

Slow Practice as Ethical Aesthetics: The Ecocritical Strategy of Patience in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Clerk's Tale*

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Abstract

How can cultural works from the distant past—such as the Middle Ages—teach us ethical modes of behavior for today? One form of ecopoetics emerges through *slow* practice, making the reader collaborate in the measured process of co-creating the emotional impact of an imaginative text. Drawing on rich debates about slow cinema, this essay suggests how Chaucer's *The Clerk's Tale*—from his grand fourteenth-century poem, *The Canterbury Tales*—evokes a slow eco-aesthetics with ethical impact. The relative slowness of walking shapes how individuals respond to their environment. In turn, a deceleration of perception affects how travel comes to be written about, as seen in the tale of Patient Griselda. Introduced by Giovanni Boccaccio and adapted by such writers as Francesco Petrarca, Geoffrey Chaucer, and Christine de Pizan, she acts dynamically through her apparent silence and notorious patience. The environmental humanities offer paradigms for us to consider the strategies of slowness and patience. This essay shows how medieval pilgrimage literature evokes a slow aesthetic which is at the same time an ecocritical strategy. Slowness results in an enduring impact and heightened sensitivity to the ecological damage for which we all are culpable. Slowness somatically inculcates key aspects of environmental awareness. Pilgrimage texts from the Middle Ages teach us slow ethical aesthetics, suggesting that the medieval moment—finally and a long time coming— is now.

Keywords: Slow, slow walking, slow cinema, ecocritical strategy, pilgrimage, Middle Ages, ethical practice; Chaucer; Patient Griselda; *The Clerk's Tale*.

Resumen

¿Cómo puede la producción cultural del pasado más lejano, como la del medievo, enseñarnos modos éticos de comportamiento para hoy en día? Una de las formas de la ecopoética surge a través de la práctica *lenta*, haciendo que el lector colabore en el proceso medido de co-crear el impacto emotivo de un texto ficticio. Inspirado en los valiosos debates en torno al *slow cinema* (cinematografía lenta), este ensayo plantea cómo *El cuento del erudito (The Clerk's Tale)* de Chaucer, de su gran poema del siglo XIV, *Los cuentos de Canterbury*, logra evocar una ecopoética lenta con un impacto ético. La relativa lentitud del caminar determina cómo responde el individuo a su medio ambiente. La desaceleración de la percepción, a su vez, afecta a la forma en la que se narra el viaje, como se ve en el cuento de la paciente Griselda. Introducida por primera vez por Giovanni Boccaccio y adaptada por escritores como Francesco Petrarca, Geoffrey Chaucer, y Christine de Pizan, ella actúa dinámicamente por medio de su aparente silencio y su notoria paciencia. Las humanidades ambientales nos ofrecen paradigmas para considerar las estrategias de la lentitud y la paciencia. Este ensayo muestra cómo la literatura del peregrinaje medieval evoca una estética lenta que es a la vez una estrategia ecocrítica. La lentitud resulta en un impacto duradero y una sensibilidad aguzada hacia el daño ecológico del que somos todos culpables. La lentitud corporal inculca aspectos clave de concienciación medioambiental. Los textos medievales sobre el peregrinaje nos enseñan la lenta estética ética, sugiriendo que el momento medieval, tan largamente esperado, por fin ha llegado.

Palabras clave: Lentitud, caminar lento, cinematografía lenta, estrategia ecocrítica, peregrinaje, Edad Media, práctica ética; Chaucer; Patient Griselda; *The Clerk's Tale*.

How can cultural works from the distant past—such as the Middle Ages—teach us ethical modes of behavior for today? Unlike biological, sociological, or environmental studies that statistically measure the damage humans inflict in the Anthropocene, literary language offers the impact of affect and aesthetics through linguistic articulation. One form of ecopoetics emerges through *slow practice*, making the reader collaborate in the measured process of co-creating the emotional resonance of an imaginative text (see Garrard on “savouring”). Drawing on rich debates about slow cinema, I will suggest how Chaucer’s *The Clerk’s Tale*—from his grand fourteenth-century poem, *The Canterbury Tales*—evokes a slow eco-aesthetics with ethical impact. The relative slowness of walking shapes how individuals respond to their physical environment. In turn, a deceleration of perception while travelling affects how metaphorical and imaginative landscapes come to be written about, as seen in the tale of Patient Griselda. Introduced by Giovanni Boccaccio and adapted by such writers as Francesco Petrarca, Geoffrey Chaucer, and Christine de Pizan, she acts dynamically through her apparent silence and notorious patience.

The current threat of climate change hangs over us all—human and more-than-human. Consider the opening lines of Chaucer’s *The General Prologue*, where the birds’ singing provokes human agency in the form of pilgrimage. Would climate change alter the avian chorus and, consequently, pilgrimage practice? After all, if climate change continues apace, there will be fewer or later or even no “shoures soote” (“sweet-smelling showers”) (I.1)¹ to pierce March’s drought. Perhaps sirocco-like hot and dry winds would not inspire the tender crops but desiccate them, blow the shoots and seeds away from the parched earth. Would avian populations become stressed in response, shells thinning so that fewer eggs could hatch? And what about feeding those birds? Drier ground means fewer worms and seeds. If Nature is what provokes anthropoid action—in this case, the act of pilgrimage—then Nature’s anxiety in turn affects human ritual and more-than-human activity. Consequently, no such poetry devoted to pilgrimage would be written since pilgrimage itself would not be stirred or catalyzed by the processes of systems, such as weather itself.

Every dire warning suggests we need to accelerate our actions. Yet certain paradigms allow us consider slowness and patience. An argument has been forwarded from various practitioners within the Environmental Humanities for “an ideal of slow scholarship which cultivates thinking across different spatiotemporal scales and seeks to sustain meaningful public debate” (Bergthaller et al. 261). “Slow [s]cholarship for the [a]nthropocene” runs “counter to current demands on academia for speed” (264-5). Concurrently, various art projects layer their works with the ideal of slowness and

¹ All Chaucer quotes in Middle English from *The Clerk’s Tale* are lines number[s] from Fragment IV in *The Riverside Chaucer*; Modern English version adapted from Benson’s *Interlinear Translation*.

patience as ecocritical strategies. In artist Katie Paterson's *Future Library* project, inaugurated in 2014, renowned writers and poets have pledged to contribute works which will remain unpublished until one hundred years from now (2114). Norwegian spruce trees planted in May 2014 will be used a century in the future to print the books held in trust until that time. As the artist herself explains:

Future Library is a living, breathing, organic artwork, unfolding over 100 years. It will live and breathe through the material growth of the trees [...]; *Future Library* [...] questions the present tendency to think in short bursts of time, making decisions only for us living now. (Future Library)

The slow process of sowing and planting words to be found in four generations connects the now to the future in this unhurried work.

Slowness has been observed to constitute a mainstay of films, through long takes or minimal coherent narrative. Glacially filmed movement “allow[s] a length of time wherein spectators may observe nature’s rhythms and patterns as they occur on screen” (Lam 209). The videos by artist Bill Viola and even Nature Cam videos “share[...] a visual strategy that encourages an attentive mode of observation and the development of an ecologically oriented gaze” (Lam 207). These cams arouse much affection and devotion, including the FogCam at San Francisco State University, the longest-running such cam, and the now sadly defunct Cheddar cam, which allowed viewers to see a cheese maturing—*very* slowly. As has been argued by slow cinema critics, slowness results in an enduring impact and heightened sensitivity to the ecological damage for which we all are culpable. Lúcia Nagib has argued that “[t]he idea of ‘slow cinema’ carries within it a politics.... At a time when commodification of speed is ruthlessly obliterating the fruition of our most basic pleasures [...] it seems indeed sensible to advocate slowness” (26). Slowness can function as a strategy which inculcates key aspects of environmental awareness.

A parallel to the *Future Library* project and slow cinema can be found in late medieval pilgrimage poems, where slowness emerges as an eco-poetical practice or process in multiple ways (Morrison, “Slow Pilgrimage Eco-poetics” 44). Given the richness of debates about “slow cinema,” I apply these critical insights to suggest how medieval pilgrimage literature—with a focused look at Chaucer’s poem—similarly evokes a “slow eco-aesthetics” as ecocritical strategy (Lam 207; de Luca 219). *The Clerk's Tale* is one of the slower—if more disturbing—of Chaucer’s tales. The marriage between a low-born peasant, Griselda, and her high-born husband, Walter, is predicated on a notorious vow that she should acquiesce to his will no matter what. Though situated in a position of disempowerment from the start—poor, humble, and of low status—she unexpectedly makes for a good counsellor and leader (see Stanbury 125). Taking away their children—a girl and a boy—with the apparent intention of having them killed, Walter tests Griselda. Later, after repudiating her, he drives her back to her poor father's home. Recalled to court to prepare the festivities for his new young spouse, Griselda warns Walter not to treat his second wife in the same way she herself had been. This sparks his confession: the supposed bride is really their daughter, who, with her brother, had been secretly raised

by his sister. All ends 'happily,' though Chaucer adds an "Envoy," a sort of Epilogue, which has been much debated by scholars.

While the artists and scholars cited above work within a contemporary context, Chaucer's *The Clerk's Tale* concurs with their assertions, particularly the key figure of Patient Griselda. Ursula Heise points out how the quality of patience (Heise 25) acts as a dynamic agent in understanding the "culturally specific practices of enviring" (Bergthaller et al. 268). As notoriously embodied by the central figure, Griselda, the necessary slowness inherent to patience can be seen as a vibrant force in environmental perception; in contrast, "opportunistic utilization" (Kerridge 21) constitutes her husband Walter's exploitative intentions and actions.

Official and Vernacular Landscapes: Tenancy and Contingency

Ecological metaphors invariably influence how we write about and understand the human. Writing ecocritically often necessitates the use of similes and metaphors grounded in the landscape. For example, in their claims for the principle of slowness, Bergthaller et al. conclude as follows: "In this effort of building pathways that open up the environmental humanities to a wider audience, mapping the common ground on which we stand—the ground we need to occupy more consciously—is an important first step" (272-4). The context of this lovely passage builds on the idea of paths, walking, ground, and landscape—all elements present in both the metaphoric and literal walking utilized in *The Clerk's Tale*. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have famously contended, "How we think metaphorically matters" (Lakoff and Johnson 243). Such metaphors necessitated by our embodied experience in the world permit us to see how we are embedded *in* the world, not above it.

Likewise rooted in metaphoric topography is the thinking of Rob Nixon, who argues that orchestrated and intentional landscapes can impose themselves on organic, unprocessed, and "vernacular" ones (17; see also Bergthaller et al. 266). When this happens, socially and ecologically deleterious results take place. Influenced directly by Petrarch's Latin translation of Boccaccio's Italian original, Chaucer returns the tale to its vernacular home. Referring to more than just linguistic usage, the vernacular extends to material practices (Minnis xi). The tension between official and vernacular—literal and metaphoric—landscapes can be found symbolized in Griselda and Walter, who emerge from competing ecosystems. Before her rise in status, she tends to sheep and spins, supporting her father. While poor, they possess a few sheep (IV.223) and an ox (IV.291), or at least the stall for one. Interacting with his environment through predatory hunting and hawking, Walter attacks the vernacular landscape of pastoral economy, one of herding and agricultural stewardship as seen in Griselda. Here, stewardship functions as caring tenancy, preserving and maintaining animals' present wellbeing into the future, as opposed to simply slaughtering them.

The tale dramatizes a human actor's attempts to manipulate the human and more-than-human actors he encounters. Walter acts in opposition to the environmentally-

friendly precepts as laid out by Michel Serres, who argues that we should act as tenants, not appropriators, of our environment. Through “tenancy” (Serres 86), we resist possession of the environment, allowing it to act and develop freely. Being no tenant (in Serres’ meaning), Walter works to appropriate Griselda, along with his land. In the set-up to the vow, Walter demands Griselda’s cheerful compliance to “al my lust” [“all my desires”; 352]. This “lust” recalls the “lusty playn” [“lusty plain”; 59], the fruitful earth, he owns. Just as he interacts with his environment through predation, Walter takes Griselda as his own: “But on his lust present was al his thoght,/ As for to hauke and hunte on every syde” [“But on his immediate pleasure was all his thought,/ Such as to hawk and hunt on every side”; 80-1]. The narrating Clerk blames Walter for focusing “on his lust present” (80), an expediency of immediate gratification rather than slow appraisal.

An underling bidding Walter to take a wife, any wife, urges him to act “as yow lust” [“as it may please you”; 322]. Lust suggests not only sexual desire, but also vigor with an edge of extremity. This is in contrast to Griselda herself, explicitly described as possessing “[n]o likerous lust” [“[n]o sensual desire”; 214]. At the start of the tale, the lush beauty and vegetation of Walter’s land flourishes: “....And many another delitable sighte,/ And Saluces this noble contree highte” (“And many another delectable sight,/ And Saluces this noble country is called”; 62-3). Echoing this rhyming couplet some two hundred lines later, we learn of Griselda’s humble father: “A doghter hadde he, fair ynogh to sighte,/ And Grisildis this yonge mayden highte” (“A daughter had he, fair enough in appearance,/ And Griselda this young maiden was called”; 209-210). End rhymes reverberate and echo, forcing us to parallel Walter’s land—“this noble contree highte”—with Griselde herself—“this yonge mayden highte” (Waugh 149-150). She corresponds to the rich terrain Walter possesses and on which agriculture thrives—and upon which he intends to cultivate his own legacy. His attitude towards nature, as something to be possessed through violent means, extends to his wooing of Griselda.

Using Nixon’s argument, we can see that “imposed official landscapes typically discount spiritualized vernacular landscapes” (13). Walter imposes a “landscape” of patriarchal obedience and silent acquiescence. His official landscape encroaches on the intimate one of poverty, filial loyalty, and motherly love. Resentful of peasants’ seeming liberty—“I may not doon as every plowman may” [“I cannot do as every plowman may”; 799]—Walter stalks prey, continuing to do so as he seizes a wife in parallel acts of aggression. Walter targets her just as he does animals. He sees her and takes her. Denying agency to Griselda, he deliberately chooses a poor woman, a seemingly non-vital object to dominate. In *The Clerk's Tale* as disaster narrative (Rigby 2), Walter exudes a toxic, “incremental and accretive,” slow violence (Nixon 2) against Griselda.

Slow ecopoetics teaches us to contingently respond to the “vagaries” of unexpected encounters, both “fortuitous” and less than ideal (de Luca 219; also Solnit 11). Accidental meetings surprise and disrupt, preventing us from feeling as though we can master the world around us. For Griselda, the unexpected encounter with Walter upends her formerly pastoral life. Ultimately, as I will argue, she manages to resiliently resist his machinations. Her lack of mastery of the world around her allows her to develop coping

strategies emerging from the lessons she has imbibed from her interactions with the land itself.

Slow Walking

How one journeys phenomenologically alters one's perception of the world. As Carl Honoré in his book, *In Praise of Slowness*, observes,

Travelling on foot can also be meditative, fostering a Slow frame of mind. When we walk, we are aware of the details around us—birds, trees, the sky, shops and houses, other people. We make connections....[W]alking can teach us to forget about acceleration. It is inherently Slow. (Honoré 138)

Slow walking works as an ecologically welcome form of transportation (see Gros 54), where the walker encounters details of the more-than-human environment during this slow travel. Before her marriage at the end of the day, Griselda walks home. This act of slow walking allows for the practice of place-awareness which resists rapacious actions (see Finlay 179; also see Ahlberg). She attends to, marks, and identifies each little aromatic herb, paying attention to vegetables and plants that she can first sow and then gather.

And whan she homward cam, she wolde brynge
Wortes or othere herbes tymes ofte,
The whiche she shredde and seeth for hir lyvyng.
[“And when she homeward came, she would bring/ Cabbages or other greens very often,
Which she shredded and boiled for their sustenance”; 225-7]

Knowing her environment allows Griselda, though poor, to thrive in virtue, goodness, and beauty along with the world around her.

Walking grounds the spatial practice of her vernacular landscape, in contrast to riding on horses, restrained by human masters. Significantly, Walter rides a horse (234) when he first sees Griselda. The day he comes to take her hand, Walter presumably rides again as opposed to walking. We are explicitly told how Griselda—once she has been “translated” (“translated”; 385; see Grennen 1971, 90) into rich clothing—is “sette/ Upon an hors, snow-whit and wel amblyng” [“set/ Upon a horse, snow-white and with a gentle pace”; 387-8]. After Walter lies that his people want him to take another wife, Griselda walks back to her father's humble cottage on foot.

Biforn the folk hirselves strepeth she,
And in hir smok, with heed and foot al bare,
Toward hir fadre hous forth is she fare.
[“Before the folk she strips herself,/ And in her smock, with head and foot all bare,/ Toward her father's house forth is she gone”; 894-896]

Weeping people accompany her on her pathetic “walkyng” [“walking”; 878] home. Sarah Stanbury sees this moment as staging “a kind of sacramental theater” (Stanbury 127; also Solnit 68). Griselda may be clad only in a white smock, she may be bereft of her children and status, but her walking serves as an “act of resistance” (Solnit 267). She gains sacred

authority and even sovereignty through this “geography of spiritual power” (Solnit 50). Renowned—even infamous—for her reticence, Griselda can be heard. Indeed, as has been argued, in walking “sound renders silence accessible” (Gros 212).

Walter, an intruding colonizer, functions as a new species in Griselda’s world and affects it (Artman 112, 114). She becomes endangered by *him*. As Stacey Artman metaphorically argues, literary characters belong “to an ecosystem [....]. As new species are introduced, one of three changes must be made; either the new species is destroyed by other elements in the ecosystem, the ecosystem adapts to the species, or the species migrates to a new and more suitable environment” (120). Yet another possibility exists: the new species could destroy the ecosystem it has invaded. Ultimately, Griselda dismantles Walter’s predatory agency with her own vital one. If Walter is the official landscape, Griselda’s vernacular one affects *him* in turn. Though she seems passive, she ultimately dynamically acts to dismantle the infamous vow instigated by her abusive husband (see Morrison, “Insistent, Persistent, Resilient”). Her patient perseverance slowly endures over the course of the narrative (see Gaard et al.; also Alaimo 5).

Radical Resilience

A useful, if venerable, way to explore pilgrimage literature can be found in the concept of defamiliarization. Victor Shklovsky argues “the technique of art is ... *to increase the difficulty and length of perception* because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and *must be prolonged*” (Shklovsky 12; my emphasis). This lengthening of perception, prolonging our observation, exceeds the necessary or utilitarian mode of vision (see Shklovsky 22) and acts within slow eco-aesthetics. This ecocritical maneuver catalyzes varying responses, including “an amplified interest in noticing details” (Lam 215). As with nature cam videos, we can “promote a viewing practice based less on a desire to dominate than a desire to care for [...] specifically because they demand patient viewing” (Lam 215). Griselda endures slowly, patiently, and resiliently (for reading against patience as passivity, see Hamilton and Gunaratnam 4 and Scala 147-8). Her slow story forces us to decelerate and remember her, marking her experience. Through active and slow reading, we can, with Griselda, resist Walter.

While reading literary texts from the medieval past under the peril of climate change may seem out of joint, doing so can teach us how delicate and frail our ecosystem and home—the earth—are. Slow wayfaring leads to wayfinding—finding our place in a specific locale. An environmental consciousness reverberates through slow art. Novelist David Mitchell suggests that *Future Library* offers hope—“hope that we are more resilient than we think: that we will be here, that there will be trees, that there will be books, and readers, and civilisation” (quoted from Flood). The silence of words, literally rooted in the earth, resiliently and patiently waits to be read on the very trees gradually growing. Whether we bide our time for one hundred years to read a hidden book or patiently accompany Griselda on her painful pilgrimage that is her marriage, attenuated velocity and deceleration can function as ecologically aware strategies for today. Chaucer’s poem,

along with other pilgrimage texts from the Middle Ages (see Morrison, "Slow Pilgrimage Eco-poetics"), teaches us slow ethical aesthetics, suggesting that the medieval moment—finally and a long time coming—is now.

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