Insistent, Persistent, Resilient: The Negative Poetics of Patient Griselda[1]

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This essay, which reads a core text of late medieval Europe through paradigms from the theoretical fields of new materialism, the environmental humanities, and trauma studies, illustrates unexpected strategies for agency in a patriarchal world. The story of Patient Griselda, first finding written life in the last of one hundred Italian tales in Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1353), persevered in multiple iterations, from Francesco Petrarch's Latin translation and commentary (1374) to at least two French versions, those of Philippe de Mézières (1380s) and Christine de Pizan (*The Book of the City of Ladies* [finished 1405]). The focus here will be on *The Clerk's Tale*, the Middle English version by Geoffrey Chaucer in his long poem of multiple stories framed by pilgrimage, *The Canterbury Tales*. Generally assumed to have been written in the last decade of the fourteenth century, Chaucer's version deviates, as will be shown, from his presumed sources (certainly Petrarch; arguably Giovanni Boccaccio, Philippe de Mézières, or another French source), to make a pitiful, but surprisingly powerful, female protagonist.[2]

1. Many thanks to the helpful comments of the anonymous reviewers of this article, as well as those of James A. Kilfoyle.

2. J. Burke Severs, *The Literary Relationships of Chaucer's Clerkes Tale*, Yale Studies in English, 96 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1942); Anne Middleton, "The Clerk and His Tale: Some Literary Contexts," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 2 (1980): 146; and Leah Schwebel, "Redressing Griselda: Restoration through Translation in the *Clerk's Tale*," *The Chaucer Review* 47, no. 3 (2013): 274–75.

Clearly resonating in multiple linguistic traditions, the story concerns the marriage between a low-born peasant, Griselda, and her high-born husband, Walter (Gualtieri in Boccaccio), predicated on the notorious vow that she should acquiesce to his will no matter what. Although his wife unexpectedly makes for a good counsellor and leader, Walter decides to test her.[3] These trials consist of taking away their children—a girl and a boy—with the apparent intention of having them killed. Griselda accepts Walter's decisions, including his repudiation of her, which drives her back to her poor father's home. Recalled to court to prepare festivities for Walter's young bride, Griselda agrees, only to tell him not to treat this second wife in the same way she herself had been treated. At this, Walter tells her the truth: the supposed new spouse is really their daughter, who, with her brother, had been secretly raised by Walter's sister. All ends "happily," though Chaucer adds an "Envoy," a sort of Epilogue, which has been much debated by scholars.

Griselda, given the name "Patient Griselda" for her endurance over the years under her marital yoke and the anguish of emotional torment, resonates with and provokes readers and scholars. Are we to read her allegorically, with Griselda standing in for the individual soul and Walter for God as Petrarch suggests?[4] Is she a pathetic victim in a world where class and gender norms enforce her submission to sadistic machinations?[5] Is she a monstrous mother to accept Walter's seemingly murderous actions against their children?[6] Do her parallels to the Virgin Mary or even

3. Sarah Stanbury, *The Visual Object of Desire in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 125; and Rowena G. Archer, "How ladies…who live on their manors ought to manage their households and estates," in *Woman is a Worthy Wight: Women in English Society c. 1200–1500*, ed. P. J. P. Goldberg (Wolfeboro Falls, NH: Alan Sutton, 1992), 149–81.

4. Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 190–97.

5. Elizabeth Salter, *Chaucer: The Knight's Tale and the Clerk's Tale*, Studies in English Literature 5 (London: E. Arnold, 1967), 50–59.

6. Larry D. Benson, ed. *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 880; see Thomas R. Lounsbury, *Studies in Chaucer: His Life and Writings*, 3 vols. (Harper & Bros. 1892 (repr. 1962), 3:341, who finds the entire tale "revolting."

Christ mitigate her passivity in the face of her children's apparent doom?[7] Does Griselda show agency at any point in the tale, such as when she cautions her husband to deal with the young bride more gently?[8] And what about that vow—is it a legal contract she can never break or does it allow for subversive maneuvering?[9] The ambiguity of these issues makes Chaucer's version the focus for much debate, concern, and investigation, not only today, but in the late Middle Ages as well.[10]

As Charlotte C. Morse points out, "Responding to the tale of Griselda is problematic to us because she makes a moral and spiritual demand on our lives, just as Petrarch and his fellow fourteenth-century translators intended her to do."[11] A key sticking point lies in Griselda's silence and patience. "Doubtless our resistance to patience is culturally conditioned. . . . We do not attribute positive power to patience."[12] In this essay, I fashion a reading which views Griselda's silence and patience in a constructive light. To do so, I draw on various critical voices. We might reconsider Patient Griselda as acting vibrantly through her (apparent) silence and patience by using lessons from trauma studies concerning silence, as well as new materialist and ecocritical approaches. Whether focusing on emotional distress, environmental devastation, or the agency of materiality, these critical approaches cohere by making manifest and heard what has been repressed, silenced, or overlooked. Such a braided

7. Sr. Rose Marie, "Chaucer and His Mayde Bright," *Commonweal* 43 (1940–41): 225–27; Francis Lee Utley, "Five Genres in the 'Clerk's Tale,'" *The Chaucer Review* 6, no. 3 (1972): 224; Jill Mann, "Parents and Children in the 'Canterbury Tales,'" in *Literature in Fourteenth-Century England*, ed. Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1983), 180–83; Lynn Staley, "Chaucer and the Postures of Sanctity," in *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture*, ed. David Aers and Lynn Staley (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 237–40.

8. Mary Carruthers, "The Lady, the Swineherd, and Chaucer's Clerk," *The Chaucer Review* 17 (1983): 230; also Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 190–91.

9. See Kathryn Jacobs, *Marriage Contracts from Chaucer to the Renaissance Stage* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 29–35.

10. See Middleton, "The Clerk and His Tale," 121–22; Charlotte C. Morse, "The Exemplary Griselda," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 7 (1985): 55–56.

11. Morse, 85.

12. Morse, 85.

theoretical approach allows for an exploration of the Griselda story to argue for "redemptive and rhetorical silence" as a dynamic actant, not a passive strategy.[13] Patient Griselda perseveres, slowly enduring over the course of the narrative. The work of trauma scholars Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Chana Teeger, while not rooted in medieval testimony, can help tease out how Griselda's silence can be understood as liberating her from Walter's abuse. As they argue, "silence can be understood as a complex and rich social space that can operate as a vehicle of either memory or of forgetting."[14] In Griselda's case, I will show how her silence acts as a mnemonic device. Through an intentional silence uttered over the long term via her notorious patience, Griselda writes her own narrative. Her patient silence acts to dismantle the infamous vow instigated by Walter. In Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*, Griselda ultimately undermines the vow through a covert silence, enacting agency through her poetics of negation.[15]

The Sounds of Silence: The Resilient Poetics of Negation

The issue of wifely spousal rights festoons *The Canterbury Tales*, most notoriously in *The Clerk's Tale*. Before their marriage, Walter prescribes a vow to Griselde:

> "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?"
> (351-54)[16]

The vow for Griselda as "meticulously detailed prenuptial [agree-

13. Jennifer Reilly Bluma, "Weaving Ropes with the Desert Fathers: (Re)Inventing Rhetorical Theory a Silence and Listening," *The International Journal of Listening* 30, no. 3 (2016): 148.

14. Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Chana Teeger, "Unpacking the Unspoken: Silence in Collective Memory and Forgetting," *Social Forces* 88, no. 3 (2010): 1104.

15. Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger, 1104.

16. Chaucer quotations are from Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*; quotations from *The Clerk's Tale* from Fragment 4.

ment]" allows Walter to manipulate "the secular court by arranging a mere contract marriage."[17] His articulation of the vow proceeds. Even Griselda's face must remain neutral, with no "resistance" in evidence.[18]

> "And eek whan I sey 'ye,' ne sey nat 'nay,'
> Neither by word ne frownyng contenance?
> Swere this, and heere I swere our alliance."
> (355-57)

Walter creates crises for Griselda in order to "tempte his wyf, hir sadnesse for to knowe, / That he ne myghte out of his herte throwe / This merveillous desir his wyf t'assaye; / Nedelees, God woot, he thoghte hire for t'affraye" (452-55). These flashpoints occur when he takes away their daughter and son, presumably in order to kill them, rejects Griselda in order to re-wed, and calls her back to the castle to prepare for his new marriage. Each time she acquiesces. She is to enact the text he writes, by positively assenting to his every word.[19]

> Wondrynge upon this word, quakynge for drede,
> She seyde, "Lord, undigne and unworthy
> Am I to thilke honour that ye me beede,
> But as ye wole youreself, right so wol I."
> (358-61)

Griselda's word is to mirror Walter's word.

But the way she assents is telling. Though her vow has been never to "nay" Walter's "ye," (355), close examination of the tale shows how Griselda actually defies her husband through a preponderant use of negative words—either in her response or the description of how she reacts. Negative words include **ne**, **nat**, **noght**, **neither**, **no thyng**, **no**, **nyl**, **nevere**. Indeed, her very words after Walter's restrictions as articulated for the vow initiate this "negative" tendency. Her discourse subverts his

17. Jacobs, *Marriage Contracts from Chaucer to the Renaissance Stage*, 29–30.

18. Stephanie Trigg, "Chaucer's Silent Discourse," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 39 (2017): 51, doi:10.1353/sac.2017.0048.

19. Judith Ferster, *Chaucer on Interpretation (*Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 120, also 104.

order. Instead of saying "ye," she nays, albeit not directly.

> "And heere I swere that **nevere** willingly,
> In werk **ne** thoght, I **nyl** yow disobeye,
> For to be deed, though me were looth to deye."
> (362-64; all bolded words my emphasis throughout)

Walter does not remark on—or, indeed, even seem to notice—her use of negatives. While grammatically each sentence agrees with him, Griselda layers her vocabulary with the very construction he forbids. She only seemingly obeys Walter's command. While Petrarch's Latin revision of Boccaccio's *Decameron* tale contributes some negatives in her response to the vow—"I will **never** consciously cherish a thought, much less do anything, which might be contrary to your desires; **nor** will you do anything, even though you bid me die, which I shall bear ill"—the negative larding of her speech does not exist in the Italian original.[20]

Walter reminds Griselda of her low degree after their daughter is born. He intimates he must do away with their child because of his people's will. He wishes, "That ye to me assente as in this thyng" (494). As in Petrarch's version, Griselda weaves words of disavowal into her compliance:[21]

> Whan she had herd al this, she **noght** ameved
> **Neither** in word, or chiere, or contenaunce,
> For, as it semed, she was **nat** agreved [. . .]
> "Ther may **no thyng**, God so my soule save,
> Liken to yow that may displese me;
> **Ne** I desire **no thyng** for to have,
> **Ne** drede for to leese, save oonly yee.
> This wyl is in myn herte, and ay shal be;
> **No** lengthe of tyme or deeth may this deface,
> **Ne** chaunge my corage to another place."
> (498-500, 505-11)

The sergeant takes her daughter, "But nathelees she **neither** weep **ne**

20. Francis Petrarch, "De Obedientia Ac Fide Uxoria Mythologia," in *Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds*, ed. Robert P. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 143.

21. Petrarch, 145.

syked" (545). She says, "Fareweel, my child! I shal thee **nevere** see" (555). Thereafter Walter observes Griselda carefully, but he can trace no difference in her behavior:

> As glad, as humble, as bisy in servyse,
> And eek in love, as she was wont to be,
> Was she to hym in every maner wyse;
> **Ne** of hir doghter **noght** a word spak she.
> **Noon** accident for **noon** adversitee,
> Was seyn in hire, **ne nevere** hir doghter name
> **Ne** nempned she, in ernest **nor** in game.
> (603-9)

Four years later, their son is born. Once the boy turns two, Walter comes again to Griselda, telling her that the people do not want to be ruled by offspring with her father Janicula's blood. Walter removes their son and requests her, "Beth pacient, and therof I yow preye" (644). She agrees, with Chaucer filling her speech with more negatives than even Petrarch uses:[22]

> "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—
> At youre comandement, this is to sayn.
> I have **noght** had **no** part of children tweyne
> But first siknesse, and after, wo and peyne[. . .]
> Deth may **noght** make **no** comparisoun
> Unto youre love."
> (645-51, 666-67)

While she appears to him unchanged, as Mary J. Carruthers argues, Griselda is neither a passive victim nor "one of literature's most pitiable losers. . . . While some might wish her to be aggressive toward Walter, all the versions give her lines which can be read with an edge to them,

22. Petrarch, 146.

and Chaucer's additions provide some of the clearest examples."[23] Ultimately, such discursive elements change Walter's actions. By asking the sergeant to bury her children in the earth (4. 569-72; 680-83), Griselda rejects Walter's predatory practices. This internment assures they will not be eaten. Kathy Lavezzo thoroughly analyzes this burial plea, arguing that Chaucer pays "special attention" to it in order to focus on the "material disparity between the privileged and oppressed." Settled in the ground for natural decomposition, this decay of her children can lead to emotional consolation, spiritual fertility, and, in literal terms, a rich loam of fecundity. Lavezzo points out how "peasants engage in subtle, yet important, acts of resistance."[24] One way in which Griselda resists is rhetorically. Her words do not simply have "an edge to them," as Carruthers argues; indeed, her negative poetics speak to her resistance and inner sorrow. Negative poetics in this instance means chaffing against Walter's injunction by using the linguistic form he has forbidden. Her rhetoric can be seen as "negative" in the use of—forbidden—negating words that nullify Walter's restriction. The overall result culminates in positive outcomes for Griselda and her children.

When Walter tells Griselda of his plan to remarry because of the people's "rancour" (802), she answers "agayn [. . .] in pacience" (813), though, as in Petrarch, weaving negatives into her speech:[25]

> "And my poverte **no** wight kan **ne** may
> Maken comparison; it is **no nay.**
> I **ne** heeld me **nevere** digne in **no** manere
> To be youre wyf, **no, ne** youre chamberere."
> (816-19)

She leaves the castle, the folk weeping as they accompany her. But she "fro wepyng kepte hire eyen dreye, / **Ne** in this tyme word **ne** spak she **noon**" (899-900).

Trauma studies allows a way into seeing Griselda's speech as having articulate consequence. Within the paradigms argued for by

23. Carruthers, "The Lady, the Swineherd, and Chaucer's Clerk," 230.

24. Kathy Lavezzo, "Chaucer and Everyday Death: *The Clerk's Tale*, Burial, and the Subject of Poverty," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 23 (2001): 286, see also 272.

25. Compare Petrarch, "De Obedientia Ac Fide Uxoria Mythologia," 149.

Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger, covert and overt silences, "utilized in the aim of either memory or forgetting," are mechanisms to enhance their power.[26] Covert silence does not function as negative or inarticulate lack. Rather, it communicates; in Griselda's case, silence works to remember. While Griselda appears to be silenced—after all, she had promised not to "nay" his "ye"—the negative form of her seeming acquiescence functions as "the ultimate example of acknowledgement and remembrance."[27] One form of covert silence "inhere[s] in the mnemonic talk of agents intending to construct and maintain memory."[28] The mnemonic agent in Griselda's speech lies in the preponderance of negative words, intended to remind Walter both of his initial injunction and of her obedience. Each time she uses a negative word, his formulation of the vow to never "ye" his "nay" returns, but with a destabilizing twist.

These "no"s, which have been reverberating throughout the entire text, climax with the description of her life once she has returned to her father. Unlike Petrarch, who lacks such an extensive description—his includes only two negative words[29]—Chaucer's Clerk emphasizes Griselda's obedience with twelve negatives:

> Thus with hire fader for a certeyn space
> Dwelleth this flour of wyfly pacience,
> That **neither** by hire wordes **ne** hire face,
> Biforn the folk, **ne** eek in hire absence,
> **Ne** shewed she that hire was doon offence;
> **Ne** of hire heighe estaat **no** remembraunce
> **Ne** hadde she, as by hire contenaunce.
>
> **No** wonder is, for in hire grete estaat
> Hire goost was evere in pleyn humylitee;
> **No** tendre mouth, **noon** herte delicaat,
> **No** pompe, **no** semblant of roialtee,
> But ful of pacient benyngnytee,

26. Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger, "Unpacking the Unspoken," 1104; also 1108.
27. Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger, 1108.
28. Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger, 1108.
29. Petrarch, "De Obedientia Ac Fide Uxoria Mythologia," 146.

Discreet and pridelees, ay honurable,
And to hire housbonde evere meke and stable.
(918-31)

Chaucer's negative structure belies the usual perception of Griselda's patience. The "nay" which the vow prohibited has been sneaking into both Griselda's language and the narrator's description of her all along. In encouraging women to challenge existing discourses, Julia Kristeva suggests, "If women have a role to play . . . it is only in assuming a *negative* function."[30] Barrie Ruth Straus discusses how the use of the rhetorical figure litotes seems "to point to the negation by which woman has been defined in masculine discourse."[31] In Griselda's case, her nays act vibrantly. Her discursive litotes subverts Walter's vow; the literal level of her speech coheres, but the form sabotages his intention. Through the increasing layering of negative words, she resists the text Walter has created for her.

Once Walter pronounces his intention to repudiate her, customary law comes into force. She dispossesses herself of all the clothes and jewelry he gave her, preferring to leave as she had arrived: "But ther as ye me profre swich dowaire / As I first broghte, it is wel in my mynde / It were my wrecched clothes **nothyng** faire" (848-50). She points out her maidenhead is her only dowry and claims the privilege of a smock as only right, given what she has sacrificed.

"Ye koude **nat** doon so dishonest a thing,
That thilke wombe in which youre children leye
Sholde biforn the peple, in my walkyng,
Be seyn al bare; wherfore I yow preye,

30. "Oscillation du 'pouvoir' au 'refus,'" in an interview by Xavière Gauthier, *Tel Quel* 58 (Summer 1974), translated in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 166–67, quoted by Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of *l'écriture féminine,*" in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 359.

31. Barrie Ruth Straus, "'Truth' and 'Woman' in Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*," *Exemplaria* 4, no. 1 (1992): 158, https://doi-org/10.1179/exm.1992.4.1.135.

Lat me **nat** lyk a worm go by the weye.
Remembre yow, myn owene lord so deere,
I was youre wyf, though I unworthy weere.

Wherfore, in gerdon of my maydenhede,
Which that I broghte, and **noght** agayn I bere,
As voucheth sauf to yeve me, to my meede,
But swich a smok as I was wont to were,
That I therwith may wrye the wombe of here
That was youre wyf."
(876-88)

Walter took her maidenhead, literally leaving her with a hole or cipher—the "o" in "no" which is her only possible response. She denies her wifehood with Walter on a symbolic level by concealing her womb with the blank sheet of the smock—a white page which erases the inscription of Walter's text on her body.[32] Her desire to modestly drape herself stems from more than mere decorum. She informs the audience of her walk home to her father concerning the corporal narrative of her marriage. The smock emblemizes Griselda's resistance by rendering invisible and impotent Walter's somatized cultivation of her. The couple together have written their marriage on her body through the birth of two children. Such a smock hides that as it covers, even rejects or negates, what has been her marriage.

Negative words work to maintain the memory of what she has suffered under that vow. Rather than being constructed as a "'docile bod[y]' disciplined in the art of memory," which is how Griselda can be read, her purpose remains in managing memory.[33] Silence "is also part of the language of remembrance," coming dramatically to the fore when Griselda counsels Walter not to revisit this behavior with his new wife.[34] Griselda's

32. See Susan Gubar, "'The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 2 (1981): 259; also Kristine Gilmartin, "Array in the *Clerk's Tale*." *The Chaucer Review* 13, no. 3 (1979): 234–46, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25093463.

33. Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger, "Unpacking the Unspoken," 1109.

34. Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger, 1116.

warning at the tale's conclusion against treating his young bride as prey alters her previous protective actions. The regulator, confounded and surprised, stops his predatory activity. Indeed, Griselda utilizes Walter's own means against him. By beseeching him not to abuse this new young wife, she obligates him, just as he had made Griselda vow earlier.

Her long speech at this juncture (814-89) not only succeeds in having Walter accept her terms.[35] After this moment in the text, he uses the second person singular "thow" in addressing her, unlike the more formal "yow" previously, suggesting both "affection and alienation"—affection in the close bond it implies, yet alienation in that she continues to use the honorific second person plural to address him.[36] This shift in his address could mark Griselda's power. She catalyzes change in Walter's behavior, here marked by a shift in speech.

Catherine Gilbert explores the "'unsayable' at the heart of the traumatic experience," urging us, concerning trauma testimony, to "listen attentively to the silences and accord them meaning."[37] Applied to Griselda, Chaucer gives "form to this silence, testifying to its existence."[38] While a "struggle between the desire to testify and the inadequacy of language to convey the traumatic experience" exists, Griselda's negative poetics allow her simultaneously to testify to her experience and erase Walter's writing of her life.[39] After years of resiliently enduring her husband's cruelty—falsely making her believe their children have been killed by his orders—she finally bursts forth, warning him not to inflict the same cruelty on his next wife. Her protest transmutes the vicious brutality she has endured into a—seemingly—happy ending. Griselda's apparent silence ultimately speaks through the patient and slow poetics of negation. Ultimately, Griselda's "no" rings loud and clear, occuring

35. Jacobs, *Marriage Contracts*, 31–32; Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 136, 146.

36. Benson, 883, referencing insights from Colin Wilcockson, "'Thou' and 'Ye' I Chaucer's Clerk's Tale," *Use of English* 31, no. 3 (1980): 42.

37. Catherine Gilbert, "Rwandan Women's Testimonial Literature: *Une écriture du silence*," *Bulletin of Francophone Postcolonial Studies: A Biannual Publication* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 9.

38. Gilbert, 10.

39. Gilbert, 12.

in variant forms (ne, nat, noght, neither, no thyng, no, nyl, nevere). Resisting her husband's desire to write her past, Griselda reclaims her future and that of her children. While her power lies in "continuing to excel at suffering," for all her renowned anguish and patience Griselda can be seen as acting in a subversive manner.[40] Silence itself functions as a form of rhetoric, even an "act of protest."[41] Griselda's seeming silence can be heard, "not as an absence but as a political act."[42] Her rhetoric resiliently persists.

Griselda as "flour of wyfly patience": The Ecopoetics of Articulate Plants

Karl Steel's rumination on "Medieval Muteness" proves suggestive for Griselda's situation in Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*. While not mute—a medieval conception laden with agentic dynamism in Steel's reading—Griselda carries some aspects of its nuances. "To be *mutus* in Latin is . . . to have the qualities of speechlessness or, crucially, incomprehensibility."[43] Griselda proves incomprehensible to Walter over time, hence his persistence in torturing her. Yet, according to Steel, to "be mute is not necessarily to be silent; in many instances, it is rather a condition of being silenced: not listened to, not taken seriously, ignored." Nonhumans, including plants, he argues, have been characterized as "mute."[44] While both plants and the peasantry who tend them are essential underpinnings to a society that silences their vitality, figures like Griselda remind us how they sustain us all.

Griselda herself is described in terms of more-than-human nature—as the "flour of wyfly pacience" (919). Critical plant studies can enrich

40. Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender,* 194.

41. Cheryl Glenn, *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), 18, quoted in Bluma, "Weaving Ropes with the Desert Fathers," 141.

42. Magda Gere Lewis, *Without a word: Teaching Beyond Women's Silence* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3, quoted in Bluma, 141.

43. Karl Steel, "Medieval Muteness," *In the Middle*, April 25, 2016. http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2016/04/medieval-muteness.html, accessed April 12, 2019.

44. Steel.

our understanding of Griselda as metaphorical "flour" (flower). Botanical more-than-human actors can aid in understanding human actions. Transplanted (385) into a non-native environment, as it were, Griselda encounters unnatural stresses. The seeming silence of vegetation stems from anthropocentric deafness. Despite the overwhelming biomass of plant life, living vegetation has been elided, "forgotten and abjected within a dominant regime of humanist biopower."[45] This despite Aristotle's assertion that humans are "walking plants."[46] Plato roots this pushing aside of plant life, seeing plants, the "lowest' form of living," as passive, created "to be food for us."[47] Yet flowers and fruits are "semantic in their being," sending out signs.[48]

Griselda's affinity to vegetation becomes apparent when she marks and identifies little aromatic plants. She carefully attends to individual vegetables and plants that she gathers.

> And whan she homward cam, she wolde brynge
> Wortes or othere herbes tymes ofte,
> The whiche she shredde and seeth for hir lyvynge.
> (225-27)

Knowing her environment, Griselda listens to her vegetal neighbors. Elizabeth Preston argues we should learn to speak "shrub," the language of plants. She admonishes us: "So the next time you are enjoying the silence in a garden, alone, remember that the silence is an illusion. There is a riot of shouting going on, if only you could hear it."[49] When Griselda, that "flour of wyfly pacience," shouts, we should listen to her. Aristotle acknowledges that plants, for some reason, confound us. As Randy Laist argues, "Aristotle's positioning of plants at the borderline between

45. Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Plant Theory: Biopower and Vegetable Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 109, x.

46. Nealon, 36, 60.

47. Nealon, 30.

48. Randy Laist, introduction to *Plants and Literature: Essays in Critical Plant Studies*, ed. Randy Laist (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), 14.

49. Elizabeth Preston, "Learning to Speak Shrub," *Nautilus* 6, October 3, 2013, http://nautil.us/issue/6/secret-codes/learning-to-speak-shrub, accessed November 30, 2018.

animate and inanimate registers charges the vegetable kingdom with uncanny ontological potency."[50] This potency we see in Griselda's rhetoric. The plant "defeat[s] its manipulators."[51] Inevitably, "[n]ature . . . will always win its battles with human will."[52] Griselda's "flour" exerts "an uncanny will of its own that overwhelms the agency" of Walter.[53] That uncanny aspect to Griselda's resilience ultimately prevails over her husband's cruder attempts of control.

Beyond her negative poetics, another means by which she speaks lies in her noiseless body language. When her children are returned to her and she restored to them, she embraces her children so powerfully that it takes effort to disengage her physically. This speaks dramatically to her enduring, though inaudibly expressed, attachment to them. So steadfastly does she hold the two

> . . . whan she gan hem t'embrace,
> That with greet sleighte and greet difficultee
> The children from hire arm they gonne arace
> (1101–3).

Her affective engagement with her daughter and son can be seen in how her arms have to be prised open. While it is true she says nothing, her inaudible love cries out, thus refuting views that see her as troubling or indifferent mother. Her nonverbal gestures speak to her feelings more eloquently than any words she could utter.

Upon the arrival of their son and daughter, Walter returns to Griselda to request her to prepare the castle in readiness. She agrees to serve him, "Withouten feyntyng, and shal everemo; / **No nevere**, for **no** wele **ne no** wo, / **Ne** shal the goost withinne myn herte stente / To love yow best with al my trewe entente" (970–73). She erases her presence from the house in preparation for a new vassal to take her place. Walter asks Griselda what she thinks of her rival. Responding pleasantly, she praises

50. Laist, introduction, 12.

51. Adapted from Graham Culbertson, "This is Your Brain on Wheat: The Psychology of the Speculator in Frank Norris' *The Pit*," in Laist, *Plants and Literature*, 86–87.

52. Culbertson, 101.

53. Laist, introduction, 15.

the girl's beauty. At last Griselda cautions Walter—the only time in the entire tale:

> "O thyng biseke I yow, and warne also,
> That ye **ne** prikke with **no** tormentynge
> This tendre mayden, as ye han doon mo;
> For she is fostred in hire norissynge
> Moore tendrely, and, to my supposynge,
> She koude **nat** adversitee endure
> As koude a povre fostred creature."
> (1037-43)

She beseeches him, acknowledging that he tormented her. It is significant that the tormenting was enacted by pricking.[54] The actual torment for Griselda is the writing of her life by Walter as representative of the phallic order. Couched in terms of a request, Griselde accuses Walter. Yet he sees only "hire pacience, / Hir glade chiere, and **no** malice at al" (1044-45). Griselda passes as patient by walking—and talking—the *via negativa*.

Linguistically, there is nothing to distinguish her from her betters. As Tim William Machan has pointed out, Walter and Griselda, who come from radically opposing levels of social strata, speak "the same variety of Middle English."[55] In her camouflage (385)—signified by rich clothes—she protects her low lineage by mimicing upper-class women in the face of Walter's predatory behavior.[56] While aristocratic women, marked by sumptuous clothes, might be protected by a family network of elite should they be abused by husbands, Griselda's secret of poverty, already known by Walter, makes her vulnerable to abuse. As a passing poor woman she is desirable, but vulnerable.[57] Her "disguise"

54. See Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 9, 155.

55. Tim William Machan, *English in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 136.

56. See Joseph Grennen, "Science and Sensibility in Chaucer's Clerk," *The Chaucer Review* 6 (1971): 90, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25093183.

57. Paul Outka, *Race and Nature From Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 71–72. Many thanks to the anonymous reviewer of this essay who identifies Griselda's appearance as a noble woman as "class drag."

as noble—fully known to Walter and the community—fails to protect her, and she becomes his prey. Her status as poor woman allows her to be exploited by her spouse. Yet there is nonetheless an element of power she retains. Griselda is "translated" (385) into rich clothes. As Emma Campbell has pointed out concerning various forms of translation, such acts can be obedient, conservative, and traditional, yet simultaneously subversive, destabilizing, and disruptive.[58] Just as Griselda only passes as noble, she similarly only passes as passive when she mimics Walter's injunction to never nay, by naying.

As Steel argues, the character of silence lies in "not being the opposite of sound." While Griselda makes sounds, she simply cannot be heard. Indeed, "humans face particular dangers of being rendered mute, of not having their reason recognized, of being treated like objects." Steel, whose discussion revolves around Thomas Aquinas, could equally be talking about Griselda when he writes, "Given enough patience, given enough time [. . .] his thoughts will burst forth, and astonish the world."[59] Griselda's negative poetics astonish the attentive reader. As Jill Mann has argued with reference to the *Franklin's Tale*, patience functions as "a dynamic force capable of opening up the narrative in unforeseen directions." Both an "agent and expression of change," patience works through Griselda's persistent utterance of nay.[60] This allows her to act in the wake of Walter's actions—the predatory exploitation of nonhuman actors, which, within misogyny, women embody. Patience, as the Franklin tells us, "venquysseth [. . .] Thynges that rigour sholde nevere atteyne" (5.774-75). Like the stone engraved so long "[t]il som figure therinne emprented be" (5.831), Griselda's perseverance succeeds in rewriting Walter's narrative for her life and nurtures "the unexpected changes, the events, that other than human creative agencies bring to happen."[61] Paralleling Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's "eco-media" of "stone

58. Emma Campbell, "Sexual Poetics and the Politics of Translation in the Tale of Griselda," *Comparative Literature* 55 (2003): 197–98, https//www.jstor.org/stable/4125405; also Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 133.

59. Steel, "Medieval Muteness."

60. Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, new ed. (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), 94.

61. Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 214.

structures used to send wordless stories across millennia," silent women under the patriarchy—including Griselda—"speak."[62] Silence itself can function as a rhetorically vital actant.

Radical Resilience

Griselda resists the slow violence Walter commits against her, offering an "uncanny resilience" to the ecocatastrophe that is her husband, who plays at murder and incest.[63] Simon Estok's paradigm helps us unpack Griselda's steadfastness: "[R]esistance has to involve reading for those spoken and unspoken ontologies of violence that conscript and define our voices, that texture and confine our vision, and that muffle and plug our ears."[64] While the ultimate scene of reconciliation at the end disturbs, Griselda resiliently lives on with Walter.

The Envoy, in which the death of Griselda is lamented, expresses hope for the death of *Griseldas*, that is, that kind of behavior which Griselda had to endure and enact herself. The Envoy calls on wives **not** to act in this manner, acknowledging the danger of such stories:

> O noble wyves, ful of heigh prudence,
> Lat **noon** humylitee youre tonge naille,
> **Ne** lat **no** clerk have cause or diligence
> To write of yow a storie of swich mervaille
> As of Grisildis, pacient and kynde,
> Lest Chichevache yow swelwe in hire entraille!
> (1183–88)

Griselda has demonstrated the power of her "crabbed eloquence" (1203) in disobeying the commandment of her husband by literally obeying it. How seriously are we to take Chaucer's Envoy? Echo is praised as a model

62. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Stephanie LeMenager, "Introduction: Assembling the Ecological Digital Humanities," *PMLA* 131, no. 2 (2016), 342.

63. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 11. Stanbury, *The Visual Object of Desire*, 129.

64. Simon Estok, "The Ecophobia Hypothesis: Re-membering the Feminist Body of Ecocriticism," in *International Perspectives in Feminist Ecocriticism*, ed.ited by Greta Gaard, Simon C. Estok, and Serpil Oppermann (New York: Routledge, 2013), 79.

to follow: "Folweth Ekko, that holdeth **no** silence, / But evere answereth at the countretaille" (1189-90). Echo, of course, can only repeat what she hears. By echoing phrases incompletely, Echo reframes the context of the words she repeats. Following Echo, according to the Envoy, could indeed be an act of verbal disagreement. To assert her autonomy, Griselda echos Walter's words: "ne say nat 'nay'" (355); like Echo, she only partially reiterates his words, thus destabilizing his intended meaning. The resounding word of *The Clerk's Tale* is "no." Griselda shows how wives should echo this word, saying "nay" unto the male's "ye." Her "no" is the cipher which eludes manipulation and slips out of male control.[65] Griselda endures slowly, patiently, and resiliently.[66] She doesn't want her story told by Walter, but by herself. This covert silence—uttered via negative words—allows Griselda to speak and be remembered.

Griselda reconstitutes the memory of her trauma by naying Walter's ye. Through this rhetorical action, she functions as one of the agents "of memory who choose to give up on part of their preferred interpretation of the past (often the context of the event) so as to enable various collectives to participate in mnemonic activities, to enlarge the potential mnemonic audience, and thus to enhance memory."[67] Certainly, by interpellating the reader/listener into the tale at the end through the Envoy, Chaucer insists we remember Griselda, whose endurance parallels the reader's own perseverance in reading this painful tale. Unless we acknowledge her resilience, we, too, like Walter, enact "cultural silencing," a "form of 'symbolic violence' enacted on the witness by an audience who is unable to hear her story."[68] We need to confront our own "complicity in the silencing process."[69] While many scholars have already "heard" Griselda, we need to continue to maintain "the act of

65. Elizabeth Kirk, "Nominalism and the Dynamics of the *Clerk's Tale*: *Homo Viator* as Woman," in *Chaucer's Religious Tales*, ed. C. David Benson and Elisabeth Robertson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990), 117.

66. For reading against patience as passivity, see Carrie Hamilton and Yasmin Gunaratnam, "Introduction: Environment," *Feminist Review* 118 (2018): 4 and Elizabeth Scala, *Desire in the Canterbury Tales* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2015), 147–48.

67. Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger, "Unpacking the Unspoken," 1117.

68. Gilbert, "Rwandan Women's Testimonial Literature," 14.

69. Gilbert, 14.

bearing witness [which] constitutes an essential stage of the continued process of surviving trauma."[70]

Positive silence acts dynamically through Griselda's poetics of negation. Everything, everyone, even the seemingly dead, inert, or silent, acts dynamically. One concern in terms of ecology is the potential loss of sounds replete in a richly diverse biosphere.[71] By listening attentively, with awareness, the reader can hear Griselda, who functions as an insistent, persistent, and patiently resilent actor in the world of Chaucer's tale.

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70. Gilbert, 18.

71. See Lina Dib, "Sonic Breakdown, Extinction and Memory," *Continent* 6, no. 1 (2017): 18, https://discardstudies.com/2017/05/01/sonic-breakdown-extinction-and-memory/, accessed November 30, 2018