



Courtly Constraints: Clothing, Gifts and Honour in Medieval Romance

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Supervisor: Dr. Derrick Higginbotham
University of Cape Town

Laura Barnard
BRNLAU014

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Abstract

By investigating three texts, namely Chrétien de Troyes' *Erec and Enide*, Geoffrey Chaucer's "Clerk's Tale", and the anonymous *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, I seek to demonstrate how clothing, honour, gender and gifts shape the experiences of the characters as they find their social place, and disrupt the body as a category on which to base nobility. Although my texts emerge from different social and historical circumstances, the clothing they depict represents similar social transactions of class, gender and honour in the courtly space: ladies are made suitable for marriage through dresses, and a knight is forced to come to terms with the fallibility of his honour through his armour and a girdle. Vital to my investigation is the category of the body, on which Medieval theories of class and virtue were based. Clothing that is frequently used as a constituting symbol of acceptable bodies proves fallible; Enide and Griselda take up royal robes and positions unsuited to their humble origins, and Gawain cannot maintain his honourable manhood when faced with the lure of the life-saving girdle. The characters' divergence from the norms of symbolic representation through clothing alienates the performance of honour from the body, thereby destabilizing bodily superiority (nobility) as a basis for social elevation. Enide and Griselda change their clothing and their social position, but neither woman's translation alters their core characteristics of virtue and goodness. Clothing is physically removable from the body, which poses a challenge for a society so invested in its representative and symbolic power. My investment in clothing as it relates to 'correct' social performance relies on the disjuncture between the characters' natural embodiment of honour and the clothing they receive as gifts. The obligatory reciprocation of gifts takes on the nature of economic transactions, linking clothing to gendered expectations of honour and virtue. Throughout these texts, changeable clothing, whether received as a gift, put on or taken off, demonstrates the heightened attention paid to the rapidly-changing social structure of commercialising society in the high- to late-Medieval era. Removable and improvable, clothing disrupted concepts of class and gender, allowing for greater social freedom in the courtly space.

Introduction

We need to understand the animatedness of clothes, their ability to ‘pick up’ subjects, to mould and shape them both physically and socially, to constitute subjects through their power as material memories.

(Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass 2)

While people often claim that clothing plays no role in our judgement of others, those same people—almost everyone—make inferences based on clothing, inferences about gender, class, culture, ethnicity, and so on. If someone wishes to demonstrate high socio-economic status, the individual may choose to wear an expensive suit by Armani or carry a handbag by Louis Vuitton; those around them can read these social signals and relate to them accordingly. If the designer item in question is a knock-off, the public perception of its user/wearer can change. My argument over the course of this project is that the clothing worn by certain characters in the texts I am reading expresses their struggle for a place in society as they navigate class conflict, gender struggle, and the work of maintaining honour; clothing, to put it more generally, is a means by which characters read each other and readers read characters. I engage with three medieval texts arising from quite different social and historical circumstances, namely *Erec and Enide*, “The Clerk’s Tale” and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and I find that they use clothing in similar ways to articulate class, gender, and honour within their social spheres.

Today, good clothing can be worth a significant amount of money, but in precapitalist society, clothing was much more valuable. The sheer monetary value of clothing (particularly given as a gift) made it significant, even inheritable property, especially since no institutions like banks were available to store wealth.¹ The clothing mentioned in my chosen texts takes on the deeper meaning of a social transaction: the characters exchange clothing for marriage and sexual access, rendering particular gender relationships explicit and linking them to honour. The exchanged dresses and girdle in the texts contribute to the embodied representation of particular social roles in terms of class. My interest in clothing arises from its intimate relationship with the body and its inevitable political significance. I argue that while clothing may be used to cover, shape, and show

¹ E. Jane Burns makes the observation in her book *Courtly Love Undressed: Reading through Clothes in Medieval French Culture* (2014) that garments circulated widely “as a form of monetary exchange among members of both courtly and uncourtly worlds” (27).

off the body in accordance with social norms and expectations, it does not always perform these tasks as expected.

Several critics have paid particular attention to the important social role of clothing in the medieval period, including Andrea Denny-Brown, E. Jane Burns, and Susan Crane. Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, in *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (2000), pay attention to ‘fashion’ as both the noun indicating changing tastes in clothing, and the verb, meaning ‘to make’, thereby drawing attention to the power of clothing to constitute the body and “the social practices through which the body politic was composed” (2). The close symbolism between the body and clothing is also a focus of Denny-Brown’s book, *Fashioning Change: The Trope of Clothing in High- and Late-medieval England* (2012); in it, she investigates the power of changing clothing that can render visible numerous shifting social positions. Rather than clothing indicating and defining the body, as Jones and Stallybrass contend, Denny-Brown states that “*alteration* [of both clothing and general social structure is] one of the enduring structural elements of the medieval experience” (179, emphasis in the original), reflecting the fickle reaction of characters within various texts to changes in clothing.² In a similar vein, Burns’ *Courtly Love Undressed: Reading through Clothes in Medieval French Culture* reads the changeability of clothes as potentially disruptive to the normative social structures: she states that “lavish garments often subvert indications of class and rank they are designed to enforce, and luxury dress transgresses the gender boundaries it is presumed to uphold” (3). Her intervention in the field is to read clothing’s function as culturally *and* bodily powerful, generating “sartorial bodies” spaced along a “gendered sartorial continuum” rather than “discrete, naturally sexed bodies” (Burns 13-15). Crane, in turn, highlights sumptuary regulation common in Europe from the late thirteenth century as it combined “conservative resistance to social climbing with a more pragmatic awareness” of the social significance of dress in an increasingly-mobile society (11). My investigation into clothing adds a new dimension to these insights by framing gifts of clothing as economic and social transactions governing gender, honour, and class fluidity. My investment in clothing as it relates to ‘correct’ social performance relies on the disjuncture between the characters’ supposed natural embodiment of honour and the clothing they are given. I argue that the gifts of clothing do not *transform* as much as *expose* the wearers’ inherent qualities and personalities, returning to the fraught natural body as the site of social meanings pertaining to gender and class.

² Denny-Brown also highlights the anthropomorphic ‘Fortune’, whose actions frequently leave the characters differently clothed or stripped to their origins in her paper “Fashioning Change: Wearing Fortune’s Garments in Medieval England” *Philological Quarterly* (2008). By linking ideas of Fortune and Nature, the allegorical articulation of self is related to clothing, wealth, and the body.

During the Middle Ages, people and institutions invested in the category of the body when classifying character and social position. R. Howard Bloch states that marriage and family structure had undergone a “startling transformation” (66) during the eleventh century, including increased attention to the biopolitics of lineage as it related to the fortification of the nobility and land ownership. Michel Foucault’s conceptualisation of biopolitics in *A History of Sexuality Volume 1* defines the crucial role that the body plays in generating and maintaining power structures in a given society, particularly through the discourse of sex. Although Foucault’s theory is based on changing circumstances in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, the texts I engage with demonstrate that the keen interest in the “power over life”—as Foucault puts it—via the body existed much earlier than this (139). Biopolitics in the Middle Ages signifies the ways that authorities discipline and optimize the body so that it expresses noble perfection as well as the control over the further generation of nobles via reproduction (Foucault 139). Foucault states that it is vital “to understand the importance assumed by sex as a political issue” (145), enabling a shift in reading from the individual to society, from gendered relationships between characters to relationships between rulers and subjects. The framework of biopolitics provides an understanding of the medieval era’s stratified class structure, which was based on both land ownership and embodied nobility vis-à-vis lineage, as Dyer observes (72-73). Clothing bridges the divide between wealth and birth, symbolically signifying a consumable materiality and social superiority.

The intimacy of clothing and the body hints at clothing’s potential to enact bodily (or representative) change of character, but this ability is thrown into doubt by the characters of my texts. Sylvia Thrupp and Susan Crane indicate the importance of virtue to nobility because those born noble were supposed to be better than those born into poverty. The supposedly natural quality of nobility—a quality passed through blood—links concepts of superior bodies to superior social graces. Clothing, with its physical and metonymic relationship to the body, ought to articulate the characters’ honourability in accordance with their nobility, expressing this linkage; however, in each of the texts I study, this relationship is troubled or even broken. Through this, the texts question a social order based on birth by disaggregating social virtues from wealth and noble blood, setting the stage for ideologies that can embrace class mobility. Clothing is physically removable from the body, which, as Denny-Brown highlights, poses a challenge for a society so invested in the representative and symbolic power of clothing; bodies and the clothes that covered them were not necessarily related and also not necessarily indicative of particular social or moral performances of self (179). Throughout my investigation, I outline how the characters’ personalities and traits are independent of their clothing, bodily presentation, and social circumstance, which contradicts the social norms of courtly society that imagined a particular

hierarchical world. The dresses worn by Enide in *Erec and Enide* and Griselda in Chaucer's "The Clerk's Tale", and the armour and girdle worn by Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* disrupt the link between the body and honour in different but related ways. The characters' divergence from the norms of symbolic representation through clothing alienates the performance of honour from the body, thereby destabilizing bodily superiority, and thus nobility, as a basis for social pre-eminence.

My first chapter, "Suitably Dressed: Clothing, Gifts and Honour in *Erec and Enide*," addresses the ways that this early Arthurian romance uses clothing as a means of bodily control over the courtly space. The titular characters marry and go on quests, a typical way of attaining honour, but before this, they engage in particular rehearsals of the social order based on class and gender. Enide's noble but impoverished situation means her clothing renders her unsuitable for the rich social setting of the court; Erec ensures that Guinevere re-clothes her in accordance with her new social situation, keeping his bride-to-be dependent on her social betters. The dress as gift operates to increase Enide's honour because she is enabled to move within the courtly sphere. Through the new clothing, Enide is able to take up an empowered position at court suited to her virtue and noble birth. However, it does little to enact any real change on her body or virtue, altering only the public appreciation of her body. The clothing itself does nothing to increase her inherent suitability for her new role, aside from altering public perception of her wealth, indicating that virtue and honour, particularly a socially embodied form of virtue and honour, are more important than material wealth as a foundation for successful rulership. This narrative then confirms a particular vision of the noble body.

The story of Griselda in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* also engages with her inherent virtue as this helps her to succeed in her elevated position as a ruler; by relating the tale of the poor, virtuous peasant-turned-marchioness, the Clerk highlights *gentillesse* above birth or wealth as valuable to rulership. This differentiates it from Chrétien's tale, in which birth is a required condition for rulership. This point suggests that the critique of the power structures at court seems to have deepened in the years between Chrétien and Chaucer, likely because of the impact of commercial growth after the consequences of the plague in the middle of the fourteenth century. As in the first text, the main character in "The Clerk's Tale" is re-clothed in preparation for her marriage to a noble ruler. Walter chooses to marry across class lines, which explicitly draws attention to the social graces and virtues expected of rulers and peasants respectively. Griselda's change of clothes highlights and exposes her steady virtue, decoupling virtue from the body, from class, and even from wealth. This radical formulation proposes a power structure based on social

virtues rather than nobility and inherited wealth, implying the possibility of shifting the locus of power from the world of the nobility to the middling ranks.

Virtue is a key feature of a good knight's identity, and my final chapter focuses on the knotty problems faced by Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as he attempts to confirm his masculine identity in court. Gawain's armour and its symbolism operate to construe (and constrict) him as the perfect knight, complete with inalienable virtue and honour. His adventures with the Green Knight—Lord Bertilak and his wife—threaten to damage this highly honourable presentation of self. Ultimately, he accepts the gift of a girdle in an attempt to preserve his own life: as much as Enide and Griselda's dresses ennoble them, the girdle dishonours and shames Gawain. Honour as a social virtue is at the heart of this text; Gawain's actions and the constraints placed on him by courtly society indicate the difficulty (if not impossibility) of a man maintaining his honour. Gawain exposes himself to dishonour by accepting the girdle to save his life, showing that his fallible honour is directly linked to his body and exposed through his clothing. Gawain's hypermasculine perfection gives way to his will to live as he navigates an impossible contradiction between different codes of chivalrous behaviour. If virtue is lost through attempts to maintain the body and to sustain life, the court would be full of less-honourable-but-still-living characters and be forever mourning the loss of the virtuous dead. Gawain's struggle with honour as dramatised through the girdle thus complicates the status of *virtue* as an indicator of social acceptability in courtly society.

As can be seen in the three texts, gifts play an important role in articulating and expressing the characters' honour. Marcel Mauss' investigation into the anthropological valence of the gift highlights the possibility of the gift as a form of economic transaction in which balance is often difficult to achieve (30). Between "the obligation to give presents and the obligation to receive them" (Mauss 10), significant space opens up for gifts to reflect social standing and honour. Moreover, between debts of gratitude and contracts allowing for sexual access, the gift of valuable clothing frequently requires the receiver's deft navigation of a highly gendered social order. The honour of female characters is usually dependent on their performance of a particular version of femininity: submitting to their husbands. The wedding gifts of dresses given to Enide and Griselda oblige them to fulfil the role of wife, and offer sexual access to their bodies in exchange for honourable status. Women may be gifted themselves in a society that objectifies the female body for trade between men, as Gayle Rubin has argued, but these same women may also receive gifts; gifting is thus a complex and nuanced process. Gawain, on the other hand, resists receiving a gift he cannot reciprocate, which might render him further duty-bound to his host's wife. The

obligatory reciprocation of gifts takes on the nature of an economic transaction, linking clothing to gendered expectations of honour and virtue within the courtly world. Griselda and Enide must 'pay' for their opportunities with sex, along with the implied production of heirs, and Gawain must perform quests, thus earning his keep and his honour. In the cases of Enide and Griselda, the versions of femininity they play disrupt the expectations of submissive virtue associated with good wives. While the dresses they receive actually do very little to change them, this clothing exposes their honour, ultimately troubling the staid and limiting courtly regulation of gender and class in distinctive ways. Gawain, on the other hand, enables readers to grasp that while honour may be an assumed virtue for knights, playing it out in reality is frequently very difficult. His personage is pushed in different directions by his armour and the girdle: towards honourable presentation and virtuous embodiment with one and towards servitude and shame with the other.

Throughout this project, I demonstrate how clothing, honour, gender, and gifts shape the experiences of characters as they find their social place and disrupt the body as a category on which to base noble identity. To put it differently, the social implications of the characters' changing clothing challenge expectations of courtly constraints based on either gender or class, ultimately pointing to broader social dislocations generated by the commercial transformation of the fourteenth century. Because of Enide's noble birth, her social mobility is not as drastic as Griselda's, nor as socially troublesome as Gawain's frustrated honour, indicating the strengthening sense of social dislocation in the fourteenth century texts when compared with Chrétien's twelfth-century text. Enide, Griselda and Gawain, though, must all weigh up the gift transactions they are offered, and choose how best to develop agency in a courtly environment designed to limit and constrain them. Clothing becomes so much more than just a covering of the body: for the characters in the three texts, clothing becomes an articulation and transaction of power.

The question of who is fit to rule still unsettles us today. While noble birth is no longer a defining factor in most countries, honour is still a key indicator of a candidate's suitability to assume a position of power. Medieval romance devotes significant time to the topic of honour, emphasising particular gender and socioeconomic power dynamics. In Chrétien de Troyes' *Erec and Enide*, issues of class and gender intermingle in representations of both physical appearance and gifts of clothing in the poem to express how both shape characters' social standing and honour. Ultimately, I argue these material indicators of wealth are shown to be less important than the characters' virtue and actions to distinguish them in the courtly arena, which points to how Chrétien's poem poses a quiet challenge to a static social structure based on birth.

Erec and Enide, written in the late twelfth century—around 1170—focuses on the main characters' marriage, a significant institution for controlling and determining hereditary nobility and honour. According to the French historian Georges Duby, the role of marriage in the eleventh century was to “ensure that a stock of possessions, reputation and honour was handed down intact, and to guarantee the lineage a position, a ‘rank’, which was at least equal to that enjoyed by previous generations” (*Love and Marriage in the Middle Ages*, 7).³ *Erec and Enide*, written almost a century later, articulates anxiety about these issues in its insistence on Enide's nobility, and through the characters' definition of the courtly space as appropriate only for certain figures. The text explores the actions of an honourable knight, Erec, who is a prince and in line to the throne of Lac. His encounter with Enide and her impoverished family on one of his adventures leads to the marriage of Erec and Enide, but only after Enide has been enabled to join the courtly space through expensive gifts of clothing that authorise her presence. The characters' further adventures in their marriage establish them as honourable due to their virtuous actions, showing that the intrigue surrounding the clothing and gifts is actually a smokescreen, diverting attention from a central political issue in the poem: their natural virtue.

Using *Erec and Enide* as an example, the text discusses marriage as a social and economic transaction during the twelfth century: the production of heirs, trading property (dowries, damsels and dominions) and honour are all aspects affected by marriage, pointing to its power as

³ Another of Duby's books, *Medieval Marriage*, lays out the conflict between liturgical and secular marriages during the twelfth century and explores how marriage shaped and was shaped by the social space of the noble's house. In this way, his argument about lineage and social structures is similar to that made by R. Howard Bloch, but the latter's focus is also how these features of society are reflected in the grammar of the time.

socioeconomically transformative.⁴ During this period, there was a “conscious blending of moral, economic, and political considerations” (Thrupp 15) in the formation of a marriage and these come to the fore in the text. The liaison of Erec and Enide underscores the link of marriage to honour and social position, but their union is also full of economic oddities: Enide enters into a honourable marriage without a dowry, and this problem must be resolved in order to maintain social norms. Enide’s lack of a conventional dowry is important because it opens the relationship up to interference from outside sources such as Guinevere, and has an impact on the structure of authority within the marriage. Throughout the text, Enide is kept in a state of disempowerment and dependence on those around her because she lacks her own wealth, solidifying a traditional and patriarchal hierarchy between wife and husband.

There are two key aspects, namely clothing and gifts, that form the crux of my investigation of social status and public presentation in this text, and I aim to show that the marriage of Erec and Enide uses these objects and this practice to define the terms of honour. As Margaret Burrell points out, the naming of both characters in the text’s title indicates that this romance must be read with a focus on both, and attention must be paid to their marriage and thus their interaction (7). First, I will investigate how clothing as a form of embodiment distinguishes particular characters as honourable by focussing on Enide’s physical appearance and her changing clothing, which is altered based on context.⁵ Erec chooses to keep Enide in her original ragged garments until the queen is able to present her with a more suitable dress; this moment of re-clothing and the gifting of the dress will be the second major investigation of this chapter. In short, the text uses clothing to indicate which characters are honourable because the clothes they wear supposedly represent their bodily respectability and place in society; clothing given as gifts also alters the character’s respectability in social terms. Ultimately though, while the clothing and gifts *seem* to represent the characters’ honourability, they can still be altered or removed; for Erec and Enide, honour is shown as a product of virtue in action, rather than of trappings of wealth. Even though it is his birth-right, it is only after Erec proves himself honourable through action that he can assume the throne of Lac. The implication of this is that nobility tied to wealth or even birth is

⁴ The trading of dowries, damsels and dominions could be viewed as a reflection of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s concepts of alliance theory, as he outlines it in *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949) in which alliances are forged between groups and families due to the exchange of women (as if they were objects/possessions) by marriage. This is also discussed in great detail by Gayle Rubin in her famous article, which critiques Lévi-Strauss, ‘The Traffic in Women: Notes on the “Political Economy” of Sex’.

⁵ Andrea Denny-Brown’s book, *Fashioning Change: The Trope of Clothing in High- and Late-medieval England* (2012), traces how changing clothing influences and is influenced by changing social structures; Enide’s changing dress marks her marriage as a step up in honour and in society as she gains access to the court.

inadequate as a distinction to define honourable rulership; rather action is what defines honour, and this implicit message contains a radical statement in society for whom rulership was generally based on noble heritability of feudal land and riches.

Clothing and Honour

Over and over in medieval texts we find perfectly fair maidens who are morally flawless; the handsomest knight is also the most brave, most courageous, most loyal – in short, simply the best. Therefore, it is disturbing when noble characters are reduced to poverty, and their beautiful appearance degraded.

Monica Wright, 3

Clothing influences how one is perceived by the world, while at the same time having no effect on the body beneath it; in *Erec and Enide*, Enide's physicality is frequently discussed, and ultimately changed to agree with her honourable birth and marriage. Her appearance is mediated by those around her from her initial impoverished clothing to the queen's gift of a dress that confirms her nobility. She first appears as a member of the poor vavasour's household, where her clothing indicates her poverty. The vavasour's daughter remains nameless for quite some time and is initially described purely in terms of her physical appearance:

La dame s'an est hors issue
et sa fille, qui fu vestue
d'une chemise par panz lee,
delïee, blanche et ridee;
un blanc cheinse ot vestu desus,
n'avoit robe ne mains ne plus,
et tant estoit li chainses viez
que as costez estoit perciez:
povre estoit la robe dehors,
mes desoz estoit biax li cors.
Molt estoit la pucele gente,
car tote i ot mise s'antante
Nature qui fete l'avoit;

“[The vavasour's wife] came out as did her daughter, who was dressed in a flowing shift of fine cloth, white and pleated. Over it she wore a white dress; she had no other clothes. And the dress was so old that it was worn through at the elbows. On the outside the clothing was poor, but the body beneath it was lovely. The maiden was very beautiful, for Nature in making her had turned all her attention to the task. Nature herself had marvelled more than five hundred times at how she had been able to make such a beautiful thing just once, for since then, strive as she might, she had never been able to duplicate in any way her original model.” (page 42)

ele meïsmes s'an estoit
plus de .v^c. foiz mervelliee
coant une sole foïee
tant bele chose fere pot;
car puis tant pener ne se pot
qu'ele poïst son essanplaire
an nule guise contrefaire. 401-420)

This passage indicates significant dissonance between the Enide's body and her clothing. The push-and-pull is awkward: the fabric itself is fine, but the dress is old, but even so, it covers a beautiful body, one that is beautiful by Nature's hand. According to Claude Luttrell, this is an indication that the family's "poverty is of condition, not quality" (19) because Enide's father is noble but lost his money in the crusades, causing his family's fall into poverty. This description subtly communicates a conservative vision of social rank: born noble, Enide's honour shines through her shabby clothing since her very body exhibits its noble qualities, its beauty. Enide's presentation in purely physical terms privileges her external appearance above all other information about her, including her name. At this point, the only other information to which the reader has access is her birth—that she is the daughter of a vavasour—but even this fact could be considered a physical detail, given its stress on her lineage. Moreover, the lovely body combined with the whiteness of the cloth could be a reference to the purity and virtue that Enide embodies.⁶ This consideration of Enide's body as it relates to her inner being is made explicit when the poet invokes an allegorical Nature, whose important influence creates in Enide an unrepeatable ideal. Her body in its external beauty and noble birth reflects her internal beauty, her virtue. Because her appearance and spirit are crafted by nature, they are inherent to her, and cannot be changed by external means, emphasising the initial and continuing perfection of Enide despite her less-than-beautiful clothing. Chaucer, as I will argue in chapter two, appears to echo this logic in "The Clerk's Tale" in his representation of Griselda.

Nature is given a large amount of credit for the bodily aspects of Enide's beauty, which fits with conservative theories of class and virtue: Enide's lineage predisposes her to have good social

⁶ This is reminiscent of E. Jane Burns' concept of sartorial bodies in her book, *Courtly Love Undressed: reading through clothes in Medieval French Culture*. Enide's body and the clothes that cover it constitute one such very symbolic sartorial body.

qualities, and therefore she is suited to be part of the noble class. Enide is almost philosophically beautiful, which can be seen in the following quotation:

Que diroie de sa biauté?
Ce fu cele por verité “What should I say of her beauty? She was truly one
qui fu fete por esgarder, who was made to be looked at, for one might gaze at
qu’an se poïst an li mirer her just as one gazes into a mirror” (42).
ausi com an un mireor. (437-441)

Enide’s captivating beauty is the source of rhetorical questions but also of telling observations: the narrator identifies with Enide through the use of the mirror imagery, because one sees oneself in a mirror, and this might indicate that the narrator considers himself in a similar position to Enide in various ways, including her marginalisation and lack of agency throughout most of the text or her impoverished and therefore dependent state. Possibly, Chrétien de Troyes felt as if he were a marginal member of the court because of his social status: as a poet, he remained dependent on the nobility for patronage and this dependence made him a subordinate. Whatever the implications of this section for the poet, Enide’s physical beauty beneath the ragged clothing is important because it indicates that she has an inherently noble nature, which is fitting to the social position that she eventually attains. The clothing is removable, and therefore her poverty-stricken condition is remediable, so it is important that her body itself is suited to the change she will undergo.

The decision to keep Enide in her threadbare clothing after her marriage to Erec maintains the gendered power dynamic between her and her new husband by keeping her in a vulnerable and ‘unpresentable’ state. Erec states that he wants her to stay in her old dress until the queen can “de la soe robe demainne,/ qui est de soie tainte an grainne” (35-36) [“clothe her in one of her very own dresses of scarlet-dyed silk” (54)]; this would enforce once more Enide’s dependence on the actions of others for her place in court. Keeping Enide in her old clothes could do more than just enforce her dependence on her husband, however: by ensuring that it is the queen (not one of Enide’s cousins, for instance) re-clothing her, Erec ensures that Enide brings no valuable dowry at all to the marriage, and her family’s interests are subsequently not represented in their marital finances.⁷ Rather than a dowry from her family, Erec hopes for what essentially becomes a royal dowry, fit for a future queen. Tying into Erec’s ambitions, this closely links his future kingship of Lac with the court of Arthur by a bond via gift between Guinevere and his future wife.

⁷ This action is reminiscent of Chaucer’s “Clerk’s Tale”, in which Griselda also contributes nothing but her old clothing by means of dowry. In that case, though, Griselda leaves even her old clothing behind, coming naked to her marriage.

Like Erec, the vavasour polices his daughter's body; Enide's father guards her physical appearance and social opportunities, to be leveraged for the good of the family. Her father states that "povretez fet mal as plusors" (510) ["poverty ill-treats many men" (43)], and expresses sadness that his daughter has to dress poorly, but he seems unwilling—rather than unable—to change this. He claims he is "ne n'ai poir que je l'amant" (514) ["powerless to change the situation"], but then prevaricates with "Et ne por quant bien fust vestue,/ se ge sofrisse qu'el preïst/ ce que l'an doner li vossist" (518-520) ["she would be well-clothed if I allowed her to accept what someone would gladly give her" (43)]. One such offer is made by Enide's uncle, the count, who "l'eüst vestue bien et bel/ et se li feïst toz ses buens" (521-523) ["would have clothed her handsomely and granted her every wish" (43)]. The vavasour rejects this offer in favour of holding out for a well-born suitor to clothe his daughter and take responsibility for her: he states that many lords would have married her, but he is "atant ancor mellior point,/ que Dex greignor enor li doint,/ que aventure li amaint/ ou roi ou conte qui l'an maint" (529-532) ["still waiting for a better opportunity, for God to grant her greater honour and for fortune to bring her a king or count who will take her away with him" (43)]. While this could be seen to be in Enide's best interests (waiting for the richest husband), there would have been no guarantee that such a good match would have been possible considering the family's poverty.⁸ Although this sort of parental control over marriage in order to ensure the continuation of the line is conventional, the vavasour seems to have rejected what would be comparatively good matches for his daughter in order to wait for a suitor representing a significant social upgrade for Enide (and implicitly, her family as well). For the family, this gamble is dangerous because if no rich and suitable match came along, they would be bound to their poverty for another generation. Enide's marriage is thus the focus of considerable effort to ensure the family's economic well-being into the future.

Enide's body indicates her virtue as it relates to her beauty and lineage, even as her clothing represents this natural virtue: although it is less than beautiful clothing, it only confirms her embodiment of nobility. The aspects of Enide's physicality as they are articulated by her lovely body are at odds with the threadbare dress, meaning she must change to be better suited to her new, elevated position. The poverty of the clothing presents an opportunity for Erec to exercise his social superiority over his wife by choosing the circumstance of her re-clothing.⁹ Erec's

⁸ Again, this reflects Levi-Strauss's alliance theory; the vavasour is able to exchange his daughter for significant land and cement a social link with a prince through his 'gift' of his daughter.

⁹ This use of the female character in a courtly story calls to mind the courtly lady as described by E. Jane Burns: "constructed by cultural forces that fix and limit her as an object used to promote the amorous desires, literary aspirations, moral improvement, marital superiority, social mobility, or psychic fantasy of men" ("Courtly Love: Who Needs It?" 35).

intention is not necessarily to shame his wife by presenting her in her old dress, but he is intent on favouring particular avenues of social improvement in the form of royal gifts from Guinevere as a means of authorising his bride's presence at court.

Clothing and Gifts

During the pre-capitalist era, the gift may have had even more social weight and implications than it does today. Marcel Mauss' investigation into the anthropological valence of the gift highlights the possibility of the gift as a form of economic transaction in which equilibrium is often difficult to achieve (30). The marriage transaction between Erec and Enide's father concerns the nature of the gift (in this case, Enide herself), demonstrating the many possible positions of women, as both gifts and recipients. The social power of gifts to authorise social place is also a key focus of this section, especially in terms of how the gift from Guinevere affects Erec's place at court.

The practise of gift-giving is certainly very culturally rich and is frequently gendered; as Mark Osteen puts it, there is often an "affiliation of gift and gender" (19) in history, based on women's positions as both recipients of gifts and as gifts themselves within the institution of marriage.¹⁰ Although Enide's financial outlook is initially bleak, she is still praised as a valuable gift. Erec and the count discuss the value of Enide as a gift, balancing her against appropriate recognition of honour. Erec declines the count's offer of accommodation on the grounds of "ne lasserai mon oste enuit,/ qui molt m'a grant enorm mostree,/ quant il sa fille m'a donee" (264-1266) ["not wanting to abandon [his] host, who showed [him] such great honour when he gave [him] his daughter"], which praises the act of giving. He goes on to objectify Enide by asking the count "Don n'est biax et riches cist dons?" (1268) ["Isn't this gift exquisite and priceless?" (53)]. By reducing Enide to the status of a valuable and beautiful gift, he is able to trade for her with her father, and she is denied any say in the marriage; this lack of agency combines with his later insistence that she cannot wear better clothing, marking the ways that he dominates her through the institution of marriage.

Erec and Guinevere are comparatively empowered by Enide's shabby appearance since her presence at court is based on their kindness and generosity rather than on her lineage and beauty.

¹⁰ This is also discussed by Gayle Rubin at length in her work, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex".

Through her old clothing, Enide is made vulnerable to the authority of those in more secure social positions such as the Queen and Erec, demonstrating that the court judges her based on her embodied goodness, particularly her virtue, rather than the material signifiers of wealth like clothing. It also parades Erec's nobility that he is able to instigate such charity while on his knightly adventures, ensuring his honour increases through this performance of virtue. The process here is similar to the marriage of Walter and Griselda in Chaucer's "The Clerk's Tale", which I focus on in chapter two, because the bride-to-be is presented publically in unsuitable clothing, and in both instances, the husbands vouch for her virtue and supply her with new clothing, confirming that goodness.

The gifted tunic from Guinevere is tailored to fit the queen, indicating an equality between the female characters' bodies, and therefore of their virtue, nobility, and place at court. The gifted dress is a(n) "boene et bele,/ tot or androit, fresche et novele" (1565-1566) ["elegant and beautiful, brand-new one" (57)], and operates in two ways: firstly, as I have noted, it makes her presentable in court, and secondly, it enriches her to the extent that her place in court cannot be debated any longer. The brand-new dress is worth a considerable sum of money, and the narrator describes it in extensive detail, from its material ("rich green cloth") to the decorations adorning it. The poet states that it is "plus de .II^c. mars d'or batu;/ et pierres de molt grant vertu" (1579-1580) ["more than two hundred marks of beaten gold, and gems of great presence" (57)] in its construction. In conjunction with the mantle, which was "worth not a bit less" (57), these two items of clothing represent a significant monetary gift to Enide, showing the queen's blessing and authorising her entrance to the courtly space.¹¹

Enide is reliant on the generosity and acceptance of others in order to join the court, and Erec's insistence that Guinevere re-clothe her raises the stakes of this necessary charity. Enide's ragged appearance is balanced against her noble birth ("D'un povre vavasour est fille" [daughter of a poor vavasour](1539), but the niece of "un genil conte"), stressing that Enide is not a ragged pauper from a lower social class but a noblewoman whose family's lack of wealth places her outside the court. Enide's dowry-less state means that their marriage did not adhere to the economic systems of exchange for the time, but the gift enriches her sufficiently to participate in the marriage. That Guinevere provides this wealth certainly indicates her approval because she has, in essence, given Enide a dowry as a family member would. Through the gift, Enide joins the court and

¹¹ Similar attention to the details of a garment can be found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* when the poet describes Gawain's valuable and beautiful armour and develops its symbolism. The ill-fated/ill-fating girdle is also described in detail, but is significant more for its life-saving qualities than for its economic value. Interestingly enough, Chaucer and his narrator, the Clerk do little to furnish similar details about Griselda's new clothing, despite its centrality to the story.

becomes, in a way, an adopted member of Guinevere's family. This rich gift from the queen may be read as establishing a close bond between the women; Guinevere's actions serve to authorise, protect, and perfect her protégé, ensuring the presence of a companion within the courtly space.

Erec's request for one of Guinevere's own dresses for his bride shows that he means to equate her body to Enide's, a politically dangerous action. Erec is a prince in line to the throne of Lac, meaning his wife would be a queen one day. Erec's insistence that it should be Guinevere's dress covering his wife's body could indicate to those gathered in the court that Enide's husband-to-be recognises his place as a prince and he seeks to fill that role. Requesting the gift becomes a power play on Erec's part, designed to remind those surrounding him that he will be a king like Arthur. Because the dress equates the bodies of Enide and Guinevere, there is an inkling of treason in this request: it could signify his desire to compete with the king for power. From this point onwards, Erec is a future king, rather than a subordinate knight: a subtle shift in his own honour and in the court's social order, brought about by clothing.

Enide's shift between her ragged old garment and her regal gift accentuates the features that make her naturally suited to her new role in the court. Up to this point, Enide has not objected to her clothing in any way, but gladly changes into Guinevere's new dress in order to gain public acceptance. Her old dress, a sign of her previous poverty, seems to mean little to her, as can be seen in the following quotation: "lors a son chainse desvestu,/ quant ele an la chanbre fu" (1625-1626) ["she removed her old dress, for she no longer cared a straw for it" (58)]. Her change of situation seems to have provoked a change of heart in Enide: she *no longer* cared for the old dress, which is interesting because her attention to appearance is directly linked to her exposure in court. She puts on the new garment, and the poet duly reports a change in her appearance: "Or n'ot mie la chiere enuble,/ car la robe tant li avint/ que plus bele asez an devint" (1632-1634) ["she looked far from dispirited for this attire suited her so well that she became even more beautiful" (58)]. The new clothing supposedly increases her beauty, making her even more suitable for Erec to marry. Once again, the poem links this suitability to Enide's physicality, which can also be seen when the queen welcomes her after she has changed her clothing. The poet notes that Guinevere welcomes her "warmly", and that "por ce l'ama et molt li plot/ qu'ele estoit bele et bien aprise" (1656-1657) ["she loved her and was pleased with her because she was beautiful and well-bred" (58)]. Because it can be understood that Guinevere has given the dress as a substitute dowry for Enide, the love and warmth becomes a 'natural' familial reaction: considering the careful attention throughout the poem to the physicality and natural quality of nobility, this is a strong endorsement. The new dress merely emphasises those features of Enide's physicality (and implicitly her

personality, conduct, and virtue) that fit her for the court. After her acceptance in the courtly space, Enide is praised widely for both physical and non-physical attributes; while her beauty remains a prominent focus of the descriptions, she appears to be “tant fu gentix et enorable,/ de saiges diz et acointable,/ de bon ere et de boen atret” (2413-2415) [“noble and honourable, wise and gracious in her speech, well-bred and of pleasant company” (67)]. In the new space, and with the opportunity given to her of increased riches, she is able to become the ideal woman, and indeed, a suitable queen for Erec.¹²

Honour and Marriage

Erec and Enide’s marital honour is dependent on external appearance and negotiated through the giving of gifts. Interestingly, this process governs Erec as much as it does his wife. As much as Enide’s acceptance at court depends on a particular performance of wealthy, noble femininity, Erec is constrained to maintain his honour as a knight in keeping with the codes of chivalry. When he fails to do so, his loss of honour is felt keenly by his wife, catalysing the remainder of the plot to action. Since Erec is a prince in line for the throne of Lac, he is not a ‘normal’ knight, solely dependent on quests to achieve his honour. In fact, it could be argued that his attempts at errant knighthood are out of place and inappropriate for a prince (Shippey 244). T.A. Shippey makes allowance for Erec to seek adventure by acknowledging that the “seeming irresponsibility (even in kings) is itself based on an awareness that stasis in realms or relationships can only be maintained by effort, action and reconquest” (245); in other words, in order to maintain a level of honour, or a kingdom’s peace, those who wish to maintain the status quo have to strive or even fight to keep it. A knight’s social position was generally derived from his actions that informed his reputation and maintained his honour, but in the case of Erec, his honour should derive primarily from his nobility of birth. According to Georges Duby, ideals of courtly love were generally understood as restricted to younger sons and unmarried men who needed to improve their social standing through acts of bravery (*Love and Marriage* 57), which would not be needed for a prince, except if he were unsure of his own honour. Erec’s drive for action and re-conquest (particularly of his wife) indicates that he struggles with his social position and the nature of his honour, a theme that also occurs in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* when Gawain struggles to maintain flawless honour in his encounters with the Green Knight and his host’s wife. Shippey

¹² Once again, this is similar to Griselda, who was re-clothed and instantly was perceived to be both more beautiful and more virtuous (and suited to rule).

indicates that “Erec is slowly mounting a ladder of adventures which increase his parallelism with Arthur” (243), and this provides insight into Erec’s potential motivation. His ambition to become king is at odds with his place at Arthur’s court as a subservient knight; this position appears to rankle him, hence the perpetual attempts to improve himself by means of both marriage and adventure.

The identification of marriage as a form of honour is based to some extent on the nature of the relationship during this period: marriage was a means to ensure the continuation of the family line and reputation, a means of joining adult society. Shannon McSheffrey writes at length about the link between honour and respectability in marriage and the appropriate sexual conduct within that marriage (176), and this is the root of the problems that creep into Erec and Enide’s relationship. As has been emphasised, marriage is an opportunity for Enide to better her social standing and improve her honour; unfortunately for Erec, the same cannot be said of his honour through this marriage, as the second part of the poem reveals. Erec’s honour is at risk because he neglects his chivalry in favour of enjoying his wife. Ironically, the association of honour with clothing is reflected even in this: Enide’s honour and clothing improves with her marriage, and the cause of Erec’s dishonour is that he spends all day naked and in bed, rather than dressed in his armour.¹³ Enide is concerned that she is the cause of his loss of honour: she expresses worry that his obsession and (over-)involvement with her is detrimental to his honour, and ultimately, this galvanises him into action. She tells her husband of his diminishing honour, and this critique is the direct cause for the adventures in the second half of the text. Enide’s moment of significant agency, then, can be understood as her way of enforcing gendered norms; she is not radically declaring her freedom from her weak husband, just kicking him out of bed so that she is not eternally bound to his fading honour.

Erec seems ‘too much in love’ to perform his role as husband, let alone knight or prince, which indicates that his marriage has affected not only his honour but also his social role: he, in this state, appears unfit to rule. In order to put this right, he acts to silence his wife and claim back his powerful position as husband and prince. In response to his wife’s chiding and to redress the skewed power dynamics that emerged from it, Erec once more exercises his power over his wife’s public appearance. He instructs that she must “put on [her]most beautiful dress” and ready herself to ride (69), which leads her to think that he will exile her; this demonstrates once more how

¹³ Erec’s honour diminishes while he is in bed; this is paralleled in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in which Gawain must repel his host’s wife’s advances and gifts from the vulnerable position of lying naked (unarmed) in bed. Both knights lose the bodily and social definition of honour when their bodies are no longer constrained by their armour and the quests the armour implies.

Enide's tenuous position at court is reliant on Erec's generosity and inclusion, and that once more she is powerless to even choose her own self-presentation. The text states that she "bien et bel s'est atornee/ de la meillor rob qu'ele ot;/ mes nule chose ne li plot,/ einçois li dut mild enuier" (2608-2611) ["dressed herself becomingly in her best dress, but it gave her no pleasure; rather, it caused her much grief" (69)]. In her initial change of clothing, the new dress permits her greater access to the courtly space, but she perceives this order to change as potentially revoking her place, indicating that she is once more denied power over her situation. Erec orders her to ride ahead in silence, and Enide laments that "m'avoit Dex mise et essuciee,/ or m'a an po d'ore abessiee" (2779-2780) ["God has raised and elevated [her] to great joy; now in such a short time He has abased me" (71)]. The use of clothing in this moment once again empowers Erec and disempowers Enide through the action of changing her physical appearance and ordering her silence. Erec then achieves honour through the events of the Joy of the Court episode. After this, he is worthy enough to be crowned as the King of Lac by Arthur, indicating a healthy social order is once more in place, putting to rest any inklings of sedition; a social order founded by a patriarchal version of marriage.

Conclusion

Through clothing, especially clothing as gifts, *Erec and Enide* dramatizes power dynamics between the characters and the ways that clothing confirms or signifies honour. Virtue is placed in the spotlight because Enide's inherently virtuous body ultimately does not need clothing to render it honourable, which is contrary to what the text initially seems to imply about the changed dress. While at first it appears important that Enide's clothing is appropriate to each setting, her real virtue is in her body, and is not contingent on the new clothing. The story seems torn between affirming the importance of wealth, exemplified by the dress, to illuminate and even create noble honour, and a form of virtue established in an individual body as a key determinant of honour. Erec uses his marriage to Enide—and the gift she receives from Guinevere—as a means to remind the court of his social place as a prince. While it may seem somewhat seditious because his quiet declaration of his status as a prince and a knight involves equating his new wife Enide with Arthur's wife, Guinevere, his identity as a prince means he has a certain amount of honour, and once he has earned this through virtuous actions, he assumes his rightful place as a king under Arthur's authority. This interaction enriches and solidifies a social order reliant on a hierarchy of nobles because it affirms Arthur as preeminent king and indicates a relative social space for his courtiers.

Through their marriage and subsequent actions, Erec and Enide relocate the attention of the readers onto personal characteristics that define gendered forms of honour and away from items of value. Between gifted dresses, changing circumstances and changing social status, *Erec and Enide* proves through paradox that it is the person underneath the clothes that matters, rather than the clothes and the wealth they represent.

Dressing and Stripping: Power, Poverty, and Gender in Chaucer's "Clerk's Tale"

In the late fourteenth century, when Geoffrey Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, commerce had already undergone a transformation and expansion, which disturbed contemporary social structure in complex ways. "The Clerk's Tale", through its attention to clothing, registers the ways that commerce disturbed the social structure by stressing the potential social mobility of characters: the clothes visibly indicate the changing social position of a character based not on birth but on wealth. In the "General Prologue", the Clerk is described as being thin and as wearing a shabby coat, in contrast to his kingly rhetoric as described in the prologue of his tale. This can be seen as a foretaste of efforts to make space for nobility and gentility of spirit coexisting with ragged and impoverished clothing, a theme that is carried through the "Clerk's Tale". The plot of this tale revolves around a rich marquis, Walter, who marries a low-born but virtuous girl, Griselda, and subsequently puts her through a series of trials to gauge her faithfulness. The prologue to the tale states that the Clerk had come across this tale in Francis Petrarch's Latin translation of the tale from Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*.¹⁴ The development and alterations of the plot between Boccaccio and Chaucer focus the tale on the translation of Griselda from one state to another. Just as the tale underwent translation from Italian to English, so Griselda shifts from poverty to riches, from singleness to marriage. All these changes are mirrored in her changing clothing.

As a preparation for her marriage, and as part of the subsequent trials of faithfulness, Walter strips and redresses Griselda as a way to express her social mobility. Andrea Denny-Brown argues that changing clothing—like Griselda's—marked or concealed particular social mobilities between classes or social roles. In contrast to this concentration on mutability, the crux of "The Clerk's Tale" is actually Griselda's constant patience as she bears the torments from Walter. The social mobility and changes in clothing Griselda experiences do not alter her virtuous patience, showing that contemporary conservative theories of class linking character (*gentillesse* in Chaucer's parlance) with physical appearance and circumstance are under pressure in this story.¹⁵ I will argue that the

¹⁴ In the 1370s, Chaucer travelled to Italy to work as a diplomat; it is likely that he may have encountered both *The Decameron* and Petrarch's translation of the Griselda story during this time. Judith Bronfman's book, *Chaucer's Clerk's Tale: The Griselda Story Received, Rewritten, Illustrated* (1994), and N.S. Thompson's *Chaucer, Boccaccio And the Debate of Love: A Comparative Study of The Decameron and The Canterbury Tales* (1996) both indicate the likelihood of Chaucer's having encountered not only Petrarch's translation, but also the vernacular original.

¹⁵ From the Estates Satire in the "General Prologue" of the *Tales* onward, physical appearance is linked to social class, and thus virtue. Throughout the text, *gentillesse* (and accompanying beauty) is often invoked in order to challenge this virtue's "natural" or "inherent" link to the higher social classes. This is particularly clear in "The Wife of Bath's Tale",

exchangeability of Griselda's clothing symbolically disrupts/destabilises social norms relating to the inherent (bodily) nature of nobility, and therefore virtue. The gifts of dresses from Walter to Griselda, moreover, become an economic transaction: Walter is buying access to (and commercialising) Griselda's body through 'gifts' conditional on particular terms of exchange.¹⁶ Griselda's clothing visualises her changing situation, from her impoverished origins to her enriched end, as well as marking several intangible changes, such as her transition from virgin to wife. The story addresses her body through the clothing with which it is covered, while at the same time paradoxically indicating its irrelevance to her constant spirit. By dramatizing her changing situation and emphasising her immutable spirit, Griselda's public strippings and dressings call to attention the importance of virtue to nobility, rather than bloodline (birth) or even wealth (indicated through the clothing). The Clerk displays an unwillingness to allow the link between virtue and nobility to be maintained, meaning this text contests the older economic order based on landed wealth and nobility. I argue that the constant, virtuous spirit displayed by Griselda (regardless of changing situation and wealth) calls into question the 'inherent' superiority of nobles based on wealth in an even more radical manner by suggesting that virtue is wholly separate from either nobility of birth or acquisition of wealth. The dangerous implication of this is that anybody may be suited to rule, and that those who are in power may not necessarily be the best for the job.

Continuing in this vein, I will investigate how the re-clothing episodes explicitly demonstrate power and agency of the characters. When Griselda is stripped before her marriage she has very little agency, but at its supposed dissolution, she undresses herself, claiming a strange agency through the disempowerment. Walter and Griselda's relationship, shown through clothing, is perplexing; the development of Griselda into the strangely empowered newcomer despite her trials further emphasises the importance of virtue to rulership, above all other factors (such as nobility or even wealth).

The tale opens with a biopolitical conflict that would have been understandable to Chaucer's audience: the seeming unwillingness of a nobleman to marry and produce an heir.¹⁷ Walter, the marquis of Saluzzo, resists his subjects' offers to find him a well-born wife, instead choosing the

in which a 'loathly lady' calls into question the inherent gentility of the nobility, and "The Franklin's Tale", in which the characters act with greater *gentillesse* than their class should enable.

¹⁶ Economic and social transactions through gifts point towards the "obligation" of exchange addressed by Marcel Mauss in his *Essay on the Gift*, with the valence of a particular gift relating to a gendered performance in order to secure honour at court, as I argued in chapter one.

¹⁷ Walter frustrates Foucauldian concepts of biopower by being unwilling to reproduce and so ensure the continuation of his line.

impoverished Griselda. The biopolitical concerns of the tale arise out of conceptions of nobility as a natural condition, which Griselda's ennoblement troubles as she moves between an impoverished situation to a noble position and setting. Christopher Dyer identifies the formation, during the eleventh century, of the aristocracy as a social elite based on land ownership, as distinct from the non-land-owning peasants (72-73).¹⁸ Griselda's poor birth is at odds with the ideals of landed nobility acquired through heredity and the supposed virtue which went along with that situation: according to Sylvia Thrupp, nobles were seen as "more sufficient" (*pluis sufficeauntz*), while the poorer citizens were referred to as *de plebis*, or "lower" (15), indicating a "conscious blending of moral, economic, and political considerations" (15) by which society was judged. Susan Crane, in *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (1994) states that during Chaucer's lifetime, the hereditary nature of nobility was under threat from increasing social mobility due to the rise of the rich "mercantile and professional circles [who] were challenging the gentry's traditional dominance" (97). The mercantile "ambition to become a gentleman" (Thrupp 234) was at odds with the linear heritability of bloodlines, creating some allowance for social mobility.¹⁹ *The Canterbury Tales*, specifically "The Clerk's Tale", engages with this anxiety about nobility and virtue as distinct from land and lineage in the face of rising commercialism.

The discomfiting nature of the tale is frequently a starting point for critics, along with the acknowledgement of many interpretations. In its introduction and *envoi*, the tale brings the matter of interpretation and reading into the text itself; this forms the basis for Carolyn Dinshaw's reading of the translation of Griselda as a gendered hermeneutic activity, while Laura Ashe also focuses on the act of reading as key to Griselda's self-framing and decision-making. Critics like N.S. Thompson and Roger Ramsey focus on the possible sources and analogues for "The Clerk's Tale", comparing the sources' attention to different details. Thompson and Judith Bronfman have both investigated possible religious allegories in the actions and attitudes of Griselda and Walter. Several critics, including Ramsey and Kristine Gilmartin Wallace deal with Griselda's clothing as it indicates or obscures identity, which often manifests in the tale as a contradiction between appearance or situation and inner virtue. My intervention in this criticism uses the attention to

¹⁸ R Howard Bloch also explores the shifting dynamics of the noble family in the eleventh century in his book, *Etymologies and Genealogies: A Literary Anthropology of the French Middle Ages* (1986).

¹⁹ Thrupp states that legislation such as sumptuary laws from the later fourteenth century accounted for merchants in the same economic category as landed gentry (237), which indicates that indeed, the line was blurring. It is worth noting that such a categorization would theoretically render the groups visually indistinguishable as they were allowed to wear the same clothing.

Griselda's clothing as a starting point, and will extend to investigate how the gift of rich clothing initiates an economic exchange, destabilizing social norms that define and constrict nobility.

Exchangeability and Clothing

Walter's unorthodox choice of Griselda as a bride threatens the conventions surrounding noble marriage: she has no dowry or political advantage to contribute to the marriage, appearing at least superficially to be unsuitable, and must therefore be changed to fit the ideals. His exogamous marriage threatens to 'dilute' noble blood because any heirs that are generated are not fortified by having two noble parents; Walter is therefore choosing to disperse rather than compound his wealth.²⁰ His radical choice of bride could be interpreted as a threat to the noble order in an era in which nobility was already under pressure from outside sources, like the increasingly powerful merchant class. Walter's actions could be seen as a social experiment, in which the importance of birth is tested; it is not the marriage his subjects imagine for him, and it could be interpreted as a form of retaliation against the pressure Walter feels from them to marry. Lesley Johnson indicates that the reasons that Walter offers in explanation for his actions—the supposed displeasure of his subjects—operate to reinforce the social hierarchy governed by a noble elite (209). In addition to this, Johnson states that "in a paradoxical way, Walter plays the role both of social innovator and arch disbeliever in his own experiment" (207), through his selection of Griselda and his subsequent testing of his wife's faithfulness. Walter's selection of Griselda is also based particularly on her virtue, which in light of conservative theories of class and virtue, could also be seen to trouble the social hierarchy of the time.²¹ As much as Griselda's virtue is the reason for Walter's choice, her wealth and appearance are unsuited to her new position: she must still be physically transformed through the provision of new clothing before she can become his wife.

Griselda needs to be fitted to her new situation in order to be socially accepted, so Walter has a full set of new clothing made for her in anticipation of their marriage, making sure that his bride can look the part. This act demonstrates public concern and judgement of Walter's choice,

²⁰ These anxieties reflect the social changes described by R. Howard Bloch in *Etymologies and Genealogies: A Literary Anthropology of the French Middle Ages* (1984).

²¹ Susan Crane, in *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, indicates this supposed link between virtue and nobility. The theme makes a specific appearance in "The Clerk's Tale", when the guests at Walter's supposed second wedding feast are astonished at Griselda's virtue despite her social status (lines 1020-1022).

but also provides a method whereby Griselda can be made suitable, namely through her literal enrichment. Chaucer relates that:

 this markis hath doon make
 Of gemmes, set in gold and in asure,
 Broches and ringes, for Grisildis sake.
 And of hir clothing took he the mesure
 By a maide lik to her stature,
 And eek of othere ornamentes alle
 That unto swich a wedding sholde fall (253-259).

This passage indicates several noteworthy aspects of the clothing that is part of Griselda's marriage agreement. Firstly, there is significant focus on actual wealth in the form of "gemmes", "broches and ringes" made of gold for the bride: this form of adornment would have represented a significant capital outlay on Walter's part to make the marriage socially acceptable. This can be seen in the following lines: "And eek of othere ornamentes alle/ That unto swich a wedding sholde fall". These lines indicate the link between the ornaments and adornment with the propriety of the wedding: the re-dressing of Griselda's physical situation therefore operates on two particular levels, namely, the cosmetic (ensuring she looks suitable for the courtly space) and the financial (ensuring that she possesses enough wealth to become part of the ruling class). Walter's intent to redress her situation occurs in clothing and in jewellery, as the bride's physical appearance and wealth could be a consideration on which to judge the (im)propriety of the marriage.²² The contrast between Griselda's past life and the royal situation into which she enters can be seen in her first makeover, during which a coronet is placed on her hair which "laye untressed/ ful rudely" (381-2), demonstrating that her acquired nobility is at odds with her rustic origins at the bodily level. E Jane Burns explores the effect clothes can have on a body, from its supposed natural effects to the cultural influence the clothing may have. Griselda's "sartorial body" (Burns, *Courtly Love Undressed* 13) is initially at odds between the rich adornment and poor hairdressing, but ultimately her physicality is 'altered' by the new clothing and adornment because it is rendered more suitable for the courtly space. Her messy hair and the rest of her body is altered through the influence of courtly ladies, which transforms her into a suitable bride for Walter.

²² Bloch also identifies a rising interest in such things as "the mediatory semiotic fields of heraldry" (76) which became gradually more popular after the eleventh century, as a method of articulating rank and nobility through visual appearance and symbols. While Griselda's changing dress is never described in heraldic terms, it is worth bearing in mind the link of lineage and visual appearances. Walter brings Griselda into the courtly space by changing her outward appearance, indicating her new rank and identity to all those who see her. Even though the clothing is not described in enough detail to be representative of specific heraldic meanings, it can be read as a visual symbol of rank and belonging, and may be read as a symbol of 'ownership' by Walter and loyalty from Griselda, closely mirroring court liveries.

The above excerpt also contains a very interesting description of the clothes that Walter intends for his bride: they are made to the measure of a substitute, calling into question the necessity of Griselda in particular to his plan/experiment. Walter's gift is tailored to fit another, which is strongly reminiscent of Guinevere's gift in *Erec and Enide*; in both cases, the ability to substitute one body for another has significant social consequences. In Chrétien's text, Guinevere's gift equates Enide's body to her own body to authorise her presence in court. A different operation is at work in "The Clerk's Tale": when the new clothing is made, it is stated that Walter "took he the mesure/ By a maide lik to her stature" (256-7). Interestingly, this line suggests that one female body can be substituted for another since an unnamed maid stands in for Griselda herself. The use of a substitute to measure the clothing indicates that there may well have been other ladies who could have occupied the position of Walter's wife. As a rich marquis, Walter could have had his choice of woman, whether noble or common. His peculiar choice of Griselda recentres the tale's concern from physicality to the metaphysical: on the one hand, she could have been replaced by any woman who had the same figure as she did (marriage based purely on the physical), but on the other, Walter goes out of his way to select a wife who is virtuous but not noble. This whole process of potential substitution indicates the importance of Griselda's character as a governing factor, and in addition to that, it emphasises that the relationship of character to the body is non-essential. The clothing, tailored to fit one body and supposedly "change" it to be more suitable, is given to a woman whose constancy of spirit is the key feature of the tale, implying that this change is unnecessary.

The clothing prepared for Griselda's wedding also represents a particular transaction conducted through the marriage, namely the exchange of physical items and wealth for non-physical qualities, such as obedience and virginity. There is a key link between the giving of gifts and the marriage taking place, which I have previously explored in Chrétien de Troyes' *Erec and Enide* in which Enide is also re clothed to make her more suitable for marriage. In *Erec and Enide*, Enide is gifted to Erec in exchange for land and allegiance before she herself receives a gift. The gift of a dress that Enide receives from Guinevere is similar to Walter's premarital enrichment of Griselda, and the gift serves a particular social and economic purpose. Working from theorists such as Marx, Engels and Levi-Strauss, Gayle Rubin explores how the 'gift' of women establishes social alliances between the men conducting those exchanges, usually between families and/or clans. Her essay limits the power of women because "to enter into a gift exchange as a partner, one must have something to give. If women are for men to dispose of, they are in no position to give themselves away" (Rubin 175). I have framed the exchange in "The Clerk's Tale" as a trade

between Walter and Griselda, specifically because Janicula submits to Walter's request with no hesitation or bargaining, and Griselda herself is asked if she consents. Griselda is given the voice and agency to engage in the marriage exchange. The gift transaction in "The Clerk's Tale" is a virginity exchange in which Walter gives Griselda a gift for her marriage, offering her the trade of a tangible object—the dress and the wealth it stores—in exchange for her intangible virginity.²³ The implications of the clothing gifts are not explained in such terms as part of their initial marriage agreement, but the importance of the new dresses in reducing Griselda's virginity to a possession to be traded returns later in the text. The marriage of Walter and Griselda is based on an agreement that she must be fully obedient to him in countenance and spirit, for which he rewards her with status and clothing, amounting to wealth. She demonstrates her understanding of this transaction during one of the trials when she says the following:

Ye ben oure lord; dooth with youre owene thing
Right as yow list; axeth no reed of me.
For as I lefte at hom al my clothing,
Whan I first cam to yow, right so,' quod she,
'Lefte I my wil and al my libertee,
And took youre clothing (652-658).²⁴

The last two lines of this interaction indicate that for Griselda, Walter's gift of clothing was in exchange for her free will and liberty. In their book *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (2000), Jones and Stallybrass explore how "clothing was a form of bodily mnemonic, marking the wearer's indebtedness to master or mistress" (11). In wearing his dresses, she is taking up a place in his household. The gift-dress becomes a form of livery indicating her social position, and as such, the position of Walter's wife could be filled by any woman willing to take the payment of clothing for liberty and virginity.

The clothing in the transaction not only buys Griselda's "wil" and "libertee", but it also acts as a down-payment on the production of heirs. This can be seen in Griselda's use of "oure" in this passage, which refers to herself and the children born as a result of the marriage. Walter buys her

²³ Rubin frames this as "marital debts" to be "reckoned in female flesh" (182), presenting a very reduced agency of women to act in the marriage. Because Griselda is vocal in her marriage (particularly at its supposed dissolution), I consider her virginity exchange to be a conscious trade, rather than a debt to be paid.

²⁴ The double meaning of the words "oure lord" as both a reference to Walter and potentially to God indicate the allegorical reading of these characters. The *Tale* is shot through with biblical imagery, from Rebecca and Mary (whose stories refer to wells or drawing water), to Job and his famous patience, and even to Christ, whose stoic response to torture is reflected in Griselda. Several critics, including N.S. Thompson and Judith Bronfman have dealt with the religious allegory of "The Clerk's Tale" in great depth.

virginity with the understanding that she will produce offspring. Her position as his wife is based on the desire of his people for an heir and predicated through the exchange of one property for another: clothing for virginity, which ultimately means clothing for children. Her understanding of this exchange is further apparent in her speech when she is being sent away:

My lord, ye woot that in my fadres place
Ye dide me strepe out of my povre wede,
And richely me cladden of youre grace.
To yow broght I noght ellis, out of drede,
But feith, and nakednesse, and maidenhede.
And here again youre clothing I restore,
And eek youre wedding ring for everemore (862-868).

This excerpt demonstrates clearly the exchange of one thing for another: Griselda states that her “povre wede” were exchanged for rich clothing. She also directly articulates her contribution to the marriage as “feith, and nakednesse, and maidenhede”. The use of “And” following this list of contributions indicates that Griselda interprets the clothing as being directly related to her marriage and virginity. The wedding ring is listed *after* the clothing and could therefore be read as being of lesser significance. This passage is also noteworthy since it indicates which character is active in each of the dressings and strippings. Walter is responsible for the first episode of stripping, and the clothing is identified as ‘his’, not hers. Griselda’s obedience in this test involves her clearly delineating the terms of exchange: her virginity for clothing. Of this exchange, she is able to return the ring and the gown, but Walter cannot return her virginity.²⁵ This indicates that although the marriage has significant financial aspects, the transaction cannot be reversed in its entirety: the system of exchange falters because Griselda cannot recover her virginity.

Although she cannot retrieve her virginity, Griselda accepts a substitute in the form of a smock to cover her nakedness; this negotiation is also conducted in terms of a financial exchange. Griselda says to Walter, in front of the gathered company, that “Naked out of my fadres hous’, quod she,/ ‘I cam, and naked moot I turne again” (871-2), but requests that she not be forced out of the palace “smoklees” (875).²⁶ This request is made so as not to expose the womb that bore the marquis’s children to public scrutiny; in other words, even the request for modesty is put in terms of the products of the marriage, their children. Griselda asks:

²⁵ Mauss’s concepts of obligatory gift exchange developed in his essay on the nature of “The Gift” indicates that if one party is unable to reciprocate adequately, that party is dishonoured. In this case, Walter cannot return Griselda’s gift equally, so he faces potential dishonour.

²⁶ This is one of several allusions to Job.

Wherefore in gerdoun of my maidenhede,
Which that I broghte, and noght again I bere,
As vouchethsauf to yeve me to my mede
But swich a smok as I was wont to were,
That I therwith may wrye the wombe of here
That was youre wif (883-888).

She claims that there is a direct exchange in her mind of the smock or shift for her virginity. At this crucial point, her clothing is accounted as having equal value to her embodied sign of her virtue, her virginity. Griselda, in essence, charges the marquis for the sexual contact that resulted in their children; her initial value to the marquis is based on her capacity to bear him heirs, which she remembers. Ultimately, she reverses this transaction to allow herself a small modicum of dignity as she leaves his house.

The commercial understanding of marriage generated by this tale would have significant social consequences and implications: while it is clear that Walter is not acting in a socially responsible manner during the torment of Griselda (facing dishonour, certainly not to be emulated), this sort of exchange opens up the opportunity of discussing marriage as a transaction, with unwanted products able to be returned. Griselda's frank approach to her commodified body indicates a society with growing investment in trade but the subtle condemnation of Walter's attitude in returning 'unwanted goods' indicates a possible limit of this commercialism. Their interaction raises a valid question: is marriage separable from trade? While the text's clear interest in the paradigm of 'marriage as trade' wrestles with the place of nobility in an era of mercantilism, Griselda's goodness in poverty and wealth reinforces the importance of character to successful marriage above both birth and wealth.

Constant Character

Part of the intrigue of the Griselda story is the constancy of her spirit, which operates in a surprising manner in the tale, particularly in light of the changes of clothing and status. In Walter's initial choice of Griselda, Chaucer notes that she is physically attractive, but this is not the quality that entices her future husband. According to Chaucer, Walter begins by "Commendinge in his herte hir wommanhede,/ And eek hir vertu, passing any wight" (239-240). This indicates that Walter places a higher importance on his future wife's femininity and virtue than on her outward appearance. In this argument, I am at odds with Kristine Gilmartin Wallace, who uses the repeated

motif of array in “The Clerk’s Tale” to argue that Walter is highly concerned about appearance, which is echoed by Chaucer throughout the tales in his character descriptions. As much as clothing is important since it beautifies and transforms Griselda, it does not transform her inner being, which is the overarching point of the tale. The theme of misleading appearance occurs throughout *The Canterbury Tales*, including another important tale in the marriage group, “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”. After the knight has survived the justice of the court with the loathly lady’s help, she prevails upon him to marry her; when he objects because of her ugliness, age, and low social class, she chastises him and asks if “swich gentillesse/ As is decended out of old richesse” (“The Wife of Bath’s Tale”, line 1109-1110) really exists. Both Walter and Griselda continue to build on this challenge, because he seems to lack the good social graces supposedly natural to nobility, while she is held up for her virtue, which is seen as being at odds with her lowly birth.²⁷ This assumed link between external appearance (and class) and internal/non-physical attributes of character is disrupted when a character’s personality and actions do not match their birth and appearance; just as the loathly lady is internally gentil but appears foul, Griselda’s poor origins seem to conceal her virtue. In both cases, however, the women’s inner *gentillesse* is revealed despite social structures intended to limit them like class and gender.

Griselda’s fairness of body and spirit troubles conservative theories of class because her base birth and poverty cannot be seen in her face or spirit. In theory, a beautiful face meant a beautiful character: non-physical aspects of a person’s character were frequently inferred from the person’s physical appearance. Crane states that the topos that nobility must be based on personal virtue (rather than relying solely on landed wealth) became a dominant theme in the literature of the time; while this seems to open a space for the mercantile class, it actually reflected an attempt to maintain distinction between high-born nobles and the nouveaux riches (97). Rather than submit to the merchants’ challenge to the nobles’ economic and political superiority, the second estate used moral *gentillesse* as “a new ground on which to base its claims of superiority” as “[t]hose who are superior by birth should behave superlatively” (Crane 97). Griselda’s deviation from this understanding can be seen in the following quotation: “Unnethe the peple hir knew for hir fairnesse/ Whan she translated was in swich richesse” (384-5). The emphasis here is on two bodily aspects, namely the Griselda “unnethe” the clothing and the ‘translation’ of her physical body into its new setting.²⁸ Both of these words refer to the physicality of Griselda’s body, and can be read

²⁷ It is worth noting that the word “virtue” is incredibly semantically laden, as it refers to virginity and positive character traits, both of which are relevant to the discussion of Griselda.

²⁸ Translation means “transplant” in this context. In *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* Dinshaw explores the acts of translation enacted on Griselda, and the particular hermeneutic activity at the heart of translation. She identifies this as a masculine pursuit, which adds a new dimension to the discussion of gendered hierarchies operating within the text. Laura Ashe’s

in conjunction with the word “fairnesse”, which ambiguously refers to physical fairness (colouring/beauty), spiritual fairness (virtue) and judicial/professional fairness, as would become Griselda’s position as the marchioness.²⁹ Griselda puzzles others because she is low-born but virtuous and beautiful, which confounds the conventions of class somewhat; despite this, her constant virtuous spirit indicates that she is of sufficient good quality to be amongst the nobility.

When Griselda is dressed in new clothing, the people standing around her “thought she was another creature” (406), indicating a supposedly drastic change in manner. The clothes are credited with transforming her so much that even those familiar with her think she seems different. This change, however, is governed by the other people’s perceptions of her rather than her own actions. According to Denny-Brown, clothing does not change the person as much as it exposes the fickleness of public opinion (*Fashioning Change* 179). Griselda’s supposed transformation precisely illustrates this process because her virtue remains the same no matter her circumstance, making clear the changing nature of the people’s opinion. Griselda only appears to be changed through clothing since she is already an exemplary woman. The observations about her change are based on the physical clothes because her constant spirit cannot be materialized. The people’s insistence on Griselda’s drastic transformation could be understood as an attempt to shore up the class system against further mobilities; this task fails because of the ultimate assertion that Griselda’s fairness, virtue and patience suit her for ruling.

The unchanging and constant nature of Griselda’s spirit can be seen clearly when she is bereft of her clothing and situation. She is stripped of her station, returns her robes, and then returns to her father’s house, where “He covered hire, ful sorwefully wepinge” (914). Chaucer relates that her previous clothing no longer fits her, “For rude was the clooth, and she moore of age/ By dayes fele than at her mariage” (916). This is significant because it indicates that there is in fact *some* transformation brought about by the royal robes; it is a bodily transformation through the act of child-bearing (enabled through the royal dresses), and therefore cannot be undone through the simple switching of dresses. Griselda’s body no longer fits into the clothing of her girlhood because she has been married and bore children. Her clothing might also not fit her body as a metaphor for the fact that she has outgrown her role in Janicula’s home: in her transition to noblewoman, she gained influence, knowledge and experience beyond her rural/domestic

article, “Reading like a Clerk in the Clerk’s Tale” further explores hermeneutic exploits within the text, and clearly identifies Griselda as a reader who can read (and interpret) like a clerk.

²⁹ “Fair” is also an epithet frequently ascribed to the Virgin Mary, echoing once more the biblical resonances of the Griselda story.

sphere.³⁰ The tale locates Griselda's goodness in her inherent, intangible, non-material spirit, and not in her wealth (indicated by the dress), importantly suggesting that her social mobility is not related to her material circumstances but rather to her character; her experience as part of Walter's court develops and cements her suitability rather than creating it. This is at odds with a system based on either hereditary nobility in which high birth is taken to correlate to goodness, or the emergent market economy, in which it often seems that the richest person is deemed best. Griselda's (or more accurately, the Clerk's) non-adherence to either of these paradigms makes it clear that virtue is not the sole preserve of the wealthy, and that *gentillesse* of spirit fits a ruler better for his or her task than does esteemed birth. Considering the Clerk's own shabby clothing is indicative of poverty, which is at odds with his stylish and noble speech, it is possible that he is calling attention to other figures (like himself) in society who are arguably as fit to rule due to a gentil spirit, but who otherwise do not have access to the resources of the noble class or even the rising merchant class.

Public Stripping and Power

Clothing operates in several different ways in articulating and dramatizing embodiment in "The Clerk's Tale", reflecting both the intimate domestic space and the public courtly space. It represents a public appearance of the self that Griselda must negotiate as she takes up her position at court. It indicates the occurrence of the intimate and personal process of generating an heir, which is at the heart of the marriage transaction in the text. Others frequently dress and undress Griselda, making her publically visible even during intimate and potentially embarrassing moments. The publicity of her dressing scenes emphasises that she actually is who Walter says she is; if she were stripped and dressed in private, there would be room for doubt about her identity. Griselda is brought into public view and stripped in order to cleanse her of her past and to enable her 'transformation' into a noblewoman. Griselda is quickly re-clothed into her noble garb, but the publicity of her stripping and dressing indicates/exposes the 'truth' of Griselda's identity. In other words, she was indeed a peasant who was 'changed' by her clothing, not a noble woman who looked like her. The anxiety about this translation of her body into that of a noble rests on the desire to identify the underlying 'truth' of Griselda—her immutable spirit—which is not affected by her changing clothing. Carolyn Dinshaw stresses that "[h]owever clothed, or, more to the point,

³⁰ Lesley Johnson draws a parallel between the palace of Saluzzo and Janicula's home as they "are linked by the paradigms of good governance they represent and contain" (205).

unclothed, she is absolutely true” (142).³¹ Griselda’s bodily state has no effect on her identity and spirit, and she remains true throughout; this means that Griselda’s suitability to rule predates her social climbing.

Chaucer focuses on the nature of the clothing and the undressing process as significant to the translation of Griselda into her new noble state. The Clerk emphasises that it is important that “nothing of hir olde gere/ She should bringe into [Walter’s] hous” (372-3). In order to achieve this, Walter requires:

That wommen shoulde despoilen hir right there;
Of which these ladies where nought right glad
To handle hir clothes wherinne she was clad.
But nathelees, this maide bright of hewe
Fro foot to heed they clothed han al newe (374-378).

It is fitting to Griselda’s new and elevated status that she be undressed and dressed by handmaids, so this aspect of the passage is unremarkable. The ladies who re-clothe Griselda do so with scorn and disgust for her old garments, due to their ragged state. This disgust could also be read as a concern about ‘contamination’ through the wretched garments, considering the fact that Griselda’s upward mobility is demonstrated through her clothing. If a shepherd’s daughter can become a marchioness through changing her dress, could not a noble lady sink in rank through clothing too? A key word in this excerpt is “despoilen”. This word refers to the process of undressing; particularly, “despoilen” signifies a passive body being undressed or stripped, unlike “spoil”, which reflects the active participation of the person whose clothes are removed. Other meanings of “despoilen” relate to the post-victory ravaging of the enemy’s body. This establishes the body of Griselda as something over which Walter has total control. In this public act of undressing, her body is ‘robbed’ of its clothes and dignity, in a symbolic taking of her virginity. The use of a word so closely related to warfare brings into play the possibility of reading this as a moment of class conflict in which Walter must be the victor for the sake of maintaining the social status quo. It also makes the uprooting of Griselda from her rural origins into a violent act, a form of rape, both in its etymological understanding of ‘carrying off’ and in its modern sense. This action, performed on Griselda’s body by those of better social standing, articulates in clear terms the ownership of bodies.

³¹ In addition to this, the public stripping and humiliation may be interpreted as the first of the trials through which Walter puts his patient wife. This also opens the text to a hagiographical reading: the patient Saint Griselda survives the torments in order to please her L/lord.

When Griselda is later stripped as part of Walter's torments, she takes her own clothes off, indicating much greater agency, despite the renewed violence against her body. This can be seen in the following excerpt:

Biforn the folk hirselves strepeth she,
And in hir smok, with heed and foot al bare,
Toward her fader hous forth is she fare (894-6).

This excerpt demonstrates that even while Griselda seems bound to returning to relative destitution, she retains agency through her act of undressing herself. Where in all other instances of stripping and dressing in the story, she is helped by other women, this moment expresses a particular lack of power that she negotiates. The courtly ladies who undress Griselda from her 'poor' clothing act as gate-keepers to courtly propriety as they shape her body for its new context in both of the translations from poor-to-rich clothing; in the transition back from rich to poor, the courtly ladies do not help, again possibly out of anxiety of contamination by association. Griselda turns her moment of vulnerability as an outcast into a moment of strength when she undresses herself and she leaves independently, which confers bodily authority on her in a moment when she is excluded from her position of social authority. Her clothing as she returns to Janicula's house indicates that she is a pauper, but she chooses the manner of her going, as this is the power she can make for herself in the face of her marital commitment to obedience and constancy of spirit.³²

This act of agency on the part of Griselda, paired with her negotiation for a smock in exchange for her virginity, demonstrates that this tale has at least two levels of authority on which it operates, namely bodily authority and social authority. Firstly, the obsession with Griselda's vow of obedience is central to the plot; she demonstrates obedience through her responses to Walter's torments, and in doing so, she claims bodily agency over her own conduct. Social authority, in the form of Walter's decrees, is demonstrated to be open to cruelty and evil: Griselda's adherence to her obedience and constancy of spirit ensures that Walter carries the blame for the trials he puts his wife through (Ashton 233). This can be seen in her language when referring to her re-clothing ("there ye me lady made") and in her requests that her children might be buried to protect them from wild animals, which demonises Walter's actions, even though he is called "Oure lord" (562). Griselda's obedience thus proves to be full of subtlety and irony in its fulfilment. As Gail Ashton states, "Chaucer's slippery presentation of this complex tale allows the figure of Griselda to

³² Her self-stripping in this episode, along with her return to an impoverished situation could be seen to reflect certain themes and choices that are also common to certain religious vocations: a happy response to hardship could be interpreted as similar to a saint's life or to the process of taking religious orders.

highlight the gap between embodied ideal and resistant practice” (“Patient Mimesis” 237). Her vow of obedience ultimately gives her more agency than Walter since she offloads all responsibility for his evil actions onto him, causing distress for his people at several points in the text when they are led to believe that their ruler is a child-murderer. At the same time, Griselda uses her vow as a means to bring herself into a sphere of public influence over Walter’s people, ultimately achieving social authority by subjugating her bodily agency.

It is apparent that Walter, who is constrained by his nobility to fulfil certain social expectations, is actually less free to act than is his wife, despite the violence of his stripping, dressing and uprooting her.³³ Patricia Cramer points out that Walter’s entry to this marriage is not through the more usual literary trope of courtly love but through royal obligation (493). His people request that he “Boweth [his] nekke under that blisful yok/ Of sovereintee, noght of servise” (113-4). He initially objects because he says that marriage would “streine” him (144), and diminish his liberty to do what he wishes. Through the dressing and stripping, Walter seemingly retains authority over Griselda’s body, and through the vow, her spirit. His concern relating to possible husbandly servitude is not eliminated through these actions, and appears in his dismissal of his wife, when he states that his people think “it is greet shame and wo/ For to be subgetz and been in servage/ to [Griselda]” (481-3), due to her lowly birth and rustic origins. Walter does not encounter a change of clothing that limits his authority as Griselda does, but his use of clothes to ‘buy’ her obedience can be read as an attempt to retain as much authority as possible. This is one reason for his choice of a wife not “born of the gentileste and of the meste” in his land (131), as he people instruct, but he chooses a wife that he can oblige to obey him because of her relative socioeconomic status. Griselda is in essence, able to be bought, and as such, her propensity for wilful behaviour is diminished. This does not turn out to be true because Griselda manages to turn even her moment of greatest shame into a form of agency in her graceful departure from court, clad only in a smock.

Part of the important operation performed by clothing is to generate a public understanding of individual character. Griselda’s change in situation is particularly noteworthy in this case because her clothing describes a change in situation that is not necessarily reflected in a change of spirit. Her change in clothing rather negotiates the interface between the individual and the group for her new husband. Sarah Stanbury states that “[t]he centring of Griselda as public spectacle, and as

³³ Similar constraint through social position can be seen in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in which Gawain’s position as an honoured knight limits his freedom to particular performances of virtue and honourability; these ultimately prove unrealistic, implying that the social constraints of the court are nothing more than an unreachable ideal, rather than a liveable reality.

the focal point of multiple levels of collective and private scrutiny, evokes [...] the paradigm or trope of a masculine gaze on a woman's body" (262). As it is clear that Griselda's virtues were evident before her first re-clothing and persist in a constant manner despite shifts in her experience and appearance, she does not really undergo changes as a result of her clothing, which means that her clothing operates primarily on the level of public appearance rather than symbolically indicating interior processes and developments. If Griselda is affected by the male gaze, she manages to subvert its control over her body by the pre-eminence of her spirit as her key virtue, and in so doing, she preserves her agency. Her changing clothing indicates her changing publicity and public esteem, rather than acting as a sign of the power others have over her; her wardrobe changes expose and amplify her honour, rather than create it. Her translation from poor, rural girl to rich, powerful lady is the main change that she experiences, representing a broadening of the prospective scope of her diligent duty. Her more prominent public position as marchioness means that her actions and their consequences are greater than simply domestic concerns; her marriage is decidedly political, functioning as it does to expose Griselda as honourable because of her dutiful fulfilment of the role of wife and to fulfil the will of the people under Walter and Griselda's rule. While Griselda's clothing marks the propriety of the court situation as influencing her, the key 'change' that she undergoes is her entry into the court. If she had been re-clothed but had remained in her impoverished situation, it is unlikely that she would have had the influence she possesses as a ruler. In that sense, the field of influence that her virtue and constant spirit exerts extends beyond the private sphere of the home to matters of political significance.

Conclusion: "Of hire array what should I make a tale?"

As can be seen, various aspects of this story revolve around Griselda's clothing, from its role in articulating a translation from one class to another, to its role in buying access to her body. In negotiating the transformation to mercantile capitalism, "The Clerk's Tale" highlights the power of clothing as a currency. Through the substitutability of Griselda's body, to the purchase of her virginity, this tale problematizes the logic that previously governed the noble class's marriage processes by delinking class-based assumptions of concurrent beauty, nobility and virtue. Griselda's constancy and patience despite her various re-clothings serve as an attempt to disaggregate external appearance from character. Through the virtuous, low-born Griselda, contemporary theories of right rulership and the virtues of the nobility are challenged. In a society that was gradually shifting away from being dominated by hereditary nobility, the story of Griselda

opens a space for individuals to be fit to rule through virtue unrelated to wealth. Her spirit, rather than her physical appearance, circumstance, or wealth is her defining characteristic. It is clear, then, that Griselda's underlying *gentillesse* destabilises the class structure that the rest of the plot seems at pains to solidify.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Knots and Knighthood

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight dramatizes Gawain's struggle to do his duty honourably when he is caught between courtly and knightly codes, making this poem a compelling discussion about ethics. The story takes place over the course of a year: one Christmas, the Green Knight visits Arthur's court and challenges the king to participate in a game, namely one axe stroke for another in a year's time. Gawain protects Arthur by volunteering in his stead, but when he beheads the supernatural Green Knight, the foe does not die, obliging Gawain to undertake a quest towards his doom the following Christmas. Gawain must find the Green Knight and willingly accept the return stroke from the axe (and the likely possibility that this will kill him). This situation is by no means a good one, but he feels duty-bound to see it through. Gawain's interaction with the Green Knight is paralleled in his conduct towards the host and hostess he meets on his travels since they each make certain requests of him that he finds difficult to fulfil. The wager/game with his host of swapping the profits of their pursuits each day threatens to expose Gawain's love talk with the host's wife, and ultimately, Gawain chooses to ignore the rules of the game with the host, which later causes his undoing. The story dramatizes explicitly the different demands placed on a knight as he attempts to adhere to the guidelines of chivalry; Gawain's honour is at stake throughout the text, and he agonises greatly over how to fulfil his duty most correctly, suggesting a perfectionism that will become paramount to a reader's understanding of Gawain at the poem's end.

This poem was written in a North West Midland dialect during the late fourteenth century, which makes it contemporary with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, but *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* appears to be operating in a different social register when compared to Chaucer's text; the Gawain poet's rendering of courtly society and correct social procedures privileges the nobility. Critics of the poem are also frequently arrested by its heavy-laden symbolism, and have developed readings of the poem based on religion, such as Beaugard's, or the operations of courtly life and commerce, as in Harwood's analysis.³⁴ My focus draws together the poem's attention to courtly propriety and maintenance of honour with various symbols of identity, particularly Gawain's negotiation of manhood in the court. To do this, I will draw on the work of Heng, Craymer and Ashton, who all focus on issues of gender identity, and play those readings off against Harwood's understanding of gifts and honour in courtly society, to argue that Gawain's masculine presentation is at risk through his interactions with his host's wife and because of the gifts he receives; Gawain

³⁴ David N. Beaugard, "Moral Theology in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: The Pentangle, the Green Knight and the Perfection of Virtue" *Renascence*, 65.3 (Spring 2013) and Briton J. Harwood, "Gawain and the Gift", *PMLA*, 106.3 (May 1991), pp.483-499.

is tied up in knots between courtesy and chivalry. He cannot respond appropriately to the social conventions of reciprocity, meaning that the gift of the girdle from his host's wife becomes a social burden and lessens his honour. I argue that Gawain's armour and the girdle he is given shape his body and his performance of the courtly and chivalric ideal, in a way that attempts to reinforce the era's norms of gender, honour and social position at court. As much as clothing improves Enide's and Griselda's social outlook, the girdle has the power to place Gawain's honourable standing as a knight in Arthur's court in doubt because it represents illicit and unreciprocal gift-giving and so places Gawain in the lady's debt. The supposedly perfect Gawain responds imperfectly to the girdle, indicating a break-down in the assumed system of honour associated with the court.

My argument throughout this chapter is that Gawain's masculinity and (diminishing) honour is articulated through his clothing and the processes of exchange in which he engages. The poem follows several conventions that construct masculinity: Gawain, as the perfect knight, appears the perfect man. During the Christmas party and the Green Knight's challenge, Gawain's sense of duty leads him to intervene in order to save Arthur, distinguishing himself from all of Arthur's other knights. He is further distinguished as a paragon of virtuous masculinity in the arming scene where he is dressed in noble and symbolic armour. I will investigate how the armour constructs a particular image of the perfect knight and even shapes his body to this performance. Gawain's prestigious position is not without its challenges and demands: the presence of various knots and knotted cords, and even the pentangle on Gawain's shield, describe how the role as a knight can constrain his conduct. The symbolism of the pentangle device decorating Gawain's shield is explicated in the poem as a way of showing Gawain's perfection as a knight, but this perfection is called into question by the end of the text due to his divided duty between chivalry and courtly love. The clothing this knight dons could be seen to define his body in a particular manner: E. Jane Burns contends that his armour might be viewed as placing him along the spectrum of sartorial bodies as 'masculine', but this is not a fixed position because he also wears the girdle he is given by a woman, which might just as well 'feminize' his body (13). Gawain's masculine perfection is linked to his honour, so when one aspect of his character is threatened, so is his 'social performance of self', to use Susan Crane's phrasing.

Gawain's clothing and heraldic symbols insist on his perfection, tying him up into a particular performance of maintaining his honour. Ultimately, he is undone by the gift-exchange game in which his dealings with his host and the lady are not what they should be, and his tarnished honour is exposed by means of the girdle. In Chaucer's "The Clerk's Tale" and Chrétien's *Erec and Enide*, clothing is used to increase Griselda and Enide's honour and social standing substantially,

but this text employs the girdle as a symbol of diminishing honour, proving to Gawain (and others) that he cannot serve the multiple facets of knighthood, and the simultaneous demands of chivalry and courtly love, equally. His failing implies that the system is flawed because not even Gawain, the supposedly perfect knight, can do his duty and maintain his honour.

The Full Armour of Gawain

Gawain's clothing, at first, signifies his status as a paragon of manhood and knighthood, especially when he dons his armour after the Green Knight's visit to Arthur's court, demonstrating that there is still a cultural link between the (noble) body and virtuous character in this poem. Gawain's masculinity contributes to his position as a knight, demonstrated through both his appearance and actions. During the Christmas feast at Arthur's court, Gawain defends the honour of the King, and in so doing, builds his own honour in the eyes of the court. A year later, when Gawain must seek the knight to face the return blow, he arms himself in accordance with his honour. Arming scenes are relatively common in romances, describing the hero's armour in potentially symbolic terms as he prepares for his quest, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is no different: the Gawain-poet lists in detail the clothing and armour covering Gawain's body.³⁵ He is dressed in fine silks, and all of his armour is shining, clean and bright (lines 567-572). This indicates his nobility and wealth, as well as providing an idea of the sort of knight Gawain is: both pure and ready to fight his enemy. His external appearance is clearly important because this arming scene continues for several lines, and many details are mentioned. The poem states that:

His legez lapped in stel with luflych greues,
With polaynez piched perto, policed ful clene,
Aboute his knez knaged wyth knotez of golde (574-577).

As can be seen, his body is protected by armour which completely encases his body ("lapped in stel"); this could be interpreted as a mould which shapes his body to the ideal form, as well as a barrier preventing him from action not in line with the ideals of chivalry. Patricia Craymer develops the idea that superior bodies deserve special clothing such as elaborate armour as a method of indicating social privilege. The arming scene might be interpreted as "endorsing the belief that only individuals with innately superior bodies, a product of lineage, could wear elaborate dress and

³⁵ Lorraine Stock discusses some aspects of arming scenes in "Arms and the (Wo)man in Medieval Romance", focussed more specifically on the rare female arming scenes; the article is useful because it provides a good sense of how these scenes differed.

enjoy the social privilege it indicated [...or employ] the practice of constituting social privilege through wearing elaborately tailored dress which moulded the body” (Craymer 51).³⁶ In other words, Gawain’s armour may be interpreted as correlated to his honour but may also be important in constituting him as honourable.

The armour Gawain wears is symbolic of his characteristics: its “clene”, “policed” state reflects not only his care that he presents as a knight of good standing but also has some figurative aspects. The word “policed” refers to polish as we understand it (clean and shining), but could also be understood as “the act of improving”; in other words, Gawain’s body and honour are improved by his armour. Likewise, “clene” might be understood literally, but might be interpreted metaphorically as being free from sin.³⁷ Both aspects are important to Gawain since he is considered the ‘perfect’ knight and must perform to these expectations to protect his honour. The armour and clothing that indicate Gawain’s honourable position also signifies that he is duty-bound to perform a certain social role, namely undertake quests to maintain that honour. His armour is reportedly “knaged” (tied) to Gawain with golden knots. This indicates that there is some literal constraint of Gawain’s body by his armour, implying that his position as a knight shapes and limits his social options.

While the armour itself constrains Gawain’s body in a way that conforms to his lineage and noble circumstance, his shield indicates specific ideas about the character of its bearer. According to R. Howard Bloch, heraldry was linked to the process of developing a visual (symbolic) language for noble families (76). The images on knights’ shields and the family crests work to identify and co-identify people and family members, creating social hierarchy and in-groups. In this way, Gawain’s identity as a knight is linked to his identity as a noble, rendered through symbolic language. The identity demonstrated by the shield’s device is also significantly chosen or assigned by others: it is given to him by people, indicating the importance public perception plays in the definition of honour. The pentangle is described in the following excerpt: “Then Þey schewed hym Þe shelde, Þat was of schyr goulez/ Wyth Þe pentangel depaynt of pure golde hwez.” (619-620) As can be seen from this, the colours on Gawain’s shield are red and gold: he is constituted as the opposite of the Green Knight. The colours are also linked symbolically to the divine and to

³⁶ Craymer also goes into detail about how lineage ‘naturally’ sets some groups apart; armour is a means of noting this difference, corresponding to the characters’ honour due to their lineage and social position.

³⁷ Attention to the religious aspects of the poem has allowed some critics (such as Beaugard) to read it as a Christian allegory; in some readings, Gawain is the Christ figure, fighting a demonic Green Knight, and in others, the Knight is the Christ-figure.

martyrdom, while the pentangle also has associations with the heavenly realm.³⁸ Gawain's cleanness and perfection fit him well to the martyrdom his knighthood seems to be, but ultimately his preference to save his own life by keeping the girdle makes this connection ironic and begs the question of the necessity of martyrdom in the court.

The poem devotes a significant number of lines to the symbolism of the pentangle as it symbolically renders Gawain's identity as a knight and a noble, as well as praising his physical and other virtues. Once again, a poet explores a character's inner virtues and characteristics by externalising them in their clothing; in the case of Enide and Griselda, the clothing did not actually impinge on their honour, while in Gawain's case, the symbolism chosen for his armour is based directly on his virtues. The figure used to describe his seeming perfection is set out in the following excerpt:

For hit is a figure Þat haldez fyue poyntez,
And vche lyne vmbelappez and loukez in oþer,
And ayquere hit is endelez; and Englych hit callen
Oueral, as I here, Þe endeles knot. (627-631)

The lines of the star overlap and lock each other in a reportedly "endelez" manner, as it is possible to retrace one's lines when drawing the shape. The poet states that English people refer to the pentangle as the "endless knot", following this with the message that such an emblem suits Gawain well, foreshadowing his future entanglement in his divided duty. At this point in the poem, only the positive traits of Gawain are emphasised, and these are linked to the five-pointed symbol in detail; the endless knot of Gawain's perfection could also be understood as tying him up and holding him to extreme and unreachable standards of masculinity and knighthood. His social position and noble birth require him to perform in a particular manner, and although this endless knot is made of gold (ostensibly valuable), he is still tied and limited by his position: the ethics of courtly and knightly conduct at the host's castle ultimately will tangle and constrict Gawain's actions.

Through the pentangle, the poet brings to the fore particular ideals, both physical and otherwise, which deepen the reader's understanding of the social perception of Gawain as a perfect knight and man. His virtues are spiritual, mental, physical and social, all necessary aspects of his perfection. The poet lists the characteristics supposedly abundant in Gawain's being, from being

³⁸ While pentangles or pentagrams are now considered controversial, there were no links to the occult or black magic during the fourteenth century.

“fautez in his fyue wyttez”, to never failing in his fingers, to his faith in “Þe fyue woundez/ Þat Cryst kaʒt on Þe croys” (640-644); the poet also states that:

Þe fyft fyue Þat I finde Þat Þe frek vsed
Watz fraunchyse and felaʒschyp forbe al Þyng,
His clannes and his cortaysye croked were neuer,
And pite, Þat passez alle poyntez, Þyse pure fyue
Were harder happed on Þat haþel Þan on any oþer. 651-655

In the arrangement of Gawain’s virtues, the poet begins with his wits/senses, and then builds to his social graces, placing these at the top of the list in terms of the importance to the knight. His social characteristics are weighted more important than his religious faith, which is telling of the necessity of certain characteristics to maintain the social space of the court. Gawain’s “fraunchyse” could refer to his freedom of action, the nobility of his character, generosity or even the sets of rights and authority held by high-standing members of society. The use of this word demonstrates the richness of the symbolism employed by the poet; its privileged position as one of Gawain’s most important traits highlights social obligations of the court remembered even in the armour he wears as he leaves that space. Moreover, this list of characteristics is also ironic because Gawain is not nearly so free and privileged to act as the word “fraunchyse” implies. He is duty-bound to his king and God, and is also honour-bound to completing his quest, meaning the social pressure and expectations placed on him by chivalry and by courtly life actually reduce rather than increase his franchise.

Out of armour: the demands of courtly love

The troubling matter of being caught between courteous behaviour and the duties associated with chivalry are dramatized in Gawain’s interaction with his host and hostess at the castle he encounters on his quest. His interaction with his host is correct according to the demands of chivalry: “ʒe, sir, for soþe, sayed Þe segge trwe,/ ‘Whyl I byde in yowre borʒe, be bayn to ʒowre hest” (1090-91). This excerpt demonstrates Gawain’s desire and willingness to serve his host as he should. The word “hest” is a shortening of “behest”, meaning ‘command’, so through this statement, Gawain is pledging to serve his host’s desires and commands willingly during his time in the house. His understanding of chivalry binds him to the host’s service for his time in the other man’s castle. This is an honourable position for him to take since he exchanges his knightly service

for his host's accommodation. This obliges him to be obedient to his host in order to maintain his honour and position.

As an extension of the social conventions implied between Gawain and his host, they agree to a game in which they swap the results of their days' labour; the game comes to threaten Gawain's honour because of the terms of exchange and because ultimately he does not comply with the rules, keeping a girdle for himself. Gawain's honour is threatened in the game, which he does not seem to realise:

'ȝet firre,' quoþ þe freke, 'a forwarde we make:
Quat-so-euer I wynne in þe wod hit worþez to yourez,
And quat chek so ȝe acheue chaunge me þereforne.
Swete, swap we so, sware with trawþe,
Queþer, leude, so lymþ, lere oþer better. (1105-1109)

This passage outlines the terms of exchange in this new game: Gawain and the host will swap the winnings/achievements of each day's labour (which could be understood as the day's profits), and must do so truthfully.³⁹ This game seems relatively benign, and Gawain is happy to agree, but the game itself could be seen as a smaller version of the quest he has already undertaken: he must swap one blow for another with the Green Knight, and a day's unknown winnings with his host's winnings, the potential value of which is unknown, indicating that exchange and its effects are crucial to the poem's logic. Gawain's first game with the Green Knight had supposedly clear rules, but the blow did not kill the adversary and obliged Gawain to uphold his end of the deal or else forfeit his honour. This game with his host is bound to leave him indebted (and therefore dishonoured) to his host because he has brought nothing to trade with and has no real way of generating any winnings of any value. At most, he will receive several gifts from his host and not be able to repay him. According to Marcel Mauss, the social contract of reciprocity in gift-giving (4) requires the parties to balance their exchanges, and the likely uneven exchange between Gawain and his host could be interpreted as risking a loss of honour. Mauss's explanation of the gift claims that the exchange helps maintain social functions by linking people together. Gawain's potential lack of reciprocal gift may be read as damaging to the courtly society of which he is part, showing his inability to maintain links with others of his class. Gawain's honour at stake, he would be

³⁹ Britton J. Harwood explores the Gawain-poet's use of language: although the game is based on gifts, not commerce, "the poet is aware of commerce and sometimes uses its diction metaphorically" (486).

indebted to his host, and the lack of even exchange would bind him to a position of servitude, further constraining his actions.

Gawain's interaction with his host is mostly in line with the expectations of chivalry, but his interaction with the host's wife puts him in a difficult social position, threatening his honour. The lady's initial attempts at seduction (1180 onwards) involve her trapping Gawain in his bed, and keeping him there until he has satisfied her. He asks to be allowed to dress and then to serve her, but she keeps him at her mercy, unclothed and vulnerable. Gail Ashton argues that when Gawain is out of his armour, his carefully constructed masculine identity is removed ("The Perverse Dynamics of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" 60), and he adopts a different social role, one that is passive and vulnerable, as if feminised in contradistinction with the lady, who is aggressive and dominant.⁴⁰ Burns' concept of "sartorial bodies" is valuable here because of Gawain's *lack of clothing*: his nakedness means he is outside the society so invested in the symbolism of clothes. According to Stephanie J. Hollis, the earlier arming scene "serves to heighten the human vulnerability of the man within the metal casing" (272), implying that when he is without his armour, this vulnerable manhood is exposed, especially when compared with the lady's clothed position of power. Bearing this inverted dynamic in mind, Gawain offers to serve the lady in accordance with courtly duty, as this is the right and honourable course of action:

In god fayth,' quoþ Gawayn, 'gayn hit me þinkkez,
þaʒ I be not now he þat ʒe of speken;
To reche to such reuerence as ʒe reherce here
I am wyʒe vnworþy, I wot wel myseluen.
Bi God, I were glad, and yow god þoʒt,
At saʒe oþer at seruyce þat I sette myʒt
To þe plesaunce of your prys – hit were a pure ioye. (1241-1247)

Gawain is humble and submits to her service because this is the role expected of him in this relationship: as a knight, he must love the lady (and even better that the lady is out of reach) and serve her wishes in completion of the ideals of courtly love. This places him at a potential disadvantage with the lady's husband because once more he has agreed to something without ensuring he is familiar with the terms of exchange, and he is not sure that they will not contradict his promise to swap his day's achievements with his host. The commercial language used in this

⁴⁰ While a case may be made in Gawain's defence here because he is not really responsible for the actions of the lady, he does not act to remedy the situation or even let his host know about his wife's attempts at seduction. This is what puts his honour at risk in this situation.

excerpt highlights the social transaction taking place by referring to an economic one; the “prys” is unnamed, as are the terms of service (the same as the other exchanges), once more putting Gawain on the transactional back foot. Gawain’s lack of armour during this exchange highlights his vulnerable situation, of which the lady takes maximum advantage.

The lady must goad Gawain into doing his duty in accordance with the requirements of courtly behaviour; Gawain is obliged to fulfil the expectations she has of him or he will risk losing his honour and reputation. However, his fulfilment of this duty places him between the duty he has to his host and the service to his host’s wife. The taunt the lady employs can be seen in the following extract:

So god as Gawayn gaynly is halden,
And cortaysye is closed so clene in hymself,
Couth not lyȝtly have lenged so long wyth a lady,
Bot he had craued a cosse, bi his courtaysye,
Bi sum towch of summe tryfle at some talez ende. (1297-1301)

This passage indicates the lady’s expectation of Gawain’s actions, governed by social conventions, predominantly the norms of chivalry and courtly love. The lady questions Gawain’s identity as a knight and as himself, which puts his honour at risk. He is obliged to fulfil her desires to maintain it. The most important part of this passage is the fact that there is an extreme difference in the power dynamics to ‘usual’ life: the host’s wife has all the power and actually physically traps Gawain in bed, who does not want to reveal his nakedness immodestly. This power dynamic in which Gawain is thoroughly subservient to the lady is in accordance with the tropes of courtly love, but it also dramatizes the problems of such subservience, because it places his honourable masculinity at risk. In addition to this, the lady’s demands are at odds with his promise to his host, meaning that there is no honourable way for Gawain to fulfil his duty to all parties. Gawain’s knighthood as a construction of virtuous masculinity requires that he act honourably towards his host and the host’s wife, which he cannot do concurrently. Sharon M. Rowley engages the idea that the characters’ gender identities are social constructs, visible through their actions or inactions, rather than referring to a state of self which is inherent and “true” (159). This understanding of gender relationships and hierarchies seems to agree with the obvious discomfort of Gawain in this moment; the Gawain-poet uses Gawain’s vulnerability to trouble the general conception of honourable masculinity and its behaviour. The actions of the lady demonstrate that even in the social environment of the court, Gawain’s performance of masculinity is artificial. The removable nature of his armour should give Gawain some freedom to have an identity not derived from his

knighthood, but his over-investment in his honour means that even without his clothing, he is constrained to a particular social performance. The lady's goading words and actions show up the folly of holding too tightly to unrealistic performances of self.

In the lady's three attempts to seduce Gawain, she invokes his honour as a knight and her status as a lady in order to get her way, demonstrating that the gender relationships in the poem's court can be manipulated to particular ends and are thoroughly bound up with honour. The lady's evocation of courtly love codes can be seen in the following excerpt:

what were þe skylle
þat so ʒong and so ʒepe as ʒe at þis tyme,
So cortayse, so knyʒtly, as ʒe ar knowen oute –
And of alle cheualry to chose, þe chef þyng alosed
Is þe lel layke of luf, þe lettrure of armes;
For to telle of þis teuelyng of þis trwe knyʒtez,
Hit is þe tytelet token and tyxt of her werkkez,
How ledes for her lele luf hoe lyues han auntered (1508-1516)

The word "skylle" can refer to ability or knowledge to perform a certain goal, or the ability to interact well with others (as is necessary for the maintenance of the social order of the court), but it also refers to an argument in favour of something. In this case, the host's wife tries to convince Gawain of the importance of (courtly) love in the stories of knights. This seems to be a small, metatextual bubble, because the lady speaks at length about the 'text' of the knights' labours, and how love is actually the goal for which they ought to be out adventuring. This demonstrates an awareness of the concerns in the poem and the genre as a whole, and indicates that Gawain is an oddity in the genre because he is not highly concerned with the niceties of love, preferring the maintenance of his honour through diligence towards his duty. The metatextual bubble allows for the audience to reflect on the contrived nature of the tale and link it in their minds to the contrived and ultimately fictional nature of Gawain's honour. Gawain's unrealistic attempts to perform honourably are made more improbable through this comparison to courtly poems because even the knights in the romances do not strive to maintain their honour as much as Gawain. The lady is at pains to point out that as much as Gawain is praised for his courtly behaviour and knightly chivalry, he seems to have missed the point. She endeavours to 'correct' him but to no real avail. Most importantly, Gawain's unwillingness to participate in the supposed norms for knights because of his purity places him into a position as a social outsider that could potentially damage his honour.

The lady offers Gawain a valuable ring and the fated girdle in addition to the kisses, but the monetary value of these gifts causes him to consider their impact on his honour; not only would the ring's cost render him beholden to the lady, but the terms of his earlier agreement with his host would require he surrender the gift, and thus expose his actions, which could diminish his honour. When the lady attempts to give him a ring (on top of the day's three kisses), he states that "I wil no giftez, for Gode, my gay, at Þis tyme;/ I haf non yow to norne, ne no3 t wyl I take" (1823-1824). This passage indicates Gawain's awareness of the obligation behind gifts, and how receiving a gift without returning one would risk his honour. He would be placed into the lady's debt if he accepted a gift without returning one, and this might oblige him to do more than kiss her. In addition to this, his wariness of the lady's generosity could also arise from his unwillingness to pass any particular gift on to the host in accordance with their games.⁴¹ Gawain's refusal of the ring does not get him out of the interaction altogether though; the lady makes him another offer:

If 3e renay my rynk, to ryche for hit semez,
 3e wolde not so hy3ly halden be to me,
 I schal gif yow my girdel, Þat gaynes yow lasse.⁷
 Ho la3t a lace ly3tly Þat leke vnbe hir sydez,
 Knit vpon hir kyrtel vnder Þe clere mantyle,
 Gered hit watz with grene sylke and with golde schaped,
 No3t bot arounde brayden, beten with fyngrez (1827-1833).

The economic value of the gift is demonstrated to be a sore point for Gawain: he refuses the lady's ring as too valuable (and does not want to be "halden" to her).⁴² According to Jessica Cooke, in many Arthurian stories, rings are supposed to carry particular protective powers as well as material value but even this is unable to tempt Gawain (2). He has the good sense to refuse the ring, but agrees to take the lady's girdle (belt), which reportedly is worth less economically. The implications of a girdle, however, might be seen to be no less problematic in the symbolism stakes: a belt, holding a woman's dress to her sides might well be a form of sexual trophy, further delegitimizing

⁴¹ In "A kiss is just a kiss: heterosexuality and its consolations in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", Carolyn Dinshaw investigates how the poem "produces the possibility of homosexual relations *and* renders them unintelligible" with reference to the problematic passing on of kisses from the lady to Gawain and on to his host. The logical – but as Dinshaw states, "unintelligible" – follow-through of the seduction would be Gawain having to have sex with the lord to honour his promise. The poem's recourse to the valuable ring and girdle means it veers to subject matter it can tackle more safely: honour and its fallibility in the face of gift exchange.

⁴² In addition to this, the possible symbolism of the exchange of a ring mimics the gift of a wedding ring, which makes the illicit interaction between Gawain and the host's wife even more problematic. The implication is that the wife is inviting Gawain into a relationship like marriage.

the interaction between the host's wife and her prey⁴³. Geraldine Heng addresses the symbolism and status of the girdle as a body-memorialising sign (505), as a magical and sexual item which also has protective power. The girdle, also called a "lace", ties and constricts Gawain once more in a similar manner to his armour because his body is tied up to reference his social conduct. Ultimately, Gawain accepts the girdle in order to make use of its life-saving qualities, despite the fact that this action places him in the lady's debt, and dishonours him when he chooses not to surrender it to the host. In other words, he chooses to compromise his honour in order to save his life. By accepting the girdle, Gawain prioritises his body over his honour. The girdle constricts his body, mimicking his armour and his heightened ideals of honourable manhood, indicating that once more it is possible to understand honour and social structures through clothing.

The girdle is a crucial part of Gawain's undoing in its doing him up. The green and gold of the girdle reminds the reader of the supernatural knight from the beginning of the text, and indeed, this is a foreshadowing of the downfall of Gawain or at the very least of his sense of his loss of honour. Crucially, Gawain retains the belt, even though he has promised an exchange of his days' earnings with his host. The girdle traps Gawain since he cannot give his host the belt without revealing who has given him the previous days' kisses, a closet he will not exit. In this, he has broken his promise made in the wager, rendering his honour greatly reduced because of his choice to exchange honour for survival. In the wager, there seems to be free exchange of the profits of each day, but there is a distinction between the value of the different characters' profits: the host kills large and impressive game on his hunts, while Gawain achieves nothing more than kisses. This is not an honour-neutral situation: he is certainly indebted to his host over the course of this game, and he only increases this debt of honour when he retains the girdle, although now he is indebted to the wife. His decision to keep the life-saving 'lace' could be understood as a critique of society overly focussed on honour at the expense of life and health; even Gawain's unrealistic attempts to maintain his honour break down when faced with a threat to his life. In this way, it could be said that the girdle actually functions to constrain Gawain's idealistic concepts of honour towards socially maintainable levels.

Body, clothes and (dis)honour:

⁴³ It is worth noting that in both *Erec and Enide* and "The Clerk's Tale", the gifted clothing stood to legitimize the bodies of the women it covered. Gawain's girdle, on the other hand, is a clear marker of illegitimate access and behaviour towards his host's wife.

Ultimately, the girdle functions as a symbol of Gawain's diminishing honour when he wears it to preserve his body because it exposes his misdeeds to his foe. He chooses to wear the girdle to face his enemy; as the poem puts it "3 et laft he not Ð e lace, Ð e ladiez gifte,/ Ð at forgat not Gawayn for gode of hymself." (2030-31). The poem explains that it is for his bodily good in particular that Gawain wears the girdle, but this action also mimics carrying a token into battle as was customary during tournaments. In this way, Gawain is visibly displaying his close relationship with the lady, and this betrays him to the Green Knight, who it turns out, is the host. Gawain's foe states that

hit is my wede Ðat Ðou werez, Ðat ilke wouen girdel,
 Myn owen wyf hit Ðe weued, I wot wel for soÐe.
 Now know I wel Ðy cosses, and Ðy costes als,
 And Ðe wowyng of my wyf: I wro3t it myself. (2358-2361)

The other knight claims that the seduction attempts were conducted under his instruction, and these could be seen as a trial of Gawain's honour and duty towards the host, which by and large he passes by not committing adultery. The belt around his waist, worn to protect his own life, indicates that Gawain holds his own life more valuable than his duty to his host in the terms of their wager. The gift, in those terms, reduces his honour. In this way, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* works in the opposite way to the stories of *Erec and Enide* and "The Clerk's Tale": while the latter two stories involve the bettering of characters through gift clothing, Gawain's honour is diminished through the girdle because he cannot reciprocate the gift, and does not pass it on in accordance with his bargain with the host, indicating that he is not the paragon of virtue and knightly behaviour as he is set up to be. The poet uses the symbolism of the girdle to criticise the extreme emphasis placed on maintaining honour in court; if even perfect Gawain has difficulty maintaining his honour, then perhaps it is too much for anyone to require. After the Green Knight (Lord Bertilak, as the reader discovers) nicks Gawain's neck as "payment" for the withheld girdle, and in the process, uses his free hit, Gawain is freed from the constraints of the beheading game, but is still shamed by his actions and decisions related to the girdle. This demonstrates that Gawain does not understand the girdle as a grounding symbol, relieving him of his duty to perform honourably at all times. Gawain's self-centred nature means that he cannot appreciate the court's perception of him, which can be seen when he wears the girdle as a mark of shame on his return to Arthur's court. The people, less invested in his extreme maintenance of honour, do not see the girdle as shameful: they see a hero who has returned alive from a dangerous quest, rather than Gawain's impression of himself as dishonest. The girdle is taken up as a mark of honour, indicating

the power of clothing to dramatize social standing in very contradictory ways. The people consider him honourable for surviving the danger, whereas he can only focus on his misdeeds: his stubborn shame indicates a misunderstanding of honour, which is, after all, based on public perceptions rather than on internal virtue.

Conclusion

Gawain's driving force throughout the text is his sense of duty and his desire to maintain his honour. Between the challenge from the Green Knight and the wager of the day's profits, Gawain's honour is at risk; throughout the tale, honour is linked to giving (whether a blow, a kiss, or a gift), and Gawain must balance courtly love with chivalry in order to maintain his honour. He maintains it (for the most part) despite his folly with the lady and the girdle he achieved from it because honour is based on public perception rather than internal virtue: Arthur's court celebrates Gawain's success and the symbol of his shame is reclaimed as a symbol of honour. The subtleties of the exchange in the text keep the knight on the back foot despite the armour that seeks to establish him as beyond reproach and shore up his honour against attack. Gawain struggles to perform honourably when forced to weigh up his own livelihood against an economic debt incurred by keeping the girdle, which indicates to the reader that his idealised chivalry and manhood are impossible to maintain. This subtly mocks the social order from which the story emerges. Ultimately, the story seems to engage with the idea of honour-maintenance only to dismiss it: despite Gawain's internal conflict and external bolstering of his image through his armour, Arthur's court only seems to care about his success in his quest, rather than his personal failings. The knotted armour indicates his seemingly perfect masculinity, a performance he gives to ensure his place at court; the lady's girdle tied around him threatens his honour by indicating his personal failing. Between the two, Gawain's unrealistic and inflexible performance of knighthood proves impossible to maintain, calling into question the legitimacy of the social order requiring these social strictures.

Conclusion

Chrétien's *Erec and Enide*, Chaucer's "The Clerk's Tale", and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* destabilize and disrupt the body's importance to conceptions of nobility in different ways, especially by challenging the association of lineage and beauty with virtue and by indicating the impossibility of perfect honour, despite perfect armour. From dazzling, bejewelled dresses fit for queens to magical, lifesaving green girdles, clothing plays an important role in these medieval texts, allowing characters to navigate the court by supposedly representing their internal honour in a visible and external manner. Importantly, the characters' actions, clothing, and character traits challenge prescriptive ideals of what defines the nobility because they repeatedly do not fulfil public expectations based on the material trappings of clothing.

The link between the clothing and power is undone when the characters do not act in accordance with their appearance and the expectations linked to their social rank. Enide's noble family's poverty excludes them from the court, and Griselda is from humble origins, but both of these women succeed in moving up the social order through their marriages. The clothing they are given in their marriage transactions points to the irrelevance of their initial origins by stressing their new enriched and ennobled states. For Enide, the story articulates her honour as linked to her virtue alone, and although she changes her clothing to fit in with the expectations of the court, this is a smoke screen; her enhanced wealth does little to make her more suited to her role as Erec's wife and future queen, which turns out to be reliant on her actions and responses rather than her wealth. After all, only after she encourages Erec to return to knightly action upon their marriage does he regain the honour and position that fulfils his destiny as a prince of the kingdom of Lac. Similarly, in "The Clerk's Tale", Griselda's virtuous character is far more important to her suitability to rule than her birth or wealth, which is demonstrated through her constant spirit despite the drastic social changes she undergoes over the course of the text. Representationally, Enide lays a foundation that Griselda can build upon: the first woman indicates that virtue is the defining recommendation for a person, while the second enables a critique of a society still dependent on wealth and heritable nobility. Through this, these two texts resist and even rearticulate the biopolitics of nobility, indicating the importance of character and inner virtue as separate from, and more valuable than, the expression of lineage through a show of wealth in clothing.

Radically, these texts create space in the higher echelons of society for non-nobles to rise to positions of social eminence and power, indicating the socio-cultural consequences of the rise of

commercial activity during the Middle Ages, as detailed by historians like Britnell and Dyer. Enide and Griselda are able to move up the social ladder, more so than Gawain because their marriages give them access to their husbands' honour and status; Gawain, by contrast, must create his own honour through his actions while wearing his armour. The brightly polished armour symbolises the personal restrictions Gawain faces during his attempts to maintain his honour, while the girdle diminishes his honour but saves his life, indicating the impossibility of the perfection of nobility. Ultimately, not even Gawain can act perfectly, demonstrating an effort by the poem to offer a less idealistic vision of chivalry and nobility. Clothing, with its physical and metaphoric relationship to the body, ought to articulate the characters' honourability in accordance with their nobility, but in each of these texts, this turns out not to be the case. The removable nature of the semantically-imbued clothing indicates that the presumed link between physical and non-physical persona is not straightforward; the characters' personalities are independent of their clothing, bodily presentation, and social circumstances, which appears to contradict conservative theories of class that imagine that one's place in the social system is determined by one's birth.

Between debts of gratitude and contracts allowing for sexual access, the valuable clothing in these texts frequently represents the characters' deft navigation of a highly-gendered and sexualized social order. The prominence of gifts in all three texts articulates honour as it is contingent on particular expressions of gender relations and appropriate reciprocation of gifts: women's inherent honour and marital suitability is exposed paradoxically through the new dresses, and Gawain's girdle shapes and constricts his honour as a part of his effort to maintain a perfect manhood. The honour of female characters is dependent on their performance of a particular version of femininity: the wedding gifts (dresses in each case) given to Enide and Griselda oblige them to fulfil the role of wife, and they reciprocate by giving their new husbands sexual access to their bodies in exchange for honourable status. In gaining their new clothing as part of their marriages, the women's honour appears to increase. It is clear, however, that in the case of both Enide and Griselda, the clothing does not actually impart more honour on them; it just exposes their already existing and inherent virtue and honour, indicating their predetermined suitability for their place in the social order. Gawain, on the other hand, accepts the girdle as a gift he cannot reciprocate in order to save his life. This renders him duty-bound to his host's wife and diminishes his own sense of perfect honour. Clothing acts dynamically in social and economic transactions: the characters are forced to face up to the fact that there is no such thing as a free gift, weathering the implications of gifted clothing for their honour and place in the court. Gendered expectations of honour are based in the characters' changing clothing, meaning that the dresses and girdle are implicit representations of a social order that the characters' actions and virtue contradict.

The romance genre frequently places emphasis on particular performances of ‘correct’ gender roles, with masculine knights and feminine ladies whose honour is contingent on maintaining the social system in which they move and operate. Susan Crane outlines how gendered hierarchies in romances operate on such ‘correct’ or normative performances of masculinity and femininity. In *Erec and Enide*, “The Clerk’s Tale” and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Chrétien de Troyes, Chaucer and the Gawain-poet seem at pains to allow space for their characters to transgress some aspects of traditional gender roles, throwing their honour (or lack thereof) into sharp relief. These transgressions, moreover, hint at their social mobility: if the links between body and virtue, wealth and nobility are broken down, then the separation of biological determination and gender performance also becomes a possibility. This fluidity, described by E. Jane Burns as a “sartorial continuum”—defining bodies according to a mix of natural and cultural factors—allows for female characters to have masculine agency and manly knights to be subservient to women. The sartorial continuum also calls to attention the artificial nature of social hierarchies based on bodies, wealth, and honour: the traditional allocation of agency to male characters is challenged in each of the texts when Enide and Griselda are proved honourable in spite of their dresses, not because of them, and when Gawain’s honour is compromised through his interaction with the host’s wife. Because of the breakdown of a rigid gender-based allocation of agency, these texts imply the fallibility of other supposedly established and unassailable social structures in the court. Can structures based on birth and wealth stand if a gender-based hierarchy is proven more malleable than expected? Indeed, Enide and Griselda show that wealth is not required to be virtuous and honourable, and Gawain shows that even those most in line with social expectations may also blunder, calling into question the assumptions about nobility and its socio-cultural significance.

Throughout the texts, the social implications of the characters’ changing clothing challenge expectations of courtly constraints based on either class or gender. Between virtue and honour, Enide, Griselda and Gawain must weigh up the gift transactions they are offered, and choose how best to exercise agency in a courtly environment designed to limit and constrain them. Enide eventually becomes the queen of Lac, having ensured her husband’s honour is maintained. Griselda is rewarded for her constant spirit under Walter’s trials by resuming her rightful place as his wife reuniting with her children; the social improvement she brokers through clothing enables her to benefit from the otherwise restrictive space of the court. Gawain returns home, feeling upset that his perfect manhood is tarnished, but the court’s response to the girdle demonstrates that the public’s perception of his acts has not changed: he remains honourable in the eyes of the court, implying that his own standards are too high. While hereditary nobility and wealth are both

still considerable factors in the Middle Ages in the definition of rulership and the establishment of the court, these texts demonstrate that the characters' virtue is the most important factor to consider, a virtue not absolutely tied to lineage or wealth. Using clothing as a symbol of this works well because of the sheer value of clothing during this period, paired with its close representation of the body makes clothing an apt signifier of the self and its status; at the same time, however, clothing is removable from the body, exposing a naked truth about the characters, namely, their virtue. The early text, *Erec and Enide*, is still mired in its era's concern for the noble lineage ground in bloodlines, while "The Clerk's Tale" and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* indicate a growing stress on the ways that culture proves more important than nature in defining social rank, possibly due to the substantial increase in commercialization after the Black Death in the 1350s. A rich symbol, a potential means of rebellion, and an indication of an unreachable social goal: clothing is so much more than just a covering of the body.

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