THE HISTORY OF PATIENT GRISEL

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The History of Patient Grisel by Henry B. Wheatley

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HENRY B. WHEATLEY

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Griselda.

THE HISTORY

OF

PATIENT GRISEL.

1619.

EDITED, WITH AN INTRODUCTION,

BY

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Introduction.

THE narrative of the Patient Griselda is one of the most wide-spread of the stories which have come down to us from the Middle Ages. It has been annexed to the highest literature by such poets as Boccaccio, Petrarch and Chaucer, and has been brought within reach of the meanest capacities by the ballad-mongers and the writers of penny histories.

We cannot trace the story back farther than the middle of the fourteenth century, when Boccaccio incorporated it into his *Decameron* (day 10, novel 10); but it must have had a previous existence in Italy, for Petrarch says in his letter to Boccaccio that when he read it in the *Decameron* he remembered how pleased he had been with it when he heard it many years before. When his memory was thus revived in the story that charmed him so much he set to work to learn it by heart, so that he might repeat it to his friends. He then translated it into Latin for the benefit of those who did not know Italian.*

* See *Originals and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, part ii. pp. 150-176 (Chaucer Society).

That he did repeat the story to his friend we learn from the Clerk of Oxenford's Prologue to his tale in the *Canterbury Tales*, where he says :—

> "I wil yow telle a tale, which that I
> Lerned at Padowe of a worthy clerk,
> As provyd by his wordes and his werk.
> He is now deed, and nayled in his chest,
> Now God yive his soule wel good rest!
> Fraunces Petrark, the laureat poete,
> Highte this clerk, whos rethorique swete
> Enlumynd al Ytail of poetrie."

There has been much controversy over these words. We must all wish to believe that Chaucer met Petrarch at Padua and was friendly with him; but although it is highly probable that he did so we have no actual evidence other than this passage. Some say that Chaucer is not speaking here in his own name but in that of a fictitious character, and therefore the statement goes for nothing. Another objection is that here Chaucer's indebtedness to Boccaccio is overlooked and all the credit is given to Petrarch. It is highly probable however that Chaucer was interested in the story from Petrarch's talk, and that when he decided to make it one of his Canterbury Tales he adapted it from Petrarch's translation of Boccaccio, which is referred to farther on in the Prologue :—

> "I say that he first with heigh stole enditeth
> (Er he the body of his tale writith)

> A proheme, in the which descrivith he
> Piemounde, and of Saluces the contre,
> And spekith of Appenyne the hulles hye,
> That ben the boundes of al west Lombardye."

That this is the true origin of the Clerk's tale is confirmed by the fact that Petrarch varied somewhat from Boccaccio's original, and in these variations Chaucer follows Petrarch. An impossible tale such as this requires all the art of the true poet to make it delightful to us, and this of course we have in Chaucer. It is far different when we come to read the common-place prose of the chap-book or the equally common-place verse of the ballad-monger.

The picture of patience carried to the extreme in the wife and of brutal violence in the husband is so out of harmony with our present views that it is somewhat difficult to read the story with patience. We are wrong, however, in taking it in this spirit, and Professor Hales has so beautifully expressed the true motive of this mediæval picture that I feel I cannot do better than transfer to these pages his remarks in the publication of the Chaucer Society containing *Originals and Analogues of some of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*:*—" Now, it is the characteristic of the unsophisticated mediæval litterateur that he deals with one idea at a time. It would often lead to a highly injurious conclusion to attach at all equal a moral importance or rather any moral importance to the subordinate parts of what he sets

* Part ii, 1875, p. 174.

forth. The central lesson is kept well in view; the others must look to themselves. The principal figure is brought into relief with enthusiasm; on the mere surroundings and background little or no care is spent . . . . . And so in the story of Griselda: if we would read it in the spirit of the day when it became current we should not vex ourselves into any righteous indignation against the immediate author of her most touching distresses. The old story does not make the marquis a monster in human shape; indeed, it represents him as a man of a noble and lovable nature; if he is not so, then even in the end Griselda reaps no earthly reward in permanently securing his admiration and love. And yet this marquis perpetrates inexpressible cruelties; he is a very wolf, ruthlessly teasing and tearing the gentlest of lambs. The explanation is in accordance with what has just been said: the patience of Griselda is the one theme of the tale, and nothing else is to be regarded. In relation to her the marquis has no moral being; he is a mere means of showing forth her supreme excellence; a mere mechanical expedient. He is no more morally than a thorn in the saint's footpath, or a wheel, or a cross. Surely it is vain to be wroth with him. Who rages against the mere fire that enfolds the martyr, or the nails that pierce the hands of a crucified Believer? Indeed, nothing in the tale is of any ethical moment but the carriage of the heroine herself. The eyes and the heart of the old century when she first appeared were fastened devoutly on that single form, and let all else go by. She is

wifely obedience itself, nothing else. Before that virtue all other virtues bow. It enjoys a complete monopoly, an absolute sway. Other moral life is suspended in this representation of it. She has but one function; for her there is but one sin possible, and that is to murmur. She is all meekness, all yielding, all resignation.

"Such a figure has comparatively few charms for us of these latter days. But it pleased the world once—even down to Shakespeare's time, who himself portrayed it in one of his earliest plays: Catherine in the *Taming of the Shrew* is a phase of Griselda. Perhaps in ages when much most ignorant abuse of women prevailed in literature—abuse springing mainly out of the vile prejudices and superstitions of the mediæval Church—some such figure might have been expected to arise. It is the figure of a reaction. The hearts of men refused to accept the dishonouring pictures so often drawn of their fellow mortals. They rose in a loyal insurrection against lying fables of essential wantonness and of shameful obstinacy. To such chivalrous rebels the pale, sad, constant face of Griselda showed itself as the image of far other experiences and histories; and they gazed on it as on the face of their saint. With an infinite reverence they saw her still calm and quiet in the midst of anguishes, with heart breaking but lips uttering no ill word, with eyes that through the tears with which kindly nature of herself would relieve the terrible drought of sorrow still looked nothing but inalienable tenderness and love."