

Love is a Four-Letter Word¹

by Phillip W. Weiss

In the world of Chaucer love is a sham and a convenient pretext for justifying the most outrageous conduct to augment and protect one's power. Instead of bringing happiness, love is used as a weapon by nasty, insensitive, and base people, who are utterly lacking in consciousness, to inflict misery and sow discord, with results that are devastating. This is the case in three of Chaucer's stories: "The Clerk's Tale," "The Miller's Tale," and "The Franklin's Tale."

In "The Clerk's Tale," a woman, Griselde, is forced to endure the unendurable to prove her loyalty to her husband, who is the sovereign of the realm. Born into poverty, she is chosen by the sovereign, Walter, to be his wife, and they produce two children, a girl and a boy, both of whom are taken from her as a test of her steadfastness. After a several years, Walter is satisfied of Griselde's loyalty and as a reward the children are returned to her and the story ends happily. However, early in the story certain troubling aspects of Walter's personality are revealed. He is compared to a hawk that enjoys the hunt and is presented as a man who is not psychologically prepared for marriage. Chaucer writes:

But on his lust present was al his thought,
As for to hauke and hunte on every side;
Wel ny all othere cures leet he slide,
And eek he nolde – and that was worst of alle –
Wedde no wyf, for nought that may bifalle. (80-84)

He enjoyed being single and felt no compunction to get married. But then he is pressured into getting married in order to produce an heir, and so,

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¹ From the title of an online album by Jason Mraz, <http://jasonmraz.com>

acting out of desperation, he meets and marries a poor peasant woman named “Griselde, this pvre creature” (232), the daughter of one of his subjects, who becomes a hapless pawn of a man who, although believing that he is in love, is ambivalent as to his real feelings for this woman.

Commendinge in his herte hir wommanhede,
And eek hir vertu, passinge any wight
Of so yong age, as wel in chere as dede.
For thogh the peple have no greet insight
In vertu, he considered ful right
Hir bountee, and disposed that he wolde
Wedde hire only, if ever he wedde sholde, (239-245)

As Chaucer shows, Walter’s decision to marry is a calculated move; he is thinking of the benefits to be derived from being married in terms of his own needs. Griselde’s father is amazed (316) that the sovereign even bothers to take notice of his daughter, not to mention wanting to marry her, sensing that Walter may be acting for reasons not motivated by genuine feelings of affection. This is borne out after they get married and Griselde gains the admiration of the people (“So benigne and so digne of reverence/And coude so the peples herte embrace,/That ech hire lovede that loked on hir face” – 411-413), thus becoming a potential rival for power, which for Walter is intolerable. Therefore, to test her loyalty and reinforce her subservience, he kidnaps their children, which, although an extreme measure, is well within his prerogative to do as the sovereign. He wants to keep his power and not lose it to his wife, a fear which is not unfounded. After all, did not Messalina betray her husband, the Roman Emperor Claudius, who had his recalcitrant wife beheaded, and did not Helen desert

her husband, Menalaus, the king of Sparta, which sparked the Trojan War? And did not Nefertiri, the wife of Rameses II, Pharaoh of Egypt, openly love the renegade prince and traitor Moses, who was threatening to destroy Egypt, and her husband, through divine intercession?² Such examples of spousal disloyalty, double-dealing, and duplicity are proof that Walter's concerns had some merit. What is objectionable, however, is how he selfishly acts on his concerns by using his children as leverage, which was thoughtless, cruel, and stupid. By acting thus, he exposed his children to risk by placing them in someone else's care, undermined the mother-child relationship critical to a child's development, and threatened to destroy the integrity of his family, all of which could be seen as pathological, and at minimum a perversion of love. Having a gripe against his wife gave him no valid cause to take it out on the children, who become innocent victims.

In "The Miller's Tale," Chaucer treats the love that a man has for his wife as a farce. In this story a carpenter, John, marries a much younger woman, Alison, who becomes unfaithful, and in an effort to conceal her unfaithfulness conspires with her lover, Nicholas, to fool her husband, with both amusing and humiliating results. John loves his wife, who is young and wild, but has trepidations. Chaucer writes:

² These events are depicted in two major motion pictures, *The Ten Commandments* (1956), directed by Cecil B. De Mille, with Charlton Heston, Yul Brynner, and Anne Baxter; and *Troy* (2004), directed by Wolfgang Petersen, with Orlando Bloom, Diane Kruger, and Brendan Gleeson; and in a television series *I, Claudius* (1976), directed by Herbert Wise, with Derek Jacobi, Patrick Stewart, and Sheila White. Source: www.imdb.com

**This carpenter hadde wedded newe a wyf
Which that he lovede more than his lyf;
Of eightetene yeer she was of age.
Jalous he was, and heeld hire narwe in cage,
For she was wilde and yong, and he was old
And demed himself ben lyk a cokewold. (3221-6)**

So he knows that he is married to a “piggesnye,” i.e., a “cuckooflower” (3268), that is, a whacko, and she proves him right when she decides to consort with Nicholas (3288-93), a boarder in John’s house, demonstrating contempt for her marriage vows and a reckless indifference to the consequences of her actions, if not in words, then through her actions. And what makes her conduct even more egregious is that she knows that her husband is insecure regarding their relationship (“Myn housbond is so ful of jalousie” – 3297), yet instead of acting to assuage his fears and bring him peace of mind, conspires with Nicholas to play on John’s superstitions to make her husband look like a fool, by solemnly warning John that the world will be coming to an end (3513-21). Understandably alarmed, John wants to protect his wife (3522-23), and following Nicholas’s advice, takes measures which seem ridiculous but are reasonable since he was acting on what he believed was reliable information, not realizing that he was the target of a cruel joke being perpetrated by the two people closest to him – his wife and his boarder. The lesson here is that if you cannot trust the people who live under your roof, in your very household, and perhaps are sleeping in your very bed, like, for instance, in John’s case, his wife, then whom can you trust? Once again, love is perverted as people violate their social obligations to satisfy their own twisted needs.

In “The Franklin’s Tale,” the meaning of love is completely bent out of shape as a knight holds his wife to a promise that deliberately places her in a potentially compromising position, calling to question the knight’s motivations. In this story, the knight, Arveragus, marries a lady, “the faireste under [the] sonne” (734), named Dorigen. As part of their vows, he promises never to take any mastery over her against her will or to demonstrate any jealousy, and to obey and follow her will, but with the understanding that he retains the title of sovereign (747-752). Her goal is to avoid marital strife (757) and she assures him that she will be his “humble trewe wyf” (758). Arveragus now has “bothe his lady and his love” (796). Then Arveragus leaves the home to go fight abroad and in his absence, a “lusty squyre” (937), Aurelius, professes his love for Dorigen who tells him that she has never been an unfaithful wife. Nevertheless she agrees to accede to his amorous desires if he removes all the rocks from the coastline (990-4). Aurelius complains that her conditions are “impossible” and then, in an attempt to blackmail Dorigen into complying with his demand, threatens to commit suicide (1009-10). But Dorigen remains steadfast in her vow to remain faithful and does not accede to the squire’s demand. Yet, in an act of sheer chicanery, Aurelius deceives Dorigen into believing that the rocks have been removed (1300-01) and demands satisfaction (“And in myn hand youre trouth plighen ye/To love me best.” 1328-29). Being a true, that is, faithful wife, Dorigen informs Arveragus, who has returned home, of her problem with Aurelius (1465-66). Exclaiming his love for Dorigen, Arveragus instructs her to meet with Aurelius, on the

grounds that “Trouthe is the hiest thing that man may kepe” (1479), thus putting “his wyf in jupartye” (1495), and it is only after Aurelius comes to his senses and absolves Dorigen of any obligations to him, that the crisis abates (1534-35) and she avoids having to commit suicide.

Aurelius trying to induce a married woman to commit adultery is bad enough, but what is even more reprehensible and baffling is Arveragus’s refusal to come to his wife’s assistance and his willingness to place his marriage and his wife’s personal safety at risk over an absurd promise his wife made in jest and under duress, without taking into consideration the mitigating circumstances, which suggests a mean-spiritedness that belies Arveragus’s expressions of love. By refusing to act to protect his wife from Aurelius, whose motivations are entirely self-serving, Arveragus abdicated his responsibilities as a husband and it is only because of a last-minute pang of consciousness on the part of Aurelius that no harm is done to her.

Although Arveragus agreed not take mastery over his wife or demonstrate any jealousy, there was nothing, either implied or explicitly stated, in his agreement with Dorigen that absolved him of his duty as a husband to preserve the integrity of their marriage and to love, honor, and cherish his wife. Rather, his concern that “his wyf sholde breke hir trouth” (1519) seems a pretentious and transparent attempt to humiliate his wife, teach her a lesson, and impose total dominance over her, all in the name of love and honor. Once again, the concept of love is distorted for seedy purposes as a wife is denied the protection of a man who is not only her

husband, but her sovereign, and by denying her that protection, transforms her into an outlaw, that is, someone who is outside of the protection of the law, thereby making her fair game for anyone who wishes to cause her harm.

Arveragus's actions also call to question the sanctity of the marriage vows which seem to have little meaning in the world of Geoffrey Chaucer. And if the marriage vows are mere empty words, and the sacrament of marriage a bureaucratic formality without substance and spiritual meaning, then what is Chaucer saying about love?

Work Cited

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