Medieval Depictions of “Poor Queens” in Art and Text

In the Prologue to “The Man of Law’s Tale,” Geoffrey Chaucer’s story of the falsely accused queen Custance, the narrator castigates poverty: “O hateful harm, condicion of povertie! With thurst, with coold, with hunger so confoundid!” After deploring the extremes to which indigence can lead – stealing, begging, or borrowing – he warns his readers against falling into poverty: “Alle the daies of povre men been wikke./ Be war, therfore, er thou come to that prikke!” This passage has been a puzzle to Chaucer scholars because it seems to contradict the message of the tale of Custance that follows. That tale extols the fortitude and spiritual wealth of a heroine subjected to extreme poverty: she is twice deprived of all material possessions and social status by being exiled and set adrift on the sea in a rudderless ship. Rather than, as some scholars have done, read this seeming contradiction between the Prologue and the Tale as a sign of the unfinished nature of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales,* I use it to begin a discussion of poverty as seen through the lens of medieval narratives of “poor queens.” In short, “The Man of Law’s Tale” provides us with two definitions of poverty: the negative view of the Man of Law, who equates it with hunger, thirst, and cold; and a positive view provided by the story itself, which equates poverty with spiritual fortitude and constancy. The disparity of attitudes toward poverty

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1 *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson. 3rd ed. (Boston, 1987), 88-89. Hereafter all quotations from Chaucer will be from this text and cited in the essay by the abbreviation for the work: *The Canterbury Tales (CT)* or *Troilus and Criseyde (TC).* The parenthetical reference to *CT* will be followed by fragment number and lines as here: II. 99-100 and 118-119. The parenthetical reference to *TC* will be followed by the number of the book and the line numbers.

2 Patricia J. Eberle's explanatory notes to *The Riverside Chaucer (op. cit. supra, n. 1),* 856, summarize the scholarly commentary on the problematical connections of the Prologue to the Tale.
found at the start of the tale reflects larger cultural anxieties and philosophical debates about poverty and wealth in the fourteenth century in France and England.

Evidence of contradictions in medieval attitudes toward poverty can also be found in the preceding century and in other source materials. In her recent book, Surviving Poverty in Medieval Paris: Gender, Ideology, and the Daily Lives of the Poor, Sharon Farmer analyzes not only traditional historical documents, such as wills and tax assessments, but also sermons and sixty-five posthumous miracles of St. Louis for what they reveal about the condition of the poor in thirteenth-century France. I am particularly interested in the larger attitudes toward the poor that emerge from her study. The elite discourse about the poor, particularly about the disabled or begging poor, is largely negative. Although Farmer acknowledges that alternative views of the poor existed and mentions a few, my essay follows up on her brief discussion and explores the works of several authors in the next century, authors close to or working for royal patrons in Paris and London between 1314 and 1400. Study of these works reinforces the view that positive notions toward the poor indeed existed. I shall demonstrate that stories of “poor queens” were an important part of that discourse; that during this period attitudes toward wealth and poverty were complex; and that this discourse is inseparable from contemporary critiques of justice and power.

The “poor queens” of my title is shorthand for all fictional noblewomen—whether queens or countesses or marquises—who experience an abrupt change in social status. These include “falsely accused” noblewomen, the subject of my prior research, as well as the narrative of one who might more accurately be called “abused”: Griselda, the wife of Walter, Marquis of Saluzzo, the subject of Chaucer’s “Clerk’s Tale.” While the “falsely accused” women, of which Custance is a notable example, experience a sudden removal from court into the extreme poverty of exile, the “abused” Griselda moves abruptly in the reverse direction. When Walter stops by her hut one day and asks her father for her hand in marriage, she moves suddenly from the life of a shepherdess to that of a marquise, a surprising elevation in social status. Whether these heroines move abruptly down or up the social ladder, their stories relate closely to one another, as a comment from Christine de Pizan indicates. She speaks both of an accused queen (the empress of Rome,

3 Ithaca, 2002.
4 Ibid., 70-73.
5 See Nancy B. Black, Medieval Narratives of Accused Queens (Gainesville, 2003).
whom she calls Florence) and Griselda when she writes in *The Book of the City of Ladies* that they “both endured great adversity with amazing patience.” And Chaucer himself introduces the stories of both Custance and Griselda into his *Canterbury Tales* in such a way that they become important, parallel examples of virtuous women, the heroines of two key stories: “The Man of Law’s Tale” and “The Clerk’s Tale,” respectively.

This study examines both accused and abused fictional noblewomen to see what their stories can tell us about medieval depictions of and attitudes toward poverty. My starting point is not the modern editions of the tales but rather the manuscripts themselves. Analysis of the manuscript as cultural artifact enables us to understand both the language of text and the language of art, different types of signifiers used to evoke poverty to audiences in the Middle Ages. Two illustrated manuscripts provide evidence of visual depictions of poverty in fourteenth-century France. The first is the only illustrated manuscript of the *Roman du Comte d’Anjou* by Jehan Maillart, secretary to the king of France, Philip IV, BNF n.a.fr. 4531, dated 1316. The second is an illustrated dramatized version of the story of Griselda, *L’Estoire de Griseldis*, based on a work by Philippe de Mézières, tutor to the French dauphin, BNF fr. 2203, dated 1395. After analyzing the relationship of art and text in these manuscripts, I then move to the larger issue of attitudes toward poverty, placing these documents into the context of debates about poverty in Paris. Finally, I will show how Chaucer incorporated these ideas into his *Canterbury Tales*, thus transferring those debates across the Channel to London.

Jehan Maillart’s story is typical of narratives of accused queens in that it follows a four-part structure: the heroine falls twice from a position of high status and then twice recovers that status, a cyclical movement that echoes the turnings of the wheel of fortune. The heroine, who is the daughter of the count of Anjou, flees from the court with her governess in order to escape her father’s incestuous desires. Her life in exile is one of poverty, which the author frequently compares to the life of luxury she has left. Taken in by a poor woman in Orleans, the count’s daughter and her governess begin to embroider for a living. The heroine is eventually rescued by the count of Bourges, who marries her and restores her to a life of luxury. During the count’s absence on a military expedition, she gives birth to a beautiful boy.

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6 Tr. Earl Jeffrey Richards (New York, 1982), 176.
7 Ed. Mario Roques (1931; reprint Paris, 1974).
8 Ed. Barbara M. Craig, Humanistic Studies 31 (Lawrence, 1954).
However, letters announcing the birth are altered by a jealous aunt, the countess of Chartres, and the result is a death sentence for mother and child. Just before they are about to be murdered, the henchmen take pity and allow mother and child to flee on foot. The mayoress of Etampes rescues them and sends them to the bishop at Orleans, who has a reputation for helping the poor. Meanwhile, the count of Bourges returns home, learns what has happened, and pledges a life of poverty and fasting until he finds his wife and son. Eventually the family is reunited in Orleans in the presence of the bishop, who turns out to be the heroine’s uncle. The happy couple returns to Bourges, and the count appeals to the king of France to punish the falsely accusing aunt, the countess of Chartres. With the king’s approval, the count launches an attack on his aunt, who is finally called to justice and burned at the stake. The happy couple returns to Anjou to claim the lands as part of their inheritance.

The sudden removal of this aristocratic woman from her luxurious, courtly surroundings plunges her into a hard-scrabble world where she needs to find shelter, and the artist of BNF n.q.fr. 4531 depicts both her involuntary poverty as well as the voluntary poverty of her husband when he leaves the court to search for her. Within the program of twenty-seven illustrations that originally accompanied the text (one miniature has been cut out and lost), two miniatures depict the poverty of the heroine and one the poverty of her husband. In these three illustrations, clothing is the principal signifier. The first image of the heroine and her governess in exile (Fig. 1) depicts them dressed simply in dresses and tunics barely distinguishable from those of the poor, old woman who offers them some of her bread. Later, after the falsification of letters, the heroine is depicted in much more dire straits (Fig. 2). In this scene, mother and child wait to be murdered and thrown into the large pit shown in the center of the illustration: the countess wears only her undergarment, indicating that she has been nearly stripped naked of all her material possessions and, needless to say, her social status.

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9 For a more general discussion of the use of clothing by medieval artists, see Françoise Piponnier and Perrine Mane, *Dress in the Middle Ages*, tr. Caroline Beamish (New Haven and London, 1997); originally published as *Se vêtir au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1995). For the relationship between sumptuary laws and social status, see *Showing Status: Representation of Social Positions in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. Wim Blockmans and Antheun Janse (Turnhout, 1999).
It is interesting to contrast the artist’s rendering of the involuntary poverty of the countess to that of the voluntary poverty of the count (Fig. 3). After learning that his wife had been falsely accused, he decides to embark on a pilgrimage: his garments consist of a flimsy tunic, reflecting his rejection of the clothing of wealth.\footnote{The green leaf-like marks on his garment are a puzzle; perhaps they suggest a spiritual renewal similar to that referred to by Chaucer at the start of the \textit{Canterbury Tales}.} The text just below the picture explains that he has given away his good robe and quite deliberately assumed the tunic, shoes, and hat of a poor servant.\footnote{“Lors a sa bonne robe ostee,/ Celle a un serf a dossee:/ D'uns soulers a lienz se chaue,/ Si ne mist dessouz nulle chaue:/ Un chaperon ot deschiré:/ Con povres s'est bien atiré,/ Et en sa main prist un baston”(5293-5299).} How different is the status of the count, countess, and their son at the happy ending of the tale when they make their entrance into Anjou. Now they can travel in comfort in a closed carriage instead of wandering on foot like poor people, begging bread as they journey along (Fig. 4).
Fig. 2: Paris, BNF n.a.fr. 4531, fol. 34r; reproduced by permission of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France

Fig. 3: Paris, BNF n.a.fr. 4531, fol. 43r; reproduced by permission of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France
The emphasis on poverty in this manuscript is not merely the whim of the artist, for Jehan Maillard’s text also frequently contrasts the world of poverty experienced by the heroine to the life of luxury she has left behind. In addition to using clothing as a signifier, however, the poet also employs food as a key signifier. Maillard’s principal flight of rhetorical fancy occurs in a passage found just after the image above in which the daughter of the count of Anjou and her governess beg bread from a poor, old woman. The fifty-three-line passage is notable for its length and the details of fine meats, fish, pastries, and wines enjoyed at the court. It begins with the heroine’s memory of “Mes viandes chieres et fines,/ Chapons en rost, oisons, gelines,/ Cynnes, paons, perdris, fesanz,/ Herons, butors qui sont plesans” and ends with a list of fourteen outstanding wines (see the Appendix I for the entire passage).

It is significant that this passage, and others like it, were copied and incorporated into another important work from the same period, Chaillou de

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Pestain’s *Roman de Fauvel* (1316-18), a remarkable critique of fourteenth-century Parisian abuses of wealth and power by means of an animal fable in which a horse named Fauvel is crowned king. According to the editors of the recent facsimile edition of BNF fr. 316, Chaillou and Maillart were part of the same circle of clerical writers who complained about abuses of power following the death of King Philip IV (d. 1314) and who campaigned to restore legitimate and effective royal leadership. This close connection between the two texts suggests that the depiction of poverty in the *Roman* functions both to illustrate the inner virtues of the heroine – who can resist her father’s incestuous advances and survive a life of poverty away from court – and to serve as a critique of the wealthy class, an “admonitio” to the ruling classes.

As former royal secretary to Philip IV, Jehan Maillart had a vested interest in presenting a view of the world in which virtue reigns in the affairs of government. In his fictional world, a powerful king and an effective, centralized royal administration maintain order and carry out justice. Rejecting the fanciful geography of earlier narratives of accused queens, the author writes “Une aventure veritable” and sets the events in towns and counties under the control of the French king. More important, he devotes over one thousand lines of his 8156-line narrative to describing in detail the elaborate process by which the count of Bourges accuses his aunt of treason in the royal court and obtains a judgment permitting him to make war on her and ultimately order her death by fire. Thus, the count of Bourges becomes an example of a virtuous, effective ruler in contrast to the bearer of the title of the work, the willful count of Anjou whose incestuous desires cloud his mind and make him an ineffective ruler. The rhetorical contrasts between poverty and luxury that occur throughout the text serve to underscore this admonitory message.

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13 For a complete list of passages from *Roman du Comte d’Anjou* used in *Roman de Fauvel*, see Roques’ edition of *Roman* (*op. cit. supra*, n. 7), 256-258. In addition to the banquet scene printed here in Appendix A, the following passages have been borrowed: prayer to God (877-1008); more rich food (2353-2367, 2369-2370, 2371-2382, 2738, 2887-2888); richness of bed coverings (2896-2920, 3010); riches dispensed (6397-6402); lavish entry into Bourges (6507-6520).

In contrast to the Roman du Comte d’Anjou, the story of Griselda has a well-documented literary history and a broader audience. The story was first written by Boccaccio in the Decameron in 1353, the last of his stories in that collection. Petrarch retold the story in Latin and sent it in a letter to Boccaccio, first draft in 1373, revised in 1374, the year of Petrarch’s death. The letter was translated into French as Le Livre Griseldis by an anonymous translator and as Le Miroir des Dames Mariées by Philippe de Mézières (1385-89). In creating “The Clerk’s Tale,” Chaucer used both Petrarch’s Latin version and the anonymous French prose version, perhaps with some consultation of Philippe’s contemporary version. Philippe used his version of the Griselda story as part of his Le Livre de la Vertu du Sacrement de Mariage, but the story also circulated widely in France and was included in two fourteenth-century marriage manuals, Le Menagier de Paris and Le Livre du Chevalier de la Tour Landry. It was also used for the only extant dramatized version of the story, L’Éstoire de Griseldis (1395). The manuscript of this last work, BNF fr. 2203, includes nineteen illustrations and one historiated initial; it provides us with another source of information about visual representations of poverty at the end of the fourteenth century.

The story concerns the marquis of Saluzzo (a town in north-western Italy, near Turin), a man absorbed in his own pleasures, who declines to marry and produce an heir. His barons and knights select a “quint chevalier qui moult estoit ancien” to plead with him to take a wife, and he agrees on the condition that he can make the choice without consultation with them. He chooses Griselda, a poor shepherdess, after she promises never to contradict him or express any displeasure about his behavior. She is a model wife and produces two children, first a girl and then a boy. After the birth of each child, the marquis decides to test his wife’s fidelity by ordering her to let their child be taken away, presumably to be killed; he actually sends them off to his

15 Judith Bronfman, Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale (New York, 1994), 16.
18 Goodwin, ‘The Griselda Story’ (op. cit. supra, n. 16), 131.
19 L’Estoire de Griseldis, p. 30.
sister, the countess of Panico (near Bologne), to be educated. A third test of
his wife’s fidelity occurs when he tells her that he wants to discard her as his
wife and send her back home to her poor father so that he, the marquis, can
remarry. Again, without a word of complaint, she leaves her rich clothes
behind and returns to her father, dressed only in a simple shift. As a final
test, the marquis calls her back to his home and asks her to prepare the house
for his marriage to his new wife. After this last insult, she makes what may
be read as one slight murmur of complaint, warning him that his new bride
may not be tough enough to stand up to the same treatment she has received.
And only then does the marquis reveal that their two children are alive and
that the young woman he pretended to want to marry is actually their daugh-
ter. He takes Griselda back as his wife, and the family is reunited, presuma-
bly to live happily ever after.

An analysis of BNF fr. 2203 shows us that clothing is the principal signi-
fier of poverty in both illustrations and text. In fact, the contrasts between
wealth and poverty are more sharply accentuated in this program of illustra-
tion than in the Roman du Comte d’Anjou. At the start of the narrative,
Griselda and her father are seen outside their “hut,” which, admittedly,
seems rather a substantial building in the depiction here (Fig. 5). Griselda’s
long, flowing hair, her simple dress, her shepherd’s staff, and the sheep at
her feet define her lowly status. Once married and in the marquis’s home,
with elaborately coifed hair, she wears an elegant gown with fashionable
sleeves and long, dangling elbow pieces, clothing that almost matches that of
the marquis in elegance (Fig. 6). I say “almost” because her dress lacks the
embroidered “S” for Saluzzo that marks the marquis’s garments, perhaps
suggesting that her status as noblewoman has not yet been fully achieved or
acknowledged. However, the most dramatic contrast in status, as depicted
through displays of clothing in the illustrations, comes when the marquise is
sent from the court to return to her father’s hut (Fig. 7). The dress, marked
this time (and the only time) with the “S,” perhaps to indicate that it is the
property of the marquis, is handed back to him; Griselda’s hair is now cov-
ered by a simple, modest veil. Finally, at the end of the work, she has re-
gained her aristocratic status and dress (Fig. 8).
Fig. 5: Paris, BNF fr. 2203, fol. 15v; reproduced by permission of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France
Fig. 6: Paris, BNF fr. 2203, fol. 33r; reproduced by permission of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France
Fig. 7: Paris, BNF fr. 2203, fol. 46v;
reproduced by permission of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France
Fig. 8: Paris, BNF fr. 2203, fol. 52v; reproduced by permission of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France
The attention to clothing in the illustrations is echoed by references to clothing within the text. For example, during Walter’s third testing of Griselda, a chevalier comments on the action, noting the consistency of her deportment both when she was dressed poorly (as now) and when dressed richly (as she was before Walter rejected her). 20 When, toward the end of the work, Walter finally admits that he has tested Griselda enough and reveals that the woman he has pretended to marry is actually their daughter, she herself notes the need to have her mother reclothed: “Madame, il fault qu’on vous reveste,/ Car trop estes petitement.”21 In contrast to the distinction we saw in the *Roman du Comte d’Anjou* between the visual (clothing) and textual (food) signifiers, in this work clothing is the common signifier of social status, and hence the visual and textual signifiers merge. In fact, because this is a dramatic text destined for performance, it is the act itself of clothing/unclothing that becomes the focus of what is both seen and heard. Two dramatic scenes of undressing or dressing mark the performance and are noted in the rubrics. The first occurs just after Walter announces that he will take Griselda as his wife; a rubric not associated with a picture explains that “La premiere dame, faisant chamberiere et service a Griselda, la fait desvestir et parer richement.”22 The second occurs when Walter sends Griselda back to her father, a scene given prominence in the illustrations, as we saw above (Fig. 7). The illustration is followed by a rubric that makes the action on the stage clear: “La marquise sanz signe d’ire despoille son riche habit et reprent le viez qu’elle avoit laissee et se consent liement de retourner a son povere pere.”23 The dramatic representations of dressing and undressing Griselda reflect cultural anxieties about social status and its relationship to virtue.24

As in the *Roman du Comte d’Anjou*, the contrasts of rich and poor are used by the dramatist to critique the abuses of power. At the beginning of the narrative, Walter disregards the future of his realm, and he is arrogant in choosing a wife far beneath him in social status without consultation from

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20 “Ains est liee en dit et en fait,/ Et se porte en son povre habit,/ Combien qu’il soit simple et petit,/ Aussi bien et honnestement/ Comme s’elle feust richement/ De robes de soye paree” (2376-2381).
21 *L’Estoire de Griseldis*: 2488-89.
22 *L’Estoire de Griseldis*, p. 41.
23 *L’Estoire de Griseldis*, p. 57.
24 The role of “elite garments” in cultural discourse is explored by E. Jane Burns in *Courtly Love Undressed: Reading through Clothes in Medieval French Culture* (Philadelphia, 2002).
his advisors. His abuse of power continues with each new testing of Griselda, the worst being his scheme to employ her as a servant in the house in which she has previously reigned as marquise. The critique of aristocratic behavior suggests that the author, like Jehan Maillart, was also interested in providing advice to princes. Indeed, this hypothesis is borne out by what we know about the probable author of the play.

The dramatist of *L’Estoire de Griseldis* was most likely Philippe de Mézières, author of the prose version on which the play is based.\(^{25}\) Like Jehan Maillart at the beginning of the century, Philippe was a significant presence in French royal circles from 1373 until his death in 1405: he was a counselor to Charles V and tutor of his son, the future Charles VI. Although the story of Griselda was, in some contexts, used to counsel proper female behavior in marriage, it is clear that Philippe’s interest in the story was also due to its political value in providing advice to princes. Philippe was a strong proponent of peace between England and France and, in this connection, wrote a *Letter to King Richard II: A Plea Made in 1395 for Peace between England and France.*\(^{26}\) In this work, he argues (not unlike the “quint chevalier” of the play) for a marriage, in this case the marriage of Richard II to the young Isabel of France. As part of his argument, he refers to the story of Griselda:

May it please God, worthy Prince, for the furtherance of peace in Christendom and the comfort of your royal person, to grant you a wife such as Griselda, the wife of the Marquis of Saluzzo, who was but the daughter of a poor working man, yet, according to the authentic chronicle of the said Marquis of Saluzzo and Griselda his wife, written by that learned doctor and sovereign poet, Master Francis Petrarch, there is no record, from the beginning of the world until today, apart from the saints, of a woman of such great virtue, nor so loving towards her husband, nor of such marvellous patience, as this same Lady Griselda; and this you have read, or may come to read, in the said chronicle.\(^{27}\)

If Richard II did indeed know the story of Griselda, he also knew that its meaning went beyond providing an example of female subservience in marriage; Walter, Marquis of Saluzzo, was an example of a willful and tyranni-

\(^{25}\) Barbara M. Craig, in the introduction to her critical edition of *L’Estoire de Griseldis* (op. cit. supra, n. 8), reviews the authorship evidence, pp. 4-6.

\(^{26}\) Intr. and tr. G. W. Coopland (Liverpool, 1975).

\(^{27}\) *Ibid*, 42.
cal ruler whose selfish desires were tamed through the judicious counsel of his advisors and the fortitude of his wife.

In addition to political ramifications, the stories of “poor queens” also have religious implications. Both Griselda and the daughter of the count of Anjou represent a type of patient suffering that is associated with the biblical story of Job and with a well-known passage from Isaiah 48:10: “See how I tested you, not as silver is tested, but in the furnace of affliction; there I purified you.”

In the Vulgate text “furnace of affliction” is *camino paupertatis*, literally, the “furnace of poverty.” The sufferings of the daughter of the count of Anjou in the French countryside and the multiple testings of Griselda by Walter represent experiences of poverty and affliction in this sense. *Paupertatis* carries positive religious connotations: women are tested and their ability to survive and recover their former social status illustrates their fortitude and the accompanying refinement of their souls. But the suffering of these “poor queens” is not gender-specific; it represents a type of religious fortitude available both to men and women, a type of suffering we also see in the experiences of Job.

*Cantino paupertatis*, this quality of constancy in the face of adversity that leads to refinement of the soul, was well understood in the Middle Ages and originates in Boethian ideas current in fourteenth-century France and England. Keep your sight on God, Lady Philosophy tells Boethius in *The Consolation of Philosophy.*

The adversities of this world are but the twists and turns of fickle fortune. The constancy of your faith in God will be rewarded with eternal life. Or as Geoffrey Chaucer writes in *Troilus and Criseyde*, echoing Boethius:

Repayreth hom from wordly vanyte,
   And of youre herte up casteth the visage
To thilke God that after his ymage
   You made, and thynketh al nys but a faire,
This world that passeth soone as floures faire.

*(TC V: 1837-41)*

When Chaucer retells the story of Griselda in “The Clerk’s Tale,” he highlights both the political and religious messages inherent in the tale: the abuse of power and the virtues of constancy. He inserts explicit condemnations of

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29 Tr. W. V. Cooper (New York, 1943), 120.
the behavior of the marquis and draws parallels between the sufferings of Griselda and those of Job. (For a sampling of additional passages, see Appendix II). When handing her garments back to her husband, Griselda addresses her husband, echoing Job 1:21:

“Naked out of my fadres hous,” quod she,
“I cam, and naked moot I turne again.
Al youre pleasance wol I folwen fayn;
But yet I hope it be nat youre entente
That I smoklees out of youre paleys wente.

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Lat me nat lyk a worm go by the weye.
Remember yow, myn owene lord so deere,
I was youre wyf, though I unworthy were.”

\(CT IV. 871-75; 880-82\)

Although Griselda’s words echo those of Job, she manages to avoid the literal nakedness or state of undress that we find in artistic renderings of Job or in the personification of Poverty in the \textit{Roman de la Rose}, two other popular texts that offer a view of poverty. When she returns to her father’s hut, she returns to a life of labor; her virtue was present before her rise in social status and will continue after her fall from power.

Like that of Philippe de Mézières, Chaucer’s attitude toward the poverty of Griselda is a positive one, one that appears to reflect a growing criticism of the excesses of the aristocracy and an appreciation of the spiritual advantages of poverty. Chaucer exposes the hypocrisy of many religious figures in \textit{The Canterbury Tales} who have taken a vow of poverty but have been lured away by the attractions of wealth – such as the monk, the friar, and the prioress. However, through the stories of virtuous women – not only the patient Griselda in “The Clerk’s Tale” but also the classic “accused queen,” Custance in “The Man of Law’s Tale” – Chaucer presents a positive model.

\footnote{In her explanatory notes to ‘The Clerk’s Tale,’ Patricia J. Eberle in \textit{The Riverside Chaucer (op. cit. supra, n. 1), 880-84, notes all Chaucer’s additions to his sources.}

\footnote{The nakedness or partial nudity of Job is a common theme; see, for example, New York, The Pierpont Morgan Library, G. 42, fol. 153\textsuperscript{v}; H.8, fol. 127\textsuperscript{v}; M. 1001, fol. 114\textsuperscript{v}; M. 452, fol. 97\textsuperscript{v}; M. 622, fol. 98\textsuperscript{v}. The allegorical figure of Poverty in \textit{The Romance of the Rose} is depicted with exposed breasts in BNF fr. 25526, fol. 5\textsuperscript{v}, and in tattered clothing in BNF fr. 19153, fol. 5\textsuperscript{v}.}

\footnote{It is possible that Chaucer was familiar with the work of Philippe de Mézières; see Goodwin, ‘The Griselda Story’ (op. cit. supra, n. 16), 133-134.}
for men and women alike who would follow the Boethian path to spiritual refinement and union with God.

If Chaucer’s attitude toward poverty is so positive, why then does he place a speech castigating poverty – the one quoted at the start of this essay – into the mouth of the Man of Law? I suggest that he does so in order to undercut the authority of his own narrator and to present, without necessarily approving, multiple perspectives on poverty and wealth. The Man of Law is quoting a Latin source here, Lotario dei Segni’s De miseria condicionis humane, a work Chaucer translated.33 But the Man of Law quotes out of context, for De miseria castigates both poverty and wealth, viewing both as aspects of a transient earthly life, of little importance when viewed analogically, or from the perspective of the Last Judgment. Thus, any reader who knows the source of the Man of Law’s words also knows that the narrator misreads – or at least quotes selectively – perhaps to justify his own capitalist attitudes about the acquisition of wealth.34

Chaucer is notoriously difficult to pin down to a single point of view, particularly when it comes to a subject, such as this one, with political ramifications. Nowhere is the author’s slipperiness more evident than in the speech on “gentilesse” that he imbeds into the tale of the Wife of Bath:

Looke who that is moost vertuous alway,
Pryvee and apert, and moost entendeth ay
To do the gentil dedes that he kan;
Taak hym for the grettest gentil man.

Povere is hateful good and, as I gesse,
A ful greet bryngere out of bisynesse;
A greet amendere eek of sapience
To hym that taketh it in pacience.
Povere is this, although it seme alenge:
Possessioun that no wight wol chalenge.
Povere ful ofte, whan a man is lowe,

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33 Scholars have suggested that he was translating Lotario dei Segni (who became Pope Innocent III), around the same time that he was composing the “Man of Law’s Tale”; see The Riverside Chaucer (op. cit. supra, n. 1), 856.
34 See my discussion in Medieval Narratives of Accused Queens (op. cit. supra, n. 5), 134-36. In fact, it appears that Chaucer may have included Latin glosses to the text in order to highlight the narrator’s “misreading.” There are nine extant Latin glosses for this text, five of which are taken from De miseria condicionis humane.
Maketh his God and eek hymself to knowe.
Poverte a spectacle is, as thynketh me,
Thurgh which he may his verray frendes see.
And therfore, sire, syn that I noght yow greve,
Of my poverte namoore ye me repreve.

(*CT* III. 1113-16, 1195-1206)

The speaker here, a poor, old hag, argues that gentility is based not on inherited social standing or wealth but on good deeds. She quotes Dante, Valerius Maximus, Seneca, Juvenal, and Boethius to prove that aristocrats are not necessarily virtuous and that poor people are not necessarily thieves. But it would be facile to assume that the old hag serves as Chaucer’s mouthpiece, for in many ways his characterization of the Wife of Bath and of the old hag of her tale mocks women, and he may even be questioning the ability of women to engage in intellectual discourse. Nonetheless, the words of the old hag and the examples of patience and constancy found in the *Man of Law’s* and the Clerk’s *Tales* remain an important part of broader discussions of poverty in fourteenth-century England and France.

Ultimately, a thorough understanding of Chaucer’s treatment of poverty calls for a more extensive historical approach, placing his work in the midst of other important texts and events from the end of the fourteenth century in England, not merely in relationship to French texts. I think particularly of Langland’s *Piers Plowman* and texts associated with the Lollard movement (with which Chaucer appears to have had some sympathy). In fact, recent Chaucerian scholarship depicts Chaucer as more intimately involved in the political upheavals of his day than previous scholars have thought.  

However, such research clearly goes beyond the scope of this essay. It is my modest hope that the analysis of the two manuscripts I have presented, along with my discussion of related religious and political texts, will complicate and enrich future discussions of poverty in the Middle Ages.

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Mes viandes chieres et fines,  
Chapons en rost, oisons, gelines,  
Cynnes, paons, perdris, fesanz,  
Herons, butors qui sont plesans,  
Et venoisons de maintes guisez  
A chiens courans par force prises:  
Cers, dains, connins, senglers sauvages,  
Qui habitant en ces bocages,  
Et toute bonne venoison;  
Poissons ravoe j’a foison  
Des meilleurs de tout le païs:  
Esturjons, saumons et plaïs,  
Congres, gournars et grans morues,  
Tumbes, rougés et grans barbues,  
Maqueriauz gras et gros mellens  
Et harens fres et espellens,  
Sartres graces, nullés et solles,  
Bremes et bescües et molles;  
J’avoie de maintes mennieres  
Poissons d’estans et de rivieres  
Atornéz chascun par grant cure,  
Selonc son droit et sa nature,  
A poivre, a sausse kameline;  
J’avoie lus en galantine,  
Grossez lemproitiez a ce mesmes,  
Bars et carpes, gardons et bresmes,  
Appareilliéz en autre guisez;  
Truttes ravoe en paste misez,  
Lez dars, lez vendoiz rostiez,  
En verjus de grain tooillies,  
Et grosses anguilles em paste,  
Autre foiz roustiez en haste  
Et les gros bequês chaudumés,  
Si com il sont acoustuméz  
Des keus qui sevent lez sentances  
De l’atorner; j’avoie tances
Que en appele renversees;
J’avoie gauffres et oubleez,
Gouieres, tartes, flaonciaus,
Pipes farses a grans monciaus,
Pommes d’espices, dirioles,
Crespines, bingnes et ruissoles;
Si bevoie vins precïeus,
Pyment, claré deliciëus,
Cyhoundés, roséz, floréz,
Vins de Gascoingne colourëz,
De Mont Pellier et de Rochelle,
Vin de Garnace et de Castelle,
Vin de Biaune et de Saint Poursain
Que riche gent tiennent pour sain,
D’Aucuerre, d’Anjo, d’Orlenois,
De Gastinois, de Leonnois,
De Biauvoisin, de Saint Jouen....

(Roman du Comte d’Anjou, ll. 1107-59)

Appendix II: A sampling of Chaucer’s additions to his source in “The Clerk’s Tale.”

A. On Griselda’s virtues

Labor more virtuous than idleness:

Wel ofter of the welle than of the tonne
She drank, and for she wolde vertu plese,
She knew wel labour but noon ydel ese.

(CT IV. 215-17)

Griselda’s actions as echo of Mary, Mother of Jesus:

And doun upon hir knes she gan to falle,
And with sad contenance kneleth stille,
Til she had herd what was the lordes wille.

(CT IV. 292-94)
Her religious faith when first child is taken from her:

And thus she sayde in hire benignevoyse,
“Fareweel my child! I shal thee nevere see.
But with I thee have marked with the croys
Of thilke Fader – lessed moote he be! –
That for us deyde upon a croys of tree,
Thy soule, litel child, I hym bitake,
For this nyght shallow dyen for my sake.”

(parallely to Job 42:6)

Men speke of Job, and moost for his humblesse,
As clerkes, whan hem list, konne wel endite,
Namely of men, but as in soothfastness,
Though clerkes preise women but a lite,
Ther kan no man in humblesse hym acquite
As womman kan, ne kan been half so trewe
As wommen been, but it be falle of newe.

(parallely to Job 42:6)

B. Criticism of Marquis of Saluzzo:

On the need for the marquis to marry:

Wol nat oure lord yet leve his vantee?
Wol he nat wedde? Allas! Allas, the while!
Why wole he thus himself and us begile?

(parallely to Job 42:6)

On marquis’ first temptation of his wife:

...what neded it
Hire for to tempte, and alwey moore and moore,
Though som men preise it for a subtil wit?
But as for me, I seye that yvele it sit
To assaye a wyf whan that it is no nede,
And putten hire in angwysssh and in drede.
Faint regret of marquis after first temptation of wife:

Somwhat this lord hadde routhe in his manere,
But natheless his purpos heeld he stille,
As lordes doon, whan they wol han hir wille.

(*CT IV. 579-81*)

On marquis’ second temptation of his wife:

O nedelees was she tempted in assay!
But wedded men ne knowe no mesure,
Whan that they fynde a pacient creature.

(*CT IV. 621-23*)