popular female actor of the Burgtheater. See Costenoble, *Aus dem Burgtheater*, 262.

²⁷ Zanuchi, “Stoische Philosophin,” 220.

²⁸ Peter Skrine, “Friedrich Halm and the Comic Muse.” *The Austrian Comic Tradition: Studies in the Honour of W. E. Yates*. Ed. John R. P. McKenzie and Lesley Sharpe. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998. 145-159. 145.

²⁹ Peter Skrine, “Halm’s Griseldis: A Landmark in Nineteenth-Century German Drama.” *The Modern Language Review* 63.2 (April 1968): 417-424, 424.

³⁰ Luigi Reitani, “Griseldis am Artushof,” 227. The argument may be more convincing for a different Griseldis text of the nineteenth century, namely Eleonora L. Hervey’s “Griseldis, with her Children” (1850), a poem on the weak position of women in marriages. See Ward, “Giving Voice to Griselda.”

³¹ Taillandier, “La Poésie dramatique à Vienne,” 179.

³² Friedrich Halm, *Griseldis: Dramatisches Gedicht in fünf Akten*. Wien: Carl Gerold, 1837. 7-8. Further citations in the text.

³³ Franz Hadamowsky, “Ein Jahrhundert Literatur- und Theaterzensur: 1751–1848.” *Die österreichische Literatur: Ihr Profil an der Wende vom 18. zum 19. Jahrhundert (1750-1830)*. Ed. Herbert Zeman. Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1979. Part 1, 289-305. 292.

³⁴ That being said, there are a number of differences between the stage manuscript (manuscript M5974 in the Theatermuseum in Vienna) and the printed version of the play. One of the more striking differences concerns the scene in which Queen Ginevra concedes that she has lost her wager with Percival and, as promised, kneels before Griseldis. As we

know from contemporary reports, the Emperor left the Burgtheater after seeing this scene (see Costenoble, *Aus dem Burgtheater*, 258). In subsequent performances, Ginevra was only seen bowing before Griseldis and the stage manuscript was corrected: “Percival (*in stolzer Freude*): Sie ~~kni~~et huldigt ihr, oh ruft es aus in alle Winde,/ die Königin ~~kni~~et ~~vor~~ beugt sich dem Köhlerkinde.” (M5974, 227). The printed version, by contrast, retains the original wording (133). However, revealing as this difference might be of contemporary censorship practice (the original censor apparently let the scene pass [see the censorship manuscript M5975, 190]), it has little bearing on the present interpretation.

³⁵ Otto Heinrich von Loeben also added a clearer motivation for the ordeals in his novella *Markgraf Walter und Griseldis* (1819). See Zanuchi, “Griseldis im Zeitalter der Reformation,” 210.

³⁶ The censor did not interfere with this offense of the majesty. See the censorship manuscript M5975, 40.

³⁷ In the censorship manuscript, these verses are written on paper that is taped over the original page, which could indicate an intervention by the censor (M5975, 45). As the stage manuscript reveals, the verses were later changed to align with the fact that Queen Ginevra was no longer supposed to kneel before Griseldis (see note above). Percival now simply states, “[d]aß sie [Griseldis] verdiente Königin zu sein,/ Und du [Ginevra] huldigtest vor dem Köhlerkind!” (M5974, 55).

³⁸ Percival’s acceptance of the wager is repeatedly associated with pride, notably by the king (42).

³⁹ Smarr, “Marriage Politics?,” 221

⁴⁰ There was no need for Halm specifically to cut the final concession from Petrarch's story, in which Griseldis asks to spare the new wife the harsh treatment she received because Halm removed that entire scene.

⁴¹ In the stage manuscript, the text is struck through with a pencil after "Ich kann's nicht, Percival." (M5974, 233) Thus, some of the decisive lines for my interpretation would not have been spoken on stage. It is possible, however, that these cuts were made only for the 1881 production of the play, for which the original stage manuscript was reused (information on the use of the manuscript in 1881 by Claudia Mayerhofer, Theatermuseum).