CHAPTER 6

Love's promise: the *Clerk's Tale* and the scandal of the unconditional

Throughout the history of its modern critical reception, the *Clerk's Tale* has been marked by a powerful but obscure sense of scandal.[1] It is not hard to see why. The Clerk's story of Walter and Grisilde is that of a wife's unconditional love for her husband which compares her loving virtue to various models of Christian heroism such as Abraham, Job, Mary, and even Christ. But the husband she loves is a paranoid despot who puts her through the most terrible trials, leading her to believe that he has ordered their children killed and finally ejecting her from the palace and staging a fake wedding to a new bride, all to see if there are in fact conditions under which her love for him might come up short. In such a context, the very idea of unconditional love begins to look tarnished, by its seeming indistinguishability from sheer subjection, by its fueling of sadistic hunger, by the implication of that subjection and hunger in the nastiest of gender politics, and by the sheer ugliness of what gets done in its name.

Some critics have insisted that any such reaction to the tale is nothing more than an anachronistic projection of modern concerns on to the text, fueled by a failure to appreciate the Christian ideals to which the Clerk adheres.[2] But, as a number of critics have argued, the tale's generation of moral unease is not the product of a modern reading, and Chaucer's revisions to his sources suggest that he wanted such a response, since he enhanced or added the features of the tale that have helped produce it.[3] In one of Chaucer's most pointed additions to the tale's Petrarchan source, for instance, the Clerk frames the onset of Walter's desire to test his wife by declaring his own feelings of outrage:

Ther fil, as it bifalleth tymes mo,
Whan that this child had souked but a throwe,
This markys in his herte longeth so
To tempte his wyf, hir sadnesse for to knowe,
That he ne myghte out of his herte throwe
This merveillous desir his wyf t'assaye;
Nedelees, God woot, he thoghte hire for t'affraye.

He hadde assayed hire ynogh bifore,
And foond hire evere good; what neded it
Hire for to tempte, and alwey moore and moore,
Though som men preise it for a subtil wit?
But as for me, I seye that yvele it sit
To assaye a wyf whan that it is no nede,
And putten hire in angwyssh and in drede.
(IV.449–62)

The Clerk makes it abundantly clear that the subsequent narrative should not be taken as an endorsement of Walter's conduct. But the very effort to secure a sense of scandal here raises questions which the tale gives us no easy way to resolve. The passage seems to describe the sudden upsurge in Walter of a strange, terrible, and irresistible desire to tempt Griselde to betray him, so that he might know the strength of her commitment. But the Clerk also casually remarks that this is the kind of thing that "bifalleth tymes mo," as though husbands were routinely vulnerable to desires of this kind, as he later claims they are: "wedded men ne knowe no mesure, / Whan that they fynde a pacient creature" (IV.622–23). Is Walter then an exceptional case or the husbandly rule? For that matter, is his "merveillous desir" an exceptional event in his own psychic life, the initiating moment for the awful events to follow, or does it simply accompany the latest in a series of ever escalating tests that ought to have been enough and by now have become needless? These questions together point to a tendency in the passage to normalize Walter's behavior. It might just be the usual thing husbands do; what is more, if it is the kind of thing that should not be done to excess or needlessly, that implies that some form of Walterish testing might be just enough, and might even be necessary. This normalizing tendency, however, sits uncomfortably against the Clerk's outrage; after all, the acts he is getting ready to relate are supposed to be both unusual and horrible,

not merely needless exaggerations of normal practice. In the face of such confusions, the Clerk retreats into a shrill attempt to secure his *bona fides* by conjuring a nameless enemy with whom to contrast his own views of Walter's actions: *some* men may see Walter's method as the work of a refined intelligence, but as for *me*, *I* say it's unseemly – at least when there's no need for it.

The Clerk never does address the question of when there would be a need for the course of action Walter pursues, or that of who could be inclined to praise its subtlety; in fact, he works hard in what follows to make such considerations morally repugnant. Nor does he do anything to clarify the sense of an obscure history of temptation and betrayal, or the discrepancy between Walter's perverse exceptionality and his approximation to a husbandly norm. That is part of what gives this passage, and the tale as a whole, its sense of *scandal*, of being a collecting site for a powerful sense of shame and disgrace that can never quite be located or localized, even as it demands to be named and spoken of. The peculiar psychic and social power of this sense of scandal depends on its disavowed ambivalence between two incompatible moral postures: one of knowing resignation in the face of an all too familiar sordid state of affairs, and one of shocked affront in the face of a terrible anomaly that nearly escapes our capacity to understand it.[4] The urge to name scandal's object in each of these ways is only intensified by the self-contradiction of doing so, which is one reason why scandal tends to feed on itself as much as on the news it devours so eagerly. Within the tale, the Clerk describes just such a circular production of the appetite for rumor and judgment as "the sclaundre of Walter ofte and wyde spradde" (IV.722): "for which, where as his peple therbifore / Hadde loved hym wel, the sclaundre of his diffame / Made hem that they hym hatede therfore" (IV.729–31). What makes Walter's people come to hate him is not simply what they think he has done – which, as it happens, is not even anything he *has* done, since his spreading infamy revolves around the false belief that he has murdered his children rather than his actual ill-treatment of his wife. Nor is it even the spread of Walter's infamy that brings about his people's change of heart; rather, in an oddly doubled formulation, they come to hate him for "the sclaundre of his diffame," literally "the scandal of his infamy," which very nearly amounts to saying "the scandal of his scandal."[5] This

formulation marks the public response to Walter's conduct as a site of opacity and repetition: as with the Clerk's own response, the production of moral judgment gains a momentum of its own, in no small part because of the lack of any clear set of terms linking that judgment to the scene it purports to evaluate.

This phenomenon of a powerful sense of scandal joined with a deep unclarity about the location of the moral problem has continued in the modern critical response to the tale, as opprobrium has spread from Walter to take Grisilde, the Clerk, and Chaucer as its targets as well, with little collective agreement about what the criteria of moral judgment should be here. So some have seen both Walter and Grisilde as peculiarly perverse, his cruelty and her obedience so pathological as to be nearly unintelligible; others have produced intelligibility by denying any human or characterological dimension to the tale, shifting the moral focus to the Christian lessons exemplified in the narrative; and others have produced other forms of intelligibility by reading the narrative and its characters as exemplary of various political and gendered pathologies and virtues.[6] What almost all critics share is individual certainty about where the moral problems of the tale are to be located – in crazy sadistic urges and crazier passivity; in the difficulty of owning up to the heroic self-abnegation demanded of the medieval Christian subject; in the tyrannical or patriarchal gaze and the production of the feminine as a site of self-sacrifice – while all this certainty about location occurs in the context of a collective uncertainty more powerful than that produced by anything else Chaucer wrote.

In this chapter I will argue that the Clerk is right to be worried about Walter's exemplarity, and about Grisilde's too; he is also right to be worried about his own good faith. In this he anticipates the collective, if not the individual, critical response to the tale, which rightly insists at once on Walter's exceptionality and his normalness, on Grisilde's heroism and her pathology. Chaucer means the tale to produce all of these responses, and not as false lures to be resisted by the properly armed reader, but as substantive engagements with what the tale is about. This does not imply that the tale is merely incoherent or a product of the Clerk's confusions, or that the questions the tale raises, or the concepts that inform those questions, are "undecidable." Chaucer rather intends the *Clerk's Tale* to throw into relief what is simultaneously deeply

attractive and deeply disturbing about unconditional love. Further, conflicting attitudes towards unconditional love in the tale are of interest to Chaucer partly because of how they open into a broader ambivalence concerning autonomy and the ideal of an unconditional will. In this chapter, then, I will return to the argument concerning eros and autonomy that has preoccupied me throughout this book. Here, however, I will be focusing less on the romantic contexts of enamoration and desire that have been central so far, and more on love's promise: both the promise it entails of unconditionality, and the promise it holds out of a redemption of the conditions within which it comes into being and endures or fades. That is not to say that the tale offers some kind of object lesson on the value, or for that matter the dangers, of unconditionality and redemption: Chaucer does not intend the *Clerk's Tale* to illustrate a doctrine or impart a lesson. Here as elsewhere in the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer makes a contribution to philosophical inquiry by exploring the way a deep practical commitment opens into a set of conceptual problems, and by clarifying what makes those problems hard.

THE POLITICS OF NARCISSISM

What does it mean for Walter to test Grisilde with such grim resolve, and for Grisilde so doggedly to stand up to his ordeals? Why do these two exert such a powerful fascination on each other that, through their long story of violent betrayal and faithful commitment, neither flinches until the rather awkward and unconvincing anticlimax of the tale, in which Walter, seemingly for no reason, declares an end to his tests and reunites Grisilde with her children? And what does it mean for Chaucer and the Clerk to build an investigation of love's promise around this claustrophobically obsessive pair?

The place to start with these questions is with the tale's representation not of love's promise but of its politics.[7] Walter's early portrait as a political leader sets the stage for the tale's love narrative; and in that narrative it is no accident that Walter is Grisilde's lord and she his subject, nor that he is the husband and she the wife. For the Clerk, then, love's promise is imbedded in its politics, and love's politics are imbedded in the structure and motivations of larger political arrangements. The Clerk lays out the rough form of these imbeddings when

he diagnoses what he calls Walter's one major moral and political fault: his failure to consider "in tyme comynge what myghte hym bityde" (IV.79), a failure that attends his fixation on "his lust present" (IV.80), and which finds its paradigmatic expressions in his attraction to hawking and hunting (IV.81) and his aversion to marriage (IV.83–84). Walter's people voice the most immediate link between what will happen to him in "tyme comynge" and his refusal to marry when they beseech him to choose a wife. As their nameless spokesman says,

> thenketh, lord, among youre thoghtes wyse
> How that oure dayes passe in sondry wyse,
> For thogh we slepe, or wake, or rome, or ryde,
> Ay fleeth the tyme; it nyl no man abyde.
>
> And thogh youre grene youthe floure as yit,
> In crepeth age alwey, as stille as stoon,
> And deeth manaceth every age, and smyt
> In ech estaat, for ther escapeth noon;
> And al so certein as we knowe echoon
> That we shul deye, as uncerteyn we alle
> Been of that day whan deeth shal on us falle.
> (IV.116–26)

What the people have in mind here is the danger that Walter will die without an heir, in which case they will be vulnerable to foreign rule. But the ominousness with which this spokesman drives home his point about death's inevitability, describing death as a lurking, creeping menace whose certainty is only matched by the uncertainty with which we await the moment of its blow, suggests that more is at issue here than a failure of political prudence. If part of Walter's marriage resistance stems from avoiding the problem of political succession, the shadow of death looming over this passage suggests that marriage and reproduction bear with them broader intimations of mortality and replaceability. In resisting marriage and ignoring the problem of succession, Walter in effect reverses the position of Nature in the *Roman de la Rose*, who argues that sexual reproduction provides a mortal creature with a version of immortality through its ability to replace itself: for Walter, refusing reproduction allows him to repress the need for his replacement and so to imagine himself immortal.[8]

While the people's complaint focuses on Walter's lack of political prudence, the Clerk's broader diagnosis focuses on a more fundamental prudential failure. To fail to consider the future through a fixation on immediate pleasure is to indulge in an extremely narrow and ultimately self-defeating picture of desire, pleasure, and freedom: freedom consists in doing whatever you want whenever you want to, heeding only the call of your pleasure, allowing nothing to stand in the way of your enjoyment. This is a picture of freedom as wantonness, as the sheer unplanned enjoyment of being moved by whatever desires happen to arise in you. But, as almost any moralist's discussion of prudence will tell us, there are plenty of cases in which pursuing your immediate pleasure is not only wrong, but will lead to a catastrophic result even from the perspective of your own narrow self-interest. To live as Walter does, then, is to indulge in a peculiar fantasy of immortality – literally, since it requires ignoring that the pursuit of some pleasures could get you killed; but also figuratively, since it requires ignoring the "death" in your own desire, the rift that is always there between your desire for immediate pleasure and your desire to pursue ends that may be incompatible with your immediate pleasure, such as (leaving moral considerations to the side), your middle- or long-term self-interest. The Clerk captures Walter's indulgence in such a fantasy of immortality in the list of his paradigmatic activities of hawking and hunting, riding and roaming. One's goal in pursuing such leisured aristocratic activities just is to do them in a pleasurable way, to reside as it were immortally in the timeless present of the pleasure they produce.[9] In keeping all his thought on his "lust present," then, Walter's problem is not simply that he ignores the need to plan for the future, as though he were Aesop's irresponsible grasshopper; it is that he does so in a way that allows him to imagine his pleasures – and so, by extension, *himself* – as utterly present and whole, free of any deferral, opacity, or self-contradiction. But far from escaping the thought of death, Walter is haunted by it, seeing death's shadow in every renunciation of pleasure, every difference in his own desire, everything that projects him forward in time one step closer to his inevitable end.

By itself this says little about politics, marriage, or love, except that all are, for Walter at least, tainted by an association with death which he attempts to repress. The political and erotic import of this taint begins to come out when Walter asks Grisilde to marry him:

I seye this: be ye redy with good herte
To al my lust, and that I frely may,
As me best thynketh, do yow laughe or smerte,
And nevere ye to grucche it, nyght ne day?
And eek whan I sey "ye," ne sey nat "nay,"
Neither by word ne frownyng contenance?
Swere this, and heere I swere oure alliance.
(IV.351–57)

Even as prenuptial agreements go, this is rather ominous. If there is to be a union here, it will be predicated on an extremely sharp contrast between Walter's husbandly lordliness and Grisilde's wifely subjection, a contrast strong enough to support and require Grisilde's readiness to Walter's every pleasure and his freedom to cause her happiness or suffering. Walter wants to be assured of Grisilde's "good herte" – on a very pointed formulation of how a good wifely heart should be understood – while offering her no such assurances about himself, since doing so would constitute a boundary on his freedom. Perhaps his pleasures will be anchored in his doing well by her; but they may just as well be anchored in his causing her pain. The Clerk looks back to Walter's terms here, and offers a gloss on them, when he later speaks of the impropriety of married men knowing "no mesure" in the face of patient wives: husbandly pleasure lies in the sensation of unboundedness, produced by the violation of the boundaries of propriety and by the violation of those boundaries marked out by wifely pain, the most basic sign of her otherness to him, of her potential for resistance to his desires even in the form of an unwilled animal flinch.

The gender politics of Walter's demands are explicit enough, but, as the background portrait of Walter the marquis suggests, the Clerk has a broader political horizon in mind as well. In asking Grisilde to make herself "ready to his desire" while never exhibiting resistance to his commands in her words or facial expressions, Walter echoes his expectations of all of his subjects, whom he commands to revere his wife "in word and werk" (IV.167), and whom the Clerk describes as "obeisant, ay redy to his hond" (IV.66). Walter wants from Grisilde an extension of what he wants from others generally: to be unresistant, transparent to his desires, ready-to-hand as though they were his instruments. The wish to reduce the world of others to a field of instruments finds

expression in Walter's peculiar restriction of the obedience he demands to words, expressions, and actions, a restriction thrown into sharp relief when Grisilde alters his terms, much more ambitiously promising "as ye wole youreself, right so wol I" (IV.361). Grisilde's promise would seem to offer an attractive development to Walter's hunger for control: his power will now extend beyond the observable phenomena of behavior, any of which could be mere performances masking an inner resistance, to include her will itself. It is clear from Walter's subsequent fascination with establishing the truth of Grisilde's inner obedience that he finds such power alluring. It might be surprising, then, that Walter does not ask for such power in the first place, that he predicates his politics on the demand for an obedience that, as it were, stops short at the skin, leaving the interior world of his subjects unaccounted for. But the logic of instrumentalist reduction precludes any talk of inner obedience; an instrument, after all, does not have a will, so all you can ask of it is that it perform properly in clearly observable ways. Of course, in the case of an instrument, it makes no sense to think of this as a restriction, since there is no interior life being left out of account. In restricting his demands of others to such observable performances, then, Walter is not revealing a fundamental view of them as his instruments so much as he is working to assimilate them to the condition of instruments, as though by doing so he could fastidiously keep his subjects' wills out of the picture entirely.

In Walter's politics, then, we see another example of Chaucer's interest in the myth of the subject, and of the grip of that myth on a narcissized masculinity for which the presence of another's will, even in the form of a Grisildan Echo, is unbearable – so for which instrumentalist fantasy serves as a way of imagining a world, like the one Narcissus sees in his pool, emptied of others except in the form of a surface reflecting back his own image, his own will. In the aseptic immortality of Narcissean suspension, Walter seems to think he can escape everything that has the stink of death: the inexorable forward march of time, the claims of prudence, all signs of a world of others and of his own inner fragmentation. As the Clerk says and Walter's people sense, more than anything else this means avoiding the pollutions of marriage, with its twin demands of intimacy and of self-replacement; or, if marriage there must be, it must be accommodated as fully as possible to the politics of narcissism, the intimate other reduced to an instrument and

all offspring removed from the scene and declared dead. The tale's later invocation of the incest motif in Walter's staging of a fake wedding to his daughter highlights this feature of his psychology: his children are allowed to return, but only in a context that denies their status as his replacements, a context in which he can pretend to reclaim immortality by reinserting himself in the subsequent generation.

But, as we have already seen, Walter's request for a perfect instrumental obedience produces something else, Grisilde's promise of a union of wills. While Walter had always demanded of his subjects a perfect but external conformity, Grisilde, in forcing the issue of her will on to the scene of their marriage, opens up a vista on the interior life of his subjects, and on his own desires, that his instrumentalist picture had always served to occlude. This vista helps to account for Walter's strange yet familiar inability to resist the urge to test Grisilde. Now he must "know her sadnesse" – know, as it seems, not just the observable fact of her loving obedience, but the interior fact which backs that obedience up, making it a durable reality rather than an ephemeral veil. But after Grisilde twice remains firm while having their children seized from her and, as far as she knows, murdered at his command, Walter's thirst for such knowledge only becomes more vampiric and epistemically extreme: he longs "to tempte [Grisilde] moore / To the outtreste preeve of hir corage, / Fully to han experience and loore / If that she were as stidefast as bifoore" (IV.786–89). But what could "the outtreste preeve of hir corage" possibly be, if it has not been reached already? And what could possibly constitute full and direct experiential knowledge of her steadfastness? According to the logic of Walter's obsession, Grisilde's obedience at any moment can only show that she will go *that* far; there could always be some further point at which she would balk. What's more, her will may never have been on display at all; any of her "successes" could always have been mere performances. Or, if her will was on display at least at the moment of her promise, she may have been so crushed by Walter's punishing tests that there is nothing of her left, her interiority become an insensate mass, like the interior of the instrument Walter first asked her to be. In fact, how could her acts of obedience be anything other than performances or signs of her insensateness, given what she does at his command? Even if she meant her pronounced love of him before, how could she possibly do so now,

given the monster he has proven himself to be? Since Walter's tests can only tantalize him with the prospect of a certainty none of them can provide, Grisilde becomes for him "ay sad and constant as a wal" (IV.1047), her obedience an impenetrable surface keeping Walter out and keeping her interiority hidden from view.

More is at issue here than the desire for knowledge, of course. As Walter said at the contractual moment, he has wanted all along the freedom to cause Grisilde pain, and in this respect as well Grisilde's obedience frustrates him even as it seems to grant his wish. Throughout the tortures Walter inflicts upon her, her pain seems hidden behind her wall-like impenetrability. Or perhaps he has not even been so successful as to cause her an invisible pain: since everything he does to her and forces her to do is by her declaration something she wills, she may not be suffering at all, at least not suffering anything she does not want to. How, then, can Walter luxuriate in the pleasure of feeling his power wash over Grisilde, violating all boundaries between them, violating even the otherness of her animal resistance, if there is no resistance, no otherness, to overcome? Here, as in the *Roman de la Rose*, the sadism of narcissized masculinity both frustrates itself and seeks vengeance on the object that provokes it. Maybe, if he causes her enough pain, Walter can break through that wall and see the suffering behind it; if he cannot do that, maybe he can break her, destroying the otherness that so stubbornly refuses to show itself; and if even that proves impossible, at the very least he will punish her for the excessive devotion that violates the instrumentalist contract and so insistently refers to the Grisildan will he wishes to repudiate.

The thought of Walter's tests as attempts to break through the wall of Grisilde's obedience helps to explain an otherwise odd detail, the Clerk's use of the term "tempt" seemingly interchangeably with "test" to describe Walter's provocations of his wife. Much of the critical discussion of Walter relies on the idea that he wants Grisilde to pass his tests and so to prove her obedience, which is his truncated way of imagining her proving her love for him. That idea is right as far as it goes. But the idea of tempting someone to do something ordinarily implies that in some sense we want them to do it; while for Grisilde to succumb to Walter's temptations would be for her to *fail* his tests, to show, as he sees it, that she does not really love him and probably never

did. If, however, Grisilde's devotion registers for Walter at least partly as an unwanted excess, then in some sense he does want her to fail, and temptation is precisely what is at issue. For if Walter were to break through the wall of Grisilde's obedience and she were to fail his tests, showing signs of an inner reserve or resistance to him, then it would turn out that she had been suffering under his commands after all. His power would have produced visible signs of a pain that he would have reason to presume had been there all along, and that would mean that even in her previous obediences there would in fact have been boundaries violated and otherness overcome. It would also mean that she was not in fact an insensate mass, showing no sign of pain only because she had so closely approximated the pure instrumentality Walter had wished for her. Walter's sadistic pleasures would then be confirmed, if only in the moment when the guaranteed obedience he seeks is lost to him.

Again as in the *Roman de la Rose*, "sadistic narcissism" here names an unstable, fragmented *habitus* of thought and desire, a phantasmatic structure that needs understanding rather than the stopping point of an explanation. Walter's instrumentalism is central to his narcissism, but his sadistic pleasures can only find confirmation through the abolition of the instrumentalist contract; and no matter how deeply the asepsis of narcissism appeals to Walter, he wants, like other sadists, to get dirty – if not literally to have Grisilde's blood wash over him, then perhaps more profoundly to feel her suffering soak into his pores. And even this desire, it turns out, is not born of some fundamental hatred of the other or love of causing pain. Walter's sadism is linked to the desire not for Grisilde's death, but for her life: torture is his way of trying to reach Grisilde, to break through the wall that separates them and end his narcissistic solitude. One might even say – in fact I think we *should* say – that torture is his way of loving Grisilde. To see how deeply related torture and love are here, we will have to turn more squarely to an account of the tale's representation of love's promise in the figure of Grisilde. For now let me conclude with the politics of narcissism by noting that the Clerk quite explicitly links something he comes very close to calling Walter's love for Grisilde to the very attributes in her that make her such perfect fodder for Walter's lust for power.

Before Walter's people approach him with their plea that he marry, when he is apparently still in the thick of his marriage resistance, the Clerk describes him coming to a curious resolution: he "disposed that he wolde / Wedde hire [i.e., Grisilde] oonly, if evere he wedde sholde" (IV.244–45). The oddness of such a decision – however common decisions like it may be in "real life" – resides partly in the direct conflict between Walter's choice of an object and his thinking that under no circumstances will he marry, "for noght that may bifalle" (IV.84). Walter's resolution to choose Grisilde thus takes the form "if I ever do this thing that I will never under any circumstances do." However deeply ingrained and genuinely felt Walter's principled resistance to marriage is, he already entertains the thought of marrying *Grisilde* in particular, and he can do so partly because he "knows" in principle that he will never make this thought a reality. There is also something about Grisilde that provokes Walter's resolution. While she is only fairly good-looking, the beauty of her virtue exceeds that of almost any other; her heart is free of all sensual desire; she never gives over labor for idle ease; and "in the brest of hire virginitee / Ther was enclosed rype and sad corage; / And in greet reverence and charitee / Hir olde povre fader fostred shee" (IV.219–22). This may seem a rather too clerkly portrait of a woman's attractions, and later we will turn to the Clerk's interests in casting Grisilde as a figure of such spartan virtue and in shielding both her virtuous beauty and Walter's attraction to it from sensual desire. For now we can say that when Walter, gazing on Grisilde, "noght with wantown lookyng of folye" (IV.236), but rather "commendynge in his herte hir wommanhede, / And eek hir vertu" (IV.239–40), decides in his provisional way to marry her, her asexual womanliness and virtue carry with them a particular charge for him. His desire for patriarchal domination could hardly find a better target than this dutiful, hard-working daughter, this virginal enclosure for a steadfast heart; and if she is a rather plain girl with no "likerous lusts" of her own, this only makes her more suited for domination, as it frees Walter of the burden of a sexy wife whose eroticism could give her a measure of power over him and could make her a prize rather hard to guard.

There is more to Grisilde's virtue, however – and more to Walter's attraction to it – than its status as the object of patriarchal fantasy. If

Grisilde works hard instead of idly pursuing sensual desire, and if Walter is attracted to her not out of wanton folly but out of admiration for her virtue, that is also because she is a figure for the prudence Walter repudiates in his riding and roaming. In the midst of his wanton pursuits, Walter is struck by his admiration for and attraction to Grisilde's steady attention to the demands of "tyme coming"; and this provokes in him a resolution that, however odd, is also clearly prudential: in case he should ever change his mind about marriage, this is the person he wants to marry. What is finally odd about this scene of enamoration, then, is that the same features of Grisilde's representation invoke both Walter's entrapment in the fantasies of power that attend his wanton picture of freedom and his attraction to the prudential virtue that that picture must repress.[10] Walter wants Grisilde because she simultaneously seems able to fulfill his patriarchal fantasies and to free him from them. For Walter, at least at first, that may be love's promise.

GRISILDAN UNCONDITIONALITY

If Grisilde is an object of intense admiration and equally intense suspicion for Walter, it remains to be seen why. It is already clear that we cannot invoke Walter's sadistic narcissism as the basis for an explanation, since that condition involves misrecognitions that themselves stand in need of explanation. Besides, as the critical history of the tale attests, Walter is hardly alone in his attraction and repulsion; and what is more, the Clerk seems to want to ensure this double movement. On the one hand, he compares Grisilde's loving self-sacrifice to Christ's, her willingness to sacrifice her children to Abraham's, and her patient suffering to that of Job and the Saints; on the other, he makes it clear that those very virtues entail her complicity in her victimization and in the victimization of those who most depend on her. The Clerk's proposed moral only makes muddy waters muddier. Grisilde, he says, should not be taken as a model for wifely behavior; such a life would be intolerable and ill-advised. She should rather be seen as a model for a generalized constancy in the face of adversity (IV.1142–47). But this moral, which could be the moral of many tales quite different from this one, erases the marital scene that the whole tale has been built around.

As the Clerk goes on in very precise language to distinguish the adversity God sends our way from what Walter has done to Grisilde – God never *tempts* us, nor does he seek to *know our wills*, since he already does (IV.1153, 1159) – it seems that, in order to make this generalized moral fit the tale, the Clerk must declare irrelevant the entire first part of the narrative, his interest there and subsequently in Walter's political and marital narcissism, and everything that interest means for an understanding of Grisilde's loving obedience. But the pointed way this moral's erasures refer us back to the tale's interest in paranoid fascination and marital desire, together with the Clerk's immediate return to gender politics in his subsequent Envoy, suggests that he wants us to notice what his moral leaves out. However admirable he and his audience may find an unswerving devotion to the divine will, and however much the love of God and the love of a spouse may seem to them comparable, the attempt to bring that comparison to bear on this story produces as many questions as it does answers.

To see how deep these questions go, let us turn to one of the scenes that generates them most urgently, Grisilde's giving up of her daughter at Walter's command to what she believes to be a cruel death. In this scene Grisilde sits "meke and stille" "as a lamb" (IV.538) while Walter's "suspect" sergeant (cf. IV.540–42) seizes her daughter with an ugly, fierce expression, as though he were going to kill her then and there. At this point the Clerk, who tells most of the tale with a spareness and emotional reserve which Muscatine characterizes as "fine astringency," shifts into an uncharacteristic rhetorical mode somewhere between melodrama and the high pathos of the Pietà:[11]

> But atte laste to speken she bigan,
> And mekely she to the sergeant preyde,
> So as he was a worthy gentil man,
> That she moste kisse hire child er that it deyde.
> And in hir barm this litel child she leyde
> With ful sad face, and gan the child to blisse,
> And lulled it, and after gan it kisse.
>
> And thus she seyde in hire benigne voys,
> "Fareweel my child! I shal thee nevere see.
> But sith I thee have marked with the croys

Of thilke Fader – blessed moote he be! –
That for us deyde upon a croys of tree,
Thy soule, litel child, I hym bitake,
For this nyght shaltow dyen for my sake."

I trowe that to a norice in this cas
It had been hard this reuthe for to se;
Wel myghte a mooder thanne han cryd "allas!"
But nathelees so sad stidefast was she
That she endured al adversitee,
And to the sergeant mekely she sayde,
"Have heer agayn youre litel yonge mayde."

"Gooth now," quod she, "and dooth my lordes heeste;
But o thyng wol I prey yow of youre grace,
That, but my lord forbad yow, atte leeste
Burieth this litel body in som place
That beestes ne no briddes it torace."
But he no word wol to that purpos seye,
But took the child and wente upon his weye.
(IV.547–74)

This touching domestic scene of a mother kissing and gently cuddling the little child she must allow to be borne away to death – the kind of thing apt to fill a nurse with pity or cause a mother to cry out in sorrow – gains a good deal of its gravity from its invocation of that other mother holding in her lap a child "marked with the croys / Of thilke Fader." But the scene's invocation of the Pietà also gives it a perverse edge that the Clerk highlights through several pointed details.[12] In many Marian lyrics, as well as in many Pietàs in painting and sculpture, Mary is tormented by her sorrow, crying, gently cradling her son as though to provide the nurture and comfort his dead body can no longer receive; or, in another standard scene of Marian piety invoked by this passage, she holds the Christ child in her lap, full of sorrow at the coming Passion, even as she knows that he is destined to die for her sake and for that of all humanity.[13] By contrast with such scenes, Grisilde shows no signs of pain as she holds her child: well *might* a mother cry out "alas," but Grisilde does not. Further, when Grisilde tells her child "this nyght shaltow dyen for my sake," she reverses the direction of

Christ's sacrificial announcement to his mother in poems like "Stond wel, moder, under rode," thus replacing its consolatory effect with something closer to cold selfishness. While the crucified Christ offers his grieving, incredulous mother consolation with the good news of his redemptive death, Grisilde's child is hardly going to her death, as Christ went to his, knowingly and willingly; nor is there anything redemptive about this death, which is "for Grisilde's sake" not because it is part of some divine providential plan, nor even because it will somehow redress the pain and injustice Grisilde suffers, but only in the sense that in sacrificing the life of her child, Grisilde is able to maintain something she apparently values more, the purity of her will in its commitment to Walter. The moment's invocation of another sacrificial scene between parent and child, that of Abraham and Isaac, makes matters worse; for Grisilde sacrifices her child not, like Abraham, at the command of God, but at that of a husband the Clerk regards as perverse and cruel. As with the tale's moral, the effect of these references is oddly double: while they compare Grisilde's love for Walter with Christian piety, they do so in ways that throw into relief the self-regarding obsessiveness of Grisilde's marital commitment and her desire for a pure will, their requirement of an inhuman detachment from maternal suffering and a monstrous dereliction of maternal duty.

Both the melodrama of this scene and its invocation of Marian piety arise in response to one of the most basic dramatic difficulties the Clerk faces. He means Grisilde to embody the perfection of patient fortitude and of her promise of a unity of wills with Walter. She must not then be seen weeping and wailing or wanting to resist Walter's commands, and in a sense she must not even be understood to *suffer* them. Like a Ciceronian friend, she must find the demands of her intimate other to present no imposition on her – "numquam molesta est" – otherwise she will have achieved, not union with Walter's will, but only a willing endurance of it. Yet if she should seem devoid of suffering, like some cardboard personification of virtue, her perfection would be empty, her "patience" more stone-like than Job-like. The Clerk must find ways, then, to allow her suffering to register without it appearing constitutive of her, without it impinging on the unity of her will. One way he does this is by using this strange mixture of melodrama and Marian piety, not to show us Grisilde's pain directly – "she neither weep ne syked, /

Conformynge hire to that the markys lyked" (IV.545–46) – but to generate pathos around her and on her behalf, and to use that pathos to create a vicarious identification between the tale's audience and the maternal suffering Grisilde manages not merely to bear but to negate.

This indirection ensures that the suffering Walter causes is not made to disappear by what Grisilde does with it. But it also ensures that just when our identification with maternal pathos reaches its height, Grisilde divorces herself from it. That is one reason so many readers have found Grisilde's actions and her affect to be monstrous, and why they have not been making aesthetic or historical mistakes in doing so. This becomes even clearer when we attend to the other way the Clerk allows Grisilde's suffering to register while maintaining her detachment from it, that is, in the way he shows the work by which she takes a deep and real pain and disidentifies herself with it, forcing it to function in her own psychic life as an unwanted intrusion that will not speak for her. The Clerk shows this most directly in the speeches in which Grisilde responds to Walter's various tests, as we see her struggle with impulses of grief, resistance, and regret as she works her way from bewilderment back to resolute oneness with her husband.[14] In the scene in question here, we see less the struggle itself than signs of Grisilde's attempted emergence from it, as when she tells the sergeant "have heer agayn *youre* litel yonge mayde," and begs him to bury "this litel *body*." To mark her freedom from the conflict in her commitments and passions, she must refer to her daughter as no longer hers, and even in a sense as no longer alive, as though, in keeping with the scene's invocation of the Pietà, the child were already a body awaiting burial. If, as Grisilde believes, the sergeant will commit the actual murder, in order to distance herself from her loss she must figuratively kill off the child first, declaring it dead in her heart and thereby declaring herself no longer a mother, no longer someone who *can* lose a child. This need gives a double edge of protectiveness and aggressivity to her marking the child with the sign of the Father, and gives an unpleasantly necrophiliac whiff to the kiss with which she bids it goodbye, a kiss now rather too close for comfort to the kiss of death.

If, however, the Clerk means us to recoil, not only from Grisilde's dereliction of maternal duty but from what she does to divorce herself from her own attachments, he does not mean us to stop there. The

point of the tale's rhetoric in such moments is not simply to cast Grisilde as a monster, but rather to break through the amnesia of sentimental pieties concerning unconditional love through which we protect ourselves from love's radical dimension.[15] It is all too easy to feel an emotional attraction to the idea of unconditional love as long as that idea is left fairly vague, contrasted, say, with the conditions we think we discover in standard melodramas of love's collapse, as when we imagine that one partner has implicitly thought "I love you as long as you do not become fat, or seriously ill, or poor, or depressed." But the implicit conditions that emerge around Grisilde's negation of them are harder to view with such condescension: "I love you as long as you do not undergo a terrible change into a sadistic monster"; "I love you as long as it does not require the death of others I love"; "I love you as long as it does not require me to become the kind of mother who would willingly send her children to be murdered at your command." The gender and class politics of the tale, far from compromising Grisilde's embodiment of unconditional love, help to reveal how muscular the Clerk's notion of it is, for in placing Grisilde in a position of political disempowerment and dependency, the Clerk distinguishes her love from the conditions implicit even in standard pictures of ideal intimacy, such as those imagined by the Wife of Bath and the Franklin: "I love you as long as we are on an equal footing and our love is mutual, as long as I am not the politically and ideologically abject, as long as there is room for negotiation and compromise."

I have argued that, contrary to one tradition of reading the tale, the Clerk does not intend his comparison of Grisilde to Abraham and Job to erase what is disquieting, and even revolting, about her; I have also argued that this very disquiet and revulsion is essential to the Clerk's effort to distinguish unconditional love from a sentimental approbation of love that remains fraught with potential conditions, waiting for the right circumstances to be actualized. In this respect, it is the very monstrosity of Grisilde that makes the stories of Job and Abraham and Isaac relevant to her case. The point of those stories is to exemplify an unconditional love for God that requires bearing up under sacrifices that can only appear horrible and even incomprehensible by ordinary standards, a love that, measured by those standards, is monomaniacal, requiring an inhuman detachment from all other bonds and a

monstrous dereliction of the duties that attend those bonds. The fact that God rather than Walter is the object of such love for Abraham and Job is in a sense beside the point, for those stories work to carve away everything about God that might make him appear worthy of devotion, so that the only thing that supports a love for him is the bare fact of one's commitment to it. We need not, then, leave the domestic scene of the tale aside to understand Grisilde's exemplary function within the Clerk's religious framework. For the Clerk, to engage in an unsentimental, nonamnesiac way with the desire to love with a whole will requires heeding the muted call of the old biblical ideal whereby a sacrificial commitment must survive the loss of one's deepest attachments; or, to put it another way, it requires a return to the primitive Christian ideal of apostolic integrity, of a purity of heart to be found in willing one thing – a purity that, as Christ declared, requires the renunciation of all intimate associations that might compete with one's commitment.[16] But such a return cannot happen through naïve idealism or conventional pieties that leave intact the settled compromises of daily life. Since those compromises are the very fabric of the normal, to begin to break them and reach towards the life of a pure, devoted will we must confront the abnormality, the repulsive excess, of the effort to be whole.

The preceding formulations stress the Clerk's moral suspicion of sentimentality; but the idea that Grisilde's love, like that of Abraham and Job, is supported only by the bare fact of her commitment to it suggests a further, more technical sense in which the Clerk's account of love is antisentimental. For the Clerk, to understand love as an unconditional disposition of the will, it is necessary to understand that love is not a sentiment; more broadly, it is not a feeling or passion or state of affect, or for that matter any other kind of subjective state.[17] There may be subjective states that paradigmatically accompany love – feelings of fondness and care for the love object, for instance – but such states are not what love essentially is. The link the Clerk makes between love and autonomy can help us see why this is so. An autonomous will is one that "gives itself a law": it is not dependent on any law outside itself, not in that sense passive or caused. But if love is fundamentally a sentiment or feeling, then the will of the person who loves can be said to be passive, in the sense that their disposition to love has its source in something else, a

subjective state that they do not choose. Such love is in the technical sense sentimental because it is *pathological*, a form of *pathe*, an affect or movement of the soul. An autonomous disposition of the will, by contrast, must be nonpathological: for love to be such a disposition, it must not be "given its law" by the feelings it involves, and it must not depend on pathological support, or indeed on any motive other than that of the loving itself. This point is so important to the Clerk because thinking of love and experiencing it as affect – that is, being committed in theory and practice to a sentimental account of love in the technical sense – is more than an intellectual mistake; it reinforces the weak-willed moral sentimentality that cannot stand up under the kind of pressures Grisilde or Abraham or Job faces. For those are pressures under which all of the affect that ordinarily accompanies love has been beaten out of you: if love depends on pathological support, in such a case it will die out, and so reveal the implicit conditions laid on it from the beginning.

The standards of moral stringency in this account are clearly very high, but as with the Ciceronian account of friendship on which it is partly based, the Clerk's point is that this is what we mean when we talk of giving and receiving love unconditionally. Beyond that, the Clerk also wants us to see that our ordinary attitude towards this ideal, and our ordinary ways of trying to pursue it, are fraught with ambivalence: we admire and desire it in a way that informs all of our experience and conduct of love, but we mostly do so in a sentimental mode that deprives love of its essence, and when faced with circumstances that reveal that essence, we tend to respond with suspicion that no one really loves that way, fear that we could never live up to that ideal, and horror at love's potential costs. In this ambivalence, we resemble the general form, if not the specific detail, of Walter's simultaneous attraction to and recoil from Grisildan virtue. In fact, if Grisilde allegorically figures the normative structure of what we want when we want to love and be loved – and if, in doing so, she embodies the monstrous excess of love's promise – then Walter allegorically figures the normal structure of our inhabitation of this desire, and in doing so embodies the monstrous privation of love's ordinary conduct. I will conclude this section by returning to Walter to suggest just how revelatory his pathology is of the normal case.

Walter's love for Grisilde, as we have seen, always involved a strong element of admiration for her moral beauty: in seeing her drive to

autonomous unconditionality, he sees a figure both for what he wants in a love object and for his desire to have a coherent loving will himself. But no one is better situated than Walter to know the risks of embracing that desire, of opening oneself to the will of another who may harbor only suspicion and threat. So he tests Grisilde to make sure that her love for him knows no bounds, not simply as a way of establishing and confirming his power over her, but so that he can see that it is safe to live up to the demand she places on him and that he, in admiring her, places on himself. Here Walter reveals in himself a version of the sentimentality the tale has confirmed in its audience. For in looking for irrefutable signs of the inner fact in Grisilde that constitutes her love for him, he imagines love as a subjective state rather than a disposition of the will; and in torturing her to make her render forth the interiority he thinks is hidden from him, he imagines that he can know her love only by forcing her into a position of pure pathology, a passivity in which she will be flayed open for his sadistic gaze. But in wanting to base his love on things seen, Walter violates the demands of love in the very act of preparing to meet them, and so confirms his shameful inability to make himself whole. In the face of this failure, the love Grisilde continues to extend to him in his abject, corrupted state is only more shaming, further proof of his unworthiness. The depth of this shame provides further reason for the Clerk's interchangeable language of testing and tempting in describing Walter's actions: for the very features of Grisilde's love that make Walter desire her success in dealing with his tests also make that love unbearably revelatory of his own failures, and so something he wants to destroy as much as to confirm.

Here it will be helpful to recall the line of biblical association running through the *Clerk's Tale* to which we have so far paid the least direct attention: the association between Grisilde and Christ. Like Christ, Grisilde is the law of love made flesh; like Christ, her embodiment of love requires her to render herself up sacrificially to a fractured heart that cannot recognize its own desire, a heart that finds her love intolerably shaming and so rejects it; and again like Christ, her sacrifice functions to redeem that fractured heart, to call it back to the love it could not bear. Along this associational path, then, Walter's reaction to Grisilde – his impulse to crucify her, to destroy love's embodiment, and

to doubt it in the absence of visual proof – appears not as the exceptional case but as the normal one, even among Christian subjects who, as the Good Friday liturgy serves to remind, continue in their hearts to respond to Christ's loving sacrifice by declaring "Crucify him!" If Walter's repeated testing of Grisilde's steadfastness and tempting her to forgo it represent his fear and shame in the face of the unbearable demands of unconditional love, then, we would seem to be little better off than he is – unless, that is, we are up to those demands in the way Grisilde is, which the Clerk, through scenes like the one in which she kisses her daughter goodbye, has taken pains to show us we are not. According to the Clerk's moral argument, then, there is something genuinely fearful, even terrible, about what love requires of us; and since we are no longer in the days of Abraham, Job, or the Apostles, since "this world is nat so strong . . . / As it hath been in olde tymes yoore" (IV.1139–40), it may even be impossible for us to live according to love's law. However we may condemn Walter's behavior, then, we are as divided as he is against our desire to love unconditionally. The very extremeness of his behavior, far from making him into an aberration from whom we can safely distinguish ourselves, functions allegorically to highlight the underlying structure of our ambivalence.

There is, however, more to our ambivalence – and for that matter more to Walter's – than the Clerk's moral argument can accommodate. For admiration and desire mixed with weakness, fear, and shame cannot fully explain the chill we feel in moments like that in which Grisilde announces to her daughter "now you will die *for my sake*." The Clerk may want to cast this moment as an instance of Grisilde's heroic ability to unify her will in the face of the moral conflicts and sheer suffering entailed by her love for Walter, but he shows us a bit too much for such a reading to stick; there is something cold and self-regarding in Grisilde's way of putting the point, as though her drive to autonomy involved an impulse to wall herself off from others every bit as powerful as Walter's. Such a thought does not sort easily with the Clerk's central argument about Grisilde, since her love for Walter was supposed to be the very antithesis of narcissistic withdrawal. But, as we will see in the next section, the very moralism of that argument, however unrelenting its grip on the ambivalences that animate the experience and conduct of love, is itself an attempt to resolve a further set of conflicting intuitions

about love in which the Clerk remains entangled and for which he has no real solution, but which Chaucer uses the *Clerk's Tale* to stage and explore.

LOVE'S ANTINOMY

We can take our cue as to the general territory of the Clerk's entanglements from the tease with which the Host invites him to speak: " 'Ye ryde as coy and stille as dooth a mayde / Were newe spoused, sittynge at the bord' " (IV.2–3). As always, we need to take the Host's comments with a grain of salt: as Chaucer's mouthpiece for the "common sense" of bourgeois masculinity, Harry Bailey voices here a conventional association between clerical meditativeness and effeminacy, and does so out of an equally conventional anxiety concerning the conflicts between normative masculinity and the moral and intellectual demands he feels the Clerk is likely to make. But Harry is not entirely off-base in seeing in the Clerk a social diffidence with a sexual dimension – or, to read Harry's simile a bit more closely, a shyness and quiet withdrawal with respect to social and sexual visibility and possession, that still carries along with it an anticipatory desire. For in the *General Prologue* portrait of the Clerk, Chaucer the pilgrim notes a similar hesitancy concerning sensuality and sociality (cf. I.285–308). There, the Clerk who famously would gladly learn and teach is described as a man whose seriousness carries along with it, in his bookishness, his emaciated body and horse and his threadbare coat, and his reserved and fastidiously moral speech, an impulse to discipline bodily appetite and to allow himself to be socially available only in ways which, as far as possible, exclude the sensual, pointing beyond his bodily presence straight to the moral purpose he wishes to pursue.

If Grisilde's commitment to autonomy involves a certain cold withdrawal from others, then, the Canterbury pilgrims see the Clerk's moral seriousness as involving a similar impulse to withdraw from sensuality and sociality. And we should remember as well what I earlier referred to as the Clerk's rather too clerkly portrait of Grisilde's attractiveness: her beauty lies more in her virtue than in her appearance, that virtue consists partly in her having a heart free of sensual desire, and even Walter gazes on her with moral admiration rather than with "wantown

lookyng of folye" (IV.236), a phrase which casts sexual attraction in suspiciously moralistic terms, as though a look of desire were automatically to be associated with the wanton-like prudential failures that characterize Walter's narcissized politics. The sexual thus begins to emerge as a particularly charged location for a broader anxiety that includes in its scope bodiliness, appetite, and the vulnerability of the Clerk's social presence to purposes not his own. Yet still Harry Bailey, in his usual way of stumbling as though by accident on an insight he does not know what to do with, describes the Clerk's attitude not as a stern rejection of sensuality and sociality but as coyness, a desire for availability that, for whatever reason, will not own up to itself. The Clerk wants that from which he withdraws; otherwise he could not be the glad learner and teacher Chaucer declares him to be.

To understand the Clerk's ambivalence concerning sociality and sensuality, and to see the connection between it and the coldness of Grisildan autonomy, we need to return to the centerpiece of the Clerk's representation of autonomous love, Grisilde's promise to unify her will with Walter's. We have already seen that a crucial feature of Grisilde's promise is her alteration of the terms Walter proposes for their marriage: her talk of a unity of wills replaces Walter's demand for an unflinching external obedience by shifting the focus from behavior to the disposition that supports it. Given that Walter's contractual demands are his way of imagining union with the Grisilde whose virtuous beauty so deeply compels him, with the only person he ever thought might free him from his narcissistic aversion to "tyme comynge," Grisilde's alteration of his terms might be read as a diagnosis and correction of them, as though to say "I know that you *think* you want instrumental control over me, but what you *really* want is for our wills to become one; I promise to fulfill your heart's deepest desire, not just the perverse desire you can bring yourself to voice." In this sense, Grisilde's embodiment of love's promise involves not only the ideal of two becoming one, but the further one of a lover who knows the best version of you, and who, in doing so, knows you better than you know yourself.

The Clerk's repeated emphasis on Grisilde's patience suggests how this initial correction can help us read her conduct throughout the tale. As Chaucer's Franklin argues, patience among friends and lovers

involves a willingness to suspend both your reaction to being wronged and the connection you draw between a person's actions and their will:

> For in this world, certein, ther no wight is
> That he ne dooth or seith somtyme amys.
> Ire, siknesse, or constellacioun,
> Wyn, wo, or chaungynge of complexioun
> Causeth ful ofte to doon amys or speken.
> On every wrong a man may nat be wreken.
> (V.779–84)

You may have been wronged by your lover, and even have suffered terribly at their hands, but a patient response in such a situation involves thinking that in a certain sense *they* did not do it, and therefore are not appropriate targets of blame. Anger, sickness, wine, and other factors outside a person's will can often cause them to act or speak badly, and to the extent that you attribute their behavior to such a cause, you decline to hold them responsible for it: "it was the wine talking," as we say. Or, in the absence of such a causal explanation, you might think that they simply acted "amiss": they made a mistake, that's all, and in that sense their behavior was not really definitive of their will. Along this line of thinking, Grisilde's patience consists in a refusal to take Walter's behavior as action expressive of him. If love's promise involves Grisilde's knowing Walter better than he knows himself, that knowledge involves the patience of waiting for the causal sources of his misbehavior to pass, or of waiting for him to stop making mistakes and mistaking himself. As before, it does not matter here that Walter's behavior is more extreme than most of what people do out of drunkenness or basic fallibility. Nothing in the definition of patience tells you when to be patient and when not to be, and the point of Grisilde's exemplarity is that she shows a patience without limits, and *that* is what unconditional love requires.

Here again we are on the verge of a sentimental truism – for how many times have we heard that to love someone we must love the best version of them, and take the rest as detritus, the product of a hard time or the necessary imperfection that is always part of being human? And again the Clerk's central purpose is to show what would be involved in taking this truism seriously. For Grisilde must patiently wait for the

"real" Walter to show himself in the absence of any indication that there is a better version of him; everything he does points the other way, towards the idea that this senseless brutality is all there is to him, that he is, as it were, pure detritus. This is a consequence of the Clerk's insistence on love being unconditional. Like Job's love for God, Grisilde's love for Walter is supported only by her faith that he does in fact love her and will so reveal himself; and, as Paul puts it, such faith is "hope in things unseen," not a rational appraisal of the available evidence.[18] But then, if Walter must show every sign of being unloving for Grisilde's patient love to confront the extremes that reveal its essential features, and if one of those features is that it refuses to count an unloving act as expressive of Walter's will, then patient love must involve a willingness not to count anything the beloved does as expressive of their will. And that is just what Grisilde does. She looks past everything about Walter that expresses the will he recognizes as his own – past his demand for a world of others conceived as his instruments, past his way of imagining a perfect external obedience as the proper expression of love, past his vampiric desire for knowledge of her will and his belief that he can make her will known to him only by her suffering, past his apparent willingness to murder his own children in the service of such knowledge – straight to the half-forgotten love that his sadistic narcissism perversely expresses, a love she has no reason to believe is there, except that she loves him.

This account of Grisilde's activity in unifying herself with Walter responds to the associations the Clerk draws between Grisilde and Job and between love and faith, and the contrasts he makes between a Grisildan heart that does not wait on reasons and a Walterish one that requires visible proof. But this is not the only account of loving union the Clerk imbeds in the tale. For the Walter Grisilde works to unify herself with is mostly not the better version of him to which she looks in her initial promise. After Walter is seized by his strange passion to tempt Grisilde, she no longer offers correction to whatever twisted thing he brings himself to say or do; she conforms herself to the pathological Walter expressed in his demands on her rather than the Walter she claimed to know in promising her love; becoming one with Walter does not involve looking past his failures of self-knowledge to the loving heart beneath, but taking those very failures as definitive of him, fixing him in

his own perverse self-reifications. What is more, the Clerk's formulation of what Grisilde does changes from talk of her willing what Walter wills to that of her "conformynge hire to that the markys lyked" (IV.546). But the Clerk has made it absolutely clear that Walter's will, like anyone else's, is not definitively characterized by what *pleases* him: to think that it is is to miss the difference between willing something and being moved by a desire, and thus to miss the difference between Grisilde's strength of will and Walter's pathological weakness. In conforming herself to Walter's pleasure, then, Grisilde would seem to pursue a radically different version of loving union than the one she initially proposed and that informs the moral argument of the tale. Rather than suspending his perverse behavior and looking straight to the half-forgotten love that constitutes the only unfragmented will Walter could hope to have, she suspends the question of Walter's will entirely, looking instead to devote her love to the pathological pleasures that dominate him.

While there is nothing immediately erotic about what Grisilde does in offering herself up to Walter's perversity, this reformulation of what a loving union entails can help us understand the Clerk's aversion to the erotic and the broader ambivalence concerning sociality that that aversion expresses. For there was always something a bit chaste about the wall-like constancy of Grisilde's unconditional love as the Clerk mainly conceived it. Becoming one with Walter's pure potential for autonomy may have involved a lot of patient bearing up under the ugliness of his moral failures, but in constantly refusing to identify him with those failures, Grisilde was also closing herself off from that ugliness, never taking it as the object of her attachment; and in constantly refusing to identify herself with her pain, she was constantly closing herself off from Walter, never allowing him to see what he was doing to her. She was, as it were, keeping both Walter and herself clothed in the celestial raiment of her faith in him, covering the obscene nakedness of his compulsion by desire and of her suffering love for him; and in doing so, she was dictating the terms of her availability to him, pointing beyond their embodiment in ideology and desire to the moral aim that that embodiment both expresses and obscures. That kind of love is one for which an erotics is impossible; or, to put the point the other way, it is a love that tries to keep the possibility of an erotics at bay. But as Grisilde conforms herself to what pleases Walter, she foregoes her chaste withdrawal and

opens herself to the possibility of an erotics, loving Walter in his shamed, naked failure to be the pure autonomous agent he wants to be; she attaches herself to the fleshy ugliness of his pathology rather than divorcing it from him and from her. And in doing so, she bares herself in her fleshy ugliness as well. For she is still on this account working to unify herself around this union, and forcibly excising everything about her that competes with it. Only now what she constitutes herself around is the embodiment of her promise in *this* man, and *this* history between them; and in doing that, she constitutes herself around Walter as a perverse love object, and constitutes herself as a lover of the perverse.

Throughout this chapter I have been arguing that the sense of scandal the *Clerk's Tale* generates is both an expression of and an attempt to handle what is disturbing about the ideal of unconditional love, however valued that ideal may be. Now we are in a position to see that what is disturbing about love in the tale cannot be restricted either to the politics in which it is imbedded or the monstrous sacrifices it may demand; it extends to the ontology of love itself. It is a necessary part of love's promise that it must be unconditional and autonomous. Yet as we have seen, unconditional autonomous love involves the erasure of the character that individuates the love object; it attaches itself only to the love object's pure abstract potential for autonomous love in his or her own right, a potential that is the same in everyone. And such love seems chaste, withdrawn from both the lover's and the beloved's embodiment in history, ideology, and desire. At the same time, then, it is a necessary part of love's promise that we love and be loved in terms of the specific characters we manage to have; but that also means embracing the interpellation of both ourselves and those we love into the ideological norms that historically organize character and desire. The ontology of love, then, is pitched on the Boethian antinomy we have been exploring throughout this book. That is why the scandal of the tale is both everywhere and nowhere in particular. For while there is scandal aplenty in the story the Clerk tells us, the core of that scandal does not lie in any local aberrations, however awful they may be. Nothing in the historical production and enactment of love stands at its source; but everything in love's histories is caught up in it. Scandal's energy in the tale derives from the unresolvable antinomy of love's promise, an antinomy we both fascinatedly stage for ourselves and seek

to repress by projecting it on to a phantasmatic scene which we cannot quite convince ourselves is the scene of other people's traumas and perversions.

By staging and exploring love's antinomy, the *Clerk's Tale* provides further support for the idea that, even in poems that make philosophical arguments, what makes Chaucer's poetry philosophical are not the arguments themselves, but rather the relationship between those arguments and the unresolvable problems that motivate them. And, as I have also been arguing throughout this book, something similar can be said about Chaucer's use of character to explore complex psychological structures. Let me conclude this chapter and this book with some final comments along these lines concerning Walter and the Clerk.

In the analysis I have been pursuing of Walter's strange passion to test and tempt Grisilde, the first step was to explore the inner logic of Walter's tyrannical desire, a desire which, however self-defeating, provides Walter with the terms of his own preferred self-understanding. The second step was to connect that self-understanding with the muted, bent love and admiration he feels for Grisilde, and so to understand his testing and tempting as his abject way of trying to love her, and his shamed recoil from the unbearable demands unconditional love places on him. But if the ultimate source of scandal in the tale is not just our tragic inability to live up to the moral demands of love but an antinomy in love itself; and since Walter is the tale's embodiment of the perversity within the normal case of loving; then the energy of Walter's testing and tempting must ultimately derive from that antinomy as well. The resting place for an account of Walter's character thus lies in the way he exemplifies a philosophical problem rather than in some supposedly self-explanatory fact of his psychology; and, as I have been arguing throughout this book, that is what makes Chaucer's interest in character philosophical, and rather closer to allegory than we have usually supposed.

I argued earlier that Grisilde's will to the unconditional holds out the possibility of a fulfillment of Walter's autonomy; but given the depersonalizing trajectory of unconditional love, we can now see that in the very act of doing so it also entails an erasure of Walter's authority over his own identity. In waiting patiently for Walter to show his true self, Grisilde refuses to count Walter's own preferred self-understanding as

expressive of him; what is more, her love sets aside everything about his character that distinguishes him as the particular person he is, attaching itself only to his pure abstract potential for autonomous love. In resisting Grisilde's love, then, Walter not only resists the loss of his authority over himself, he resists the loss of everything in him that is distinctively *him*, everything that goes beyond his characterization by a general human capacity. And this aspect of unconditional love also confirms Walter in his suspicion: for Grisilde's very success in the face of his tests, her ability to look past the particularity of his character to his potential as a lover, only seems to confirm that whatever she loves, she does not love *him*. She may love his abstract moral potential, but *he* seems to make so little impression on her; she hardly seems to care what he does; it is almost as though he were not there, doing all these terrible things to her. In this respect, Walter's torture of Grisilde can be read as an attempt to wring some kind of response out of her that shows that she cares about him and what he does, that she acknowledges him in his particularity, as though by doing so he could establish that what she loves is not an abstract capacity but *him*. Here, too, the terms in which Walter imagines confirming her love for him can only assure its failure: for the only way Walter is prepared to see that Grisilde cares about him and what he does would be for her to show that she no longer remains steadfast in the patient unconditionality that constitutes her love. But this is not only because Walter is a tyrant and a sadist, although that is a fair enough characterization of him; it is because his tyranny and sadism are his perverse expressions of a right but impossible feeling that for Grisilde truly to love him, her love must be unconditional, and yet at the same time it must pick him out as the particular person he is.

If Walter's tortures of Grisilde can thus be read as an attempt to break through her chaste withdrawal, there is yet another sense in which what Walter wants is to preserve that very chastity. For what I earlier referred to, in perhaps rather too clerkish a fashion, as love's obscenity – its dependency on perversion, its baring of an ugliness that is essential to desire and attachment – can afford us one further glimpse into what fuels Walter's behavior. Walter's simultaneous attempts to confirm Grisilde's unconditional love for him and tempt her to betray him are ways of trying to keep love's obscenity hidden, to preserve Grisilde as the site of an idealization that, even if it perpetually confirms him in his

moral abjection, at least holds out the promise of an unpolluted ideal in relation to which he can understand his failures. According to Walter's logic, if Grisilde succeeds in living up to her promise of unconditionality, then she looks past his ugliness, thus confirming love's freedom from pathology; if she fails, then she confirms that she never really loved him. Either way, he never has to look at a love that involves devotion to his pathological pleasures, and so never has to look at those pleasures as the naked revelation of his character. This helps add further sense to a peculiar detail I have already discussed, namely the Clerk's description of Grisilde as "ay sad and constant as a wal" (IV.1047). Earlier in this chapter I followed one prevailing critical view in reading this phrase as a way of putting what taunts Walter in Grisilde's constancy, that in the face of his tyrannical desires her obedience to him looks as though it must harbor a hidden resistance.[19] That reading is true to much of the conceptual architecture of the tale and Walter's place in it; but as it turns out the Clerk uses this phrase to describe not Walter's fixation in tyrannical paranoia but rather his *release* from it.[20] It is only when he sees her wall-like constancy that he takes pity on her "wyfly stedfastnesse" (IV.1050) and calls a halt to his tests, declaring " 'this is ynogh, Grisilde myn' " (IV.1051). His tests are thus sufficient to allow him to address Grisilde with words of love only when her interiority appears blocked off from him by her constancy, when her idealized unconditionality removes the threat of his seeing her pathological attachment revealed, of seeing that what she loves in him is the very perversion that makes him want to stamp her love out.

It is clear why the Clerk would be as uncomfortable with the revelation of Grisilde's perverse attachment as Walter is; for on this second account, instead of love being the site of autonomy's embodiment, love's own embodiment appears as the site of its pathological nature. We can read in the Clerk's skinny asceticism and antieroticism another way Chaucer figures such discomfort, and thus as a link between the Clerk and the figure he uses to represent the condition he pitches his tale's moral argument against. But saying that does not diminish the force of the Clerk's moral argument in the tale; I think we should rather say that, under the pressure of imagining love's promise embodied, the Clerk has done even more to elaborate the depth of our conflicting intuitions about love than his moral argument can accommodate. On

the one hand, we must understand love to be an unconditional and autonomous disposition of the will in order to distinguish it from the half-measures that usually go by its name, but that ultimately sink back as Walter does into a morass of fractured desire, in which love's true aim gets refigured as fearful egoism and the narcissistic wish to reduce the love object to an instrument. On the other hand, the very perfection of patient autonomous love involves a self-enclosure of its own, a way of chastely sealing yourself off from the love object and your own desire for it; and in order to recapture the love object in all its fleshy specificity we must readmit pathology to the scene. For in Grisilde's love of Walter's ugliness, just as much as in her unconditionality, the Clerk captures intuitions concerning love without which it becomes unrecognizable: that we love not just, as Plato would have it, the good in our beloved, but this particular person; that we love them not just in spite of, but because of, their embodiment in the desires, habits, history, and ideology that constitute their character. The philosophical achievement of the *Clerk's Tale*, like that of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole, lies in its refusal of easy conceptual and moral solutions to these conflicts, its constant return to the rough ground of our daily engagements with them, and its steady attention to what makes those conflicts matter.