

November 2021

Griselda's Afterlife, or the Relationship between Shakespeare's The Winter's Tale, Chaucer's The Clerk's Tale and the Tale of Magic

Andrzej Wicher
University of Lodz

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digijournals.uni.lodz.pl/textmatters>

Recommended Citation

Wicher, Andrzej. "Griselda's Afterlife, or the Relationship between Shakespeare's The Winter's Tale, Chaucer's The Clerk's Tale and the Tale of Magic." *Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture*, no.11, 2020, pp. 334-352, doi:10.18778/2083-2931.11.21

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Arts & Humanities Journals at University of Lodz Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture by an authorized editor of University of Lodz Research Online. For more information, please contact journals@uni.lodz.pl.

 **Andrzej Wicher**

University of Lodz

Griselda's Afterlife, or the Relationship between Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, Chaucer's *The Clerk's Tale* and the Tale of Magic

ABSTRACT

Some influence of Chaucer's *The Clerk's Tale*, also known as the story of the patient Griselda, on Shakespeare, and particularly on *The Winter's Tale*, has long been recognized. It seems, however, that the matter deserves further attention because the echoes of *The Clerk's Tale* seem scattered among a number of Shakespeare's plays, especially the later ones. The experimental nature of this phenomenon consists in the fact that Griselda-like characters do not strike the reader, especially perhaps the Renaissance reader, as good protagonists of a tragedy, or even a problem comedy. The Aristotelian conception of the tragic hero does not seem to fit Griselda because there is no "tragic fault" in her: she is completely innocent. It was thus a bold decision on the part of Shakespeare to use this archetype as a corner stone of at least some of his plays.

Keywords: Chaucer, Shakespeare, patient Griselda, tales of magic, women's social position.

According to Helen Cooper, “medieval material appears in all kinds of unexpected forms and places” (5). I might only add that the same seems to be true of the submerged stratum of folktales which Douglas Gray called “phantoms lurking behind the written texts which have survived” (1). The present study attempts to show, on the basis of fragmentary evidence, the truth of both perceptions. It is not my intention to seek an answer to the question of how much Shakespeare was influenced by specific medieval texts or by the narrative patterns characteristic of folktales, or the question of whether we are dealing with conscious borrowing on the part of the poet, or rather with parallels of which he was unaware. To quote Cooper again, we have to contend with “the continuing dynamism of the medieval within [Shakespeare’s] work” (16), and the present study is devoted to examining some aspects of that dynamism.

The reputation of Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale*, one of the *Canterbury Tales*, is severely tarnished because of its alleged antifeminism and its apparent endorsement of the principles of female passivity, silence, submissiveness and abject obedience which are embodied in the heroine, the “patient Griselda,” as opposed to the male arrogance and arbitrary rule, embodied in Griselda’s tyrannical and unnatural husband, marquis Walter. The latter, allegedly uncertain as to his wife’s loyalty, puts her to a series of tests which involve his taking away of her children ostensibly with the purpose of killing them, and eventually his apparent rough termination of the marriage with Griselda by sending her back to her father, and later employing her as a common servant obliged to wait on Walter’s new wife. Griselda suffers all those unspeakable humiliations and psychological tortures with apparently perfect equanimity and infinite patience. Eventually, it turns out that the children are alive and that the new wife is in fact Griselda’s daughter whom Walter has no real intention of marrying, especially because he loves, after all, his old wife Griselda, of whose patience and wifely obedience he is now fully convinced. The heroine accepts his sudden change of heart in a spirit of gratitude and perfect satisfaction. Even Chaucer himself clearly felt unhappy about the message of the tale, so he distanced himself from it both through the words put into the mouth of the tale’s narrator, that is the Clerk, and in Chaucer’s so-called envoy, where, in a direct authorial commentary, he advises, albeit in a rather ironical manner, that contemporary women follow a contrasting course of action to the one adopted by Griselda, becoming, that is, kind of anti-Griseldas:

Ye archewyves, stondesth at defense,
 Syn ye be strong as is a greet cammaille;
 Ne suffreth nat theat men yow doon offense,
 And sklendre wyves, fieble as in bataille,

Beth egre as is a tygre yond in Ynde;
Ay clappeth as a mille, I yow consaille. (1195–1200)

James Sledd summarized in explicit terms the negative reception of *The Clerk's Tale*¹ by asking a question: “[W]hy alleged cruelty and criminal stupidity are represented either without proper abhorrence, or even with the praise that should be reserved for virtue, we are asked, it is said, to tolerate an intolerable tyrant, and to admire a dolt” (166).

One might think, then, that for a sophisticated writer such as Shakespeare, renowned for the psychological complexity of his characters, the rather crude story of Griselda and Walter, which offended even the 14th-century sense of political and moral correctness, will hold little attraction. And yet the situation was, apparently, very different. The motif of a seemingly loving husband (or lover), who at some point turns brutally, and without good reasons, against his wife (or lover), or who turns away from her, is actually one of Shakespeare's favourite ones. Probably the most famous version of it appears in *Othello*, where the husband puts his innocent wife's patience to the ultimate test, simply by murdering her, and the murder is not a make-believe one, like the murders in *The Clerk's Tale*, but a real one. But the motif in question is already evident, in a less savage form, in one of Shakespeare's earliest plays, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, in which Proteus, seemingly very much in love with Julia, who reciprocates his feelings, suddenly falls in love with Sylvia, and no longer has any time for Julia, even though he eventually returns to her in a repentant mood. The motif can also be seen in *Much Ado About Nothing*, where Claudio is very easily made to believe, quite wrongly, that his fiancée Hero is unfaithful to him, so he breaks, in a particularly scandalous and public way, his engagement, and it takes a long time before he sees his mistake and is reconciled to Hero. Further traces of the motif can clearly be seen in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where it is the male lovers, Demetrius and Lysander, who suddenly change their attitudes and start loving the girls whom they so far used to be indifferent to, and become indifferent to the ones they apparently loved, while the girls, Hermia and Helena, remain constant in their affections. In probably the most famous play by Shakespeare, that is *Hamlet*, we observe Hamlet's unreasonable anger towards his girlfriend Ophelia. When the protagonist finally rediscovers within himself his love for Ophelia, it is too late, the girl is dead, and her death can be attributed, in a high degree, to Hamlet's hurting her feelings in many ways, both directly and indirectly. One of the late plays, *Cymbeline*,

336

¹ All quotations from Chaucer in the present article follow Benson's *The Riverside Chaucer*.

presents a character named Posthumus, though he is sometimes also called Leonatus, who is prepared to believe a piece of slanderous gossip about his perfectly innocent wife Imogen, whom he even attempts to kill before he sees through the web of lies entangling him.

In another late play, *The Winter's Tale*, we encounter Leontes, the king of Sicily, who, somewhat in the manner of Othello, conceives an irrational jealousy concerning his wife Hermione, imagining that she has betrayed him with his best friend Polixenes, the king of Bohemia. This leads to Hermione's apparent death and the king's attempt to have his, and Hermione's, daughter Perdita killed. Fortunately, unlike in *Othello*, no permanent harm is done, the daughter is found again and the wife also returns, in a most bizarre fashion, as a statue that turns out not to be a statue at all, but Hermione herself. By that time, Leontes, long cured of his jealousy, is fully prepared to welcome his almost miraculously resurrected wife back, having considered her dead for many years. This is not the end of the list. The motif can also be found, for example, albeit in a heavily changed form, in *Romeo and Juliet*, where Romeo believes all too hastily in Juliet's death (just as Leontes believed in the death of Hermione) and kills himself, thus also indirectly causing the death of his beloved.

A natural question is whether this motif, i.e. the motif of a slandered and often forgotten, or wrongly considered dead, wife can be traced back to *The Clerk's Tale*, or rather the tale of the patient Griselda, which Chaucer inherited from his Italian forerunners Boccaccio and Petrarch, who also wrote tales based on the same narrative pattern. The pattern in question is naturally derived, in its main features, from folklore, as has long been discovered (Griffith; Cate). In terms of Antti Aarne's and Stith Thompson's index of types of folktale, we are dealing here with AT 425 (The Search for the Lost Husband), one of the most important types of tales about supernatural husbands and wives, commonly referred to as Cupid and Psyche tales because the Roman 3rd-century writer Apuleius, in his book *The Golden Ass*, containing the story of Cupid and Psyche, gave us a classical version of such narratives. The clandestinely supernatural character of Griselda's husband could no doubt account, at least partly, for his unpredictability, wildness and readiness to turn against the theoretically beloved woman. In one important respect, however, the Cupid and Psyche tales are clearly different from *The Clerk's Tale* and from Shakespeare's plots, apparently inspired by *The Clerk's Tale*. In the former, the estrangement of the husband is caused by the wife's breaking of a taboo; in Apuleius the taboo consists in the prohibition to look at the husband; another typical taboo consists in keeping the love affair with the supernatural husband secret. In the latter ones, there is no rational explanation for the husband's strange and unnatural behaviour because the wife is completely innocent

and cannot be seriously accused of having broken any prohibition. We must draw, then, a rather paradoxical conclusion that the literary versions of the type, at least those written in keeping with the spirit of the patient Griselda tales, are more crude and psychologically improbable than the typical folktale versions.

At this point it is perhaps a good time to consider the value of *The Clerk's Tale's* and also of Shakespeare's plays' putative connection with the tales of magic. This value can be overestimated, which is what James Sledd suggests in his essay "*The Clerk's Tale: The Monsters and the Critics.*" Concerning *The Clerk's Tale's* hypothetical origin in the Cupid and Psyche tales, he comments on it rather sceptically, even though he does not question the possibility of such a link:

338

Griselda is the moral wife of an other-world lover, and only when this fact is understood can the problems of her story be resolved. No one can question this statement of the origin of the Griselda story. One can ask exactly what follows from it, and what does not. It has not been clear to me that the story is so improbable as Griffith and Cate seem to believe, or that to understand Chaucer's version one must keep looking over one's shoulder at a folk tale on which Chaucer knew nothing. (164)

Indeed, stories about supernatural husbands, or lovers, do not contain some essential elements of the patient Griselda story, such as the lack of any taboo that the heroine breaks or can break, and thus they have a limited power to explain the mysteries of *The Clerk's Tale* or the closely related stories told by the great Italian writers of the 14th century, Boccaccio and Petrarch.

The title of Sledd's essay, "*The Clerk's Tale: The Monsters and the Critics,*" is an obvious allusion to a much older essay by J. R. R. Tolkien, "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics,*" so it might be supposed that Sledd follows the main line of Tolkien's thought. To some extent, this is true. Just like Tolkien, Sledd is worried by the kind of criticism that explores the context of the poem, its sources and backgrounds, while having little to say about the poem itself. As Tolkien says: "But I have read enough, I think, to venture the opinion that *Beowulfiana* is, while rich in many departments, specially poor in one. It is poor in criticism, criticism that is directed to the understanding of a poem as a poem" (Tolkien 5). *Beowulf* is, of course, a vastly different poem to *The Clerk's Tale*. But, just as *Beowulf* is often associated with the three monsters that the hero fights with, so *The Clerk's Tale* also has its monsters (though, unfortunately, it does not feature a monster fighter); it is not only Walter, the unnatural husband of Griselda, who deserves this appellation, but also Griselda herself, whose

extraordinary (even by medieval standards) patience and wifely obedience make us also think of her as sheepish, in the sense of being excessively meek and submissive. Hence, Sledd talks about “that monster Walter and his monstrous wife” (163), even though the word “monster” appears here only in a figurative sense because both Walter and his wife are outwardly young and attractive. Also monstrous, in a sense, are the critics who yield to the temptation of treating works of art as quaint antiquary collection pieces, no longer capable of affecting the minds and hearts of modern readers or viewers. They may also be monstrous in their habit of lightly dismissing or condemning works that are too different from modern sensibilities or tastes.

It is difficult not to notice, however, that Professor Sledd's praise of *The Clerk's Tale* is also heavily qualified:

I think one can say without undue solemnity that *The Clerk's Tale* deserves and demands consideration, not as a monument to a departed taste, but as a tale whose admittedly limited values still can be perceived, though perhaps not deeply felt, and it is part of my thesis in this moderately solemn paper that in the present century the tale has suffered because outstanding scholars have too hastily condemned it. (161)

I would argue that not only has the tale been too hastily condemned, but also its folklore connections have been too hastily dismissed. A comparison between the Griselda story and Cupid and Psyche tales reveals the former as a radicalized version of the latter. If, in Cupid and Psyche, we are ready to sympathize with the predicament of the young heroine, how much more sympathy is evoked by Griselda, whose sufferings are even greater, and yet, unlike Psyche, she has done nothing to deserve her husband's displeasure? Among a pre-modern audience, likely to take for granted the principle of wifely obedience, Griselda might have inspired, first of all, pity and sympathy, rather than the revulsion which is so typical of modern reactions to her almost preternatural patience.

This intuition is confirmed by the fact that a version of the Griselda story was included in Christine de Pisan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* (*Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*), a book finished in 1405, shortly after Chaucer's death. The author, often called a medieval feminist, because of her vigorous defence of the reputation and dignity of women, was not, apparently, put off by a tale that few modern feminists would like. But she changed it a little: “De Pisan's retelling of the Griselda Story, however, leaves out a crucial aspect of Walter and Griselda's marriage: the prenuptial agreement of obedience” (McCarthy 9). As a result, the value of Griselda's sacrifice is enhanced because she does more than merely being true to her

word. Some measure of obedience was no doubt implied by the social status of a wife, if we mean the way this status was commonly understood in the Middle Ages, but the fact that Griselda, in most versions of the story, takes a special and extraordinary oath of obedience shows that this “normal” obedience was not regarded as unconditional. The motif of this prenuptial agreement may well be a remnant of the taboo that the heroine in tales about supernatural husbands promises to respect. Her breaking it later is hardly surprising; all kinds of vows, within the logic of the fairy tale, are there to be broken; fairy tale characters, both female and male, who say they will not do something can be counted upon to eventually do it all the same, which is one of the ways in which the action of the fairy tale advances (Lüthi 70). What is surprising is that Griselda keeps, very untypically, her vow and yet is punished as if she had broken it. De Pisan goes a step further and makes her Griselda bound by a promise she never gives, in this way pushing the limits of her loyalty to her husband. Griselda may serve, then, as a paragon of virtue and as evidence that women are capable of greater virtue and greater sacrifices than men. This argument, from the modern point of view, is hardly acceptable considering that Griselda’s virtue consists, first of all, in total submission to the will of her husband, but de Pisan naturally did not follow the standards of modernity. As for the principal characteristic of Griselda—that is, her patience—Christine says the following:

[W]ho could recite the great benefits of this virtue [i.e. patience]? It is exemplified in the life of Our Lord, who is the veritable author of this virtue. Those who are patient may be called the true sons of God, and indeed the Gospel calls them blessed, for the Kingdom of Heaven is rightfully theirs. (De Pisan 140)

2

Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* is certainly, of all his plays, the most similar to *The Clerk’s Tale*, even though it also owes a lot to its most immediate source, Robert Greene’s *Pandosto: The Triumph of Time*. It is from Greene that Shakespeare most probably took the motif of sexual jealousy which motivates king Leontes’s turning against his wife Hermione, and the motif of banishing the king’s youngest child, a daughter, who is raised in a family of shepherds and eventually, after many years, finds her true father again. Unlike in Shakespeare, she is not, however, reunited with her mother, who died long ago, and is irrevocably dead, unlike Leontes’s wife, Hermione, who is only reported to be dead. The motif of the daughter (in Greene,

her name is Fawnia; in Shakespeare, it is Perdita) becoming reunited, first of all, with her mother is strongly reminiscent of the Griselda story. Also, the fact that Perdita's father, Leontes, unlike Fawnia's, Pandosto, lives on, instead of committing suicide, makes the plot of *The Winter's Tale* similar to *The Clerk's Tale*. As has been recognized by Grace Annelise McCarthy: "Perdita and Leontes's reunion with Hermione more closely resembles the end of any given Griselda story than does Pandosto" (29).

From a folkloric point of view, however, the problem is that the Cupid and Psyche stories do not contain the motif of the heroine's children, so the part of the plot where *The Winter's Tale* and *The Clerk's Tale* most conspicuously converge is not warranted by the typical tales about supernatural husbands. However, there may be another, and closely related, type of folktale involved here. Concerning the character of Perdita in *The Winter's Tale* it has been said that "[s]he is one of the same company as Miranda and Marina, and the youthful sons of Cymbeline" (Stokes 252). This statement includes a vision of the structural unity of Shakespeare's late romances, i.e. of *The Tempest*, *Pericles*, *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*. This unity is based on the narrative structure known in folklore studies as AT 707 (The Three Golden Sons), reckoned by Stith Thompson to be "one of the eight or ten best known plots in the world" (121), in which one of the main motifs is that of lost children who, just like Miranda, Marina, Guiderius, Arviragus and Perdita, are later almost miraculously restored to their parents. This motif is paralleled, both in the folktales in question, and in Shakespeare's romances (with the exception of *The Tempest*), by the story of a lost, usually slandered and banished, wife who, having undergone a period of death-like exile or imprisonment, is finally exculpated and reunited with her child, or children. Occasionally, she is also reunited with her rather ineffectual husband, who often has a hand in his wife's misfortunes—usually, however, through his helpless passivity and gullibility, rather than malice, because the wife is usually calumniated by her envious and wicked elder sisters, or by a hostile mother in law. The calumny usually consists in saying that the heroine has given birth to animals rather than human children, so she must be an evil witch or malicious fairy. The husband normally fails to defend his wife and does not realize that animals have been substituted for normal children, who are taken away to be killed, but they are eventually saved by a kind-hearted servant or another character, such as a miller, or a fisherman. The two central motifs of the slandered wife and of the lost and restored children are clearly discernible in all of the plots in question. What makes *The Clerk's Tale* and *The Winter's Tale* special in the context of the stories about slandered wives, however, is that the main guilt for the heroine's and her children's persecution cannot be placed on her, or her husband's, relatives,

or on any other third party; rather, it is the husband himself who must take the blame, since all the actions undertaken against the heroine are initiated and masterminded by him.

In *Cymbeline*, for example, a part of the blame for the husband's, that is Posthumus's, unnatural behaviour toward his wife, Imogen, can be apportioned to the husband's false friend Iachimo, who, like Othello's Iago, unjustly accuses Imogen of adultery. Leontes from *The Winter's Tale*, like Chaucer's Walter, is fully and solely responsible for the suffering and misfortunes he causes; he is, we might say, Othello and Iago (or Posthumus and Iachimo) in one.² However, unlike Walter, he eventually feels sorry for the pain and misery he has inflicted on his wife, even though he expresses his apology in a very brief and laconic way: he just mentions his "ill suspicion" (5.3.149)³ that made him turn against his angelic wife, and also against his best friend, Polixenes, both of whom he wrongly accused of having an illicit love affair with each other, and also made him expose his and Hermione's daughter Perdita to certain death. His more contrite attitude is appropriate considering that his deviant behaviour is devoid of any rationalization, even such an unconvincing or misguided one as Walter's desire to test the full extent of his wife's patience, or Othello's obsession with the lost handkerchief.

We may generalize that in Shakespeare the motif of the heroine's accusation of being a supernatural creature that bears unnatural, inhuman children is replaced by the remotely related motif of unfounded sexual jealousy, which is represented, in *The Winter's Tale*, just as in *Cymbeline*, or *Othello*, as an invasion of alien and beastly forces that threaten and undermine the whole fabric of being, bringing in a perspective of total chaos. Sexual jealousy is of course structurally similar to the suspicion of "unnaturalness": both are motivated by the fear of an alien, uncontrollable and unpredictable element, a fear that turns the fearing one into the feared, or, in other words, a prejudice that turns the accuser's accusations against the accuser himself.

If Posthumus in *Cymbeline* compares his alleged rival to a boar (*Cymb.* 2.5.16), Leontes, Posthumus's counterpart in *The Winter's Tale*, compares Polixenes, his imaginary rival, to a spider:

There may be in the cup
A spider steeped, and one may drink, depart,
And yet partake no venom, for his knowledge

² Harold Bloom describes Leontes as "an Othello who is his own Iago" (639).

³ All the quotations in the present article from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale* follow Bevington's *William Shakespeare, The Late Romances: "Pericles," "Cymbeline," "The Winter's Tale," "The Tempest."*

Is not infected; but if one present
 Th'abhorred ingredient to his eye, make known
 How he hath drunk, he cracks his gorge, his sides,
 With violent hefts. I have drunk, and seen the spider. (*Wint.* 2.1.39–45)

Both characters conjure up visions of hateful and dangerous creatures to suggest that their wives allowed themselves to be possessed by forces alien and hostile to mankind. Thus, Posthumus and Leontes make themselves equal to the wicked female relatives that usually persecute and slander the heroines of similar tales. They suggest that a very strong taboo has been broken, but this is merely a cover for their own incapacity to distinguish between the order of reality from that of unreality, or rather their tendency to impose the latter upon the former, i.e. to build a self-consistent world based on a lie, which of course means the breaking of perhaps the most important of all taboos.

Leontes's hidden sense of guilt manifests itself in his juxtaposing himself with a whole series of animals, suggesting that unnaturalness—the fact of not being true to one's nature, one's roots or one's calling—may be a feature of *his* character rather than of his wife's:

Come, captain,
 We must be neat; not neat, but cleanly, captain.
 And yet the steer, the heifer, and the calf
 Are all called neat. (*Wint.* 1.2.122–125)

The image of the steer with its horns is obviously connected with the traditional idea of the cuckold's horns (Bevington 357), which does not exhaust the significance of the above passage, but which directs our attention to the dehumanizing aspects of the social concept of the so-called cuckoldry. A cuckold has "horns," i.e. he is ridiculous without realizing why people laugh at him, although the horns also mean that the cuckold is a hybrid creature, partly human and partly beastly. Leontes is naturally a cuckold in a rather different sense than the usual one. Instead of being a victim of adultery, he is himself an image of it, in the sense of betraying his wife and reality in general, with pernicious figments of his imagination. Leontes confirms, in this way, the stereotype of the supernatural husband, who, not so much in typical fairy tales, but rather in legends and romances, is often associated with savagery and wildness, such as the elf-king in *Sir Orfeo*, and occasionally even with the devil himself, as in the Middle English romance of *Sir Gowther*.

Antigonus, the character devoured by the bear, also has interesting ideas concerning the question of adultery. Even though he eventually believes in Hermione's innocence, there are shadows of doubt crossing his mind that make him appear to be Leontes's double:

If it prove
 She's otherwise, I'll keep my stables where
 I lodge my wife. I'll go in couples with her;
 Than when I feel and see her no farther trust her.
 For every inch of woman in the world,
 Ay, every dram of woman's flesh is false,
 If she be. (*Wint.* 2.1.134–139)

The Queen's supposed falseness can then serve as a pretext for treating all women as animals, and all marriages as scandalous cases of exogamy, as "going in couples" with dogs. Antigonus does not stop at this, and also applies his furious logic to his three daughters:

Be she honor-flawed,
 I have three daughters—the eldest is eleven,
 The second and the third, nine and some five—
 If this prove true, they'll pay for't. By mine honor,
 I'll geld 'em all ! Fourteen they shall not see
 To bring false generations. They are co-heirs,
 And I had rather glib myself than they
 Should not produce fair issue. (*Wint.* 2.1.144–151)

Antigonus's grim and somewhat grotesque threat to deprive his daughters of generative powers is certainly one of the ugliest motifs in the play, suggesting that Leontes's irrational jealousy can be infectious and result in similar outbursts of hostility against innocent women.

In a rather curious tale by the Grimms, *The Two Girls, the Bear, and the Dwarf*, the two girls in question are persecuted and imprisoned by a malicious and ungrateful old dwarf whose life they have saved. The dwarf has to be killed by a bear with whom the girls have a sexual relationship of some kind. The moment the bear kills the dwarf it turns out that the latter was an evil enchanter, while the former is his victim, a prince turned into a bear who can now regain his human form having disposed of his tormentor (Thompson 100).

I do not want to suggest that a story of this kind lies directly behind the mysterious motif of Antigonus's three daughters. And yet the tale of magic in question corresponds quite faithfully to the lines of conflict that emerge in *The Winter's Tale*. In the play the girls can also be thought to have been set free by a bear who destroys their father, a father who, at least potentially, has designs on his daughters' sexuality. Antigonus's mind works mimetically, when he envisages treating all women as animals, he immediately sees himself as their animal companion; by the same token, he can think of depriving his daughters of generative powers only in

connection with castrating himself. Like Leontes, he is inexorably attracted to and repelled by visions of extreme exogamy, but Leontes is right when he suspects the sincerity of Antigonus's sentiments; they are too faithful and sycophantic a copy of his master's madness:

You smell this business with a sense as cold
As is a dead man's nose; but I do see't and feel't
As you feel doing thus, and see withal
The instruments that feel. (*Wint.* 2.1. 152–154)⁴

If we look now at the closest existing analogue to *The Winter's Tale*, Robert Greene's *Pandosto: The Triumph of Time*, we notice that neither a bear, nor a creature with a similar function, appears in Greene's text, nor is there a character that could be compared to Antigonus, or any equivalents of Paulina or Autolycus. The unfortunate baby girl, later known as Fawnia, is set adrift at her father's behest by anonymous shipmen (Salzman 167). *Pandosto* contains, however, a motif that is interesting from our point of view, but only faintly suggested in *The Winter's Tale*, namely that of incest. In Greene's tale we have Pandosto (an equivalent of Leontes) falling in love with Fawnia (an equivalent of Perdita) before he learns about her identity. Pandosto feels unnaturally attracted to Fawnia, but he also turns immediately against her as soon as he discovers that she cannot be persuaded or bullied into loving him, and is ready to have her executed, together with her lover Dorastus (an equivalent of Florizel). This motif seems quite Shakespearean: if it had been included in *The Winter's Tale* it would have helped to identify Leontes as an essentially endogamous figure, similar in this respect to all tyrants, and similar to Antiochus, the openly incestuous king from *Pericles*. Needless to add, there is also an element of incestuous desire in Antigonus's wish to "unsex" his daughters, i.e. to make them incapable of uniting with other men and bearing children. Above all, however, the motif of Pandosto and Fawnia is a good example of the changeability and unreliability of erotic love itself, which is certainly one of Shakespeare's favourite themes, handled perhaps most extensively in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

On the other hand, the inclusion of that motif would probably have made *The Winter's Tale* too grim a play to allow the necessary happy ending. Indeed, the ending of *Pandosto* is unhappy rather than happy; the jealous king's wife does not come back to life, and he himself commits suicide, unable to bear the burden of his sins and the memory of their

⁴ An interpretation of *The Winter's Tale* as a thoroughgoing analysis of mimetic jealousy can be found in René Girard's *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare*.

consequences.⁵ In *The Winter's Tale*, it is only the death of Mamillius, Leontes's male heir, and that of Antigonus, that are irreversible and confirm the adequacy of Greene's ambiguous subtitle, *Pandosto: The Triumph of Time*. An allegorical figure called Time also appears in Shakespeare's play and introduces himself as a force that "please some, try all, both joy and terror" (*Wint.* 4.1.1), which is compatible with a rather ambiguous, or at least not consistently tragic, interpretation of time emerging from the late romances.

3

346

The motif of incest brings us back to Chaucer's *The Clerk's Tale*, where, as we may remember, Griselda is forced to wait on her cruel husband's new, much younger, wife, who turns out to be her own, and Walter's, daughter. Walter knows very well that his young bride is his daughter and he does not seriously intend to marry her, but Shakespeare's Leontes does not know at first that Perdita is his daughter. A moment before he sets his eyes on her, not having seen her for sixteen years, and is so favourably impressed that he calls her a goddess (5.1.130), he contemplates finding himself a new wife (5.1.55–70). He decides against this idea frightened by the prospect of his old wife visiting him as a ghost and urging him to murder his new wife, rather like Old Hamlet's ghost urging his son to kill his mother's new husband, the difference being that Leontes is Young Hamlet and Claudius in one, so the ghost of Hermione, his old wife for whose (apparent) death he feels responsible, should rather urge him to murder himself. Indeed, Greene's Pandosto, the equivalent of Leontes, having been responsible for his wife's real death, does commit suicide. As to the prospect of Leontes marrying Perdita, his own daughter, it is quite real considering that not only is Leontes fascinated with her, but he can also quite easily disregard the fact of her being engaged to Florizel, the son of Polixenes, because Polixenes is very much against the marriage between Florizel and Perdita.

Just as in the tales about slandered mothers and their abandoned children brought up by animals or in a lower class environment (AT 707), Perdita eventually comes to her mother's rescue and helps restore her to her former position. In doing so, and in being who she is, she also repairs her father's reputation, so that his great sins can be forgiven. One of those sins is no doubt the inclination toward incest, his sexual desire of his daughter, the motif that the student of folklore will find in a more developed form

⁵ There is also a suggestion in Greene that Fawnia dies soon after the death of her tragic father (Salzman xviii–xix).

in AT 706 (The Maiden Without Hands), where the heroine escapes from home to thwart her father's intention to marry her. By marrying Florizel, Perdita also restores the broken friendship between Leontes and Polixenes. In achieving all of this she is assisted by Antigonus's widow Paulina, who prepares the apparent resurrection of Hermione.

Perhaps *The Winter's Tale* should have been called *Hermione, Perdita and Paulina: The Triumph of (and over) Time*. Indeed all three female characters share some features of the patient Griselda, who also weathers all kinds of adversities. If they can be treated as a collective Griselda, then the character is, in her Shakespearean avatars, no longer a paragon of patience. Appearing as Paulina, the persecuted wife's closest friend, she is not satisfied with Leontes's expression of remorse and regret when he realizes that his suspicions concerning his wife were groundless. She accuses him of tyranny and sees no chance of redemption for him:

347

But, O thou tyrant!
 Do not repent these things, for they are heavier
 Than all thy woes can stir. Therefore betake thee
 To nothing but despair. A thousand knees
 Ten thousand years together, naked, fasting,
 Upon a barren mountain, and still winter
 In storm perpetual, could not move the gods
 To look that way thou wert. (3.2.207–213)

But, curiously enough, it is Leontes who shows patience at this moment. Instead of reacting angrily to Paulina's harangue, he meekly concurs with her words:

Go on, go on
 Thou cant not speak too much. I have deserved
 All tongues to talk their bitt' rest. (3.2.214–216)

In this respect, he behaves like the heroes of the tales about supernatural wives—AT 400 (The Man on a Quest for his Lost Wife)—where the person to break a taboo and to repent for it is the husband, not the wife, and the virtue of patience is expected from him.

The scene of Hermione's revival may be, at least partly, explained by referring to the inner logic of the play: its artificiality corresponds very well to the artificiality of the scene with the bear at the end of Act 3. The bear serves the purpose of removing a character, while the statue trickery brings another character back to a full life after a period of hiding and shadow-like existence. The bear seems to stand here for the suddenness and irreversibility of death, while the statue stands for its reversibility, or

rather the possibility of making up for one's apparently fatal faults and atoning for one's sins. Leontes's exclamation on the sight of the revived Hermione: "If this be magic, let it be an art / Lawful as eating" (5.3.109–110), is thus highly appropriate: "eating" is here the opposite of "magic" because the latter is a process of bringing back what the bear of time has apparently managed to devour.

It is true that the scene of the double recognition, of Hermione by Leontes, and of Perdita by Hermione, is prepared and controlled by Paulina, Antigonus's widow, whose relative freedom of action is certainly ensured by her husband's having been conveniently removed by the bear. Remarkable indeed is the way in which the finding of Perdita is coupled in Paulina's mind with the loss of Antigonus:

But O, the noble combat that twixt joy and sorrow was fought in Paulina!
She had one eye declined for the loss of her husband, another elevated
that the oracle was fulfilled. She lifted the Princess from the earth, and
so locks her in embracing as if she would pin her to her heart, that she
might no more be in danger of losing. (*Wint.* 5.2.76–79)

Perdita thus plays the crucial role of a character who triggers an entire chain of events. Without her also being recovered, the "resurrection" of Hermione would have been pointless. It is the return of Perdita that shows that the powers that govern the universe, and of which the bear was an emissary, are no longer angry with Leontes. The latter recognizes this even before he becomes fully aware of Perdita's identity, as is evident in the following words addressed to Florizel and Perdita:

The blessed gods
Purge all infection from our air whilst you
Do climate here! (*Wint.* 5.1.168–170)

Perdita also plays quite a prominent role in the scene of Hermione's "rising from the dead." She is particularly eager upon seeing the supposed statue (cf. 5.2.95–104), and she treats it as a living person, not a piece of stone, long before it becomes obvious to anybody else, save, of course, Paulina:

And give me leave,
And do not say 'tis superstition, that
I kneel and then implore her blessing, Lady.
[*Kneeling*]
Dear Queen, that ended when I but begun,
Give me that hand of yours to kiss. (*Wint.* 5.3.43–46)

Thus Perdita defines herself as the one that carries the burden of continuing Hermione's life and duties, and bears out the true version of the events, confirming her mother's innocence and saintliness. Perdita's gesture is partly religious, even idolatrous, especially from a Protestant point of view, and it ascribes to Hermione the paradoxical life of gods and goddesses venerated in statues.

It is customary to view the scene with Hermione's statue as derived from the myth of Pygmalion as told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a text that Shakespeare must have known either in the Latin original or in Arthur Golding's English translation. The problem is that Leontes, unlike the mythical Pygmalion, does not contribute in any way to the creation of the statue that later comes to life. Another difference is that in *The Winter's Tale* the figure has never actually been a statue, only a living woman who pretends to be a statue. In a number of ways this scene resembles the motif of resuscitation appearing in AT 311 (Rescue by their Sister), that is in Bluebeard tales. Bluebeard kills his wives and hacks them into pieces, as they all break his prohibition not to open a forbidden chamber in his palace. One of those wives, however, proves cleverer than her predecessors. She puts together the dismembered bodies of the dead wives, who are also her sisters, and the moment she does so they come back to life; later she avenges herself on the monstrous husband. The resuscitation of the sisters by their female relative—that is, a character analogous to Paulina or Perdita—in Grimm's *Fitcher's Bird*, is presented as follows:

Both her dear sisters lay there in the basin, cruelly murdered and cut in pieces. But she began to gather their limbs together and put them in order, head, body, arms and legs. And when nothing further was wanting the limbs began to move and unite themselves together, and both the maidens opened their eyes and were once more alive. Then they rejoiced and kissed and caressed each other. (Grimm 218)

Bluebeard figures are, clearly enough, extremely vicious versions of supernatural husbands, who punish their wives' breaking of a taboo by immediate death, instead of the more usual series of difficult tasks at the end of which a reconciliation and reunion is possible. Leontes comes close to being the ultimate Bluebeard, considering that he almost manages to kill his wife in spite of her having broken no taboo. Walter, the husband of the miserable Griselda, also has the makings of a Bluebeard figure: instead of murdering his wives, he murders (apparently) his wife's (and his own) children. Leontes, it must be remembered, brings about the death of his son Mamillius, who dies from sorrow at seeing his mother's plight (there is no resurrection for him). Leontes is also on the point of ordering his newly

born daughter to be thrown into the fire, and at the last moment decides to commute this sentence to the child's being abandoned "in some remote and desert place" (2.3.213), which of course in practice equals death, and the fact that in this case it does not is nothing short of a miracle. Leontes's guilt is naturally not alleviated by this miracle being quite common in fairy tales and romantic tales featuring the motif of children, or young people, being banished and exposed to the elements. We may be reminded of the Middle English tale of *Emaré*, about a young woman put out to sea in a rudderless boat by her unnatural father, whom she refuses to marry.

Another possible analogue to the story of an almost miraculously resurrected wife is the myth of Alcestis, on which a play by Euripides was based. We have there the motif of a wife, i.e. Alcestis, who returns from the land of the dead, having sacrificed her life for that of her husband, Admetus. She, to some extent, resembles a statue rather than a living woman, in that, after her miraculous return, she refuses, or is unable, to speak.⁶ It may also be argued that the death of Alcestis is caused by her husband's egoism; she would not have to die if he, like ordinary people, reconciled himself to the necessity of his own death. And yet the whole story does not contain the motif of an estrangement between husband and wife: they are shown as a loving couple, an embodiment of marital bliss. Robert Graves treats the story of Alcestis as an allusion to the ritual of sati (Graves, *Volume 1* 225), the burning of widows on the funeral pyre of their husband, usually associated with India, but probably also existing in pre-historic Europe, as is evidenced in another Greek myth, that of Capaneus and his wife Evadne, who indeed threw herself on her husband's funeral pyre, but the ritual is not explicitly mentioned either in the Greek myths, or in the European cultural tradition.

Griselda's single-minded devotion to her husband is perhaps remotely reminiscent of Alcestis and Evadne. Both Griselda and Alcestis owe a debt of gratitude to their husbands: Griselda is a peasant woman whose social status is greatly enhanced by her marriage to a rich and powerful aristocrat, while Alcestis, although a daughter of a king, would have probably never got married if her husband Admetus had not fulfilled the near impossible task, set by Pelias, Alcestis's father, of yoking together a lion and a boar to a chariot.⁷ Alcestis may be thought of as a female equivalent of Orpheus,

⁶ There is a painting by the German 18th-century painter Johann Heinrich Tischbein entitled *Herkules entreißt Alkestis dem Totengott Thanatos und führt sie dem Admetus zu* [*Hercules Saves Alcestis from Thanatos, the God of Death, and Restores Her to Her Husband Admetus*], where Alcestis looks indeed almost like a white marble statue.

⁷ The father who demands, from his prospective sons in law, the fulfilment of very difficult tasks before he agrees to his daughter's marriage may easily be suspected of incestuous intentions, a motif that can be seen in the Middle English romance *Sir Degaré* and Shakespeare's late play *Pericles*.

who tried to bring his wife Eurydice back from the Underworld, even though she does not follow her husband to the land of dead. She succeeds, however, where Orpheus failed, by her decision to offer her own death as a means of saving the life of her husband. The function of Orpheus is fulfilled, in the case of Alcestis, by Hercules, who is motivated by pity, sympathy and admiration, rather than by erotic love. Both Griselda and Shakespeare's Hermione may also be said to have saved their husbands, Walter and Leontes, but they save them from themselves, rather than from any external danger, as they succeed in overcoming, by means of their exemplary wifely loyalty, their husbands' beastly brutality.

In conclusion, a folkloric analysis of *The Clerk's Tale* and *The Winter's Tale* repays one's effort, as it allows one to see these texts in connection with particular archetypal patterns that make certain crucial elements of their plots stand out in relief. The story of the patient Griselda may in this way be shown as having been creatively developed and deepened in *The Winter's Tale*. Shakespeare, generally speaking, preserves the motif of the wife's infinite patience, embodied in the character of Hermione, but he adds the figure of Paulina, a female monster-fighter, who in many ways is an alter ego of Hermione, and who combines patience with resourcefulness and a determination to resist evil even if it is represented by a patriarchal authority.

WORKS CITED

- Aarne, Antti, and Stith Thompson. *The Types of the Folk-Tale. A Classification and Bibliography*. Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1928.
- Benson, Larry D., editor. *The Riverside Chaucer*. Oxford UP, 1989.
- Bevington, David, editor. *William Shakespeare, The Late Romances: "Pericles," "Cymbeline," "The Winter's Tale," "The Tempest."* Bantam, 1988.
- Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. Riverhead, 1998.
- Cate, W. A. "The Problem of the Origin of the Griselda Story." *Studies in Philology*, vol. XXIX, 1932, pp. 389–405.
- Cooper, Helen. Introduction. *Medieval Shakespeare. Pasts and Presents*, edited by Ruth Morse, Helen Cooper and Peter Holland, Cambridge UP, 2013, pp. 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139060905.002>
- De Pisan, Christine. *The Treasure of the City of Ladies, or the Book of the Three Virtues*. Translated by Sarah Lawson. Penguin, 1985.
- Girard, René. *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare*. Oxford UP, 1991.
- Graves, Robert. *The Greek Myths, Volumes 1 and 2*. Penguin, 1990.
- Gray, Douglas. *Simple Forms. Essays on Medieval English Popular Literature*. Oxford UP, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198706090.001.0001>

- Griffith, D. D. *The Origin of the Griselda Story*. U of Washington P, 1931.
- Lüthi, Max. *Das europäische Volksmärchen. Form und Wesen*. [*The European Folktale. Form and Nature*.] Francke Verlag, 1985.
- McCarthy, Grace Annelyse. "The Evolution of the Patient Woman: Examining Patient Griselda as a Source for William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*." 2015. U of Alaska Fairbanks, MA thesis.
- Salzman, Paul, editor. *An Anthology of Elizabethan Prose Fiction*. Oxford UP, 1987.
- Sledd, James. "The Clerk's Tale: The Monsters and the Critics." *Chaucer Criticism*, Volume 1, edited by Richard J. Schoeck and Jerome Taylor, U of Notre Dame P, 1982, pp. 160–74.
- Stokes, Francis Griffin. *Who's Who in Shakespeare*. Bracken, 1924.
- The Brothers Grimm. *The Complete Fairy Tales*. Wordsworth Editions, 1998.
- Thompson, Stith. *The Folktale*. U of California P, 1977.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. HarperCollins, 1997.

Andrzej Wicher is Professor in the Institute of English Studies at the University of Lodz where he lectures on the history of English literature and literary theory. His academic interests include medieval and Renaissance studies, and modern fantasy literature. He published three monographs, including *Archaeology of Sublime: Studies in Late Medieval English Writings* (1995), *Shakespeare's Parting Wondertales: A Study in the Elements of the Tale of Magic in William Shakespeare's Late Plays* (2003) and *Selected Medieval and Religious Themes in the Works of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien* (2013). In 1997, he also published a volume of Polish translations of Middle English literary works including *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Pearl*. Andrzej Wicher took part in many international conferences and various exchange programmes as a visiting lecturer at some British universities. He is also a member of the International Shakespeare Association, PASE (Polish Association for the Study of English) and the Scholarly Society in Łódź.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8568-2087>

andrzej.wicher@uni.lodz.pl