

Negative Expressions in “The Clerk’s Tale”*

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It is said that negatives play an important part in Chaucer’s texts, to say nothing of other Middle English writings. The scholars only deal with the syntactic or grammatical use of negatives, but no one has yet explained the meanings of negative expressions. This paper, focusing on the speech of the characters, has investigated the negatives or negative expressions used in the speeches of the main characters Walter and Griselda and the Narrator in “The Clerk’s Tale,” *The Canterbury Tales*. It should be noted here that the relationship between master and man cultivated and established “gladly” in “The General Prologue” is transferred to the conjugal relationship between Walter and Griselda in “The Clerk’s Tale.” Griselda, using negative expressions, receives Walter’s ascetic teaching gladly and naturally.

1. Introduction

When we read Chaucer’s texts, we often meet with negative expressions. We find these expressions not only in the poet’s sentences, clauses, phrases, and words, but also in the internal structures of the words, i.e. morphemes.

Negatives are said to be often used not only in Chaucer’s texts but also in other Middle English writings, as Elliott, Mosse, Roscow, Sandved, and others indicate in their essays. These scholars have addressed Middle English negatives from a syntactic point of view.⁽¹⁾ Burnley also discusses Chaucer’s use of negatives syntactically, noting the differences of negatives between those in the Ellesmere MS and the Hengwrt MS.⁽²⁾

These scholars only deal with the syntactic or grammatical use of negatives, but no one has yet explained the meanings of negative expressions. We should read closely Chaucer’s texts word by word to better understand the meaning of each negative expression within its context. For example, we remember the scene where the Narrator describes Criseyde as “nevere lasse mannyssh.” (1.284) The adjective “mannyssh” is defined by the *OED*: “Of a woman, her attributes, etc.: Resembling a man, manlike, masculine. Chiefly *contemptuous*.” Since this *contemptuous* word is negated by the negatives, we understand that Criseyde’s feminine virtue is much emphasized. Then we quote a famous passage in “General Prologue” in *The Canterbury Tales*: “He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde / In al his lyf unto no maner wight.” (I (A) 70-71) The noun “vileynye,” meaning “wicked, low, obscene, or opprobrious speech,” throws the virtuous speech and the action of the noble knight into relief through the accumulation of negatives.

On the other hand, in *Troilus and Criseyde* we remember the adjective “unkynde,” which consists of the negative prefix “un” and the stem “kynde.” The adjective “kynde” may mean “having a gentle and sympathetic, or benevolent nature.” Criseyde says to Troilus, “Don’t be ‘unkynde’ to me,” when she parts from him, as in “And douteles, if that ich after wende, / I ner but ded; and er ye cause fynde,

/ For Goddes love, so beth me naught unkynde!" (4. 1650-52) (Even though Criseyde tries to be "kynde" to Troilus—even believing herself to be so, she nevertheless becomes "unkynde" to Troilus in Book V.)

The negatives thus used effectively in Chaucer's works are most often found in "The Clerk's Tale." It may be too hasty to conclude that the high frequency of negatives suggests an important role in the work, but it seems that the use of negatives is directly and closely related to both the contents of "The Clerk's Tale," and the characterization found therein.⁽³⁾ Such use may be skilful and intentional by the poet Chaucer. In this paper, focusing on the speech of the characters, we would like to investigate the negatives or negative expressions used in the speeches of the main characters Walter and Griselda and the Narrator in "The Clerk's Tale."⁽⁴⁾

2. Negative Expressions Used by Walter

In order to test Griselda's patience, Walter uses various lies which are often connected with the negative expressions. An outstanding feature of Walter's orders to others, including Griselda, not to do anything, is represented by his use of negative expressions. As a marquess, Walter governs not only his subjects but also his wife Griselda, so it is a matter of course that he uses words related not only to his reign and government, but also impressionistic negative expressions.

First, Walter uses negative expressions when he orders his subjects not to make a complaint about his choice of a new wife.

... that ye
Agayn my choys shul *neither* grucche *ne* stryve; (169-70)
And but ye wole assente in swich manere,
I prey yow, speketh *namoore* of this matere." (174-75)

Second, Walter uses negative expressions again when he requires Griselda's passive obedience to him and deprives her of the free will absolutely:

"I seye this, be ye redy with good herte.
To al my lust, and that I frely may,
As me best thynketh, do yow laughe or smerte,
And *nevere* ye to grucche it, nyght *ne* day?
And eek whan I sey 'ye,' *ne* sey *nat* 'nay,'
Neither by word *ne* frownyng contenance? (351-56)

Third, Walter uses negative expressions, when he tells the truth, negating every lie he told intentionally to test his wife Griselda. In the following instance, negatives are used with the swearing before God. Even his confession has a peremptory tone of vice:

"This is ynogh, Grisilde myn," quod he;
"Be now *namoore* agast *ne* yvele apayed.
.....
"Grisilde," quod he, "by God, that for us deyde.
Thou art my wyf, *ne noon* oother I have,
Ne nevere hadde, as God my soule save!
.....
Taak hem agayn, for now maystow *nat* seye
That thou hast lorn *noon* of thy children tweye.
.....

"And folk that ootherweys han seyde of me,
I warne hem wel that I have doon this deede
For *no* malice, *ne* for *no* crueltee,
But for t'assaye in thee thy wommanheede,
And *nat* to sleen my children — God forbeede! —
But for to kepe hem pryvely and stille,
Til I thy purpos knewe and al thy wille." (1051-78)

Thus, most negative expressions in Walter's speech are used when he governs and orders the others, especially his wife Griselda.

3. Negative Expressions Used by Griselda

Griselda is a patient wife who gladly endures the trials given by Walter. Her patience is directly revealed in her speech and action, to say nothing of her facial expressions. Using negative expressions, Griselda brings herself under Walter's rule and shows her steadfast faith. Her unchangeable attitude is not unnatural indeed, but it seems to be connected with her naive joyfulness. Her heart and her speech are united harmoniously; she seems glad to endure steadfastly. So we unexpectedly find many expressions showing joy in this work.

Then we remember a famous passage concerning the Clerk in "General Prologue" of *The Canterbury Tales*: "And *gladly* wolde he lerne and *gladly* teche." (I(A) 308) In "The Clerk's Tale," Griselda gladly receives Walter's compulsive and forcible teaching. Her negative expressions are not always connected with the joyous situation, but it seems that what would normally make everybody else feel pain is a natural joy to Griselda.

Griselda thus obediently submits to Walter's orders gladly and naturally. She enters into the negative world spontaneously, as is shown in the adverb "willyngly":

She seyde, "Lord, *undigne* and *unworthy*
Am I to thilke honour that ye me beede,
But as ye wole youreself, right so wol I.
And heere I swere that *never* willyngly,
In werk *ne* thoght, I *nyl* yow disobeye,
For to be deed, though me were looth to deye." (359-64)

She does not assent herself, since she is "undigne and unworthy," the adjectives which impart her humble attitude to her lord Walter. She never says that she obeys her lord in her action and thought, but she does not disobey her lord, nor does she break her promise to obey him even if she dies. Such a negative expression emphasizes Griselda's unchangeable humble attitude more impressionistically than the affirmative expression.

While Walter uses the negative imperative, Griselda corresponds to Walter's negative speech, using recurrent negatives. Does this speech somewhat reflect her complaining tone of voice, as Winny states?²⁽⁵⁾

"I have," quod she, "seyd thus, and evere shal:
I wol *no* thyng, *ne* *nyl* *no* thyng, certayn,
But as yow list. *Naught* greveth me at al,
Though that my doughter and my sone be slayn, —
.....
I have *noght* has *no* part of children tweyne

But first siknesse, and after, wo and peyne.
.....

But now I woot youre lust, and what ye wolde,
Al youre plesance ferme and stable I holde;
For wiste I that my deeth wolde do yow ese,
Right gladly wolde I dyen, yow to plese.

“Deth may *noght* make *no* comparisoun
Unto youre love.” (645-67)

We are impressed that Griselda speaks to Walter gladly: “wiste I that my deeth wolde do yow ese, / Right gladly wolde I dyen, yow to plese.” (664-65) Even though this speech implies Griselda’s complaint, we understand that she accepts and practices “gladly” whatever she is ordered to do by Walter.

Then the scene moves to Walter’s new wedding ceremony. Walter calls back “sely povre Griselda,” on the pretext that he needs many helping hands at the nuptials. As the Narrator states: “And she with humble herte and glad visage, / Nat with no swollen thoght in hire corage,” (949-50) she is never as proud as before and she is modest and glad. Her gladness is naturally revealed in her speech where the negatives are recurrent.

“Nat oonly, lord, that I am glad,” quod she,
“To doon youre lust, but I desire also
Yow for to serve and plese in my degree
Withouten feynting, and shal everemo;
Ne nevere, for *no* wele *ne no* wo,
Ne shal the goost withinne myn herte stente
To love yow best with al my trewe entente.” (967-73)

Griselda says: “I am glad to doon youre lust,” and then she, using negative expressions, states that she will not lose her love. She is willing to serve Walter. Her reverent and humble service to Walter is done by her “glad” heart. She tries to devote herself unselfishly to her lord, even though she throws away her life, as is shown in the following negative expressions:

“Now rekke I *nevere* to been deed right heere;
Sith I stonde in youre love and in youre grace
No fors of deeth, *ne* whan my spirit pace!” (1090-92)

4. Negative Expressions Used Mainly by the Narrator

The narrative in “The Clerk’s Tale” is narrated by the “Clerk of Oxenford,” which also contains negatives. We will examine those negative expressions, and we will include the negatives in the speech of “sadde folk” who might well be regarded in the same light with the Narrator’s speech. Most negative expressions in the Narrator’s speech are used to make moralistic comments, which are general considerations and objective descriptions of Griselda’s patience and virtue. It may be an excellent expression of negatives, above all, that the “unsadde” people are judged and criticized by the continuous use of ‘un’-words, which negate the virtues of Griselda. The “sad” people comment critically regarding the “unsad” and “stormy” people. The commentators use ‘un’-words continually. The “sad” people speak for the Narrator, because in the former situation the Narrator criticizes unfavourably “the rude peple” (750), referring to the people who believe that the divorce between Walter and Griselda is right.

"O stormy peple! *Unsad* and evere *untrewe*!

Ay *undiscreet* and chaungynge as a fane! (995-96)

As we shall see, this passage may show that the supposed wise and serious persons make an ironic remark about the changeable nature of the "rude" people who are liable to change easily. It should be noted that we have three 'un'-words in this quotation: "unsad," "untrewe," and "undiscreet." Here we do not forget that there exist the stems or bases of the 'un'-words, i.e. "sad," "trewe," and "discreet." These adjectives show Griselda's unchangeable and magnificent nature. The virtues of human beings, especially Griselda's, are especially emphasized in this work. So when the negative prefix "un" is attached to these stems, it makes the meaning of the stems heighten the effect contrastively. The meaning of the stems symbolizes and represents the excellent virtues with which the "stormy," "unsad," and noisy people in this work should be invested. Ultimately, Griselda's stable nature is emphasized.⁽⁶⁾

The negative expressions which the Narrator uses in his general observations are most often found when the Narrator is conscious of those women in the audience who hear his speech. For example, the Narrator uses negative expressions when he states that men do not have as half a "trewe" nature as women.

Though clerkes preise wommen but a lite,
Ther kan *no* man in humblesse hym acquite
As womman kan, *ne* kan been half so trewe
As wommen been, but it be falle of newe. (935-38)

The Narrator thus uses the negative expressions humourously.

Thus Walter lowely — *nay*, but roially —
Wedded with fortunat honestetee. (421-22)

The negative "nay" is an interjection, but we include it as a negative expression because it ironically connects Griselda's lowly social position with her internal nobleness. In appearance Walter married with a woman of humble condition but in reality he married a woman with a royally noble heart. This kind of contrastive statement is represented humourously by the negative "nay."

It may be a masterpiece that in "Lenvoy de Chaucer" the Narrator, humourously making use of the negative expression, states that the audience does not have to be patient like Griselda, considering the ladies attending before the Narrator.

O noble wyves, ful of heigh prudence,
Lat *noon* humylitee youre tonge naille,
Ne lat *no* clerk have cause or diligence
To write of you a storie of swich mervaille
As of Grisildis pacient and kynde,

.....
Ye archewyves, stonde at defense,
Syn ye be strong as is a greet camaille;
Ne suffreth *nat* that men yow doon offense.

.....
Ne dred hem *nat*; doth hem *no* reverence,
For though thyn housbonde armed be in maille,

(1183-1202)

In short, the Narrator is so everchangingly protean that he can state opposite meanings, in order to

attract the attention of the audience. He has described the patient Griselda in his Tale, but at last he says, "do not be patient" and "do not endure," before the lively and *mannyssh* "wyf of Bath." His negative expressions are the good means of irony.

The relationship between master and man cultivated and established "gladly" in "The General Prologue" is transferred to the conjugal relationship between Walter and Griselda in "The Clerk's Tale." Using negative expressions, Griselda receives Walter's ascetic teaching gladly and naturally.

At last, Griselda's perseverance gets the better of Walter's tyranny. She is blessed by being reunited with her children. However, stating that such a patient woman does not exist in the present world, the Narrator denies his story with the use of negative expressions. This kind of the Narrator's humorous use of negative expressions shows not only Chaucerian humour but also Chaucer's uniquely well-balanced sense of style.

* This is a revised paper of an earlier version delivered at the 65th General Meeting of the English Literary Society of Japan, held at Tokyo University, on 16 May 1993. All Chaucerian citations are from L.D. Benson (ed.) *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). The italics in the passage are my own.

NOTES

Table 1. Frequency of Negatives in Chaucer's Works.

	CT	BD	HF	ANEL	PF	BO	TC	LGW	SHP	ASTR	RR
na	10	0	0	0	1	0	5	0	0	0	0
namo	9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
namoore	97	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
namore	0	0	0	0	0	1	28	2	0	0	1
nat	1059	17	3	0	20	579	197	142	27	3	38
naught	11	0	1	0	0	12	104	2	0	0	4
noght	190	22	21	2	1	45	0	3	7	0	3
nought	2	3	3	0	1	2	178	7	4	0	100
nay	83	11	7	3	3	15	33	5	5	0	9
ne	901	66	70	16	23	777	234	106	65	19	327
neither	42	0	1	0	0	10	9	1	3	1	18
never	48	37	27	5	0	0	1	6	31	1	100
nevere	223	0	0	1	9	40	150	20	6	4	23
no	825	44	39	12	15	213	219	83	95	13	270
nor	12	6	1	0	0	6	21	3	2	1	32
nothing	1	3	6	2	1	17	12	6	7	0	16
nothyng	40	14	2	0	2	21	19	6	2	0	41
un-	158	4	18	6	12	152	113	24	20	2	50
total	3711	227	198	47	88	1889	1324	416	274	44	1032

WORD TOKEN; CT:182037, BD:8668, HF:13255, ANEL:2771, PF:5522, BO:51479, TC:765590, LGW:25689, SHP:10701, ASTR:14755, RR:48370

Table 2. Frequency of Negatives in *The Canterbury Tales*.

	GP	KNT	MILLT	RVT	CKT	MLT	WBT	FRT	SUMT	CLT	MERCH	SQT	FRANT
na	0	0	1	6	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
namo	2	1	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	1	0
namoore	1	14	1	2	0	4	4	2	3	7	9	5	6
nat	26	63	39	19	5	26	59	31	35	50	57	27	28
naught	1	3	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0
noght	9	25	4	5	0	15	18	1	5	19	8	4	6
nought	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
nay	0	5	3	1	0	3	8	8	4	5	4	1	4
ne	23	99	18	8	1	26	29	15	16	58	38	28	37
neither	0	6	2	0	0	1	0	0	1	6	6	0	1
never	1	3	0	0	0	3	5	1	1	0	1	4	2
nevere	4	17	2	1	0	7	15	5	3	17	12	8	22
no	25	58	23	14	3	37	67	15	24	66	55	16	36
nor	3	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	1	0
nothing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
nothyng	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	2	2	3	0	0	2
un—	2	11	5	4	0	8	4	2	2	15	11	5	8
total	98	308	99	60	9	135	213	82	96	249	203	100	153

	PHYS	PARDT	SHIP	PRT	THOP	MEL	MKT	NPT	SECNT	CYT	MANCT	PARS
na	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
namo	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
namoore	0	4	6	1	1	2	4	5	1	5	2	9
nat	8	30	22	6	5	158	35	29	20	49	17	216
naught	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	0
noght	1	5	3	3	1	14	8	2	6	8	5	15
nought	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
nay	0	7	3	1	1	3	0	3	1	11	1	6
ne	7	16	13	2	3	139	37	25	17	25	12	210
neither	0	1	2	0	1	4	1	1	0	0	0	9
never	0	0	1	0	0	2	2	5	0	7	5	5
nevere	3	6	2	1	0	19	13	7	8	13	5	33
no	22	24	20	3	5	75	34	23	15	33	16	116
nor	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
nothing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
nothyng	0	2	0	0	1	5	1	3	0	4	2	10
un—	2	4	1	4	0	6	6	2	5	9	3	39
total	43	99	75	22	19	428	141	106	75	165	69	668

WORD TOKEN; KNT: 17147, MLT: 9044, WBT: 9987, CLT: 9447, MEL: 16906, PARS: 30964

- (1) R.W.V. Elliott, *Chaucer's English* (London: André Deutsch, 1974). F. Mossé, *A Handbook of Middle English* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1952). G.H. Roscow, *Syntax and Style in Chaucer's Poetry* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1981). A.O. Sandved, *Introduction to Chaucerian English* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985).
- (2) D. Burnley, *A Guide to Chaucer's Language* (London: Macmillan, 1983).
- (3) The fact that many negatives are used in "The Clerk's Tale" is shown in the Tables (1) and (2). We deal with the following negatives in this paper: "ne," "nat," "no," "naught(*or* no(u)ght)," "nothing(*or* nothyng)," "never(e)," "nay," "neither," "nam(o)ore(*or* namo)," and "nor." The complex word, which consists of the negative affix "un" and the stem, is also dealt with here. The other contracted forms such as "nolde," "noon," "ny," etc. are omitted in the list. The data is based on Machine Readable Texts of Chaucer Project, in which F.N.Robinson's text: *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Houghton Mifflin, 1957) is the source textbook. Table 1 shows the frequency of negatives in Chaucer's works. Table 2 shows the frequency of negatives in *The Canterbury Tales*.
- (4) Table 3 shows the frequency of negatives in the female characters' speech. Table 4 shows the frequency of negatives in the male characters' speech.

Table 3. Frequency of Negatives in the Female Characters' Speeches.

	Griselda	Criseyde
na, etc.	59	229
word-token	1292	8986

Table 4. Frequency of Negatives in the Male Characters' Speeches.

	Walter	Troilus	Pandarus
na, etc.	40	229	283
word-token	1424	11368	14212

- (5) J.Winny (ed.), *The Clerk's Prologue and Tale: from the Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer* (London: Cambridge UP, 1966)
- (6) A. Jimura, "Chaucer's Use of 'un'-words in *The Clerk's Tale* — With special reference to "unsad," "untrewe," and "undiscreet—" (forthcoming)

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