

ursula potter

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## Tales of Patient Griselda and Henry VIII

The second half of the sixteenth century saw a sudden rise in interest in England in the story of Patient Griselda. The story was familiar in Tudor England through Boccaccio's Italian tale in the *Decameron*, (1353), Petrarch's Latin adaptation (1373), and Chaucer's English version of the 'Clerk's Tale' in *The Canterbury Tales* (c1400).<sup>1</sup> This surge in interest is generally attributed to a concern with familial relations in reformation England.<sup>2</sup> Quite possibly, however, this attribution can be narrowed down to the very public familial relations of Henry VIII and the harsh treatment of two of his wives. The most obvious is Katherine of Aragon (1485 – January 1536), but as this article argues, once Elizabeth was on the throne her mother Anne Boleyn (1501 – May 1536) may also have been cast as a Patient Griselda as a tactic to strengthen Elizabeth's claim to the throne.

The Griselda story tells of the tyranny of a royal husband, a marquis named Walter, who exacts a vow of obedience from his bride. He repeatedly puts her vow to the test by taking her children from her under pretence of killing them, by exiling her from court, and divorcing her, and then by calling her back to court to wait on his new bride. She never swerves from her obedience or questions his behaviour, and she suffers in silence. The tale finishes with her restoration to favour as his wife and her reunion with her two children. Like the fictional Griselda, Henry's wives had no option but to suffer the violence wreaked on them by a royal husband; Chaucer's tale must have seemed, to many in the Tudor court, an apt analogy which had considerably more tragic consequences. This article considers the role of political allegory in two adaptations of the story dating from the mid-sixteenth century, when a rehabilitation of a maligned queen was not only politically possible but also strategically valuable in establishing the daughter's right to the throne.

In June 1558 a verse narrative entitled *The History of Grisild the Second*, which unequivocally depicts Katherine of Aragon as the tragic Griselda and Henry as the tyrant husband, was presented to Katherine's daughter, Queen Mary, by Sir William Forrest, her chaplain.<sup>3</sup> Then in the early 1560s, with

Elizabeth now on the throne, a play entitled *The Commodity of patient and meeke Grissill* appeared on the scene. Unlike Forrest's version, this one makes no direct identification with either Henry or Anne, but in view of the play's timing and taking into consideration clues within the text, there is a case for reading the work as following Forrest's precedent, only this time casting the tragic heroine as Anne Boleyn, mother to Elizabeth I. Both works adapt the story to represent their heroine as suffering mother rather than as wife, with the advantage of directing attention to the mother-child relationship and to the transmission of virtue from mother to daughter.

### **Katherine of Aragon (1485–1536)**

Chaucer's 'Clerk's Tale' anticipates – with remarkable aptness – Katherine of Aragon's tragic fate.<sup>4</sup> Chaucer's heroine is separated from her children, stripped of her clothes, her jewels, and her waiting women, banished from the court, and then required to return to attend the new bride-to-be. Katherine of Aragon suffered all of these indignities. Just as Chaucer's royal husband, the marquis (Walter), had looked to Rome for a papal dispensation for a divorce, so too did Henry VIII. Even the name in the original tale of the Italian city of Bologna, where the children were hidden and the supposed new bride was to come from, was grist to the mill of a topical Tudor reading. The French city of Boulogne was commonly associated with Katherine's usurper, Anne Boleyn, through the pun on her name and through Anne's connections with France. As E.W. Ives explains it, Anne Boleyn was generally conceived as 'wholly French', having spent nine years on the continent (1513–22), being fluent in French, and being responsible for introducing French fashions and customs into the English court.<sup>5</sup> For a mid sixteenth-century reader Chaucer's tale could not fail to bring Henry's treatment of Katherine to mind. Indeed, according to George Cavendish, Katherine herself had no doubts in claiming she was 'a perfect Griselda' toward Henry and toward 'Mistress Anne', whom Cavendish labelled as 'Venus the insatiate goddess'.<sup>6</sup> Few would dare to put this analogy into print during Henry's lifetime.

One of the few who dared, albeit from the safety of the continent, was the Spanish humanist, Juan Luis Vives, who had been advisor to Katherine on the education of her daughter, Mary. Vives voiced his opinion of Henry's treatment of his first wife through the medium of the Latin grammar school exercises he compiled in 1539. In one of these exercises, a dialogue ensues on the meaning of certain painted windowpanes, and one of the speakers explains that they represent

the fall of Griselda, which John Boccaccio wrote so aptly and skilfully; but my master has decided to add a true story to this fiction, which excels the story of Griselda, viz., that of Godelina of Flanders and the English Queen Catharine of Aragon.<sup>7</sup>

Given that these dialogues were in popular use in English public schools within Henry's lifetime and well into the following century, the image of Katherine as a Patient Griselda must have been a common one in mid sixteenth-century England. When Forrest presented Queen Mary with *The History of Grisild the Second: A narrative, in verse, of the Divorce of Queen Katharine of Arragon*, the analogy must have been bitterly familiar to her already.

### **The History of Grisild the Second**

The title page of this work claims that it was expected to be 'delectable bothe to Heearers and Readers'.<sup>8</sup> 'Heearers' suggests it might also have been intended as a performance piece. The author's motives are manifold, but the principle aims are to move for the beatification of Katherine by creating a quasi-Marian picture of Mary's saintly and suffering mother; to reinforce her daughter's right to the English throne; and to use the mother's martyrdom to argue the daughter's duty to promote catholicism in England (3).

Forrest entitles his work 'a true and moste notable Historye of a right noble and famous ladye produced in Spayne, intytuled, *The Seconde Grisilde*, practiced not longe out of this tyme, in muche parte tragedous'. He claims that Katherine's story as a true Patient Griselda is well known even twenty years after her death: 'Howe muche this Historye of the Second Grysilde is withe manye (at this present daye) knowne to be true' (21). Forrest may have had first-hand knowledge of Katherine's life since he is likely to have been the same Father William Forrest who was one of her chaplains in 1533 and who was considered sufficiently dangerous by Anne Boleyn to be sent north.<sup>9</sup> Citing Petrarch as his source (130), Forrest deviates in several ways from the popular story in order to adapt his version to suit the particulars of Katherine and Henry. The most obvious difference lies in the extended articulation of Griselda's suffering. Katherine as grieving mother is a stark contrast to her legendary namesake, whose stoicism in the face of her children's apparent deaths is the central enigma of Chaucer's tale. Following Katherine's marriage to Henry, we learn of the birth and early death of an infant son, affording the

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first of many occasions depicting Katherine's powerful maternal qualities. Forrest singles her out as a most feeling mother:

tochinge the Mother specyallye,  
Neaver was theare woman (I thinke nolesse)  
That for her childe myght shewe more heavynes. (39)

While Katherine is praised for a range of virtues, her suffering as mother dominates the text. For eight verses Forrest describes in detail how Katherine wept, sobbed, wrung her hands of 'motherly pytee' for the loss of her 'sweete soone' (40). 'I was a mother, and nowe am none' she laments. Katherine's grief is approved precisely for its unrestricted display:

Longe bode this lady and excellent Pryncesse  
Lamentynge her chyldis this life departure,  
Longe laye in her harte by muche heavynes  
The thyng which in no wise she myght agayne recure,  
Nature compelled her so to endure,  
For as she was benynge in her estate,  
So was she (by nature) affectionat. (41)

So much emphasis does the author give to Katherine's grief that he feels impelled to justify it. Excessive grieving was frowned upon in reformation England and Forrest reassures his readers that such extreme grief was virtuous and for the good of the realm, lest Katherine should be seen to contravene 'Goddys ordynance' (41-2).<sup>10</sup> At this early point in the narrative, Henry, under the persona of Walter, is also grief-stricken although manfully trying to hide his emotions:

Though *Walter* (the Father) manfully and stowte,  
(Much stryvyng against Nature ynwardelye)  
As much as hee myght, beare the mateir owte,  
Yeat to his harte (nodoutes) it went fful nye. (39)

Henry is an approved figure here, shown as capable of emotional depth, yet conforming to masculine cultural norms. As the narrative progresses, he loses this heartfelt capacity ('Nature') and turns into a willful sovereign, a hardened husband and an unfeeling father, in contrast to the caring and nurturing mother-daughter relationship that the author develops (105). Phillip's play shows equal concern with the repression of 'Nature' and compassion in the royal father.

Katherine's maternal qualities are further developed through her care for Mary's education. Forrest notes that Katherine had her infant daughter 'nursed in her owne bowre / Till tyme was come of ablactation' (43). He is drawing attention to Katherine as a good mother whose child was not nursed away from court, as Elizabeth was, for example, and who took a close interest in her daughter's early education. When Katherine is exiled from court and separated from her daughter she suffers profoundly: 'the greatest greif to goode Grisildis hart was that she myght have no comfote of her Dowghters companye' (16). Several verses are devoted to Katherine's grief, concluding that 'No Mother eaver was heere, oather yendre, / That, more than she dyd, myght her childe tendre' (86). Katherine's impending death provides occasion for further expressions of maternal grief and the narrative describes her spiritual leave-taking of her absent daughter 'withe muche Motherlye admonytions' (107). Her daughter likewise laments how much she will 'mysse her motherly consolation' (127). Eight verses describe with pathos the mother and daughter's grief and pain at separation, and the injustice of denying the dying Katherine her right to bless and farewell her daughter. The tone is dramatic and full of pathos (110-13). Although Forrest may be exploiting the tragedy for political or religious ends – in order to put pressure on his dedicatee, Mary – the author's indignation emerges from the text as nonetheless very real. Forrest then moves into a comparison of the first fictional Griselde with the second historical Griselde and a eulogy to Katherine whose 'life may well be called a Martyrdome', before closing with an 'Oration consolatory to Queen Mary' (23).

Katherine only had one surviving child, despite six known pregnancies, during her years of marriage to Henry.<sup>11</sup> This reproductive difficulty prompted accusations against her of sterility, which Forrest counters by claiming the fault lay with Henry as a consequence of his adultery: 'meanynge, hee elsewheare dispersed his seede, / Whearfore God wolde not more seade to procede' (84). No doubt the unnamed Anne Boleyn is indicated in this 'elsewheare'. Predictably, Forrest characterises Anne as a seductress, and interprets her excellent contemporary education in terms of the arts of seduction:

In the Cowrte (newe entred) theare dyd frequent  
 A fresche younge damoyzell, that cowlde trippe and go,  
 To synge and to daunce passinge excellent,  
 No tatches shee lacked of loves allurement;

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She cowlde speake Frenche ornately and playne,  
Famed in the Cowrte, (by name) Anne Bullayne. (53)

Her ability to speak French both 'ornately and playne' suggests a talent for linguistic dissimulation. Elsewhere he refers to her as 'mynyon' (82), or 'peece' (56); derides her for her mean descent (55, 69, 70); and calls her honour into question by a previous spousal (58).<sup>12</sup> Forrest's slanderous comments may seem politically risky, given that Mary's health was poor and that her half sister, Elizabeth, was next in succession to the throne, but they serve to remind us just how effective Anne Boleyn's public disgrace had been.

Forrest suggests that Henry's sensual nature made him easy prey to Anne's allurements (49, 55). In contrast, Katherine is characterised as intensely pious, a factor which not only qualifies her for sainthood, but also seems to have kept her out of the king's bed:

This godlye maner ofte wolde shee frequent  
At Greenewiche, she lyeinge alone from the Kynge;  
The Fryers at matyns withe hartye entent  
She wolde bee theare, in devotyon kneelinge. (47)

Significantly, however, Katherine's pious devotions are not to be misinterpreted as sexual frigidity. Forrest explains that she gave herself to religious contemplation for two hours every night in order to subdue any carnal desires (27). Katherine's strengths and values are used to highlight Henry's weaknesses.

Forrest condemns Henry's youthful privy chamber men as 'younkers (lyke Lackwytttes)' and 'young gadding wytts' (51) and he is also critical of Cardinal Wolsey, who was said to have urged Henry to take Anne as his concubine, thereby incurring Anne's undying hatred (58). It is interesting that Forrest notes this is hearsay, thus indicating some reliability in his version of events generally. In the final analysis, however, Henry's own nature is to blame; his volatile temper and ability to dissemble were effective deterrents against the wisdom of his counsellors who 'durst not (contrary) speake their reason, / He was ofte tymes so rageinge furyous' (50, see also 10). Forrest concludes by glossing Henry as frail-natured:

Walter (her husbonde) kynge Henry the Eight,  
A man muche noble in princely corage,  
Yeat in this mateir, importynge great weight,  
He was wronge leadde and wandred at outrage,  
(as may well bee thought, throughe lovys dotage,

love leacherous, inconstante and fycle,  
Whiche in the frayle dothe stooare and much pryce). (130)

Henry is condemned for his injustice toward his daughter Mary: the 'second Walter [did] not tender his child honourably' (21 and 105). How Mary took this criticism of her father, to whom she owed her throne, we do not know, but the work is notable for the author's forthrightness, as he himself is at pains to point out:

So clokedlye under darke coverture  
We have not walked in this Historye,  
But that the readers may undrestande sure  
The meane of oure mentioned memorye,  
Not figured as by Alligorye,  
But this sayde Grysilde, playnlye to define,  
Is playnlye ment the goode Queene Catharyne. (130)

This tone of defiance and criticism in the author's rejection of allegory and his metaphor of 'clokedlye under darke coverture' for underhand motives, suggest a reaction against literary allegory for political dissent or commentary. The catholic Forrest's strong feelings at the mistreatment of Katherine leave no place for hidden meanings and ambiguity or even for personal discretion. Forrest's political aims in this hagiography are not too difficult to discern. He reinforces Mary's legitimacy to the throne through her mother's impeccable reputation and he exploits the mother's martyrdom to urge on the daughter her duty to the counter-reformation. Just a few years later, similar political motivations can be discerned behind Phillip's treatment of the Patient Griselda story. The timing and protestant bias of his version, however, argue for Anne Boleyn as the allegorical subject.

### **Anne Boleyn (1501–1536)**

In November 1558 Mary died and Elizabeth ascended the throne. Elizabeth's mother had been *persona non grata* ever since her execution for treason, adultery and incest in 1536. So politically contentious was Anne's downfall at the time that Henry VIII is said to have written a play as a means of justifying her execution:

In the aftermath of the trial and execution Henry VIII was said to have carried about with him a 'tragedy' of his own devising, relating the misdeeds of his

former queen and her accomplices, which he sought to show to [the French ambassador] and others during a moment of high passion.<sup>13</sup>

This interesting piece of information (recorded in the state papers of Spain) not only reveals just how precarious Henry felt his position to be over the affair, but also demonstrates the degree to which literary forms were regarded as suitable vehicles for the expression of political truths. For the next twenty-two years the Boleyn name would be publicly associated with the deposition of Katherine of Aragon and with promiscuous behaviour (Henry was known to have had an affair with Anne's sister, and rumoured to have slept with her mother). After her execution, Anne Boleyn effectively became what one scholar calls 'a non-person'.<sup>14</sup> A wall of silence descended on her name, extending to puns such as Boulogne, as indicated by the following anecdote: 'When Seymour (brother to Jane) told one of Elizabeth's servants that he would shortly be leaving for Boulogne (which he, like many of his contemporaries, pronounced "Boleyn") he added the jocular rider, "No words of Boleyn!" and the tasteless pun gives some indication of the conspiracy of silence that enshrouded Anne's memory'.<sup>15</sup> In late 1558 the twenty-five year old daughter of this reviled woman was on the throne. In these precarious times how was the Tudor court to deal with the tricky problem of accommodating a royal mother whose name had been so indelibly sullied?

Even long after her death, Anne's protestant reform activity continued to earn her hostility from catholic quarters. In another work by Forrest dated 1571 (well into Elizabeth's reign) the author still refers to Anne in the following terms, although now without naming her: 'A woman born in mean estate, raised to a high one, of dissolute life, who more than others made heresy to arise and flourish in the land; her time was shortened by . . . divine sentence' (185). In a 1580s religious tract published on the continent, the accusation that Elizabeth was a bastard was still being used to refute her claim to the throne. She was no more than

an incestuous bastard, begotten and born in sin, of the infamous courtezán, Anne Boleyn, afterwards executed for advoutery, treason, heresy and incest, among others with her own natural brother.<sup>16</sup>

Sanctification of Anne was clearly out of the question, but a rewriting of Anne's personal reputation on the basis of her role as a suffering mother could be justified. A eulogy to the mother qua mother could only reflect well on the daughter and would assist Elizabeth's claim to the throne as well as argue for a return to protestant reform. In Ives' epilogue to the life of Anne Boleyn he

observes that when Elizabeth ascended to the throne '[was] it fanciful to feel that after twenty years, the mother in the nearby grave in the chapel of St Peter was at last vindicated?'<sup>17</sup> I believe this was the dramatist's aim behind *The Commodity of pacient and meek Grissil*. Unlike Forrest's eulogy, the dramatist could take only the ambiguous form of allegory, given the provocative nature of such rehabilitation, and taking into account Elizabeth's own silence regarding her mother and her acknowledged admiration for her father. An open and public revision of such a long-standing reputation would be too unpalatable and divisive for the fragile politics of the period.

### **The Commodity of pacient and meek Grissill<sup>18</sup>**

This title represents the only known play by John Phillip, dating somewhere between 1558 and 1565. A pre-1561 date of composition has been suggested based on a line in the text referring to the spire of St Paul's, which burned down in that year.<sup>19</sup> However, since the work purports to be a 'history', then the reference to the spire serves to locate the narrative – not the composition – in the appropriate time frame. Similarly, several references to London landmarks in the prologue, together with the closing prayers for Queen Elizabeth, provide an English framework for the traditional land of Salucia. This work is assumed to be the same play that was entered in 1565 and again in 1568 in the registers of the Stationers' company as 'an history of meke and pacyent gresell', both of which were licensed to Thomas Colwell, whose name is on the undated quarto of Phillip's comedy (v). Phillip is noted on the title page as the 'Compiler', suggesting more than one author, and some evidence indicates John Heywood as joint author.<sup>20</sup> Phillip's play is thought to have been performed by Paul's Children, possibly before their patron, Elizabeth; it has many of the hallmarks of drama written for children to perform, including a large number of songs and several female parts. Colwell was noted for his interest in works on the obedience of children and it is likely that he hoped to find a profitable pedagogical market for this play with schools and children's troupes. The allegorical interpretation proposed here would not have been essential to Colwell's commercial venture; only in a royal performance could historical analogies with Anne Boleyn come to the fore.

In August 1559 Elizabeth was entertained by the earl of Arundel at Nonsuch in Surrey and the entertainment included a 'play of the chyldern of Powelles and their maister Sebastian, master Phelyps, and master haywod.'<sup>21</sup> The title of the piece is not recorded, but the reference to 'master Phelyps' has led to speculation that it was John Phillip's *Griselda* play. If this is so, it

is likely to have been conceived by its patron as a gesture toward the vindication of Elizabeth's mother, whose reputation had for so long been tainted by slander and scandal. While no direct references in the play tie it with certainty to Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, clues in the dialogue and in the content suggest its deliberate historical context.

Phillip's play shares a number of similarities with Forrest's narrative. One of these is that both authors claim to be writing history. Whereas there is nothing remarkable about this fact in Forrest's case, it may be significant in Phillip's. Despite the play's classification on the title page as a comedy, it is recorded twice as a 'history' in the Stationer's register. Similarly, the preface to the play opens with the statement that 'Hystorians oft in Hystories, their hole delightes have staid . . . I meane in searching Histories, wherin doth wisdom flow. / Our Auctor found out one, wherein he tooke delight' (2–7) – thus raising the question of whether Phillip is merely acknowledging known sources, or drawing on recent Tudor history, as Forrest did. In the epilogue which honours Elizabeth the speaker again commends 'this historie' to his audience (2098). Thematically, Phillip's play shares Forrest's focus on mothering qualities and maternal suffering and on the duties of children to parents. Like Forrest, he attributes the marquis's tyranny to the failure of counsellors around him to provide good advice, but while Forrest nonetheless holds Henry's frailties of character as ultimately responsible, Phillip avoids blaming his protagonist by painting a picture of naiveté rather than weakness, and by shifting blame squarely onto an introduced vice figure, *Polliticke Persuasion*. The vice figure, under the guise of policy, persuades the marquis to test his wife: 'And that I cannot prevayle with rancor and contencion: / I will frequent through pollicie, another meane, / Wherwith I will molest and distroye her clean' (959–61). 'Policy' had become a dirty word in early sixteenth-century England, a synonym for fraud and deceit, according to Sir Thomas Elyot, who was writing in 1531, right in the midst of political manoeuvring over the divorce issue:

That manner of injury which is done with fraud and deceit is at this present time so commonly practised, that if it be but a little it is called policy, and if it be much and with a visage of gravity, it is then named and accounted for wisdom.<sup>22</sup>

Fraud, deceit, and misogyny are the main qualities attached to this vice figure. Although linking him with one of the major figures in the Henrician court, such as Cardinal Wolsey (who became an enemy to both Katherine and Anne) would be satisfying, the evidence has yet to be identified.<sup>23</sup> The marquis

appoints the vice figure to his service with the observation that 'Polliticke Persuasion [is] a name right excellent, / And for our person very convenient' (115–16); the connotations of the name are apt for Henry, who was such 'a highly persuadable man' and who placed so much faith in policy.<sup>24</sup> As one critic of the play sees it, the marquis is a 'gullible fool'; better gullible than malicious, however, if the allegorical finger is being pointed at Henry VIII.<sup>25</sup> At no point does the marquis consciously act with dishonour; in fact, Phillip specifically raises the issue in order to make this point. Griselda's father voices his fear that the marquis plans to take his daughter as his concubine, not as wife, and the marquis responds, 'I mynd not as a Harlot, with her to lead my life, / But by the force of wedlocks knot, to take her as my wife' (735–6). This innovation in characterisation can be read as an allusion to Henry's honourable treatment of Anne in marrying her, rather than following Wolsey's advice that he make her his mistress.

One obvious difference between Forrest's work and Phillip's play resides in their opposing religious positions. Forrest encourages Mary to move against protestant heretics and urges the promotion of her mother as a catholic martyr. Phillip's play is clearly protestant in its bias, as critics have pointed out. The vice figure is characterised as a vulgar misogynist, who swears freely by the saints (147, 378, 476, 1299), by 'God's mother' (189), and 'by the rood' (936), and whose opening line is a Latin greeting to the audience: 'Benedicite sante'.<sup>26</sup> He masquerades under the guise of a plain-speaking counsellor. His claim that 'I am plaine Dunstable I may say to you' (154), provides a clue to the play's political motives. Editors have glossed Dunstable as a metaphor for a plain, straight road (ie, as a plain-speaking character) but this ignores the double pun that associates Dunstable with one of the most infamous events of the sixteenth century.<sup>27</sup> The farcical trial of Queen Katherine was held at Dunstable, Bedfordshire. In Forrest's verse narrative the author associates two locations with transgressions against Katherine: one is Oxford, for the religious persecution of Catholics by the chancellor, Dr. Cox (13), and the other is Dunstable: 'A Cowrte Walter assignethe at Dunstable, where goode Grisilde was deprieved her regale estate, and there was geaven to name the ladye Douagere' (16). Phillip's transparent reference to recent history identifies this papist and misogynist vice figure with treachery against a queen.

Phillip's is the first version (to my knowledge) of the Patient Griselda story to include a mother for Griselda. In the traditional story – including the 1550 French play thought to be Phillip's primary source – there is no mother, only Griselda's father, Janicle, to guide her. Phillip writes in a mother whose main

function is to give her daughter a pious training, to exemplify the close bonds of affection between mother and child, and to emphasise the importance of filial obedience. The play's early scenes treat the audience to frequent images of domestic harmony between Grissill and both parents, but they focus on Grissill's mother as the active parent and moral instructress to her daughter. Further scenes show Grissill in grief for her now dead mother and provide the occasion for another song eulogising a mother's love. By the time the marquis enters to claim her for his wife, Grissill has been grounded very clearly in those family values epitomised by the terms 'cherishing' and 'nourishing'. This treatment mirrors Forrest's major focus on Katherine's maternal and pious care for her daughter's education as a literary strategy for asserting the daughter's virtues. In this case it is Griselda's own mother who is being portrayed so positively. The traditional role of Janicle, the father, is significantly reduced in comparison. One explanation for these deviations in dramatic treatment may lie in Anne Boleyn's own family and the author's desire to foreground her mother's status over that of the father. Sir Thomas Boleyn came originally from a family of mercers and was the cause of the accusations of 'mean descent', whereas Anne's mother, daughter to the earl of Surrey, came from impeccably noble stock.

Grissill's grief at the supposed slaying of her first child is soon silenced by her vow of obedience, but not until she has eloquently expressed her anguish. In another departure from the traditional story she calls on her women to voice her suffering for her, which they do specifically through the powerful voice given to a nurse. Proverbial wisdom in sixteenth-century England held that 'a nurse's tongue is privileged to talk', and the audience would have had no difficulty recognising the silenced mother's voice in this role.<sup>28</sup> There is no nurse in the 'Clerk's Tale' but Chaucer sows the seed for his readers' imagination:

I trowe that to a norice in this cas  
It had been hard this reuthe for to se;  
Wel myghte a mooder thanne han cryd "allas!"<sup>29</sup>

Phillip gives the nurse six substantial monologues, a song, and a soliloquy, which give her the dramatic action repressed in the wife. At one point she takes the infant daughter to its brooding father supposing it will lighten his mood (1073–74). She tries to touch the father's heart, chiding him for his lack of paternal love, and observing: 'if Nature seme in the to have a place, / Preserve thy Childe from death, end not hir vitall race' (1139–40). She draws on familiar humanist, rhetorical images of the tiger, the lion, and the bear, all of which are guided by nature in the nurturing and cherishing of their young

to point to the father's deficiency. In April 1536, only a few days before her arrest, Anne Boleyn touchingly used her infant daughter to appeal to an alienated Henry. Many years later an eyewitness sent a poignant description of the occasion to Elizabeth:

Never shall I forget the sorrow which I felt when I saw the most serene queen, your most religious mother, carrying you, still a little baby, in her arms and entreating the most serene king your father, in Greenwich Palace, from the open window of which he was looking into the courtyard, when she brought you to him. I do not perfectly understand what had been going on, but the faces and gestures of the speakers plainly showed that the king was angry, although he could conceal his anger wonderfully well.<sup>30</sup>

Henry was apparently well known for his ability to dissemble, as Forrest also tells his readers a number of times. In Phillip's play the marquis is not a natural dissembler, but under the tutelage of the vice figure he learns how to feign in the interests of policy (1051–6).

One further maternal voice is added by Phillip: that of the countess to whom the infant children are sent in secret for their upbringing. Phillip makes her a childless widow and she provides the occasion for further emphasis on a woman's natural function as mother. As one critic has pointed out, by dramatising the countess's gain he makes the audience even more poignantly aware of Grissill's loss.<sup>31</sup> When the infant daughter is brought to her, for her to 'cherishe' and 'nourishe' (1262–63), the countess and her maid respond with joy: 'my hart revyves and skipes for joye, to see thy pretye face' (1274), followed by ten further lines describing the beauty of the child and the dramatic effect she has on the two women. Nothing similar to the following lines exists in any previous version, including Forrest's, thus suggesting that Phillip had a particular interest in bringing the infant daughter to the attention of his audience:

*Countess:* Oh [s]lylly Babe whose feature fayre surmountes the ruddie rose  
 In shapinge every lim of thee Nature did forthe desclose,  
 Hir c[u]nninge skylle for every wight that hath thy vigor seene,  
 May saye and swere a fairer peece hath never framed ben,  
 Come now receive this Child behould hir seemly face,  
 Hir smilingle cheare doth comfort me, God pour on hir his grace.  
*Maid:* Oh God thou God of mightful powre, thou rocke on whom is staid,  
 My confidence and all my trust, my buckler and my ayd,

What livinge wight hath seene, a fairer female Childe,  
 Hir lively lookes and shape so cleare, hath doler cleane exild. (1281–90)

In allegorical terms these otherwise supernumerary lines could be construed as singing the praises of the infant Elizabeth. When the infant boy is sent to the countess there is no such response. This fact is particularly relevant if the play was first performed before Elizabeth. In *King Henry VIII* (1613), Shakespeare uses the dramatic device of presenting a royal infant to prophecy a great reign. In the closing scene to the play a long complimentary speech is given in praise of the infant Elizabeth, anticipating her outstanding qualities (5.4.15–62).<sup>32</sup> In the final lines attention is drawn to the queen, still lying in after childbirth, and the assembled lords are instructed by Henry to go and pay their respects to Anne (5.4.72–4). Shakespeare is of course identifying in retrospect the qualities and virtues for which Elizabeth became honoured as a sovereign and he uses them to justify her mother's virtue. For Phillip, writing when Elizabeth was still new to the throne, the transmission of virtue is intended to work the other way; promoting the virtues of the mother bestows legitimacy on the daughter. At the end of the play the marquis poses the political question of Griselda's children's entitlement to the throne, 'Is it not convenient that after me hir Children raine?' (1997), an odd question given that no other person apart from the now absent vice figure has challenged Grissill's virtue. He receives the following response from his counsellors:

Right honorable Lord a voyding daingers, and doubts scrupelous  
 I franckly and freely, make protestacyon,  
 That hir condiscion, beinge as they be most vertuous  
 Shall cause hir Children to be had in estimacion,  
 And God willinge, as our superiours, they shall rule this nacion. (2000–04)

The children thus inherit virtue from their mother. John Foxe would later use much the same argument as did Phillip to justify Anne Boleyn as a figure of virtue:

to all other sinister judgements and opinions, whatsoever can be conceived of man against that virtuous queen, I object and oppose again (as instead of answer) the evident demonstration of God's favour, in maintaining, preserving, and advancing the offspring of her body, the lady Elizabeth, now queen.<sup>33</sup>

Elizabeth's legitimacy was a major factor in Tudor royal politics and the vindication of Anne Boleyn once Mary was dead was crucial to the protestant cause.

### Conclusion

Some scholars have considered Phillip's play as an encouragement to Elizabeth to marry. Some even suggest that Lord Arundel, then aged forty-nine, and the play's patron, was offering himself as a suitor.<sup>34</sup> Certainly, Arundel had been touted as a suitor and in early 1565 Elizabeth is recorded as acknowledging that he was the only English nobleman worthy of her, but she simultaneously rejected him by stating that 'he was as far off as the poles are asunder'.<sup>35</sup> The Patient Griselda story hardly seems appropriate for urging marriage on Elizabeth; it not only graphically documents the two conflicting roles of royal wife and royal mother, but also epitomises the dangers of marriage for a female sovereign. This very logic Henry himself had used to argue the imperative of a male heir: 'if the female heir shall chance to rule, she cannot continue long without an husband, which, by God's law, must then be her governor and head and so finally shall direct this realm'.<sup>36</sup>

Forrest's use of the Griselda story just a year or so earlier offers a more logical reading. It is more likely that the play's presumed patron, Lord Arundel, was publicly consolidating his allegiance to the new young monarch by offering an acknowledgement of the injustices suffered by her mother and a rewriting of her reputation that would endorse Elizabeth's legitimacy. The play also presents the dangers of poor and ineffective counsel in court, and could well be arguing for a continuing role for Arundel on Elizabeth's Privy Council.<sup>37</sup> Since the benign counsellors in the play – Sobriety, Reason and Fidence – failed quite spectacularly to prevent the vice figure's machinations, the play supports the need for an experienced council unafraid to speak its mind. In the closing lines of the play the author offer prayers for the Lords who will advise Elizabeth, urging the need for vigilance.

Identifying political allegory is risky, as critics of this play have noted.<sup>38</sup> Yet one of the strongest indicators for political allegory must surely be the unusual rise in popularity of a particular tale at certain periods of history. For example, after 1857 there was apparently a 'sudden rash of productions of *Medea*. Why? Because the Great Divorce Act was passed that year. Cue *Medea* the spurned wife, with her terrible revenge'.<sup>39</sup> The similar sudden rash of literary productions of the Patient Griselda story in England dating from the reigns of Mary and Elizabeth seems uniquely cued to the need to publicly

acknowledge the tyranny that their royal mothers suffered at the hands of Henry VIII and to convert that public acknowledgement into political support for the reigning sovereign.

## Notes

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- 1 Between 1550 and 1602 Chaucer's *Tales* were republished four times: Thynne's 'booksellers' edition in 1550, The Stowe Folio in 1561, and Speght's editions in 1598 and 1602. See Alice S. Miskimin, *The Renaissance Chaucer* (New Haven, 1975), 226. The 'Clerk's Tale' is of course only one of many tales in the collection, but it is one that was singled out by at least six other authors for literary treatment during this same period; these adaptations include a ballad, a chapbook version, a verse narrative, and at least three plays.
- 2 See for example Lee Bliss, 'The Renaissance Griselda: A woman for All Seasons,' *Viator* 23 (1992): 301–43.
- 3 William Forrest, *The History of Grisild the Second*: ed W.D. Macray (London, 1875). All references are to page numbers and are included within the text.
- 4 'The Clerk's Tale', *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed (Oxford, 1990), 737–42. All further references are to this edition.
- 5 See E.W. Ives, *Anne Boleyn* (Oxford, 1986), 197, 255.
- 6 George Cavendish, *Thomas Wolsey Late Cardinal His Life and Death*, ed Roger Lockyer (London, 1962) 58, 65. Although not published until 1641 the memoirs were written between 1554 and 1557 and circulated in several manuscript versions. Ives, *Anne Boleyn*, 119, 69.
- 7 Juan Luis Vives, *Tudor School-Boy Life: The Dialogues of Juan Luis Vives*, ed Foster Watson (London, 1970), 96.
- 8 Forrest's work was not published until 1875.
- 9 Alison Weir, *Henry VIII: King and Court* (London, 2001), 29. Maria Dowling, 'Humanist Support for Katherine of Aragon', *Bulletin of The Institute of Historical Research* 57 (1984): 52.
- 10 Anne Boleyn wrote to a friend in grief, ostensibly to 'comfort her in her trouble', but also to chastise her: 'I pray you leave your indiscreet trouble, both for displeasing of God and also for displeasing of me, that doth love you so entirely'. Ives, *Anne Boleyn*, 378–9.
- 11 Ives, *Anne Boleyn*, 236.
- 12 This may have been to Lord Percy, son to the Earl of Northumberland, a match which was thwarted by Wolsey. See Cavendish, *Thomas Wolsey*, 59. Or it may have been Thomas Wyatt. See Ives, 9.

- 13 Greg Walker, *Plays of Persuasion: Drama and Politics at the Court of Henry VIII* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 21.
- 14 Ives, *Anne Boleyn*, 419.
- 15 Anne Somerset, *Elizabeth I* (London, 1991), 7–8.
- 16 William Allen, 'Admonition to the Nobility and People of England and Ireland 1588'. See Appendix to John Lindgard, *The History of England from the first Invasion by the Romans to the Accession of William and Mary in 1688*, 5th ed (London, 1849), 6.706, n 10.
- 17 Ives, *Anne Boleyn*, 420.
- 18 John Phillip, *The Play of Patient Grissell*, eds Ronald B. Mckerrow and W.W. Greg, Malone Society Reprints (London, 1909). All further references are to this edition and are included within the text.
- 19 Faith Gildenhuis ed, *A Gathering of Griseldas: Three Sixteenth-Century Texts* (Ottawa: Dovehouse, 1996) 200, n 20.
- 20 Gildenhuis, *A Gathering of Griseldas*, 43–4. Gildenhuis follows Charles Walter Roberts, 'An Edition of John Phillip's *Commodye of Pacient and Meeke Grissill*', Ph.D. diss, University of Illinois, 1938. Bliss offers a contrary opinion, 'The Renaissance Griselda' 305, n 14.
- 21 T.H. Vail Motter, *The School Drama in England* (London, 1929), 135.
- 22 Thomas Elyot, *The Book named The Governor*, ed S.E. Lehmborg (London, 1962) 168.
- 23 Katherine blamed Wolsey for her divorce and Anne waged a bitter power struggle with him for his treatment of her and later of her father. See Alison Weir, *Henry VIII: King and Court*, 275, 280, 289.
- 24 Ives, *Anne Boleyn*, 15.
- 25 Bliss, 'The Renaissance Griselda', 311.
- 26 See Janette Dillon on the implications of catholic language in Renaissance drama: *Language and Stage in Medieval and Renaissance England* (Cambridge, 1924).
- 27 Gildenhuis, *A Gathering of Griseldas* 199, n 3.
- 28 Morris Palmer Tilley, *Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries* (Ann Arbor, 1950), N355, N509.
- 29 'The Clerk's Tale', *The Riverside Chaucer*, ll.561–3.
- 30 Ives, *Anne Boleyn*, 354.
- 31 Bliss, 'The Renaissance Griselda', 309.
- 32 *King Henry VIII*, ed John Margeson (Cambridge, 1990).
- 33 Quoted in Ives, *Anne Boleyn*, 61.
- 34 L.B. Wright, 'A Political Reflection in Phillip's *Patient Grissell*', *The Review of English Studies* 4, 16 (1928), 427; and David Bevington, *Tudor Drama and*

- Politics: A Critical Approach to Topical Meaning* (Cambridge Mass., 1968), 148–9.
- 35 Martine Hume, *The Courtships of Queen Elizabeth: a History of the Various Negotiations for her Marriage* (New York, 1904), rev ed, 80.
- 36 J. Christopher Warner, *Henry VIII's Divorce: Literature and the Politics of the Printing Press* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1998) 41.
- 37 Arundel had been a member of the Privy Council to Queen Mary. See Alison Weir, *Children of England: the heirs of King Henry VIII* (London, 1996), 362, 942.
- 38 David Bevington, *Tudor Drama and Politics* 148.
- 39 Graham Topping, 'Medea Studies', *Oxford Today* 12.2 (2000), 10–12.