

Giving Voice to Griselda: Radical Reimaginings of a Medieval Tale*

Renée Ward

In recent decades, scholars of medieval literature have increasingly turned their attention to post-medieval interpretations and adaptations of medieval texts, including editions and adaptations of Chaucer's works. Numerous studies, such as those by Steve Ellis and Stephanie Trigg, consider the ways in which authors have reimagined and responded to Chaucer's corpus, from the Early Modern period to the present, in various media.¹ Similarly, Candace Barrington and Jonathan Hsy are expanding critical awareness of Chaucer's dissemination in other cultures through the public nature of their *Global Chaucers* project.² Their growing online database of post-1945 and non-Anglophone adaptations of the poet's works suggests that his influence is considerably more widespread than previously understood. Other studies, including those by David Matthews, Velma Bourgeois Richmond, and Mary Flower Braswell, examine adaptations and editions of Chaucer's

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¹ Steve Ellis, *Chaucer at Large: The Poet in the Modern Imagination*, *Medieval Cultures* 24 (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Stephanie Trigg, *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern*, *Medieval Cultures* 30 (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002). Other notable studies on Chaucer and his influence exist, including *Rewriting Chaucer: Culture, Authority and the Idea of the Authentic Text 1400–1602*, ed. Tom Prendergast and Barbara Kline (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999); Tom Prendergast, *Chaucer's Dead Body: From Corpse to Corpus* (New York: Routledge, 2004); and Candace Barrington, *American Chaucers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

² See the *Global Chaucers* homepage, <<http://globalchaucers.wordpress.com>>, last accessed 11 August 2015.

works aimed at primarily child readers during the Victorian and Edwardian periods, and highlight the now well-known adaptors Charles Cowden Clarke (1787–1877) and Mary Eliza Haweis (1848–98). Such studies often herald the volumes by Clarke and Haweis as forerunners of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular editions of Chaucer’s works,³ and Haweis in particular receives frequent acclaim as an early and potentially proto-feminist female adaptor. According to Siân Echard, Haweis’s *Chaucer for Children* (1877) provided for turn-of-the-century audiences a “tantalizing” alternative to more traditional editions of Chaucer’s works through its textual commentary, which articulates dissatisfaction with the medieval poet’s portrayal of female figures.⁴

Critics, however, frequently overlook writers who adapted and published individual Chaucerian narratives outside of the more familiar and frequently moralizing male-narrated framework of editions or collections, primarily of *The Canterbury Tales*. They also almost entirely overlook female writers prior to Haweis whose adaptations are progressive, even radical, in their treatment of women. This essay introduces one such neglected writer – Eleanora Louisa Hervey (née Montagu; 1811–1903) – and her poetic responses to the Griselda story, including post-medieval editions of Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale* that were popular in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Hervey published two unique adaptations of the medieval tale. The first, “Griseldis, with her Children” (1850), appeared in one of the foremost publications of the era, *The Athenaeum: Journal of English and Foreign Literature, Science, and the*

³ David Matthews notes that the success of Clarke’s and Haweis’s volumes “produced many imitators in the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods in England and in America.” “Infantilizing the Father: Chaucer Translations and Moral Regulation,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 22 (2000): 94–114 (104). For similar studies, particularly those that emphasize editions and adaptations for children, see Velma Bourgeois Richmond, *Chaucer as Children’s Literature: Retellings from the Victorian and Edwardian Eras* (Jefferson, NC, and London: McFarland, 2004); Mary Flowers Braswell, “The Chaucer Scholarship of Mary Eliza Haweis (1852–1898),” *Chaucer Review* 39.4 (2005): 402–19; Miriam Youngerman Miller, “Illustrations of the *Canterbury Tales* for Children: A Mirror of Chaucer’s World?,” *Chaucer Review* 27.3 (1993): 293–304; Charlotte C. Morse, “Popularizing Chaucer in the Nineteenth Century,” *Chaucer Review* 38.2 (2003): 99–125; Steve Ellis, “Children’s Chaucer,” in *Chaucer at Large*, 46–57; and Siân Echard, “Bedtime Chaucer: Juvenile Adaptations and the Medieval Canon,” in *Printing the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 126–61.

⁴ Echard points out that Haweis’s illustrations of the Madonna-like Griselda do not match the bluntness of her narrative, which “tells a horrific story [...] in which children are apparently murdered.” *Printing the Middle Ages*, 130. Echard also highlights Haweis’s commentary on Griselda’s behavior, in which she suggests “such submission in a woman of the present civilization would be rather mischievous than meritorious. If a modern wife cheerfully consented to the murder of her children by her spouse, she would probably be consigned to a *maison de santé*, while her husband expiated her sins on the scaffold.” Quoted in Echard, *Printing the Middle Ages*, 132.

Fine Arts; the second, “Griselda” (1869), appeared in Hervey’s volume *Our Legends and Lives: A Gift for All Seasons*.

Hervey diverges from the mainstream interpretations of Griselda and her story, and presents instead a radical, proto-feminist retelling. Although she participates in the Chaucerian branch of Victorian medievalism, she boldly rejects canonical and more widely known versions of the tale. In short, she eradicates the framework within which Griselda’s story traditionally appears. The majority of the medieval versions, for instance, relay the story through a male narrator: Boccaccio, in *The Decameron*, assigns her tale to his last male story-teller, Dioneo; Petrarch, in *A Fable of Wifely Obedience and Devotion*, presents it within an epistolary narrative guided by his own voice; and Chaucer, in *The Canterbury Tales*, has his Clerk convey and comment upon her story.⁵ Later adaptors and editors follow this pattern. Charles Cowden Clarke, for example, embeds Griselda’s story within the larger, moralizing

⁵ Boccaccio included the story in his *Decameron* (1353), as the tenth tale of the tenth day; Petrarch, in his *Epistolae Seniles (Letters of Old Age, 1373)*, translated the tale from Italian into Latin, calling it *De obedientia ac fide uxoria mythologia (A Fable of Wifely Obedience and Faithfulness)*; Chaucer, drawing heavily on Petrarch, reworked the story as the *Clerk’s Tale* (1392–95), one of the narratives belonging to the marriage group of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. Christine de Pizan also includes the story in *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames (The Book of the City of Ladies, 1405)*, but while her narrative emphasizes multiple female voices, Griselda’s tale remains at a distance. That is, her story is not a first-person narrative, even if the frame narrative has shifted to a female voice. See Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 2nd edn, trans. G. H. McWilliam (London: Penguin, 1995); Francis Petrarch, *A Fable of Wifely Obedience and Devotion*, in Robert Dudley French, *A Chaucer Handbook*, 2nd edn (New York: F. S. Crofts, 1947), 291–311; Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987); and Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Rosalind Brown-Grant (London: Penguin, 1999). Much critical work on the medieval tales exists, especially on their relationships to each other and on the moral questions they raise, including (but by no means limited to) J. Burke Severs, *The Literary Relationships of Chaucer’s Clerks Tale*, Yale Studies in English 96 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1942; Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1972); Robin Kirkpatrick, “The Griselda Story in Boccaccio, Petrarch and Chaucer,” in *Chaucer and the Italian Trecento*, ed. Piero Boitani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 231–48; Anne Middleton, “The Clerk and His Tale: Some Literary Contexts,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 2 (1980): 121–50; Charlotte C. Morse, “The Exemplary Griselda,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 7 (1985): 51–86, and “Critical Approaches to the Clerk’s Tale,” in *Chaucer’s Religious Tales*, ed. C. David Benson and Elizabeth Robertson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990), 71–83; Kathryn L. Lynch, “Despoiling Griselda: Chaucer’s Walter and the Problem of Knowledge in The Clerk’s Tale,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 10 (1988): 41–70; Robert R. Edwards, “‘The Sclaundre of Walter’: The ‘Clerk’s Tale’ and the Problem of Hermeneutics,” in *Mediaevalitas: Reading the Middle Ages*, ed. Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1996), 15–41; Robin Waugh, “A Woman in the Mind’s Eye (and not): Narrators and Gazes in Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale* and in Two Analogues,” *Philological Quarterly* 79 (2000): 1–18; and Amy W. Goodwin, “The Griselda Game,” *Chaucer Review* 39.1 (2004): 41–69.

discourse of his *Tales from Chaucer* (1833), explaining his hope that child readers “might become wise and good by example of the sweet and kind creatures” they will encounter in his text, such as Griselda.⁶

Hervey, however, favors the female voice. No male narrator guides the reader, and no male interlocutor provides introductory or moralizing discourse on the story’s content. Only one voice appears throughout the poem, that of Griseldis.⁷ Hervey uniquely reimagines Griselda’s story from a female perspective, and, in doing so, presents a negative view of male authority and patriarchal social structures. She sharply critiques the heavily polarized views of women popular in the Victorian period, that they are either angels or monsters, which recall similar dichotomous views from the medieval period of women as either virgins or whores.

This politicization of Griselda’s tale derives directly from Hervey’s professional and personal experiences. Not only was she a female writer in a male-dominated profession, but also – through her marriage to Thomas Kibble Hervey (1799–1859) and his connections to *The Athenaeum* – she was immersed in an active and critical literary circle, one greatly shaped by the reformist politics of the day. Hervey’s later widowhood likewise impacts her writing. Her status as a widow and as the sole provider for her family contributes to the revisions her Griselda poem underwent for publication in *Our Legends and Lives*, a volume in which she expresses explicit concern for control over her previously published works and in which she criticizes publishers who have printed these works without her permission. Hervey’s concerns about her own authorial autonomy link her directly to her subject.

The following discussion thus explores how Hervey employs Griselda in texts geared toward adult, female, and child readers, as well as the different media and contexts within which she presents her adaptations of this medieval figure. Further, through its examination of Hervey’s unique and proto-feminist retellings, it provides new perspectives on how writers and audiences in the nineteenth century received, reimagined, and appropriated

⁶ Charles Cowden Clarke, Preface to *Tales from Chaucer in Prose. Designed Chiefly for the Use of Young Persons. Illustrated with Fourteen Wood Engravings* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1833), iii. In his later edition, Clarke describes Griselda’s conduct as “a fervid hymn in praise of patience, forbearance, and long suffering,” *The Riches of Chaucer. Illustrated with wood engravings by W. H. Mott and S. Williams* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1835), 1.48.

⁷ In this she aligns herself closely with contemporary female writers such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, whose “The Complaint of Annelida to False Arcite” (1841) is an adaptation of Chaucer’s *Anelida and Arcite* (1380–87). Barrett Browning removes from this poem the male-narrated framework of Chaucer’s original, and focuses primarily on Anelida’s voice and complaint.

Griseldis welcomes death and demands for herself the tolling bell and the funeral pyre, burial rituals that would not go unnoticed by her audience. Indeed, Hervey's poem has strong overtones of Robert Browning's "The Bishop Orders his Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church Rome, 15 –" (1845), one of the most famous dramatic monologues of the period. Browning's Bishop, like Hervey's Griseldis, lies on his deathbed "dying by degrees" (11) and entreats his children to approach him as he fades from the earth. He also repeatedly instructs those he leaves behind to memorialize him through an elaborate tomb and epitaph, the material replacements for his decaying physical body.⁹ As Michael Wheeler explains, during the Victorian period, "highly conventionalized social customs and funerary rituals eased the transition from the deathbed to the bed that is the grave."¹⁰ Funerary rituals formalized and commemorated all aspects of an individual's passing, from confession and the last visit, to the funeral procession and burial itself, "giving shape and thus possibly some meaning" to death.¹¹ Against more traditional deathbed scenes or funerary practices, Griseldis's requests are unusual. By denying herself burial or a resting place such as the tomb Browning's Bishop requests, Griseldis deprives herself of the type of meaning and memorialization typically associated with Christian funerary rituals. Death will thus erase all vestiges of her physical presence from the earth, as she leaves behind no material or human (children) reminder of her existence. She clearly sees herself as an ultimate sinner and social outsider, one worthy only of a non-Christian burial, cremation.¹²

⁹ In the Victorian period, as Prendergast explains, monuments or memorials functioned as "material replacements for the lost body" of the deceased. Browning's Bishop, for instance, initially requests a "slab of basalt" (25) with "nine columns round me, two and two" in "Peach-blossom marble" (27, 29), but then later demands "antique-black" (54), along with a "bas-relief in bronze" (56). See Prendergast, *Chaucer's Dead Body*, 75, and Browning, "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church," in *The Works of Robert Browning*, ed. F. G. Kenyon, 10 vols. (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1912), 4: 125–28.

¹⁰ Michael Wheeler, *Heaven, Hell, and the Victorians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 5.

¹¹ As Wheeler explains:

Social and literary conventions relating to the deathbed included the visit from a doctor or priest, the presence of a loving attendant to whom a dying confession could be made or of a family on whom a dying blessing could be bestowed, the laying out of a corpse in a darkened room, the "last visit" of the bereaved, and the closing of the coffin. Those associated with the grave included the funeral procession, the funeral itself, the burial, the erection of a memorial stone, and subsequent visits to the grave made by the bereaved. These conventions formalized the different stages of death and bereavement, giving shape and thus possibly some meaning to a transitional phase between one state and another.

See *Heaven, Hell, and the Victorians*, 30–31.

¹² Mary Elizabeth Hotz notes that cremation was a focal point for Victorian social and political reformers and became an increasingly popular choice in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, even though the Cremation Act itself was not passed in England

The second stanza shifts the narrative's focus to its medieval origins. Griseldis, reflecting upon her youth, describes her former self:

I was a shepherd's daughter, and I used to watch the fold
 At eve beside a little cairn upon a lonely wold;
 And I wept to see the new-yearned lambs how close they lay at
rest
 'Neath the parent breath that fanned them like a soft wind
from the west. (5–8)

These images, especially the references to an isolated, rural setting and to the act of shepherding, contribute to the nostalgic and pastoral feel of the stanza, and to the sense that Griseldis's past life was simpler and happier than her current existence. Further, these lines paint an idyllic scene highly evocative of the world that Chaucer's protagonist inhabits, and align Griseldis with the most famous shepherd of all, Christ. Hervey reinforces Griseldis's connection to both the medieval tale and the divine when she links her protagonist to the Marian figure. Like Chaucer's Grisilde, who "A few sheepe, spynnyng, on feeld she kepte; / [and] wolde nocht been ydel til she slepte" (IV, 223–24), Hervey's speaker spends her time tending the flock.¹³ As Larry D. Benson notes, Grisilde's activities align her closely to the Virgin, who was "often pictured both as a shepherdess and as a spinner."¹⁴ Hervey's emphasis on shepherding extends this alignment to her Griseldis, and the combined focus on her purity, industriousness, and maternity marks her as an example of the "domestic angel" who provided for Victorians a secular descendant of the medieval Catholic Madonna.¹⁵ Yet the poem's sudden movement to a pastoral setting underscores the contrast between the first and second stanzas, subtly reminding readers that despite moments of similitude this poem is not the tale with which they are familiar. Likewise, the reference to

until 1902. Hotz, Chapter 5: "'The Tonic of Fire': Cremation in Late Victorian England," in *Literary Remains: Representations of Death and Burial in Victorian England* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 141.

¹³ All citations of Chaucer's works indicate fragment and line numbers.

¹⁴ Benson, "Explanatory Notes," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 881.

¹⁵ "In the Middle Ages [...] mankind's great teacher of purity was the Virgin Mary. [...] For the more secular nineteenth century, however, the eternal type of female purity was represented not by a madonna in heaven but by an angel in the house. Nevertheless, there is a clear line of literary descent from divine Virgin to domestic angel, passing through (among many others) Dante, Milton, and Goethe." See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd edn (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 20.

the cairn, itself a symbol of death, recalls the protagonist's opening eulogy and her utter despair.

The second stanza also identifies the major theme of Hervey's poem – motherhood – and establishes the standard by which Griseldis judges her own behavior. Motherhood, in Griseldis's view, consists primarily of the nurturing and protection of one's young, and her experiences as a shepherdess expose her to what she considers the paragon of mothering in the natural world. She notes the tender and protective manner with which the ewes treat the lambs, and renders their relationship sublime. The ewes are as gentle with the lambs as is a soft breeze upon their fleece. Griseldis idealizes both the pastoral setting of her past and its associated depiction of motherhood, and, through her self-identification as a shepherd's daughter, aligns herself with these nurturing figures. She sees herself, in youth, as a maternal figure of purity and love. This is a far cry from the despairing sinner of the poem's opening.

Griseldis's contemplation of motherhood continues in the third stanza, where she emphasizes the connection between instinctual behavior and correct or appropriate mothering. "Motherhood," she declares, "is strong as life" (9). That is, for the female of a species the urge to mother is as strong as the very instinct to live. Further, this urge is "strongest in the least, / [and] findeth out sweet channels in the poor four-footed beast" (9–10), in the creatures or beasts that lack the capacity of reason accessible to humans. Drawing again on the example of her sheep, Griseldis explains how the ewe's instinct to mother is so strong that it "giveth suck to the strange kid if it waieth for its dam" (11). The protection and survival of the lamb, even if not one of its own, is the most important thing for the ewe, demonstrating that instinctual behavior is natural, perfect even, when connected to motherhood. Griseldis, though, falls short of the example she presents, and emphasizes this point by aligning one of her own children with the lambs. She confesses to her audience: "But I, my bird to the kite I gave and to the wolf my lamb" (12). Rather than protect her young, as do the ewes the lambs, she relinquishes the care of her children to a known predator. The instincts to nurture and to protect are more manifest in the lesser beings of her flock than they are in her, a member of the human species. Her sin is thus twofold: she sins because she acts against her instincts and gives away her children, and she sins because as a rational being she should know better than to do so. Griseldis becomes, in her own eyes, a monster because she fails as a mother and as a human being. Here, then, is the root of her anguish.

Griseldis's belief that her decisions and actions result in the loss of her children's lives persists in the following two stanzas, which recount her transition from shepherdess to wife. She explains that upon meeting her husband, she "took him for [her] lord" (15) and "left the young sheep bleating and the cottage by the fold" (16). Hervey's use of the verbs "took" and "left" empha-

size her speaker's sense of agency, while the bleating of the lambs, a sound that evokes a sense of distress, reinforces the identification of Griseldis as an unnatural being ill-suited to motherhood. Through language, Hervey renders Griseldis's marriage an active abandonment of both her former self and the first children for which she was responsible, the sheep. She also foreshadows the later abandonment of the human children that occurs when Griseldis acquiesces to her husband's demands and allows them to be removed from her care and purportedly killed.

However, Hervey ultimately suggests that her protagonist's agency is an illusion. She draws attention to the complex and contradictory reality of married life for Victorian women when Griseldis declares that in the act of marriage she "vowed obedience" (20). As a woman under the legal doctrine of coverture, like her medieval counterpart, she must subordinate her will first to that of her father and then to that of her husband. The legal doctrine of coverture, as Ben Griffin explains, extended from the medieval period well into the nineteenth century, and even mid-century, "married women had no independent legal identity in the eyes of the law: husband and wife were deemed to be one person, and that person was the husband."¹⁶ Indeed, "It is the will of the two men, not the will of the daughter, that counts."¹⁷ Regardless of how culpable Griseldis believes herself to be, by performing her duties as a wife – by being the obedient and virtuous domestic angel – she dooms herself to failure as a mother. While one of her primary roles as a wife is to provide heirs for her husband, in order to achieve wifely obedience she must abandon her instincts as a mother. In the patriarchal system, male (and therefore supposedly rational) authority supersedes female instinct (emotion or passion), and marriage (obedience to the husband) is the ultimate undoing of the female figure.

Griseldis bemoans her union and the misery that it brings, for married life is a life without relief, a loveless life of darkness. She declares that, since marrying, "No cool draught [...] these parching lips have touched in all the land" (14), and describes the ensuing years as "the darkest ever womanhood beheld" (17). Grief overcomes Griseldis, and she slowly forgets how to love: "the shaft of love was shivered, and the shriek of anguish quelled: / I sometimes think my brain swam round in that sorrow-flood" (18–19). The nurturing young shepherdess disappears, and the resultant domestic figure becomes increasingly passive and silent, unable to act or to voice her discontent and grief. Additionally, the prominent "s" sound of these lines patterns itself after the poem's opening stanza, reconnecting the speaker to

¹⁶ Ben Griffin, *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain: Masculinity, Political Culture and the Struggle for Women's Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 4.

¹⁷ Gerald Morgan, "The Logic of the Clerk's Tale," *Modern Language Review* 104.1 (January 2009): 1–25 (11).

the flames of the funeral pyre. Griseldis, it seems, was fated for such a death the moment she married.

Hervey's treatment of the key male figures in the story, Griseldis's husband and father, reinforces her criticism of patriarchal authority and increases the distance between her poem and its literary antecedents. Specifically, Hervey drastically minimizes her individualization of the male characters. In "Griseldis, with her Children," the husband and father are both nameless and voiceless. The use of the dramatic monologue form eradicates any perspective other than that of Griselda, and eliminates any chance for the reader to experience a nuanced encounter with the male figures. As such, they signify a type of every-husband or every-father, and operate more broadly as critiques of all male authority within the patriarchal system. Only their actions speak for them, and these actions are cruel.

The opening line of stanza four provides a staccato list of verbs that emphasize the scopophilic nature of the husband's gaze. Griseldis tells readers, "He came – he stopped – he saw me with the pitcher in my hand" (13). The husband-to-be does not dwell upon his future wife's patient and virtuous character, a detail central especially to the medieval narratives by Chaucer and Petrarch. Instead, a voyeuristic perspective that emphasizes only the external, physical appearance of the woman replaces the concern for female industriousness and humility. Hervey's narrative, in this instance, evokes Boccaccio's story more than any other medieval source, building upon the husband Gualtieri's realization that his wife-to-be is "very beautiful," and his thought that "a life with her would have much to commend it."¹⁸ Further, the verbs through which Hervey recounts this scene underscore the male gaze's complete objectification of Griseldis, undermining any previous sense of female agency within the narrative.

Hervey's depiction of Griseldis's father, an original and striking addition to the tale, increases the objectification of the female figure. Griseldis explains to her audience that, as she departed from the shepherd's cottage for her new life, her father "clutched his gold" (15). This gold, which passes from husband to father, identifies marriage as an entirely economic transaction, one that renders the female body a commodity to be bought and sold at the whim of men. Unlike Chaucer's Janicula or Petrarch's Janicola, both of whom express considerable emotion concerning Griselda's condition, Hervey's father figure is an emotionless shell. In Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*, for instance, when the Marquis puts his wife aside, Janicula, echoing Job, "curseth" (IV, 902) his existence, and then escorts his daughter home "ful sorwefully wepyng" (IV, 914).¹⁹

¹⁸ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 785.

¹⁹ Janicula "Curseth the day and tyme that Nature / Shoop hum to been a lyves creature" (IV, 902–3), echoes Job 3:3: "Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in

Griseldis's father expresses no such concern for his daughter's well-being. Rather, by clutching his money, he demonstrates only his greed. Hervey's critique of the male objectification of women, like other aspects of her poem, recalls Browning's "The Bishop," in which the dying Bishop repeatedly refers to the long-dead mother of his children as an object to be gazed upon and desired, as something that earned him the envy of his rival, Gandolf. He describes her, for instance, as "fair" (5, 125), a "True peach, / Rosy and flawless" (32–33), and, significantly, as "the prize" (33). Likewise, in Hervey's poem, men view women as objects to be acquired, nothing more.

Hervey confirms male culpability and the powerless state of the female through her protagonist's exclamation, "I have vowed obedience, and the bond was sealed – in blood!" (20). This line, which evokes the cultural practice in which blood on the marriage-bed sheets proves both consummation of the relationship and the virginity of the bride, links the death of Griseldis's children explicitly to wifedom and to female submissiveness. It suggests that Griseldis's bride-price extends beyond the gold that her father clutches, even beyond her maidenhead. For Griseldis, marriage costs her the lives of her children, as well as the ability to act or speak as a woman, especially as a mother.

The remaining stanzas of the poem's first part return to Griseldis's understanding of motherhood as instinctual and as part of the natural world. Once again, she contrasts her own behavior to that of the sheep in the fold, drawing on the previously established link between the pastoral and the divine when she declares that she seeks her (human) children in the "pasture-lands" (22). The inhabitants of this space, those creatures she has already identified as the paragon of motherhood, become "angels true to motherhood, whose robes are God's own light" (23). Mothers, she suggests, do God's work when they fulfill their natural role: they protect their young, just as Christ protects his followers (his flock). Griseldis, however, fears she cannot share in God's light. As a sinner – as a mother who fails to protect her young – she denies herself the right to such bliss. Griseldis even fears that her sins will prevent reunion with her children in the afterlife. The angels, she declares, the sheep that embody motherly perfection, "Would meet my step on heaven's floor, and shut me from your sight" (24).

Griseldis further diminishes her motherhood by suggesting that lower life forms such as insects are more successful parents than she is:

The Ant, that airiest thing that haunts the meadows circling rings,
To do her mother-task assigned rends off her very wings, –

which it was said: A manchild is conceived." Benson, "Explanatory Notes," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 883.

But I, to whom a holier sense and higher gifts were given,
The wings that *I* have torn away had wafted me to heaven.
(25–28)

Personal pain and suffering are less important to this insect than its responsibilities to its unborn young, and, to fulfill its reproductive duties, the ant readily mutilates its own body.²⁰ Not so Griseldis, who contrasts herself directly to the ant. Despite being human, and therefore the supposed greater of the two species, Griseldis acts unnaturally: she tears off her wings (her children) when instead she should protect them. She fails to fulfill the natural and necessary motherly duties that normally would earn her a place in heaven.²¹

The concluding stanza of the first part reinforces the grim tone of the opening stanza while it simultaneously reminds the audience that this narrative is entirely removed from other versions of the story with which they are familiar, medieval and post-medieval. Specifically, it maintains Griseldis's belief that her children no longer live, and it erases the family reunion with which the medieval authors and their redactors conclude the tale. As she faces her demise, Griseldis seeks comfort through an imagined reunion with her dead children:

Close round me now in spirit while I yield me to my rest;
Kiss – clasp me, if ye may, – that I may feel at last in death
The phantom of that joy which died when ye gave up your
breath! (30–32)

Here, Hervey subtly evokes the language of Chaucer's text, specifically the reunion scene in which Grisilde repeatedly swoons as if dead and clasps her children so fiercely that it is only "with greet sleighte and greet difficultee" (IV, 1102) that they emerge from her embrace.²² As Barry Windeatt suggests, "a swoon distinguishes itself from other reactions to feelings or events by

²⁰ The ant's rending of its wings is a biological process called "dealation" common among certain ant families. See, for example, S. N. Burns, R. K. Vander Meer, and P. Teal, "Mating Flight Activity as Dealation Factors for Red Imported Fire Ant (Hymenoptera: Formicidae) Female Alates," *Annals of the Entomological Society of America* 100.2 (2007): 257–64; or G. Castella, P. Christie, and M. Chapuisat, "Mating Triggers Dynamic Immune Regulations in Wood Ant Queens," *Journal of Evolutionary Biology* 22.3 (March 2009): 564–70.

²¹ I am extremely grateful to the comments received on these lines via the VICTORIA listserv, specifically those made by Herbert Tucker, Michael Wolff, and Clemence Schultze. I am also grateful to my colleague Elyssa Warkentin for her assistance in soliciting their comments.

²² Chaucer describes Grisilde's swoons at IV, 1079, 1087, and 1099–1100. During the latter swoon, she "so sadly [tightly] holdeth" (IV, 1100) her children that they have difficulty disentangling themselves from her.

being such an absolute response that further ability to think and feel is temporarily overpowered.”²³ In short, a swoon is akin to death in that it is a suspension of life and action. Griseldis, on her deathbed, occupies a suspended state, hovering between life and death. Further, the intensity of Griseldis’s outcry parallels the silence of her medieval predecessor, whose swoons would denote to a medieval audience the overwhelming power of her emotional response.

This scene reminds readers that the memorialization Hervey’s protagonist desires diverges from Victorian practices by playing upon the motif of the last visit between the dying and the bereaved, a moment that should bring closure and comfort. As an imagined experience, Griseldis’s reunion fails to fulfill this traditional consolatory goal. It also increases the distance between Hervey’s narrative and its antecedents. Instead of providing resolution through reunion and comfort, Hervey highlights Griseldis’s joyless life and her failure to protect her young, and presents her children’s deaths as real rather than imagined. The only moment of relief occurs when Griseldis, in death, finds the voice she lacks in life, and can finally give shape to her loss.

The title of the poem’s second part, “Griseldis, With her Children,” suggests to its audience a turn in the narrative that should align it more closely with the widely known medieval and Victorian versions in which Griselda reunites with her family. Yet despite its evocation of such a turn, the second part reinforces a reading of Hervey’s adaptation as an entirely different narrative. It also confirms her intent to eradicate resolution. Reunion, when it happens, brings no love or joy, for Griseldis and her children are capable of neither. Drawing again upon images of the natural world, Griseldis compares her children to flora, although this time she does not evoke the idyllic, pastoral world that features earlier in the poem and in the medieval tales. Instead, she compares her children to the plant life of a neglected garden. She likens her children to buds that have not fully bloomed, and suggests that because of the damage previously done to them they never will. When she embraces the children, she notes how loosely their arms “twine” (39) around her, “like tendrils long since riven from a crushed and trampled vine” (40). The tendrils, her children, cannot help their current almost lifeless condition because the larger plant from which they stem, their mother, is equally damaged. To reach its potential, plant life, like the lambs in the fold, requires nurture; Griseldis’s relationship with her children, though, what she refers to as “Nature’s [...] bond” (52), is beyond repair.²⁴ Reunion only perpetuates her sense of loss.

²³ Barry Windeatt, “The Art of Swooning in Middle English,” in *Medieval Latin and Middle English Literature: Essays in Honour of Jill Mann*, ed. Christopher Cannon and Maura Nolan (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), 211–30 (211–12).

²⁴ These lines recall Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, which similarly focuses on the bond between

Upon meeting her children, Griseldis notes in them the very darkness that characterizes her own existence. She describes them as “shadowy forms” (33) with eyes “cold and passionless and lids without a tear” (35), and says that their faces remind her of her own upon her wedding day (36). A loveless marriage, she suggests, creates loveless children, especially if the mother subordinates the needs of her children to the needs of her husband. Griseldis even reads her guilt in the children’s faces:

Your glances say I slew you; and alas! ye seem to stand
 All shrinking and in horror – though no blood is on my hand; –
 There may be other pangs as keen from which no power can save,
 But these are as sharp thorns to bind the turf upon my grave.
 (45–48)

That her children live makes Griseldis no less culpable. By neglecting her responsibilities as a mother, she condemned her children to emotional and psychological deaths, if not to physical ones. Her reference to thorns, which evokes the Christ figure once again, reminds the reader that she views herself as a sinner and suggests that the condition of her children is a burden she must bear, in and beyond death.

The poem’s final stanzas suggest that reunion is an anticlimactic ending, but one appropriate for the ills of Griseldis’s life. She concludes that while “life hath no more sweetness left,” death also “has no more sting” (50). The knowledge that her children live provides a degree of comfort, for she no longer fears being barred from their sight in the afterlife, and, although she still welcomes death, she does so now for a different reason. She beseeches her children to embrace her in hopes that close contact in her final moments will engender in them at least one fond memory of their mother. She hopes that, perhaps, because of such a moment, “The blossoms and the stricken tree shall grow together yet” (54). The poem’s closing lines voice her dying wish: “And the sweets that failed me living shall cleave to me in my fall, / As the bind-flower to the bramble and the moss-root to the wall” (56). Although she still sees herself as a sinner (like Adam and Eve, she falls, or

parents and their children, as well as on natural and unnatural behaviors. The motif of the natural bond informs the relationships between Gloucester and his sons, Edgar and Edmund, but is most prominent in Lear’s relationships with his daughters, Cordelia, Goneril, and Regan. For instance, when Lear queries how much his daughters love him, Cordelia responds that she does so “According to [her] bond; no more nor less” (1.1.90). Lear, dissatisfied with her response, disowns his daughter, a folly that ultimately leads to the loss of his children, most especially of Cordelia, as well as to the loss of his own self and life. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Lear: The Folio Text*, in *The Norton Shakespeare: Tragedies*, 2nd edn, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York and London: Norton, 2008), 587.

sins), Griseldis hopes that in death she can accomplish what she could not in life: to teach her children to love and to bond with others, including herself. In doing so, she may find redemption.

Hervey's narrative is a radical departure from its literary antecedents, and, from the outset, she rejects the framework and male narrator or guide of more widely known versions of the tale. She also refuses readers the ending that they would anticipate: the resolution offered by the medieval texts and their adaptations.²⁵ What she offers is a new reading of Griselda's story, one that emphasizes the female perspective and female experience, and that renders maternity and female emotion superior to male or patriarchal authority. Consequently, Hervey both aligns herself with and takes up the challenge presented by Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*, who questions how representations of men and women would differ if written by the latter gender. Indeed, Hervey's depiction of male figures fulfills the *Wife's* prediction that if women wrote texts, "They wolde han write of men moore wikkednesse / Than al the mark of Adam may redresse" (III, 701–2).

These changes allow Hervey, as a writer and as a woman, to explore Griseldis's passivity and her complicity in the abduction and supposed murder of her children, along with the effects this passivity has on her emotional and psychological states. They also simultaneously allow her to gesture to the inadequacy of the more widely known medieval and post-medieval versions of the story, those told by male authors and editors, to represent women and female experiences. Hervey thus fashions her *Griselda*, to a degree, after Chaucer's *Wife*. As Theresa Tinkle suggests, "Chaucer clearly designs his feminine persona [Alison] to engage unsettled contemporary debates [...]. The persona allows [him] to enter the debates behind a mask."²⁶ Although Tinkle's point concerns primarily Chaucer's engagement with debates surrounding "vernacular scripture and lay hermeneutics," the point transfers readily to the current argument.²⁷ What matters is Chaucer's construction of a female character through which he engages in debates that ultimately concern women in society, and his use of the voice of that female figure to challenge established beliefs and practices.

Hervey does no less with her *Griseldis*. The dramatic monologue form especially allows her to explore more fully the conflicts between the roles of mother and wife that women were expected to fulfill in Victorian society,

²⁵ This is not to say that each medieval writer does not problematize his tale's conclusion. Indeed, all accounts are fraught with moral issues. However, these accounts ultimately restore the familial and social structures that order the societies of the respective tales.

²⁶ Theresa Tinkle, "The Wife of Bath's Marginal Authority," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 32 (2010): 67–101 (70).

²⁷ Tinkle, "The Wife of Bath's Marginal Authority," 70.

and to critique the socially prescribed gender roles and behaviors that relegate women to the domestic sphere and demand that they be saint-like paragons of virtue. In particular, she criticizes the obedience a woman must show her father and especially her husband, for her protagonist's success in this area leads to her "deep sorrow-flood" (19), the loss of her children. Hervey's reimagining of Griselda and her story subverts gender stereotypes that negatively associate women with emotion and instinct. Griseldis's words suggest that motherhood derives from natural and instinctual behaviors, and that such emotions are positive experiences to be embraced rather than denied. Hervey sees patriarchal and economic systems of power that rely upon the maintenance of gendered social roles as ultimately to blame for Griseldis's condition. Such systems, which put women "totally under the control of their husbands, who manag[e] their money and determin[e] the lives of their children," pit wifedom against motherhood, with disastrous results.²⁸ Indeed, Griseldis's description of her loss suggests that her children's lives are meaningless to her husband and that her life equals nothing more than monetary gain for her father. In her eyes, negative appetites and desires drive these men; consequently, she and her children suffer.

Initially, the 1869 "Griselda" (Appendix B) appears to be a carbon copy of "Griseldis, with her Children." The poem maintains Hervey's eradication of the masculine framing narrative, as well as the earlier poem's criticisms of patriarchy and the entrenched gender roles and stereotypes upon which it relies. In fact, with the exception of minor word-swaps and a few changes to punctuation, the second version reproduces most of the original poem's first part, "Griseldis, the Childless." Word changes occur in line 1 ("once more" for "again"), line 16 ("wold" for "fold"), and line 24 ("bar me" for "shut"), but the language of stanzas 1 through 6 is otherwise unchanged. Several minor alterations to punctuation likewise occur, but the only notable edit appears in line 12, where a question mark replaces a comma ("But I? – My bird to the kite I gave, and to the wolf my lamb!"). The addition of the question mark, however, significantly alters the function of this line. Whereas, in the original, Hervey presents a statement of fact, here, through punctuation, she emphasizes reader interaction. The line now focuses attention on the dialogue between the speaker and her readers, suggesting that the line responds to an audience-based query concerning the fate of Griselda's children. Interestingly, Hervey's edit aligns her story closely with Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*. The increased connection between speaker and audience parallels the Ellesmere manuscript's inclusion of an envoy, which Stephanie Trigg

²⁸ John R. Reed, *Victorian Conventions* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1975), 44.

describes as “a direct address to the audience,” one that increases audience interest in the tale.²⁹

More importantly, in “Griselda,” Hervey removes all vestiges of her protagonist’s reunion with her children by omitting entirely the second half of the earlier poem. This omission diminishes the narrative’s focus on the consequences of her wifely obedience, particularly those visited upon Griselda’s innocent children. The disturbing images of her young as damaged tendrils, and as vacant, loveless husks, disappear, as does Griselda’s despairing declaration that she reads her guilt in their faces. The absence of both lessens Griselda’s culpability and gives greater weight to the first part’s commentary on the male figures and their actions. It likewise diminishes any evocations of medieval and post-medieval Griselda stories in which reunion and resolution occur, along with audience expectations of such closure, and reminds readers that Hervey’s poem is unique.

Although the recast ending of the shorter poem renders Griselda’s loss a permanent one, it simultaneously moves away from the earlier poem’s lament for a grim existence toward an expression of spiritual salvation. In addition to shortening the poem, Hervey eliminates the original final stanza of the first part (lines 29–32) and rewrites the penultimate stanza, which now operates as the poem’s conclusion. While the last two lines of the stanza (27–28) remain the same and can still be read as Griselda’s lament for her inability to enter heaven in the afterlife, the first two lines problematize such a reading. The stanza now reads:

The lowly ant whom motherhood to earth unerring brings,
To Nature’s instinct blindly true, rends off her clay-bound wings;
But I, to whom a holier sense of higher gifts were given,
The wings that *I* have torn away had wafted me to heaven!
(25–28)

Hervey’s description of the ant’s wings as “clay-bound” (26) evokes biblical accounts of creation (in which God forms Adam and Eve out of dust) and renders the ant’s removal of her wings a similar act: it is the first step in procreation.³⁰ Further, her description of the “unerring” ant being brought “to earth” evokes the Immaculate Conception and the Virgin’s subsequent loss of her own child on the crucifix. In a single couplet, Hervey metaphorically links the ant to humanity, and, by extension, reinforces Griselda’s connection to the idealized medieval Marian figure. Such a move provides room for an understanding of Griselda’s death as ultimately redemptive. Despite her

²⁹ Trigg, *Congenial Souls*, 80.

³⁰ Specifically, it recalls Genesis 2.7: “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”

fears to the contrary, Griselda will ascend and enter heaven precisely because virtuous qualities (devotion, constancy, and obedience) inform her actions. She ultimately becomes, in death, the domestic angel.

In the second poem, then, Hervey maintains her emphasis on the female perspective and experience: Griselda condemns blind obedience in women to male authority; insists that wifely obedience conflicts with the responsibilities of motherhood; and questions the social structures that commodify the female body and existence. However, Hervey's revisions create a tension within the narrative that previously did not exist, and that potentially undermines her criticism of patriarchal authority. The confirmation of loss and utter despair present in the original gives way to an expression of hope in final redemption. The initial poem's emphasis on Griselda's failures as a mother, which result in her inability to access heaven, now exists alongside revisions that align the protagonist's behavior with the medieval pinnacle of female behavior. In short, the revised ending reinforces the social message that both versions so vehemently speak out against, that motherhood should be subservient to wifedom. "Griselda" is a strikingly different poem from its predecessor.

The use of a medieval narrative to give voice to discontent with contemporary circumstances was not uncommon in the nineteenth century. In fact, it features prominently in what Clare Broome Saunders identifies as a specifically "female" type of Victorian medievalism.³¹ In a period during which women who strayed outside of the domestic sphere were often seen as barbaric or even whorish, the vehicle of medievalism, through its historical distance, provided a reasonably safe space for social criticism. In this, Hervey practices a technique familiar to medieval writers, including Chaucer, who often sets his tales in "distant times and distant lands rather than fourteenth-century England."³² Indeed, female writers of the late Romantic and Victorian periods frequently employed "medieval motifs, forms, and settings to enable them to comment on contemporary issues, such as war and gender roles, areas where women's more open comment had often met with career-destroying censure."³³

Griselda's story, which remained popular in European countries in the post-medieval period, was particularly attractive to many Victorians, who valued its presentation of the ideal woman as a patient and obedient wife.³⁴

³¹ Clare Broome Saunders, *Women Writers and Nineteenth-Century Medievalism*, Nineteenth-Century Major Lives and Letters (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1.

³² Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, Chaucer Studies (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), xv.

³³ Saunders, *Women Writers and Nineteenth-Century Medievalism*, 1.

³⁴ By the mid-nineteenth century Griselda was revered as a saint-like or angelic domestic figure, "the wife who courageously endures intolerable conditions." See Reed, *Victorian Conventions*, 40. For a brief survey of the major nineteenth-century editions and adap-

In fact, the name “Griselda” carried considerable weight in the nineteenth century. Maria Edgeworth, for instance, demonstrated the social currency of Griselda’s figure when she named a novel, *The Modern Griselda: A Tale* (1805), and its protagonist after her, while three decades later the Austrian writer Baron Münch-Bellinghausen, under the pseudonym Friedrich Halm, reworked her story as a dramatic text.³⁵ Versions of her story appeared frequently, sometimes serialized, in popular Victorian periodicals, many of which sold cheaply, “for a penny or a penny and a half.”³⁶ For instance, in 1836, *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* published the prose “Tale of the Patient Griselda,” and a year later *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* printed “Griselda, The Clerke’s Tale,” with the subtitle “re-made from Chaucer.”³⁷ Similarly, *The Penny Magazine* ran two series on Chaucer by John Saunders, “one on the pilgrims from the *General Prologue* in 1841 and another on the *Canterbury Tales* in 1845,” the latter of which included a three-part publication of the *Clerk’s Tale*.³⁸ These serialized excerpts later appeared in Saunders’s popular two-volume *Canterbury Tales from Chaucer* (1845).

As a prolific and respected writer – Hervey had an expansive and financially successful literary career from her early twenties until her early seventies³⁹ – and as a regular contributor to widely circulated venues such as *Chambers’s*

tations of Griselda’s story, albeit one that omits Hervey’s poems, see Judith Bronfman, *Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale: The Griselda Story Received, Rewritten, Illustrated* (New York and London: Garland, 1994), 61–72.

³⁵ Edgeworth highlights Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale* when the characters read the story at a dinner party. She also names her protagonist, Griselda Bolingbroke, after the medieval figure, although Edgeworth’s Griselda demonstrates none of the patience and humility of her literary predecessor. Halm not only dramatizes the story, but also, more incredibly, renders it an Arthurian narrative in which Walter becomes Percival and in which Arthur’s queen, Guinevere, bears the blame for Griselda’s misfortunes. See Maria Edgeworth, *The Modern Griselda* (London: J. Johnson, 1805), and Friedrich Halm [Baron Eligius Franz Joseph von Münch-Bellinghausen], *Griselda: A Drama in Five Acts*, trans. Ralph A. Anstruther (London: Black and Armstrong, 1840).

³⁶ Walter Graham, *English Literary Periodicals* (New York: Octagon Books, 1966), 296 n. 1.

³⁷ “Tale of the Patient Griselda,” *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* 257 (31 December 1836): 390; “Griselda, The Clerke’s Tale. Re-Made from Chaucer,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 41.259 (May 1837): 655–67.

³⁸ Morse, “Popularizing Chaucer in the Nineteenth Century,” 105. For the serialized version of Saunders’s edition, see “Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales. The Clerk’s Tale*,” *Penny Magazine of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*, 14.856 (2 August 1845): 300–2; 14.857 (9 August 1845): 310–11; and 14.859 (23 August 1845): 323–24.

³⁹ In 1839, one reviewer identifies Hervey as a talented and well-known writer, as “a lady whose smaller pieces have now been some years before the public, as contributions to our periodical literature. They are characterized by more vigour of thought and more independent action of mind than are common with lady poets.” “*The Landgrave, a Play, in Five Acts; with Dramatic Illustrations of Female Character*. By Eleanora Louisa Montagu. Smith, Elder, & Co.,” *The Athenaeum* 616 (17 August 1839): 607.

Edinburgh Journal and *The Penny Magazine*, Hervey likely encountered many periodical versions of Griselda's story.⁴⁰ As a mother (Hervey's son, Frederic James Hervey, was born in 1845), she also probably knew other incarnations of the tale directed toward child readers, such as those by Clarke. Further, as the wife of T. K. Hervey, the recently appointed editor of *The Athenaeum*, Hervey likely encountered Saunders's serialized excerpts and his subsequent two-volume edition, as well as the lukewarm review the latter received in *The Athenaeum*.⁴¹

It is also possible that Saunders's commentary on Chaucer's treatment of Griselda provided an impetus for Hervey's own adaptations. In his "Remarks on the Clerk's Tale," Saunders praises Chaucer's version of the story, stating that the medieval poet, "while apparently making little or no attempt to show the state of Grisilde's feelings, is in truth constantly revealing depth beneath depth of the heart of this divine woman."⁴² Although Saunders questions the moral nature of Walter's testing of his wife, he purports that the aspects of the tale that might shock a contemporary audience (such as the husband's tests) would not have shocked a medieval one, which, he suggests, would recognize the behaviors of both Griselda and her husband as characteristic of their roles within the feudal system. In Saunders's opinion, Griselda, and her medieval audience, see her subjugation to Walter as "a mark of honour rather than humiliation" and as part of the "goodness" of the social system in which they existed.⁴³

Hervey's reimagining of Griselda's story speaks directly to these points. Her poems, like Chaucer's, highlight the emotional state of the distraught mother, albeit in different ways, but most especially through the use of the female voice. Through their critique of patriarchal authority and social structures, they also provide a view of the relationship between Griselda and her husband that opposes the one put forth by Saunders, suggesting that his opinion – a male opinion – is inadequate as commentary upon the condition of the female and her experiences. Hervey's poems highlight themes within

⁴⁰ Graham notes that the *The Penny Magazine*, established in 1832, "soon reached a circulation of 200,000 in weekly numbers and monthly parts." *English Literary Periodicals*, 296 n. 1.

⁴¹ The reviewer, William Hepworth Dixon, writes:

Mr. Saunders has undertaken the, in our opinion, very needless – and certainly unprofitable – task of preparing an edition of the *Canterbury Tales*. [...] We agree generally with Mr. Saunders that any attempt to improve a great work of Art must prove a failure, [...] and we only wonder that the argument and the examples did not lead Mr. Saunders to carry the warning one step further" [i.e., to his own work].

See "*Canterbury Tales, from Chaucer*. By John Saunders. 2 vols.," *The Athenaeum* 1037 (11 September 1847): 951. For Saunders's volume, see *Canterbury Tales from Chaucer*, 2 vols. (London: Charles Knight and Co., 1845).

⁴² Saunders, *Canterbury Tales from Chaucer*, 1.216.

⁴³ Saunders, *Canterbury Tales from Chaucer*, 1.217.

the medieval Griselda story that Saunders minimalizes in his commentary: the protagonist's specific responses to marriage, motherhood, and the loss of her children.⁴⁴ They also speak directly to the two basic assumptions out of which Victorian "domestic ideology" arose: "The first was that men would always use their domestic authority wisely; the second was that a wife would happily submit to her husband's wishes."⁴⁵ Both of Hervey's versions of Griselda's story make it clear that these assumptions are untenable.

As a writer and as a woman, Hervey was not alone in her explorations of such social issues. Through her career and marriage, she participated in a wide and progressive literary circle that included prominent Victorians such as long-time and influential Secretary for the Royal Literary Fund, Octavian Blewitt (1810–84), and the well-known writer for *The Illustrated London News* and *The Times*, Charles Mackay (1814–89).⁴⁶ Her connections to *The Athenaeum*, which, from the 1830s onward, was a well-established and prosperous literary journal that "exceeded, in circulation, any other similar paper,"⁴⁷ no doubt directly influenced the concerns she expresses in

⁴⁴ Modern critics provide more nuanced understandings of Chaucer's representation of Griselda. Carolyn Dinshaw, for example, suggests that Chaucer's Clerk expresses considerable sympathy for her figure and recognizes that, as a woman, she is "one who is fundamentally left out of patriarchal society." *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 154. For discussions that similarly emphasize Griselda's strength or complex position within the tales, see also Jill Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, Feminist Reading Series (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1991); Elaine Tuttle Hanson, "The Powers of Silence: The Case of the Clerk's Griselda," in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 230–49, and *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Elizabeth D. Kirk, "Nominalism and the Dynamics of the Clerk's Tale: Homo Viator as Woman," in *Chaucer's Religious Tales*, ed. David Benson and Elizabeth Robertson, Chaucer Studies (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990), 111–20; and John A. Pitcher, "The Martyr's Purpose: The Rhetoric of Disavowal in *The Clerk's Tale*," in *Chaucer's Feminine Subjects: Figures of Desire in the Canterbury Tales*, New Middle Ages Series (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 81–107.

⁴⁵ Griffin, *The Politics of Gender*, 38.

⁴⁶ Letters between T. K. Hervey and Octavian Blewitt suggest that the two, and their wives, were quite friendly. Hervey addresses letters to Blewitt as "My dear Blewitt," as opposed to the more common and more formal "My dear Sir," and their exchanges reference social meetings and express warm wishes between the two families. See, for example, T. K. Hervey to The Secretary [Octavian Blewitt] of the Royal Literary Fund, 6 June 1848, 96 RLF 1/1207: 3, British Library. Correspondence exists as well between the Herveys and Charles Mackay, mostly in response to his requests to include some of their works in volumes he edited. Eleanora L. Hervey to Charles Mackay, 19 February 1857, and Thomas Kibble Hervey to Charles Mackay, 20 February 1857, RP 7536/1, British Library.

⁴⁷ Graham, *English Literary Periodicals*, 318. Leslie A. Marchand likewise notes that once editors dropped the price of *The Athenaeum* "to 4d. in 1831" circulation exploded from approximately 3,000 issues to 18,000 issues. Marchand, *The Athenaeum: A Mirror of Victorian Culture* (New York: Octagon Books, 1971), 45.

her adaptation of Griselda's story. While in its early decades the publication maintained a "custom of strict neutrality in politics," under the stewardship of T. K. Hervey it voiced "a lively interest in social reform movements" and published "paragraphs and short articles or editorial notes" on topics such as "prison reform, workmen's housing, factory legislation, [and] the curbing of child labour."⁴⁸

These interests represent only a portion of the social issues of the day, and their emphasis on disenfranchised or marginalized populations parallels closely the contemporary political reforms that emphasized women's rights, including the Aggravated Assaults, or Women's Protection, Act (1853), which increased fines and jail terms for individuals who assaulted women and children, and provided for women a modicum of protection from domestic abuse; the Divorce Act (1857), which granted women both a legal identity and the right to the property with which they entered their marriage; and the Married Women's Property Acts (1870, 1874, 1882), which granted married women the rights to inherit property and to own the earnings they made from employment.⁴⁹ *The Athenaeum's* remarkably high level of female participation, which increased as the century progressed and was especially notable during T. K. Hervey's editorship, suggests that such issues would be of interest not only to the journal's readers, but also to its contributors.⁵⁰

"Griseldis, with her Children" is therefore a timely adaptation, and it is no surprise that it found a home in this prominent publication. The poet's husband was the editor for almost a decade, and the publication welcomed female contributors. More importantly, the liberal political views that permeated *The Athenaeum's* pages under T. K. Hervey's editorship matched the progressive nature of the poem's content. As one of the most widely circulating publications of the nineteenth century, *The Athenaeum* presented social issues to a sizable audience constituted primarily of adult, middle-class

⁴⁸ Marchand, *The Athenaeum*, 77.

⁴⁹ For more on such political advances for women during the nineteenth century, see, for instance, Griffin, *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain*; Mary Poovey, "Covered but Not Bound: Caroline Norton and the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act," *Feminist Studies* 14.3 (1988): 467–85; Dorothy M. Stetson, *A Woman's Issue: The Politics of Family Law Reform in England* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982); or Mary Shanley, "'One Must Ride Behind': Married Women's Rights and the Divorce Act of 1857," *Victorian Studies* 25 (1982): 355–76.

⁵⁰ Marysa Demoor remarks that even though female contributions increased significantly in the latter part of the nineteenth century, they were still remarkable in the early and mid-decades, and she attributes to T. K. Hervey "the recruitment of possibly the most prolific woman reviewer of the middle decades of the century: Geraldine Jewsbury." Demoor, *Their Fair Share: Women, Power and Criticism in the Athenaeum, from Millicent Garrett Fawcett to Katherine Mansfield, 1870–1920* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000), 1–2, 88.

readers.⁵¹ Hervey's primarily adult and progressively minded readers would not be unfamiliar with or unused to the critique of the cultural and social hegemonies that her first version of the Griselda story articulates.

The shifts in tone and message between "Griseldis, with her Children" and "Griselda," coupled with Hervey's inclusion of the latter poem in her volume *Our Legends and Lives*, suggests that she envisioned a different audience and more didactic purpose for the revised poem than for the original. Her description of this collection of poems as a book "Especially Offered / to a Son / by his Mother" identifies her son as the initial audience. Indeed, advertisements for the volume's publication coincide with Frederic's birthday.⁵² Although in 1869 he was twenty-four, his age does not preclude him from being viewed by his mother as a child reader worthy of instruction. The two remained close throughout Hervey's life, a bond likely strengthened by her widowhood, and Frederic, who never married, lodged with his mother until her death in 1903.⁵³ A gift book aimed at child readers was also a lucrative endeavor for the widowed Hervey, as the genre remained popular throughout the century.⁵⁴ Hervey's additional identification of the volume as "a Gift for All," however, anticipates a wider audience than just her son or other children. Families frequently engaged in shared reading practices in the domestic sphere, and adults, as the income earners, were considered the primary consumers of the gift-book genre. More specifically, middle-class female consumers were considered the target market for these highly ornamental material objects.⁵⁵ The ornamental nature and female readership of these volumes, though, did not lessen their didactic message. As Frederick W. Faxon notes, while these volumes "might ornament the drawing-room

⁵¹ Most Victorian periodicals were "literary reviews or magazines oriented to a general adult readership," according to Anne H. Lundin, in "Victorian Horizons: The Reception of Children's Books in England and America, 1880–1900," *Library Quarterly* 64.1 (Jan. 1994): 30–59 (33).

⁵² Advertisements for the forthcoming volume appeared shortly after Frederic's birthday (11 March) in the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* and the *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*. *The Examiner*, approximately two months later, includes the publication under "Books Received." *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 17 March 1869, 4d; *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 18 March 1869, 6e; *The Examiner*, 22 May 1869, 12c.

⁵³ Census documents list Frederic as residing with his mother in 1861, 1871, 1881, and 1901. It seems safe to assume that he lodged with her until her death, which was only two years after the 1901 census. *Census Returns of England and Wales*, The National Archives of the UK (TNA): Public Records Office (PRO), RG 9 PN 591; RG 10 PN 995; RG 11 PN 1117; and RG 13 PN 959.

⁵⁴ Lundin, "Victorian Horizons," 34.

⁵⁵ Eleanore Jamieson, "The Binding Styles of the Gift Books and Annuals," in Frederick W. Faxon, *Literary Annuals and Gift Books: A Bibliography, 1823–1903* (1912; repr. Old Woking, Surrey: Private Libraries Association, 1973), 15.

table,” they were to do so “without offense to mind or eye.”⁵⁶ That is, they were to present content that was simultaneously aesthetically pleasing and socially conservative.

Hervey’s revisions of her *Griselda* story thus fit its movement from a politically minded newspaper to a more conservative and didactic medium. Although Hervey did not entirely erase the harsh criticisms of the 1850 poem in its later form, she reduced much of the disturbing imagery, especially the material that describes the lifeless and loveless forms of the speaker’s children, which might be upsetting to younger readers. The new ending in which *Griselda*’s wifely obedience is rewarded renders the poem less radical to its audience and reinforces the socially normative expectations of obedience in women and children common in other gift books. While the revised poem still voices criticism of patriarchal systems and figures, and questions whether women should be as blindly obedient as *Griselda*, it suggests that they should strive toward wifely obedience. The message of the 1869 poem is therefore more suitable for the genre with which it is associated.

Significant changes in Hervey’s personal situation also provide insight as to why she would revise and republish her poem. “*Griseldis, with her Children*” appeared during the early decades of Hervey’s career, when she had considerable renown, especially as a writer for children. Her *Juvenile Calendar and Zodiac of Flowers*, for example, published the same year as her first *Griselda* poem and richly decorated by famous *Punch* illustrator Richard Doyle, received acclaim as a “dainty and delicate child’s book” and earned the poet, according to one reviewer, a status equal to that of famous children’s writer Mary Howitt (1799–1888).⁵⁷ In the early decades of her career, then, Hervey’s reputation, along with her literary connections, particularly those that arose from her marriage, provided a modicum of freedom to express progressive, even radical social commentary. Widowhood, however, limited this freedom as she now depended upon the income she derived from writing as a means by which to support herself and her son. Hervey could not risk her reputation, especially as her status as a female writer had already been questioned in the public realm. In 1837, the poet and journalist Leigh Hunt included Hervey in his satirical account of female writers, “Blue Stocking Revels; or, The Feasts of the Violets.” Although Hunt remarks that Montagu (Hervey) “hath merit” and “the right inward spirit,” his inclusion of her within this satirical poem potentially undermines her authority and position as a female

⁵⁶ Faxon, *Literary Annuals and Gift Books*, xxi.

⁵⁷ “*The Juvenile Calendar; or, Zodiac of Flowers: a Gift Book*,” *The Athenaeum* 1156 (22 December 1849): 1303b. Mary Howitt is the author of one of the most famous children’s poems, “The Spider and the Fly” (1829).

writer.⁵⁸ Yes, Hervey was a prolific writer, and, yes, she was popular, but by Victorian standards she was still a woman engaging in what many considered unseemly (public) behavior. Her work, although produced under “conditions of pressing need,” still needed to adhere to certain social conventions in order to be acceptable and therefore profitable.⁵⁹

The financial pressures of widowhood had an additional influence on Hervey’s poetic revisions. *Our Legends and Lives*, the volume in which “Griselda” appears, marks two crucial moments in Hervey’s career. First, with this volume, Hervey alters her literary identifier, her byline. In the early years of her career, when she established herself as a poet, Hervey published under her full forename and maiden surname, Eleanora Louisa Montagu. Once married, and during the first decade of widowhood, she primarily published as “Mrs. T. K. Hervey,” highlighting and presumably garnering some authority from her connection to a prominent male literary figure. Yet the Preface and byline to *Our Legends and Lives* suggests that by 1869 full identification with her deceased husband was no longer advantageous. Hervey retained her married surname, but reverted to her full forename, and, for the remainder of her career, she published as “Eleanora Louisa Hervey,” firmly reconnecting herself and her later works to her reputation and corpus prior to marriage.

The opening pages of *Our Legends and Lives* also shed light on Hervey’s decision to revise her byline. In the Preface, she voices specific concerns over the unauthorized circulation of her poems, which, for a writer dependent upon the income earned from such works, is of paramount importance. The collection includes, she explains, selections from “leading periodicals – several of such poems having, moreover, been pirated to include among the contents of Christmas gift-books.”⁶⁰ Hervey counters the pirated circulation of her works and re-establishes her authorial position by compiling a gift book of her own. In short, she reclaims her poetic works from those who have usurped and benefited from them. She reaffirms her ownership over the volume’s contents by highlighting that it includes, alongside the already known poems, “some new lyrics and legends.”⁶¹ Readers can expect

⁵⁸ Leigh Hunt, “Blue Stocking Revels; or, The Feasts of the Violets,” in *The Poetical Works of Leigh Hunt*, ed. Thornton Hunt (London and New York: Routledge, Warne, and Routledge, 1860), 211.

⁵⁹ Hervey is a perfect example of Gilbert and Gubar’s point, “For though literature by women was not encouraged, it was generally understood in the nineteenth century that under certain conditions of pressing need a woman might have to live by her pen. [...] A talented but impoverished woman might in fact have to rescue herself, and maybe even her whole starving family, by writing novels.” *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 545.

⁶⁰ Hervey, Preface, *Our Legends and Lives: A Gift for All Seasons* (London: Trubner and Co., 1869).

⁶¹ Hervey, Preface, *Our Legends and Lives*.

a new experience as they peruse her gift book's pages, one with guaranteed authorial intent. This new experience, of course, extends to her *Griselda* poem, and, interestingly, while she tones down the politics of the second poem, her bold assertions of authorial control evoke the potentially subversive content of both the 1850 and 1869 versions, creating a parallel between herself and her protagonist. Hervey, like her *Griselda* figure, speaks out against patriarchal structures that subordinate women to men.

Overall, then, Hervey's poems can be read as an expression of dissatisfaction with the contemporary social roles women were expected to fulfill and with the social systems that entrenched these roles. Additionally, her choice to reshape the *Griselda* story from the female perspective, along with its harsh criticisms of patriarchal systems, can be read as one female writer's dissatisfaction with the nineteenth-century adaptations and editions that perpetuated problematic content from the medieval versions of the story, including Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*. By rejecting the traditional framework of the male narrator or interlocutor, Hervey gives voice to *Griselda*. She presents a radical new version of the story, one that demonstrates how this medieval figure can be employed in post-medieval periods to render female experiences and female emotions equal to, perhaps even more important than, male authority.

 Appendix A

 Eleanora L. Hervey,
 “Griseldis, with her Children,”

The Athenaeum 1179 (1 June 1850): 583.

 Griseldis,
 The Childless.

 Sound, sound again the muffled bell, – toll for another dead,
 And heap – heap high the coals of fire – not ashes – on my head!
 Ye have mocked me with my patience; – let no more such incense rise.
 For here, of women most accursed, the lost Griseldis lies!

 I was a shepherd’s daughter, and I used to watch the fold
 At eve beside a little cairn upon a lonely wold;
 And I wept to see the new-yeaned lambs how close they lay at rest
 ’Neath the parent breath that fanned them like a soft wind from the west.

 O motherhood is strong as life, – and strongest in the least,
 It findeth out sweet channels in the poor four-footed beast;
 She giveth suck to the strange kid if it wailleth for its dam, –
 But I, my bird to the kite I gave and to the wolf my lamb.

 He came – he stopped: – he saw me with the pitcher in my hand,
 (No cool draught, since, these parching lips have touched in all the land);
 Alas! I took him for my lord, – my father clutched his gold, –
 And I left the young sheep bleating and the cottage by the fold.

 Then, years drew on, – the darkest ever womanhood beheld,
 When the shaft of love was shivered, and the shriek of anguish quelled:
 I sometimes think my brain swan round in that deep sorrow-flood, –
 But I have vowed obedience, and the bond was sealed – in blood!

 My darlings! shall I dare to seek the eyes ye turn away
 In those pasture-lands that lie afar in the purpling of God’s day?
 There, angels true to motherhood, whose robes are God’s own light,
 Would meet my step on heaven’s floor, and shut me from your sight.

The Ant, that airiest thing that haunts the meadow's circling rings,
 To do her mother-task assigned rends off her very wings, –
 But I, to whom a holier sense and higher gifts were given,
 The wings that I have torn away had wafted me to heaven.

Oh! dear ones, ye that nestled once so closely to my breast, –
 Close round me now in spirit while I yield me to my rest;
 Kiss – clasp me, if ye may, – that I may feel at last in death
 The phantom of that joy which died when ye gave up your breath!

Griseldis,
 With her Children.

O memory, O memory! – what shadowy forms are here,
 With eyes so cold and passionless and lids without a tear?
 Like the face that in my bridal hour I turned upon their sire,
 Beside an altar's ashes pale in which there lived no fire!

Do I dream? – are these my children? – does the ground wheron I tread
 Yet echo to the footsteps I only should have led?
 Draw nearer – clasp me round: – alas! your arms how loose they twine,
 Like tendrils long since riven from a crushed and trampled vine.

My buds! – whose first unfolding bloom these eyes have never seen,
 I cannot paint ye as ye were, – for the blank that lies between;
 And my face is to your gazing like the faces in the stone –
 For ye may not trace its fondness in the days that ye have known.

Your glances say, I slew you; and alas! ye seem to stand
 All shrinking and in horror – though no blood is on my hand; –
 There may be other pangs as keen from which no power can save,
 But these are as sharp thorns to bind the turf upon my grave.

Is this the meeting love should crown? – Is this the joy ye bring?
 Then, life hath no more sweetness left and death has no more sting;
 And the years that we have cast behind, and the hours that lie beyond,
 Time's hand shall mark as blotted scrolls in Nature's broken bond.

Yet, once again embrace me: – though Love's fruit may never set,
 The blossoms and the stricken tree shall grow together yet;
 And the sweets that failed me living shall cleave to me in my fall,
 As the bind-flower to the bramble and the moss-root to the wall.

 Appendix B

 Eleanora Louisa Hervey, "Griselda," in
Our Legends and Lives: A Gift for All Seasons

(London: Trübner and Co., 1869), 223–24.

Griselda

Sound, sound once more the muffled bell: toll for another dead;
 And heap, – heap high, the coals of fire, not ashes, on my head!
 Ye have mocked me with my patience: let no more such incense rise;
 For here, of women most accursed, the lost Griselda lies!

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 It findeth out sweet channels in the poor four-footed beast.
 She giveth suck to the strange kid if it wailleth for its dam:
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 No cool draught since, these parching lips have touched in all the land!
 Alas! I took him for my lord: my father clutched his gold;
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Then years drew on, the darkest ever womanhood beheld,
 When the shaft of love was shivered, and the shriek of anguish quelled.
 I sometimes think my brain swam round in that deep sorrow-flood:
 But I had vowed obedience; and the bond was sealed – in blood!

My darlings! shall I dare to seek the eyes ye turn away
 In those pasture-lands that lie afar in the purpling of God's day?
 There angels true to motherhood, whose robes are God's own light,
 Will meet my step on heaven's floor and bar me from your sight.
 The lowly ant whom motherhood to earth unerring brings,

To Nature's instinct blindly true, rends off her clay-bound wings;
But I, to whom a holier sense of higher gifts were given,
The wings that *I* have torn away had wafted me to heaven!