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The More Things Change: Maria Edgeworth's "The Modern Griselda"
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At a pivotal moment in Maria Edgeworth's 1805 novella "The Modern Griselda," a party gathers for a reading of "The Clerk's Tale" at the home of the eponymous character and her husband. In response to Griselda's vehement indignation at her medieval counterpart's example, one member of the party comments that perhaps, "if Chaucer had lived in our enlightened times, he would have written a very different Griselda."¹ On the surface, that would appear to be true—certainly Edgeworth's tyrannical Griselda seems much more like Chaucer's Walter. And yet, the "modern" Griselda is herself as much created by the rhetoric of ideal womanhood as is her medieval counterpart, who so wholly embraces the ideal of wifely obedience expounded in medieval conduct manuals that she acquiesces to the apparent murder of her children. So, too, for Edgeworth's Griselda . . . In his *Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*, one of the most popular conduct manuals of Edgeworth's day, Thomas Gisborne suggests that negative characteristics such as vanity, caprice, and an almost insatiable need for displays of affection—precisely the characteristics this modern Griselda exhibits—stem not from a lack or rejection of desirable feminine virtues but rather a surfeit of them. In fulfilling too completely the ideals of womanhood extolled by their particular cultural milieus, both Chaucer and Edgeworth's Griseldas become monstrous.

With the exception of a brief mention of Judith Bronfman's 1994 survey of the reception and transmission of the Griselda story,² Edgeworth's version has been largely overlooked by both Chaucer and Edgeworth scholars. This paper will explore how Edgeworth's story engages in the contemporary debates about ideal female conduct and essential feminine nature, particularly as they are manifested in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century conduct manuals. In the end, Edgeworth's revision of the Griselda story belies the listener's faith in his society's progressive attitudes toward women.

For at least six centuries, readers have been fascinated, inspired, and repulsed, often simultaneously, by the story of Patient Griselda: a wife who obeys her husband's will so completely that she acquiesces to the apparent murder of her children and her own displacement by a younger,

¹ Maria Edgeworth, "The Modern Griselda," 202; in *Tales and Novels*, vol. IX (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1848), 183-243.

² Judith Bronfman, *Chaucer's "Clerk's Tale": The Griselda Story Received, Rewritten, Illustrated* (New York: Garland, 1994).

noble-born bride. In the Clerk's Tale, Chaucer brings his sources—Petrarch's tale and an anonymous French translation—into conflicting dialogue with one another, superimposing the French Griseldis' emphasis on the story as a marital exemplum onto Petrarch's interpretation of Griselda and her tribulations as spiritual allegory.³ By doing so, Chaucer reveals the inherent dissonance within the Griselda story, a dissonance that emanates from the nature and ethical validity of Griselda's vow to Walter that she will obey his will in all things as if it were her own.⁴

Despite Chaucer's Clerk's assurance that the tale is not intended to provide a model for wives but rather that "every wight, in his degree, / Sholde be constant in adversitee,"⁵ by and large the more literalistic interpretation of the Griselda story as a *miroir des mariées*, or "mirror for wives," wins out during the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and establishes a tradition that will continue through the present day. Even in the Clerk's Tale itself, Walter is not testing Griselda's patience, obedience, or constancy but her very femaleness, her adherence to the ideals of womanhood, as he explains at the tale's end: "I have doon this deede / For no malike, ne for no crueltee, / But for t'assaye in thee thy wommanheede."⁶ Moreover, as Elaine Tuttle Hansen points out, the Clerk's version of the story repeatedly calls our attention to the marital context of the testing of Griselda's vow with references to husbands and wives generally, not just in the Envoy but throughout the tale.⁷ It is difficult to remember that we are to think of Griselda as a sort of Everyman when her womanhood is so thoroughly foregrounded.⁸

In Chaucer's time, the story of Griselda made its way into conduct manuals such as *Le Ménagier de Paris*, *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, and *Le Miroir des Bonnes Femmes*; for these texts, aimed in large part at instructing women on proper behavior in marriage, Griselda provided the ultimate example of wifely obedience. This is of course a dominant theme in all texts of this sort, whether they draw on the Griselda story or not. How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter stresses obedience as the most important quality in a wife, and that which will best guarantee her own happiness as well as that of her husband. Even female authors advocated this virtue: Christine de Pizan, for example, also recommends humility and obedience for the preservation of marital

³ For a detailed analysis of the degree of Chaucer's reliance on Petrarch and the French versions respectively, see J. Burke Severs, *The Literary Relationships of Chaucer's Clerkes Tale* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1942), esp. 216-22. A more recent discussion that adds to (and in some cases, revises) Sever's analysis may be found in *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁴ The best exploration to date of Griselda's "ethical monstrosity" may be found in J. Allan Mitchell's *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower*, *Chaucer Studies XXXIII* (London: Boydell and Brewer, 2004), 116-140.

⁵ Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Clerk's Tale," ll.1145-46; in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 137-53.

⁶ *Ibid.*, ll. 1073-75.

⁷ Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 199.

⁸ Tara Williams argues that the Clerk's Tale as a whole functions as an examination of the category of *wommanheede*, a concept Chaucer introduces in his revision of the Griselda story; see "'T'assaye in thee thy wommanheede": *Griselda Chosen, Translated, and Tried*, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 27 (2005): 93-127.

peace in her *Livre des trios vertus*.⁹ By Edgeworth's day, the Griselda story had also come to stress the recuperative powers of the obedient and virtuous wife, proposing that Griselda's devoted obedience and constancy in fact reform Walter's tyrannical tendencies, leading to the tale's happy dénouement.¹⁰

It is easy to imagine the relevance Chaucer's *Griselda* had for the early nineteenth-century conception of ideal womanhood as self-abnegation, with the total suppression of *Griselda*'s individual will in favor of Walter's. And yet, many conduct writers of the time saw themselves as breaking with the didactic literature of the past, which stressed the necessity of enforced obedience to contain disorderly female desires. Mary Poovey, Ingrid Tague, and others show that the model of ideal British womanhood that emerges in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is that of a demure, selfless woman, whose very nature is to adapt herself to the will of others. Marlene LeGates observes that as a result of Enlightenment ideals seeking to find a new, rational basis to support both a hierarchical social order and the patriarchal nuclear family as its microcosm, "the misogyny which had characterized traditional . . . philosophical thought from the ancient Greeks through the seventeenth century was replaced by the eighteenth-century version of the Cult of True Womanhood;" accordingly, the "image of the disorderly woman [was] replaced by the image of the chaste maiden and obedient wife."¹¹ This new image exalting supposedly innate female characteristics thus encouraged many of these later conduct writers to identify as pro-feminine, even while they still advocated for the same determining characteristics of the "good woman."

Though the ideal characteristics of the nineteenth-century woman do not differ greatly in essence from those of other centuries in British history, Poovey argues that there is a difference in expectation. Poovey highlights the contrast between the observations made by a seventeenth-century Dorset clergyman and *Gisborne's* conduct book for women.¹² The Dorset clergyman prescribes female behavior, telling brides that they should be mere reflections of their husbands' will, and to desire only what their husbands approve and allow: "A good wife should be like a Mirrour which hath no image of its own, but receives its stamp from the face that looks into it." She must not only obey her husband, but bring "unto him the very Desires of the Heart to be regulated by him so far, that it should not be lawful for her to will or desire what she liked, but only what her husband should approve and allow."¹³ In contrast, we may note a linguistic shift from the subjunctive to the indicative mood that occurs in conduct literature when describing female nature.

⁹ Christine de Pisan, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies, or The Book of the Three Virtues*, trans. Sarah Lawson (New York: Penguin, 1985), 62-65.

¹⁰ See, for example, Barbara Hofland's 1813 novel *Patience and Perseverance*; or, *The Modern Griselda: A Domestic Tale* (London: Minerva Press).

¹¹ Marlene LeGates, "The Cult of Womanhood in Eighteenth-Century Thought," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 10.1 (Autumn 1976), pp. 21-39; 21 and 23.

¹² Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 3-4.

¹³ Qtd. in Robert Palfrey Utter and Gwendolyn Bridges Needham, *Pamela's Daughters* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), 25.

Gisborne, for example, confidently describes the same traits as woman's inherent nature granted by divine design:

Providence, designing from the beginning that the manner of life to be adopted by women should in many respects ultimately depend, not so much on their own deliberate choice, as on the determination, or at least on the interest and convenience, of the parent, of the husband, or of some other near connection; has implanted in them a remarkable tendency to conform to the wishes and example of those for whom they feel a regard, and even of those with whom they are in familiar habits of intercourse.¹⁴

While the clergyman urges women to efface their own will in favor of their husbands, Gisborne seems to take this effacement for granted, as the natural outcome of their innate inclinations. As Tague observes, "One crucial aspect of the naturalization of femininity in 18th century conduct books was the writers' own denial of their didactic role, even within this overtly pedagogical format. If a woman was naturally modest and chaste [or obedient] then she would behave modestly and chastely and obediently naturally, with no conscious effort. Conduct writers thus presented themselves as reminding their readers to go along with their natural instincts, to behave in a truly womanly manner."¹⁵

Moreover, conduct writers reassure women that their obedience will never be a burden, for they will be able to obtain influence over their husbands through the powers of female suasion. Wetenhall Wilkes, for example, exhorts women to "never forfeith the tenderness of your sex" for "the engaging softness of a wife, when prudently manage'd, subdues all the natural and legal authority of any reasonable man. Her looks have more power than his laws."¹⁶ And Thomas Marriott poetically assures his readers that woman "by yielding conquers, and by serving reigns; / her soft endearments, her fierce master tames."¹⁷ Gisborne also argues that although women are inferior to men in "the powers of close ad comprehensive reasoning," they have been endowed with a superior share of "sprightliness and vivacity, quickness of perception, fertility of invention" that "diffuse throughout the family circle the enlivening and endearing smile of cheerfulness."¹⁸ The power of love, captured and reinforced by female charms, will, naturally, win a husband over as her devoted servant.

However, Gisborne asserts that problems may arise when these formidable powers are not regulated:

¹⁴Thomas Gisborne, *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*, 4th ed. (London: T. Cadell, Jr. & W. Davies, 1799), 122-23.

¹⁵ Ingrid Tague, *Women of Quality: Accepting and Contesting Ideals of Femininity in England, 1690-1760* (London: Boydell, 2002), 66.

¹⁶ Wetenhall Wilkes, *A Letter of Genteel and Moral Advice to a Young Lady: In Which Is Digested into a New and Familiar Method, a System of Rules and Informations, to Qualify the Fair Sex to Be Useful and Happy in Every State* (Dublin, 1740), 117.

¹⁷ Thomas Marriott, *Female Conduct: Being an Essay On the Art of Pleasing, To be practiced by the Fair Sex, Before, and After Marriage* (London, 1759), ll. 53-54.

¹⁸ Gisborne, 21, 22.

The gay vivacity and the quickness of the imagination, so conspicuous among the qualities in which the superiority of women is acknowledged, have a tendency to lead to unsteadiness of mind; to fondness of novelty; to habits of frivolousness, and trifling employment to dislike of sober application; to repugnance to graver studies, and a too low estimation of their worth; to an unreasonable regard for wit, and shining accomplishments; to a thirst for admiration and applause; to vanity and affectation. They contribute likewise to endanger the composure and mildness of the temper, and to render the dispositions fickle through caprice, and uncertain through irritability. Of the errors and failings which have been already specified, several are occasionally aggravated by the acute sensibility peculiar to women.¹⁹

In particular, the very sensibility that Gisborne lauds as the source of feminine virtue can become problematic when expressed too fully:

[Sensibility] is liable to sudden excesses; it nurtures unmerited attachments; it is occasionally the source of suspicion, fretfulness, and groundless discontent; it sometimes degenerates in to weakness and pusillanimity, and prides itself in the feebleness of character which it has occasioned. . . . In the intercourse of daily life it has been known to look for a degree of affection, perhaps of sudden affection, from friends and acquaintances, which could not reasonably be expected; and, under the impulse of groundless disappointment, to resent rather than cordially to accept the manifestations of sincere and rational regard. And if in common it fills the heart with placability and benevolence; it is known at times to feel even a slight injury with so much keenness, as thenceforth to harbour prejudices scarcely to be shaken, and aversion scarcely to be mollified.²⁰

Though he gives no specifics at this point in the book, Gisborne notes in passing that the way to guard against such excesses is through education. A later chapter on female education stresses religious education above all, essentially by inculcating in young women the same “cheerful obedience” toward God that is to be the model for their behavior in marriage, “not that [obedience] which proceeds merely from the conviction of the judgment; but that which flows also from the decided bias of purified inclinations, and is at once the performance of duty and the perception of delight.”²¹ In other words, inculcated habits, more so than discernment, are thought to be the proper means by which women will learn to restrain their feminine inclinations to the appropriate degree.

On the surface, Edgeworth’s “The Modern Griselda” does not appear to stray far from the model of ideal femininity described above, though Edgeworth structures her exploration of that model in unique and interesting ways. Unlike most famous retellings of the Griselda story, her

¹⁹ Gisborne, 33.

²⁰ Gisborne, 35.

²¹ Gisborne, 60.

version seems very different from “The Clerk’s Tale”—so much so, indeed, that one cannot immediately ascertain which character in Edgeworth’s version corresponds with the Clerk’s Griselda, for it is certainly not her namesake. It would seem that Edgeworth has taken to heart the Clerk’s observation in the envoy to his tale that one would be hard-pressed today to find a woman of such patience and docility, for Edgeworth’s character by this name is her antithesis, more a Walter than a Griselda. But Griselda also functions as a caricature of the woman whose identity and self-worth lie solely the approbation and admiration of others.

In the same way that Walter in “The Clerk’s Tale” tests his wife’s true obedience to her vow to mold her will fully with his, Edgeworth’s Griselda Bolingbroke seeks to test her husband’s love for her based on the extent to which his will is in alignment with her own. For Griselda, “true love creates perfect sympathy in taste, and an absolute identity of opinion upon all subjects. . . . [s]he reasonably expected from her husband the most exact conformity to her principles.”²² Any evidence of disagreement suggests his affection for her has faded: “If he saw, heard, felt, or understood differently from her, he did not, could not love her.”²³ She is never satisfied with the many proofs her husband gives her, and keeps upping the stakes on her bewildered spouse.

Edgeworth’s Griselda also shares Walter’s capriciousness in testing a spouse who so clearly is in no need of testing. Mr. Bolingbroke is the picture of husbandly devotion to his new bride, and it is this love along that allows him to endure his torments for as long as he does. In the aftermath of yet another protracted domestic tantrum, Bolingbroke explicitly expresses his desire for equality in marriage: “I wish to live with m wife as my equal my friend,” he tells Griselda; “I do not desire that my will should govern: where our inclinations differ, let reason decide between us; or where it is a matter not worth reasoning about, let us alternately yield to one another.”²⁴ In spite of these protestations—or more accurately, in response to them—Griselda now insists that only her complete submission will make her husband happy, and once she has chosen to do so, Griselda embraces the role of submissive wife with sadistic zeal: “The part of a wife was to obey, and Griselda was bound to support her character. She resolved, however, to make her obedience cost her lord as dear as possible, and she promised herself that this party of pleasure should become a party of pain.”²⁵ Clearly this is not the Griselda Chaucer’s Clerk had in mind.

Edgeworth’s Griselda is juxtaposed against Emma Granby, wife of Bolingbroke’s friend. Having quickly ascertained that Griselda herself does not exhibit any of the qualities of the Clerk’s Griselda, the reader is predisposed to look for her in another character. Edgeworth’s Griselda encourages us to find her in Emma, commenting after having visited with her for the first time that “to some people’s taste [Emma] is a pattern wife—a perfect Grizzle,”²⁶ and Emma does come closest to resembling both the medieval Griselda and the nineteenth-century ideal woman, though

²² Edgeworth, 190.

²³ Edgeworth, 191.

²⁴ Edgeworth, 212.

²⁵ Edgeworth, 216.

²⁶ Edgeworth, 197.

with one striking difference I will mention shortly. Emma is kind, industrious, well-loved by all (or nearly all—Griselda can't stand her), and like her medieval counterpart is known for her just mediation of disputes—a talent she tries to exercise on behalf of her friends, though unfortunately to little avail.

Emma Gransby seems to be the quintessential model of nineteenth-century womanhood, for the narrator stresses her selflessness: "Emma was capable of putting herself entirely out of the question when the interest of others was at stake; her whole desire was to conciliate, and all her thoughts were intent upon making her friends happy. She seemed to live in them more than in herself, and from sympathy arose the greatest pleasure and pain of her existence."²⁷ That seems to echo strongly Gisborne's insistence that women are naturally inclined to adapt their wishes and desires to those of others. Emma also exhibits the retiring modesty expected of the ideal woman, as we see upon her first entrance into the Bolingbrokes' drawing room:

The timidity of Emma's first appearance was so free both from awkwardness and affectation, that it interested at least every gentleman present in her favor. . . . [S]ome of the audience observed that she had a remarkably sweet voice; others discovered that there was something extremely feminine in her person. A gentleman, who saw that she was distressed at the idea of being seated in the conspicuous place to which she was destined by the lady of the house, got up, and offered his seat, which she most thankfully accepted.²⁸

Thus, her reply to the question posed by her hostess—whether she would have made the promise exacted from the Griselda of "The Clerk's Tale"—surprises us with its quiet and vehement surety: "No," Emma answers, "distinctly no; for I could never have loved or esteemed the man who required such a promise."²⁹ When at the conclusion of the reading Griselda exclaims that she could never have forgiven Walter for his sins, no matter how penitent he might have been, Emma again asserts with a self-possession her hostess finds astonishing that she would never have put such power into Walter's hands to begin with.

Edgeworth's contemporary Mary Wollstonecraft argues that imposing a model of behavior that strips away much opportunity for autonomous power in all but the most indirect means will produce a woman who sounds very much like Edgeworth's Griselda, a woman whose use of reason is thwarted. For such women, Wollstonecraft writes, "exertion of cunning is only an instinct of nature to enable them to obtain directly a little of that power of which they are unjustly denied a share; for if women are not permitted to enjoy legitimate rights, they will render both men and

²⁷ Edgeworth, 208.

²⁸ Edgeworth, 198-99.

²⁹ Edgeworth, 201.

themselves vicious to obtain illicit privileges."³⁰ Edgeworth provides hints through her characterization of Griselda that her heroine has little engage herself with beyond the expected female accomplishments: painting, playing the harp, interior decoration—and that this, added to the pernicious effects of novel-reading, has helped create a petty, selfish, overindulged child in place of a woman. The very sensibility that supposedly leads to devoted selflessness can, unchecked by reason, become instead tyrannical caprice.

What Emma Gransby possesses, and both the medieval and the modern Griseldas lack, is a well-developed faculty of reasoning discernment. Throughout the novella she functions as an advocate for reasonable compromise and mutuality, and is capable of seeing beyond the confusion of emotion to understand the true nature of conflicts. Her own assessment of Griselda's irrational caprice echoes Wollstonecraft, as she observes that her childhood friend perhaps had her temper spoiled by so admired for her feminine talents.³¹ Moreover, Emma's use of reason intersects with the very qualities of sympathy and regard for others that Gisborne would laud, as we see in her advice to Mr. Bolingbroke to temper Griselda's tyranny by a compromise of mutual sacrifice and compliance—advice that notably extends Gisborne's insistence upon sacrifice to both partners.³² If in many respects we may see Emma as validating the ideal feminine presented in the conduct books, Edgeworth implies that this is only so because of practiced, reasoned discernment as a necessary addendum.

³⁰ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: J. Johnson, 1792), 11

³¹ Edgeworth, 217.

³² Edgeworth, 208.