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Writing for an Audience: The Griselda Translations

“It is important to know for whom we are writing, and a difference in the character of one’s listeners justifies a difference in style.” --Petrarch, Seniles VII, 3

Introduction

The *English Oxford Living Dictionary* defines the term translation as “the process of translating words or text from one language into another.” However, for medieval writers, this term meant much more. Each language reflects its own culture, thus, to translate a tale from one language into another, a writer must alter more than just the language featured. This is done in order to transfer external literary systems into new communities to provide new readers with access to content. Additionally, an author’s purpose in translating a work was often to shape the literary piece into a framework that would best connect with his intended audience. According to Thomas J. Farrell, translations “are most instructive when they differ from the later text, since that difference signals a rejection of the form of the story taken in the source” (359). In order to successfully transition a story from one culture into another, this rejection of form is regularly adopted, which can shift moral meanings as well. One of the prime examples of this trend is found in the different versions of the Griselda tale written and translated by some of the leading authors at that time.

Potentially influenced by folklore, Giovanni Boccaccio was at the forefront of the major chain of this discussion through the tale of Griselda in his vernacular Italian work, *The Decameron*, as the tenth story on the tenth day. In *The Decameron*, this tale depicts a marquis who marries a poor girl with the promise that she will always obey him. The marquis decides to test his wife's patience by taking away both of her children and eventually claims he intends to leave her and intends to marry another. The wife remains virtuous throughout each struggle and is rewarded with the renewal of her marital status as well as the reunion with her long-lost children. This tale was eventually read by Francesco Petrarch who believed it to be worthy of a translation into Latin and decided to write four letters to Boccaccio in *Letters of Old Age*. Of the four letters only two actually address the Griselda tale. In *Seniles XVII, 3* and *Seniles XVII, 4*, Petrarch explains his reasons for creating his translation as well as describes the responses that Petrarch was getting from his readers. Following Petrarch, there was an anonymous French translation in which the author uses the Griselda tale to instruct his new bride on how to submit to him and fulfill her duties as a good wife. Finally, Geoffrey Chaucer attempted to bring the religious allegory into a closer version of Boccaccio through his vernacular Middle English adaptation of "Clerk's Tale" in *The Canterbury Tales*. Although the tale of Griselda has a long history, this essay will focus on Boccaccio, Petrarch, and Chaucer. Boccaccio, Petrarch, and Chaucer have developed similar stories that not only speak volumes on their own but also create a dialogue between one another that helps to display each author's goal of the work for their readers. Features of each author's distinctive interpretation are demonstrated in their translation's depictions of and changes to the story, which is meant to reflect the audience each writer means to captivate.

Literary Culture

Before delving into the changes made within each translation, we must first understand the respective cultures for which they were written. During the Middle Ages, writers were deeply interested in the potential of the vernacular. Though, it was still thought that Latin would always remain the steady language that endured beyond time and place. At that time, Dante Alighieri argued for a standardized written language that corresponded with a literary culture. For instance, if there were to be an Italian literary culture, there needed to be prominent literary works in Italian. In fact, Dante dedicated one work, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, to demonstrating how to write compelling works using Italian vernacular. Similar to Latin, Dante maintained and promoted the assertion of his authority over what he wrote. Boccaccio was wary of the type of high authority claims his predecessor and mentor, Dante and Petrarch, held. Accordingly, he chose to go against classic traditional form by writing in prose rather than poetry. Additionally, Boccaccio was interested in the current vernacular expression for a different reason: it best fit how he interpreted the authority of literature. Thus, by using a language form that is common and consistently shifting, Boccaccio was able to present his work as a matter of interpretation dependent on the reader's perception of it.

Petrarch, on the other hand, scorned the vernacular used by Dante and Boccaccio. Hence, upon realizing that he actually found merit in the Griselda tale, he made the decision that he would take Boccaccio's tale and translate it into Latin so that it could be given its "proper" value. Additionally, Petrarch felt compelled to produce a change in characterizations and the implied moral significance. In doing so, Petrarch invoked a different set of readers for the piece. Through

Petrarch's "Two Letters to Boccaccio," readers can understand firsthand Petrarch's attempt to alter the tale:

If the humor is a little too free at times, this may be excused in view of...the style and language which you employ, and the frivolity of the subjects, and of the persons who are likely to read such tales. It is important to know for whom we are writing, and a difference in the character of one's listeners justifies a difference in style. (453)

Petrarch recognizes that authors must write to their audience and in doing so, he likewise attempts to justify the changes that he makes to Boccaccio's story to meet the literary Latin culture. Petrarch writes his Latin interpretation of the story for an audience primarily made up of educated elite men. Additionally, because of the language's connection with Christianity, Latin readers also gave more significance to religious morals.

Once the tale is left to Chaucer for translation many of the aspects of Boccaccio's vernacular depictions are brought back. While these two authors differ in that one wrote in Italian (Boccaccio) and the other wrote in English (Chaucer), they both wrote in less culturally prestigious forms by using the vernacular. Similar to Boccaccio, Chaucer uses humor and open interpretations of his work to reject his authority over the text. However, the cultures that surrounded each language are what made these translations distinct. English was still being developed as a language. Chaucer was very limited in both his syntax and lexical options when writing his work. Additionally, the Italian literacy rate was about five times higher than England during this period. In reading texts from Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, Chaucer was introduced to what literary texts could do and perhaps used similar methods to try to teach the few readers in England how they should read. In choosing to write in English, Chaucer opens

England up to beginning their own English literary culture similar to what Dante was attempting to achieve.

Translations

There are two major interpretations that dominate the research surrounding Boccaccio's version, both of which fit nicely into Boccaccio's intended audience. The first interpretation believes that this story resonates with the marquis, named Gualtieri, as a tyrant and Griselda representing long-suffering people. Some criticism of *The Decameron X, 10* hold that Boccaccio distinctly portrays Gualtieri as a character that reluctantly gets married and acts cruelly against Griselda. In *Chaucer's Clerk's Tale*, Judith Bronfman follows David Wallace's argument by stating "Boccaccio was...a passionate opponent of tyranny" and that "a telling detail in Boccaccio's story would be that Gualtieri was the name of the tyrannical Duke of Athens, whom the Florentines, under duress, named ruler for life in 1342; they triumphantly ousted him in 1343" (46). Boccaccio's Italian audience would have immediately recognized the name play within the story and made political interpretations using their own history as a framework. Additionally, Boccaccio seems to have embedded further meaning through who he writes as the narrator of this story. In giving Dioneo the Griselda tale, the storyteller whose tales typically involve a twist, Boccaccio again invokes the message given in the opening of the tale in *The Decameron X, 10*: "and even though things turned out well for him in the end, I would not recommend that you follow his lead, because it is a real shame that he derived any benefit from it at all" (839). In other words, Boccaccio is saying that although this tyrant appears to have won, this experience of submissive behavior is uncommon and should not be expected.

Boccaccio writes in the vernacular in order to engage with the common citizens in a way that previous literature had not. Thus, he provides his readers with a less sympathetic representation of the tyrannical Gualtieri “who might be better suited to tending to pigs than ruling men” and who was meant to serve as a representation of the elite (850). An example of Boccaccio’s strategic representation can be seen in Gualtieri’s decision to remove his second child from his wife: “And when she came to term, she gave birth to a baby boy, which made Gualtieri very happy. Nevertheless, not content with what he had already done, he wounded his wife even more deeply” (844). Here, Boccaccio makes a point to describe Gualtieri’s actions as immediate and irrational while also emphasizing the harm it causes Griselda. While negatively depicting Gualtieri, Boccaccio also simultaneously emphasizes Griselda’s virtues to represent that “divine spirits may rain down from the heavens even into the houses of the poor” (850). Although this political interpretation could easily be seen by the Italian audience, Boccaccio’s decision to keep his tale open to multiple interpretations allowed him to undermine any consequences that would result from his authority over the work.

The second primary interpretation views Boccaccio’s tale as a comment on the authority of a text, demonstrating that an author cannot be held accountable if interpretations are shifting, changing, even contradicting each other, depending on how it is read or heard. For those that do not know Italian history, the political interpretation may not be as apparent. Additionally, in Boccaccio’s untraditional use of prose and Dioneo as a narrator, he distances himself from the story. It is difficult to determine what should be taken as truth within the tale. Where does Dioneo’s voice stop and Boccaccio’s voice start? As mentioned earlier, a vernacular language is unstable and meant to shift per user, which is exactly what the interpretations of the Griselda

story seem to do. To highlight this, Boccaccio includes the reactions of Dioneo's fictional audience following the finish of his tale. Boccaccio writes "when Dioneo's story was done, the ladies inclined to one side or the other in their responses, some criticizing one detail in it, some praising another" (851). Dioneo's audience is meant to represent, on a smaller scale at least, Boccaccio's audience. Boccaccio means to captivate an audience that is intrigued by the idea of questioning authority and truth within literature. Finally, by not being direct with his moral intention, Boccaccio leaves the story open to the possibility of multiple interpretations. Ultimately, it is this openness that allows Petrarch to create the translation that he does.

During the Middle Ages, Petrarch was known as the first public intellectual, meaning he was the individual referred to for typical topics of authority such as politics and religion. Thus, Petrarch had a reputation to maintain when translating the *Tale of Griselda*. In this translation, Petrarch not only clearly inserts a religious framework, he also undermines Boccaccio's open interpretation by providing a moral intention. According to Amy Goodwin, author of "The Griselda Game," this emphasis was necessary for Petrarch to "adapt Boccaccio's vernacular story for the recreation of elite Latin readers whose more sober values contrast(ed) with those of Boccaccio's audience" (42). Petrarch made a point to change major aspects of Boccaccio's piece in order to translate the work into a more manageable consumption for his Latin audience.

Of the more noticeable differences, Petrarch chooses to apply much more sympathetic language when describing the marquis, referred to as Walterus in the Latin translation. For the best comparison, this essay will use the same example demonstrated in a previous paragraph in which Walterus makes the decision to remove his second child from his wife. In "The Story of Griselda (Historia Griseldis)," Petrarch writes: "being again with child, behold she brought forth

a most excellent son, a great delight to his father and all their friends. But when, after two years, this child had weaned, the father fell back into his former caprice” (449). While Boccaccio shows Gualtieri making the decision soon after the birth simply because he was not content, Petrarch chooses to depict Walterus’ decision as though it was just a bad habit that he eventually fell back into. Additionally, Petrarch does not mention how this decision affects Griselda. Petrarch means to steer his readers away from thinking of the negative effects Walterus’ choices have on Griselda. By taking away the negative language describing Walterus, Petrarch allows his readers to rationalize the marquis’ behavior.

If Petrarch’s *Tale of Griselda* is a religious allegory, it is unclear to critics exactly what to make of the dynamics. However, following Farrell’s comparisons between Boccaccio and Petrarch and their use of descriptive language when the marquis is reacting to Griselda giving up her first child, Petrarch makes Walter more sensitive so that his male Latin audience can see him allegorically as God. In that case, Walterus is meant to represent God testing his followers, represented by Griselda. Following this theory, Petrarch would want his audience to be able to see a more compassionate and father like character. Along similar lines, in order to successfully steer his readers into the moral he wants them to have, Petrarch “omitted Gualtieri’s justification for testing Griselda, to teach her how to be a wife, and substituted a religious moral: the story was meant to show people how to endure the trials that God sent them” (Bronfman 16). Here, Petrarch means to take away alternative explanations of how a believer could interpret how to react to tests of faith while simultaneously exerting authority over the work. Petrarch chooses to take on Boccaccio’s *Griselda* tale; however, in his focus to translate it for the Latin culture, Petrarch reshaped the narrative beyond the original vernacular subtext. Interestingly enough,

Chaucer was able to work with what Petrarch left behind and create an appealing story of religious moralities while still including his own vernacular expression.

Critics are in constant debate as to whether or not Chaucer had used Boccaccio as a source to “The Clerk’s Tale.” While both sides of the argument are logical, this essay chooses to focus on simply comparing Chaucer’s Griselda story to his predecessor Petrarch, which is unanimously agreed to be one of Chaucer’s sources. It is in the changes made to Petrarch’s translation, in order to fit into the English vernacular culture, that Chaucer is found to be similar to Boccaccio. According to Warren Ginsberg, Petrarch’s “moral and spiritual values,...(just) as much as the politics of the tale, determined Chaucer’s translation of it into terms he, and his audience, might understand” (246). Following Ginsberg, this is why Chaucer’s Griselda is similar to Petrarch in its abundant religious imagery while still maintaining political hints of Boccaccio’s Griselda that Petrarch failed to completely erase.

In Chaucer’s attempt to translate Griselda back into a vernacular culture, Chaucer reverts back to the characterization of Walterus, Walter in the English translation, used in *The Decameron*. This can be seen through Chaucer’s depiction of Walter’s decision to test his wife a second time as an irrational, unnecessary event. In “The Clerk’s Prologue and Tale,” Chaucer writes:

When it was two yeer old and fro the brest
 Departed of his norice, on a day
 This markis caughte yet another lest
 To tempte his wyf yet ofter, if he may.
 O needles was she tempted in assay!

But wedded men ne knowe no mesure

Whan that they finde a pacient creature. (195)

Although Chaucer keeps Petrarch's decision to have Walter take the child away after two years, Chaucer makes a point to show that Walter was acting irrationally based on a "lust," or desire, and that it was "needles." Additionally, Chaucer, similar to Boccaccio, mentions Griselda.

Though Chaucer elects to focus on the fact that Griselda will stay "a pacient creature" rather than focusing on the negative effects. Like Boccaccio, Chaucer felt compelled to try to undermine the authority given to him as an author by complicating the narrative. Chaucer complicates the narrative by allowing the religious allegory to be maintained while returning to the less sympathetic descriptive language of the marquis and including a song that argues against Griselda's submissive behavior.

Additionally, this tale is also told by a fictional narrator, the Clerk, which allows Chaucer to distance himself from it. Similar to Boccaccio, it is unclear what moral Chaucer wants his readers to take away from "The Clerk's Tale," which leaves it open to interpretation. Finally, some critics believe that Chaucer allows the Clerk to attribute Petrarch as his source as a sign that Chaucer recognizes the tale as a translation from alternative sources. Similar to Petrarch's mention of Boccaccio translation in his letters as an invitation for readers to read between the works, Chaucer is inviting readers to make a comparison to Petrarch's translation. In doing so, it appears that Chaucer created his own translation as a critique of and comment on Petrarch's attempted authority claim and set moral. Here, Chaucer is able to demonstrate to his audience how literature should be read, that everything should not be given ultimate truth. Again, this is

particularly important as his culture is still attempting to develop its ability to both read and write in vernacular Middle English.

Conclusion

To completely evaluate each interpretation in comparison to one another, a critic would need a great deal of research and background knowledge for each literary culture and the author's personal agenda. However, readers are left with no commentary and explanation from Boccaccio and Chaucer. It is only because of Petrarch's letters that his translation contains the most fixed opinion from critics. Even with a great deal of investigation into these three works, reviewers would never be able to completely exhaust all of the different interpretations and "hidden" meanings within each text. Due to this, it is impossible to objectively decide which interpretation is considered to be the best. Additionally, the works are played off of each other which employs the consideration of multiple dynamics for each work. Boccaccio, Petrarch, and Chaucer have surrounded each of their Griselda translations with vastly different literary cultures. Thus, without having full knowledge of how each work, it is impossible to decide which is best.

To best understand each distinctive medieval translation of the Griselda tale, a reader must first remember that they are meant to be in a dialogue with its preceding version. The Boccaccio, Petrarch, and Chaucer versions might best be comprehended by taking an in-depth look at the changes made between each other in reference to characterization and its effect on a set moral. Each writer had its own culture that needed to be accommodated when producing their translation. Boccaccio wrote *The Decameron X, 10* playing off of the inconsistency of the Italian vernacular language to undermine his literary authority while also channeling popular political

history in the Italian culture. Petrarch wrote the *Tale of Griselda* in Latin to maintain his reputation as a public intellectual with the elite, which meant that he also had to make the tyrannical character more sympathetic. Additionally, because of Latin's traditional connection to more spiritual material, Petrarch had to embed a religious moral within the tale. Finally, Chaucer recognized that Petrarch's attempt was a matter of translation and created "The Clerk's Tale" in *The Canterbury Tales* using Middle English vernacular to both critique Petrarch and educate his own culture on the value of questioning the authority of literature. Writers across countries, cultures, and languages have attempted to associate themselves with the tale of Griselda because of its initial presentation as an open interpretation. Critics have been debating for years on why this story has been changed, manipulated, and rewritten. However, perhaps the simplest way to answer this question is by looking into the cultures for which they were translated. After all, writers tend to write for an audience.

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