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Medieval Feminine Humanism and Geoffrey Chaucer's Presentation of the Anti-Cecilia

A Thesis

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in
English

by

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Abstract

Perhaps due to its seemingly straightforward religious nature, the Second Nun's Cecelia Legend in The Canterbury Tales is often dismissed by scholars and readers alike. However, through analyzing Chaucer's earlier analogues, it becomes apparent that Chaucer has left out key pieces of the Life of Saint Cecelia. These omissions can be explained as attempts to illustrate the humanistic beliefs of both St. Augustine and Christine de Pizan. Further, the etymology of key words which appear in the "Second Nun's Prologue and Tale" help to reinforce the satire which Chaucer creates. Chaucer has deleted the humanism from the Saint Cecelia Legend in order to illustrate the potential for the corruption of female virtue.

Keywords

Saint Cecelia, the Second Nun, The Canterbury Tales, Augustinian humanism, Chrstine de Pizan, Geoffrey Chaucer

Medieval Feminine Humanism and Geoffrey Chaucer's Anti-Cecilia

While numerous scholars have conducted research on The Canterbury Tales, some tales have been studied more thoroughly than others. Chaucer scholars and casual readers seem to prefer the Chaucer stories with themes, such as sexism and racism, that are most familiar today. Often, the bawdier the Tale, the more critical work there is to be found. However, each tale is meant to function both independently as well as in terms of The Canterbury Tales as a whole. Therefore, to dismiss or ignore any tale is detrimental to the understanding of the entire Canterbury Tales. In particular, scholars have overlooked the Second Nun's Prologue and Tale, probably because early scholars thought Chaucer wrote what became the Second Nun's Tale, his telling of the life of Saint Cecelia, before the rest of the Canterbury Tales and that either Chaucer or later scribes merely placed the tale in the Canterbury Tales to fill up space (Benson xxxii). Although there has been an increase in scholarly work about the tale in the past thirty years, aspects of the tale need further critical attention.

Perhaps the tale has been dismissed because, compared to the other tales, it appears to be simple and straightforward. Lynn Staley Johnson points out that "most Chaucerians hold that this legend could not have been written before about 1373" and further that "it is generally accepted that Chaucer decided to include the legend in the Canterbury book relatively late in the Canterbury period" (316 n. 7). Although it has been suggested that a scribe, and not Chaucer himself, included the Lyf of Seinte Cecelie in the tale, the fact that the tale is linked to the Canon's Yeoman's Tale makes it likely that Chaucer meant the story to be included in the Tales, and that the Lyf of Seinte Cecelie is meant to function in conjunction with the other Tales. Unlike some of the other tales, which are fables with multiple meanings, on the surface the Second Nun's Tale seems merely to retell an earlier religious analogue whose message is simple and clearly spiritual. Further, the

scholarship on the tale seems to focus either on Chaucer's misogyny, Chaucer's championing of women, or Chaucer's devotion to religious texts. Joseph Grossi suggests Chaucer's purpose could even be a serious work of "religious vision" which emphasizes the "absurdity of paganism" (302-3). Grossi argues plausibly that Chaucer's original intention for the Lyf of Seint Cecilie was to create a text which affirmed Christian belief and dismissed pagan values as being associated with the tyranny which often marked medieval power structures, but does not address the possibility that the meaning of Chaucer's text may be more subtle. Thus, the possible argument that the tale does not include satirical elements, as the other tales do, because it was not written with the intention of being included in the Canterbury Tales, can be deflected. Since Chaucer did mean to include the tale, there is the possibility that the "Second Nun's Tale" may be as satirical as the bawdier tales. Chaucer must have had another intention besides telling an "accurate" religious narrative. If, as acknowledged by most scholars, Chaucer is a master of satire, why should the Second Nun's Tale be viewed as a straightforward narrative? Why would all of The Canterbury Tales present some kind of social or religious commentary except for one?

By telling the reader that the Nun's Cecilia legend is from the Legenda Aurea, though it closely imitates a source which deemphasized the humanism from de Voragine's version, Chaucer's Nun seems not only unaware of the origins of the story but also oblivious to the implications of the story of Cecelia as it stands in the Legenda Aurea and other earlier analogues. Chaucer downplays the humanism that prevents the text from being misogynistic by way of the Nun's ignorance of her source text. Chaucer's presentation of Saint Cecilia in "The Second Nun's Tale" as a religious pessimist rather than as an Augustinian humanist is a commentary not only on the icon of the female martyr but on all medieval women. In his version Chaucer uses antiphrasis to create a satire which illustrates how female virtue can become corrupted when women lose sight

of the humanistic values that should dictate their behavior and ideals. Chaucer presents Cecilia as a negative example of a female martyr to accentuate the double standards to which medieval society held women.

Because of Chaucer's propensity for word play and jokes, the possibility that he has created a religious satirical commentary in The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale is highly probable. The Wife of Bath's Tale, for example, is often discussed in terms of its satire. According to Lynn Staley Johnson, the satire that Chaucer creates through the Second Nun could be political; Chaucer's version of the Cecelia Legend "reveals similar concerns for the status, or moral authority, of the church" (319). Marjorie M. Malvern also discusses how the Wife of Bath's Tale offers insight into the attitudes toward women prevalent during Chaucer's lifetime (239 n. 3). Malvern argues that "the Wife of Bath ridicules the portraits of stereotyped women drawn in manifold Juvenalian satires against marriage written during the Middle Ages" (241). With often obscene language, the Wife of Bath "shocks" her audience with her satirical message; the Wife of Bath alludes to "the Aesopic fable of 'A lion and a Man' [which] plays singular didactic and rhetorical roles in vitalizing her extortive satire" (238). Chaucer uses the same basic idea in "The Second Nun's Tale" by alluding to a well-known story and then undermines its message, but the tactics to create satire which Chaucer uses in The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale are much different from those he uses in the Wife of Bath's Tale. Rather than using the bawdy language and hyperbole that the Wife of Bath uses, Chaucer's Second Nun uses much more subtle rhetorical devices to produce a much different kind of satire.

While scholars such as Malvern attempt to justify the inclusion of the "Second Nun's Tale" by analyzing how the female characters in The Canterbury Tales relate to each other, it is necessary to explain how the Second Nun's Tale functions in and of itself before attempting to

analyze its relation to the whole text. While Robert Sturges and others analyze the Second Nun's Tale in terms of the "female tradition," Sturges completely overlooks the satiric and ironic nature of the female narrators in the Canterbury Tales (49-50). However, the claims of "female authority" suggest that the "proto-feminist concerns of Chaucer's women narrators with female authority and with specifically female traditions are not an anachronism in the social history of the Middle Ages" (Sturges 42). Because such a humanistic and proto-feminist view was familiar to Chaucer and his audience, Chaucer may well have satirized so recognizable a figure of female authority as Saint Cecilia by way of the Second Nun.

Sherry Reames's claims that Chaucer used Jacobus de Voragine's Legenda Aurea as the basis for his telling of the Cecilia Legend; because Chaucer quotes the Legenda in the Nun's tale, it is most likely that Chaucer is retelling de Voragine's entire version of the Cecilia legend ("Sources" 111). Reames presents evidence concerning what Chaucer deleted from the earlier analogues, the Legenda Aurea and the Passio S. Caeciliae. Although Reames states in a later article that Chaucer's revisions to the Cecilia legend directly parallel a Franciscan version of the story, the Nun states that she has gotten her material from the Legenda Aurea ("Recent" 337). Further, in his essay "Chaucer and the Legenda Aurea," John Tatlock points out that "the Ellesmere and Hengwrt MSS even have . . . a hand written side-note [which says], 'Interpretacio nominis Cecilie quam point frater Iacobus Ianuensis in legenda'" (297). Although Chaucer's revisions may indeed parallel those in this Franciscan text, why would Chaucer point the reader instead to the Legenda Aurea as his source? One possible reason is that Chaucer's intention was to point out the differences in meaning in the original text compared to the Franciscan revision. As Trevor Whitlock explains, Chaucer's "whole method, throughout The Canterbury Tales is to show an aspect of truth, criticize it, suggest its partiality, set up a counter truth, explore that, call for a

revaluation, move on to further considerations. . . " (qtd in McGerr 110). Although it is likely that Chaucer's version of the Cecelia legend began as a faithful retelling of the Legenda version, because of his propensity to "revalue" truth, Chaucer's Cecelia story is most likely an example of "revalued" religious commentary and satire.

Although Reames suggests that the Legenda Aurea is not the sole source of The Second Nun's Tale, and that the Franciscan text is most likely Chaucer's main source, this does not discount the fact that the Legenda Aurea was an earlier analogue. Reames also discusses the revisions to the Legenda Aurea that are evident in the Franciscan version of the text ("Recent"). Even if Chaucer's main source was the Franciscan text, that text was itself influenced by the Legenda Aurea. Because the Legenda Aurea is mentioned in the margins of both the Hengwert and Ellesmere manuscripts, Chaucer's version of the Saint Cecilia legend must in some way have been influenced by the original version available in the Legenda Aurea.

Reames does not, however, analyze the implications of the deletions and other choices in source text beyond showing how the meaning changed from the earlier analogues to Chaucer's version of Saint Cecelia's story. Reames claims that Chaucer's version of the Cecilia legend loses its Augustinian perspective because "while the narrative still focuses on a series of conversions and their consequences . . . the converts' stories can no longer be understood in terms of betrothal, fruitfulness, and continuity [because of what Chaucer deleted]" (42). Chaucer's deletion of the "fruitfulness" of conversion causes the legend to lose both its Augustinian humanism and the humanistic feminism that the de Voragine version stresses. These deletions, in their loss of "Augustinian perspective," create a satire which Reames and Johnson overlook.

Reames shows that in translating the Legend of St. Cecilia, Chaucer made "a highly selective abridgement of his own" ("Cecelia Legend" 39). Although Reames shows how Chaucer

used the abridgment made by another author (in the Franciscan text and not the Legenda Aurea), Chaucer's choice in source text is still telling. Why claim to be working from de Voragine's text if he so obviously is not? Johnson believes that the "political artifice" in Chaucer's retelling of the Cecelia legend is based upon his desire to show "a strategy of dissent" and that Chaucer's emphasis upon the "labor of translation is intended to conceal his underlying political artifice" (315-316). But Johnson, like Reames, does not analyze the Cecelia Legend as satire, but as political commentary. Johnson discusses Chaucer's Cecelia as a female authority figure, but Chaucer's editorial choices force the reader to see Saint Cecelia as a martyr who has lost her feminine humanism. The Nun claims to tell a story based on humanistic values, yet, as Reames shows, the Nun's version is not de Voragine's version.

This earlier analogue, de Voragine's Legenda Aurea, stresses Augustinian humanism, yet Chaucer seems to deemphasize this humanism in his retelling. While it is agreed upon by Chaucer scholars that in The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale there are both inconsistencies in Chaucer's narrative and revisions to Chaucer's earlier analogue, the reasons for them have never fully been explained. Perhaps these deletions make Chaucer's tale an extremely negative version of a female-dominated, humanistic early Christian text.

It is important to remember that Chaucer uses irony in many of his works; therefore, the "negative" Cecilia Legend may actually have a positive message beyond that of glorifying a figure of questionable female authority. Chaucer's decision to retell the Cecelia Legend rather than another saint's life is important, because "the popularity of the life of Saint Cecilia in other sources, especially Caxton's printed Golden Legend, indicate that her piety found receptive audiences until late in the fifteenth century" (Grossi 299). When an author retells an earlier analogue, for the most part any omissions or revisions are intentional and are meant to draw the

reader's attention. Just as the "Wife of Bath's Tale" alludes to an Aesopic fable concerned with the subjection of women and uses rhetorical tactics to satirize "misogynistic attitudes present in Chaucer's England," (Malvern 239), the Second Nun's Tale alludes to de Voragine's humanism in order to satirize those who do not understand it. Both de Voragine and French medieval proto-feminist Christine de Pizan focus on the humanistic qualities of the female martyr, so the absence of St. Cecilia's humanism in Chaucer's version conspicuously draws the reader's attention..[1]

Augustinian philosophy, with its humanist emphasis on the revival of classical Greek and Latin texts, had an undeniable influence on Chaucer. Rosemarie Potz McGerr compares Chaucer's retractions at the end of the Canterbury Tales to Augustine's Retractationes. McGerr argues that "the whole of The Canterbury Tales, even in its unfinished state, embodies Augustine's ideas about the workings of memory, experience, and literature" (96). McGerr discusses, further, Augustine's extensive education in rhetoric and the similarities between his rhetoric and Chaucer's; specifically, McGerr points out that both Augustine and Chaucer were aware of the "possibilities of literary communication" (99). For Augustine, it was the author's duty to communicate truth; similarly, Chaucer "reveals [at the end of The Canterbury Tales that it is] his intention to educate the [reader]" (McGerr 102). Augustinian humanism strongly influenced Christine de Pizan's championship of women and Chaucer's ironic presentation of the female martyr.

Evident particularly in the works of Chaucer and de Pizan, Augustinian humanism incorporates humanistic interpretations of "all elements of Christian culture: philosophy, theology, law, spirituality, and mysticism" (Madec 132). Humanism emphasizes the value of educating women, which de Pizan would have known and appreciated, and it would have been

difficult for an educated person not to be familiar with Augustinian humanistic philosophy during the times when both Chaucer and de Pizan were writing (Bell 173). The pervasiveness of Augustinian humanism bears on Chaucer‘s deletions from the Cecilia Legend.

In particular, Augustinian humanism’s emphasis on “unconditioned predestination and the particular saving will” of mankind is essential to understanding the repercussions of Chaucer’s version of the Saint Cecelia Legend (Madec 133). Augustine’s ideal of Christian optimism is “an interpretation of Christianity heavily marked by the event of conversion and the spiritual experience that follow[s]” (132). Augustine emphasized the fact that even “events . . . in life before conversion take their true meaning from the conversion to which they led” (McGerr 103). The Legenda Aurea quotes Augustine as having said of his own conversion that “the examples of your servants, whom you brought from darkness to light and from death to life, crowded into the heart of my thoughts and burned there, and took away all heaviness and languor” (121). Augustinian humanism therefore values the exact experiences and ideals that should be held by “the servant” Saint Cecilia herself, since the story of Cecelia focuses on her acts of conversion, as is evident in this earlier analogue. But, in Chaucer’s version of the Cecilia Legend “the story [of Saint Cecilia] loses its balanced Augustinian perspective and takes on an increasing theological pessimism” (Reames “Cecelia Legend” 40). Further, Chaucer’s omission of “nearly every reference to instruction convey[s] the distinctly non-Augustinian notion that the convert [doesn’t] understand—and [doesn’t] need to understand—what [happens] to him” (“Cecelia Legend” 50). Chaucer’s retelling of the Saint Cecilia legend is an ironic account of the loss of the very female virtue which de Pizan and Augustinian humanism value.

It is unlikely that Chaucer would have made such glaring changes to the text or chosen to use an analogue that had already been revised, because of the fact that the story of Saint Cecilia

would have been well known in the Middle Ages, unless Chaucer's purpose in writing the Second Nun's Prologue and Tale was based upon what had been deleted or revised. By keeping the same basic plot line of the story, yet changing the subtle connotations of Cecilia's actions, Chaucer both masks the antiphrasis that he is using from a possibly misogynistic medieval audience and still depicts the fruitlessness of women who aspire to be virtuous at the cost of their own humanistic values. De Pizan herself states in The Book of the City of Ladies,

> As far as the poets of whom you speak are concerned, do you not know that they spoke on many subjects in a fictional way and that often they mean the contrary of what their words openly say? One can interpret them according to the grammatical figure of antiphrasis, which means, as you know, that if you call something bad, in fact, it is good, and also vice versa. (1. 2.2)

Therefore, Chaucer's use of antiphrasis would have been a known rhetorical tactic, as would the Saint Cecilia legend itself with its humanistic value system.[2] De Pizan's assertion that medieval poets would have known and used the rhetorical device of antiphrasis stems from her objection to antifeminist writings; de Pizan justifies some misogynistic writing by claiming that the texts were meant to be ironic. In terms of analyzing Chaucer's revisions and antiphrasis in the Saint Cecilia legend, because of her belief that works of morality often employed antiphrasis to prove a point, it is necessary to analyze the pro-feminist writing of de Pizan in her Book of the City of Ladies along with the antifeminist texts that Chaucer would have known.

The Book of the City of Ladies can be looked upon as reactionary. Much like Chaucer's ironic retelling of the Saint Cecelia Legend, de Pizan attempts to address a flaw within literature which attempts to characterize the role of Christian women. As de Pizan and Chaucer alike must

have noticed, even when male authors were attempting to defend women,

> by 1400 in the secular (and vernacular) literature of England and France, the earlier 'gentle' attitudes of the court [toward women] were losing ground before fabliaux and poems of bourgeois origin, [which were] vigorous and crude in their criticism of . . . women, love and marriage. (Kelly 10)

For de Pizan, and indeed any educated person in the Middle Ages who valued humanistic religious ideals, the most affronting piece of literature was Jan de Meung's *Roman de la Rose* (The Romance of the Rose) which "echoed thirteenth century invectives against women" and "sanctioned them in a work of undeniable literary merit" (10). The importance of "The Romance of the Rose" is two fold in the Second Nun's Prologue and Tale, Chaucer's use of antiphrasis, and his message of humanism. Because Chaucer translated "The Romance of the Rose," he would have been well aware of the controversy it caused because of its negative presentation of female characters. Further, it is because of the "Romance of the Rose" that de Pizan wrote her Book of the City of Ladies, a text which offers a great deal of insight into the humanistic qualities to which an educated Christian woman thought female Christians actually should have aspired.

In The Romance of the Rose women are depicted as being the lecherous instigators of physical love (Pearson 5). In reaction to the fact that her society deemed the Romance of the Rose as a piece of literature with "undeniable . . . merit" (Kelly 10) despite its non-humanistic and misogynistic message, de Pizan became embroiled in what scholars now term "La Querelle de la Rose." This "Querelle," which took place between de Pizan and well known male writers of her era, was a series of letter in which de Pizan "attack[ed] this central work of medieval French literature [Le Roman de la Rose] for being immoral in general and for slandering women in

particular" (Warner xx). As a consequence of her involvement in the "Querrelle," De Pizan created a book in which she presents models of female virtue; these models include martyrs, saints, female embodiments of virtues (such as Justice and Wisdom), and the Virgin Mary. Through these models, de Pizan presents the reader with images of women who embody Christian humanism and virtue. The "protagonist" of The Book of the City of Ladies, Christine, is told about various virgin saints and martyrs by the characters Justice and Wisdom; thus, because de Pizan's teachers are Justice and Wisdom, the two key qualities which de Pizan attributes to female Christian morality are justice and wisdom.

De Pizan illustrates her basis for defending women and female virtue through Lady Justice's speech to the Virgin Mary:

> My Lady, what man is so brazen to dare think or say that the feminine sex is vile in beholding your dignity? For if all other women were bad, the light of your goodness so surpasses and transcends them that any remaining evil would vanish. Since God chose His spouse from among women, most excellent Lady, because of your honor, not only should men refrain from reproaching women but should also hold them in great reverence. (3. 1.2)

De Pizan's philosophy then maintains that any slandering of women is a slandering of the Virgin Mary herself; further, all women are redeemed because of the Virgin's purity and holiness. According to both de Pizan and Augustinian humanism, women should be seen as dignified, they should be revered, and they should be seen as having, or potentially having, the qualities possessed by the Virgin Mary. Further, any female Christian, and especially a saint, should embody these traits. In The Canterbury Tales, however, Cecelia does not appear particularly just in terms of her

conversions; Cecelia is not the ultimate instructor of the Christian faith that she should be. Further, the Nun herself does not embody the traits which both de Pizan and Augustinian humanism value; because she presents Cecelia as a flat character, the Nun undermines Cecelia's role as a religious instructor.

By presenting the Saint Cecilia legend as pessimistic and satirical, Chaucer is able to expose the "unvirtuous" virtuous woman through his non-humanist Saint Cecilia. In the "Prologue" before the Nun begins her Tale, she explains why she has decided to tell the story of Saint Cecilia. The Nun warns against being trapped by idleness and says that "the feend thrugh ydelnesse us hente" (7), an idea similar to the modern saying "idle hands make the Devil's work." The Nun then proceeds to tell the purpose of her tale:

> And for to putte us fro swich ydelnesse,
> That cause is of so greet confusioun,
> I have heer doon my faithful bisynesse
> After the legende in translacioun
> Right of thy glorious passioun
> Thou with thy garland wroght with rose and lilie –
> Thee meene I, mayde and martyr, Seint Cecilie. (22-8)

Saint Cecilia, according to the Nun, is the model of a life of spiritual "bisynesse" that combats the "ydelnesse" that the Devil uses to trap human souls. The implication of the Nun's logic is that it is virtuous to be busy and that to be busy is to be virtuous. Marilyn Malina notes that much of the scholarship on the beginning section of the Second Nun's Prologue "has focused on the conventionality of the warning against idleness, on the thematic opposition of idleness and busy-ness, . . . and on the danger, psychologically, of falling from idleness into sloth and worse"

(3).While Malina's analysis of Chaucer's use of the word "idle" is certainly different from the more "conventional" analyses she mentions, the word play between the definitions of "busy" and "idle" in the Prologue calls for analysis. [3] In terms of the loss of humanistic values, the issue is that while it is true that Cecilia "busily" converts pagans to Christianity, the implications of the conversion process, as Chaucer presents them, are not necessarily either positive or humanistic.

The Nun only mentions the word "idle" and devotes serious time to discussing the word "busy" in the Prologue, yet in order to illustrates Chaucer's use of antiphrasis, it is important to discuss the meanings of the key words in the story as Chaucer would have known them. Perhaps part of the reason why the words "idle and "busy" are not used again in the body of the Tale is that Chaucer originally wrote the Legend of Cecelia so long before the rest of the Canterbury Tales, and the story was originally not satirical. However, the absence of the words "idle" and "busy" also makes sense in terms of the continuity of the story itself. Because the Nun believes that she is recounting the version of St Cecelia's life faithfully and directly from the Legenda Aurea, she would not add her own personal commentary into the story itself. Yet the Nun imposes her own meaning onto the tale, separate from the original humanist message, again reinforcing Chaucer's satire of the Nun's misunderstanding of the Legend itself and affirming the idea that the pessimistic portrayal of Cecelia reflects on the Nun's idea of herself and all medieval women.

Through her introduction of her audience to St. Cecelia in the "Prologue," the Second Nun's presentation of Saint Cecilia is based on the two words "ydleness" and "bisynesse" and her concept of how the two words relate to each other. The definition of the word "busy" as Chaucer would have known it is dual. In the Oxford English Dictionary, "busy" is defined as "to employ with constant attention; to engage or occupy assiduously" ("busy"). In terms of this definition, the Second Nun's "Prologue" is a positive affirmation of St. Cecilia's role as a martyr and would have

been familiar to both medieval audiences and modern audiences. However, the OED also lists a now obsolete definition of "busy" that Chaucer himself used in the "Treatise on the Astrolabe" and of which medieval readers would also have been aware.[4] This older usage of the word "busy" means "solicitous, anxious, uneasy" ("busy"). In terms of this second definition, the Second Nun's use of the word "busy" when describing St. Cecilia carries some irony. Is Chaucer implying that Cecilia is "uneasy" about her occupation as a servant of God? Or are the Second Nun's own concepts of virtue warped?

As Chaucer begins his version of the Lyf of Saint Cecilia, the Nun states that Cecilia is "lyk a bisy bee" in her conversion of the pagans around her (195). For the Nun to make the analogy that Cecilia is a "busy bee" seems to detract from the humanistic role of the Christian martyr. Thus, the Nun compares Cecilia, a martyr and a saint, to a drone who merely does a job without thought to spiritual consequence. Through the juxtaposition of the different meanings of "busy," Chaucer is ultimately able to show the warped image that the patriarchy of the Middle Ages, and the Nun herself, placed upon women. Despite the fact that Cecilia is a servant of God, and in de Voragine's text, humanistic, Chaucer uses antiphrasis to show the views popularly held by medieval society concerning women. Even when a woman is holy, she still is open to ridicule, and any medieval reader familiar with the original text and Augustinian humanism certainly would have ridiculed the Cecelia in Chaucer's version of the text. In his text "Skutella," Augustine notes that "in the process of collecting images of the material world. . . the memory shapes them, as if it were an authority passing judgment on all the information delivered" (McGerr 104). As a result, the Nun's inaccurate memory of the Legenda shows the judgment that the Nun herself passes on female Christians. As a consequence of this ill-formed "memory" of the Legenda Aurea, Chaucer is able to illustrate, through the Second Nun, how the misinterpretation of the role of Medieval

women leads to the loss of Christian values.[5] Through de Pizan's philosophy about the virtue of women and her defense of female intelligence and morality, Chaucer's satirical version of the Saint Cecilia legend exposes a warped view of feminine virtue that values "bisynesse" for the sake of "bisynesse" rather than Christian feminine humanism.

By contrast with the two definitions of "busy," word "idle" carries the same connotation and denotation as it does today. The word "idle" has a decidedly negative connotation: "void of any real worth, usefulness, or significance" ("idle").[6] After the Nun states her belief that Cecilia is the model of the virtuous "bisy" female, she invokes the Virgin Mary to help her tell the tale in a way that befits its content. Although the Nun's invocation to Mary is a convention in medieval writing, it helps connect Chaucer's presentation of the female martyr to de Pizan. Cecelia should be "a sort of medium for the Virgin's Truth" (Johnson 315); because the Virgin Mary is the ultimate example of the humanistic female saints, by comparing his pessimistic Cecilia to her, Chaucer reinforces the irony of his version of Saint Cecilia. The Nun's invocation of Mary seems obvious enough; Mary is the Virgin mother of Christ and Saint Cecilia is a virgin martyr. But, if Chaucer's version of Saint Cecelia's story is meant to be ironic or satirical, the invocation to the Virgin Mary helps to illustrate the Nun's cluelessness. If the Nun does not understand the humanism that she deletes from the invocation to Mary, then the invocation becomes a mockery in and of itself.

Robert Sturges observesthat in the "Second Nun's Prologue" " a female storyteller calls on a female Muse for the poetic authority to tell the story of a female saint" (49). But the Muse for the Nun's story could also refer obliquely to Mary of Bethany. Just as in the case of the differing meanings of the word busy, the reference to Mary in the Nun's "Prologue" may also have another meaning: in the gospel according to Luke, Martha rushes around to prepare her house for the

arrival of Jesus while her sister Mary "sat beside the Lord at His feet listening to him speak" (Luke 10:39). The two sisters make Christ welcome, but Christ prefers Mary's behavior to Martha's. Martha's sister Mary "seat[s] herself at the Lord's feet and stays there listening to His words" while "Martha [is] distracted by her many tasks" (10.39-40). Martha goes to Christ and says, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to get on with the word by myself? Tell her to come and give me a hand" (41). Christ replies: " 'Martha, Martha, you are fretting and fussing about so many things there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen what is best; it shall not be taken away from her'" (41-4). While Mary's "idleness" allows her to hear the word of Christ, "Martha in the story is distracted" and further "having at least for the moment lost the word of Christ, she has lost the true reason for her work" (Buttrick 197).

The Nun states in the third stanza of the "Prologue" to her tale "that ydelnesse is roten slogardye/ of which there nevere comth no good n'encrees" (198). But in the story of Martha and Mary, idleness which serves Christ trumps busyness which ignores Christ. While Martha believes that her "busy" preparation for Christ's arrival is her duty as a virtuous woman, her sister Mary is idle and is therefore able to hear the only "thing" she needs, the word of Christ. Idle Mary, not busy Martha, is portrayed as virtuous in Luke's account. Chaucer's allusion to Mary draws an ironic parallel between Luke's "idle" Mary and his own "busy" Cecilia. The Nun invokes the Virgin Mary, the embodiment of humanistic female virtue, and then praises the qualities found in Mary of Bethany's somewhat wayward sister Martha. By alluding to this other Mary, Chaucer uses antiphrasis in his invocation of his "Muse." Chaucer seems to have the Nun refer to the Virgin Mary, yet because of her discussion of busyness versus idleness, the Nun also alludes to the "idle" Mary. Chaucer uses antiphrasis to begin to hint to the reader that Cecilia's "bisynesse" is not necessarily good and that perhaps her "bisynesse" prevents her from having the true message of

Christianity.

In the Nun's "Prologue," there is an account of the origin of Cecilia's name: the Nun refers to the "interpretacio nominis Cecilie quam ponit Frater Jacobus Januensis in Legenda" (lines 84-85). Since the Nun states that she can read and translate Latin and that she has read Jacobus de Voragine's Legenda Aurea, she is aware of de Voragine's depiction of Cecilia as an exemplar of an Augustinian humanist and either chooses to ignore this humanist depiction or, perhaps more importantly, does not understand it. In the Legenda Aurea, de Voragine states that "Cecilia" "may come from coeli lilia, lily of heaven . . . or from coelum and lya, a woman who works for heaven" (318). According to the Nun, Cecilia's name is a joining "of 'hevene' and 'Lia'; and here, in figurynge/ The 'hevene' is set for thought of hoolynesse/ and 'Lia' for hire lastynge bisynesse" (95-8). The choice of definitions Chaucer uses in his description of the meaning of Cecilia's name is telling. Chaucer does not emphasize the feminine aspect of the name as Voragine does; nowhere in Chaucer's definition is the word "woman" used. Therefore, the emphasis is taken off the fact that Cecilia is a female martyr and is instead placed upon Cecilia's "bisynesse." Further, Chaucer again uses irony in that if the Second Nun does indeed misunderstand de Voragine's humanist message, Cecelia's busyness, as the Nun discusses it, actually prevents her from properly working for Heaven in converting those around her.

Chaucer's revisions to the St. Cecilia legend are most obvious when the Nun discusses the process of Cecilia's conversion of those around her. Although Sturges, Malvern, and Grossi all argue that Chaucer's version of Saint Cecelia is a powerful figure who represents female spiritual authority, Reames's discussion of the loss of Augustinian humanism convincingly argues otherwise. Specifically, Chaucer makes a significant change to his earlier analogues in terms of Cecelia's process of "busily" converting which negates any spiritual "authority" that she may have

originally possessed.[7] Chaucer's telling of the "Lyf of Seinte Cecilie" does not emphasize the fact that Cecilia's husband Valerian and her brother-in-law Tiburce come to their conversions through personal choice and conviction. Indeed, in Chaucer's version of the Cecelia Legend, there is no exhibition of growth or thought that an Augustinian ideal of humanism would value, nor is there any evidence that Cecelia focuses on the values that de Pizan associates with female martyrs.

While in both versions of the legend Cecelia sends Valerian to the town Via Apia to have a holy vision, in the Second Nun's Tale Chaucer emphasizes what occurs at Via Apia rather than the spiritual instruction which occurs beforehand. Further, while in both de Voragine's version and Chaucer's version Valerian's conversion is brought about by an angelic vision, in Chaucer's version there is no discussion of Valerian's personal spiritual growth prior to this vision as there is in de Voragine's Legenda Aurea. As Reames points out, "Valerian's inward growth in understanding and faith and purification ceases to matter . . . in comparison with the supernatural favors conferred on him from without" ("Cecelia Legend as Inherited" 46). Cecilia is merely a catalyst for the conversions in Chaucer's version of the tale. Cecelia does not explain the tenets of Christianity to Valerian; instead, she merely tells him to see a hermit who will "[purge him] fro synne/ thane shul [he] se that angel, er [he] twynne" (181-2). Therefore, Valerian is neither forced to do any sort of penance for his sins as a pagan, nor is he forced to take responsibility for his own condition; the holy vision, through the hermit, takes care of these acts of self-actualization for him.

When Cecilia sends Valerian to see Urban, the hermit, "ther gan appeere / an oold man, clad in white clothes cleere/ that hadde a book with letter of gold in hinde / and gan before Valerian to stonde" (200-3). Through the appearance of the old man, Valerian is in awe of the power of God and immediately converts. However, the implications of this "awe" are not necessarily positive; Chaucer states that "Valerian as deed fel doun for drede" (204). Augustinian humanism dictates

that conversion is a personal experience; Valerian's conversion does not appear to be a personal experience due to the "scare tactics" of the holy vision. Rather than making the choice to convert to Christianity of his own volition, Valerian is almost shocked into conversion. Upon seeing this vision, Valerian immediately allows himself to be baptized; he "does nothing between his initial demand (prompted by God) to see the angel and his declaration of faith (prompted by the old man who has arrived from heaven) except to follow the rather rudimentary directions he is given" (Reames "Cecilia Legend" 42). Therefore, Valerian's conversion has none of the humanistic values that Cecilia, as a female saint, should have given to him.

By not explaining his conversion to him fully, Cecilia has neglected to give him a real choice; since Valerian only knows of the fantastic in terms of the Christian faith (the holy vision), he knows nothing of the values that he should have as a human being. As a result, the Second Nun actually undermines Cecelia's role as a holy teacher; because Chaucer has the Second Nun delete the scenes in which Cecelia explains the conversion and the basic ideas of Christianity, the Nun clearly does not understand that the conversion process is not one of miracles and visions but rather of personal growth. Neither Cecelia nor the Nun (by way of her choice in telling Cecelia's story) appear to have many of the characteristics de Pizan outlines in her model of female Christian goodness. Chaucer's antiphrasis then, lies in the fact that the Nun thinks she is telling a story which will both teach her audience about female goodness and make herself appear to be such a model, even though the Nun's story actually exposes the warped view of the role of medieval female Christian.

Valerian's brother Tiburce has a conversion experience similar to Valerian's. When Valerian returns to Cecilia from the hermit, another holy vision occurs, this time an angel of God. Valerian tells the angel that he wants his brother Tiburce to convert also; although this vision

appears also in the Legenda, in the Legenda, Valerian has already had the tenets of Christianity explained to him (de Voragine 319). The angel then causes Tiburce to smell the flowers of Saint Cecilia, roses and lilies. Tiburce wonders,

> This tyme of the yeer
> Whennes that soote savour cometh so
> Of rose and lilies that I smelle heer
> For though I hadde hem in myne handes two
> The savour myghte in me no depper go
> The sweete smel that in myn herte I fynde
> Hath changed me al in another kynde. (Chaucer 247-52)

As a result, Tiburce's conversion is brought about by his encounter with this unnatural fragrance. While Tiburce asks more questions of Cecilia than Valerian does, Tiburce's conversion is, like Valerian's conversion, initiated by a holy vision rather than a spiritual explanation from Cecilia herself. In fact, even during the conversion process, Tiburce's questions seem almost like "the outcr[ies] of a man who is being railroaded" (Reames "Cecelia Legend" 50). Not only has she not explained the conversion process, but Cecelia is, in effect, removed from the conversion process altogether. Unlike Valerian, however, Tiburce does not look to gain spiritual growth as Valerian does when he seeks out the hermit Urban. Therefore, Tiburce has even less humanistic choice than Valerian does. While de Pizan places great importance on the Virgin saints, and gives them the places of highest honor in her City of Ladies, the honor of an active role in the conversion and instruction of Valerian and Tiburce is taken from Cecilia and given to holy visions of men.[8] Therefore, Chaucer's antiphrasis lies in the fact that the Second Nun's Cecilia, model of Christian virtue, is not actually explaining Christianity to her converts.

Cecilia's role as holy teacher only begins after Tiburce agrees to be baptized (337-50). Chaucer never states that Cecilia told Valerian anything about his new-found faith before or after his conversion; Valerian only learns about his new faith after he is baptized. Although in the Legenda Aurea Cecilia's in-depth description of Christ's passion also comes after the conversions of Tiburce and Valerian, it stresses the humanistic aspects of Christ's death. Cecilia states that Christ, "was accursed, that accursed mankind might be blessed" (de Voragine 321).[9] Thus, de Voragine presents Christ's Passion as utterly humanistic; Christ made the ultimate sacrifice for human beings, thus allowing all humans to be redeemed. Indeed, Augustinian humanism is based largely on the optimistic view that Christ saved humanity (Madec 133). In Chaucer's version, however, the Nun reduces Cecilia's description of the Passion to a brief summary:

> Tho gan she hym ful bisily to preche
> Of Cristes come, and of his peynes teche
> And manye pointes of his passioun
> How Goddes Sone in this world was withholde
> To doon mankynde pleyn remissioun
> That was ybounde in synne and cares colde…
> And after this Tiburce in good entente
> With Valerian to Pope Urban wente. (343-347)

Chaucer's Nun's use of the word "busy" after both men have already been converted also contributes to the same antiphrasis; Cecelia should have "busily" explained Christianity and the conversion process before Valerian and Tiburce were converted. Rather than appearing as the ultimate holy instructor then, wise and just as de Pizan would have her be, the Nun's Cecelia instead seems "anxious and solicitous," not serene like the Virgin Mary or the saints in The Book

of the City of Ladies. Further, Chaucer has chosen to condense the "rather eloquent discourse on Christ's passion [from the Legenda Aurea] . . . to three lines of summary." Chaucer also "ignores the examples of both Latin texts [the Legenda and the Passio] and sends Tiburce silently off with Valerian to be baptized" (Reames "Cecelia Legend" 50). Again, Chaucer, by way of the Second Nun, removes the humanist value of the convert's understanding of his own conversion and being an active participant therein. Since Chaucer does not present Cecilia as the ultimate instructor of her converts in the ways of faith, her active role as female virgin martyr is taken from her.

As the tale comes to a close, the Roman prefect Alamachius sends guards to arrest Cecelia and her converts for opposing the pagan religion, but the guards convert to Christianity. Her ability to convert Roman pagans to Christianity reinforces Cecelia's identity as a saint marked by her ability to convert. In a humanist version of the story, ideally, Cecelia's conversion of the very guards sent to stop her would be a triumph of Christian justice and wisdom. But, like Tiburce and Valerian, the guards receive no spiritual education before their conversion. Chaucer's Nun states that

> they, converted at hir wise loore.
> Wepten ful soore, and yaven ful credence
> Unto hire word, and cryden moore and moore
> "Crist, Goddes Sone, withouten difference,
> Is verray God-- this is al oure sentence--
> That hath so good a servant hym to serve.
> This with o voys we trowen, thogh we sterve! (414-20)

Although the guards state that they convert at Cecelia's wise words, the reader does not get to see or hear what her wise words are. In the original version of the Cecelia legend, there is an "extended

dialogue in which Cecilia originally [wins] the hearts of these enemies by addressing them with charity and understanding" (Reames "Cecelia Legend" 51), just as de Pizan's revered virgin saints and Augustinian humanism alike would require of a true converter. As a result of this dialogue's deletion, Cecelia again does not seem either "wise" or humanistic; instead, Cecelia appears not to take the coverts' humanity and choice into account. Chaucer, through the Second Nun's ill-informed and misinterpreted version of Saint Cecelia, is able to satirize the "religious" medieval woman who does not understand her own Christianity.

Cecelia's four converts, Valerian, Tiburce, and the two Roman guards, are all subjected to a non-humanist conversion. Rather than acting as de Pizan's model of the virtuous, wise, just, and utterly humanistic female Christian, Chaucer's Saint Cecelia, as the Second Nun presents her, appears pessimistic and unknowledgeable about the process of conversion. Although many scholars propose that Cecelia is indeed a positive example of a medieval woman, one who holds a great deal of spiritual power over representations of male authority, her actions and their repercussions reveal that Cecelia has no real claim of authority. Because she does not explain the tenets of Christianity before her converts are baptized, the converts really have had no choice in their conversion; thus Cecelia removes a key element of the Augustinian humanism which should dominate conversion. Further, although various authors have pointed out the disparities between Chaucer's version of the Cecelia Legend and his earlier analogues and have noted that these disparities cause a loss of the original version of the story's humanistic values, it is important to consider the possibility that the disparities are satirical and do not necessarily mean that Chaucer meant to deliver a non-humanist message.

The values of both Augustine and proto-feminist de Pizan help show that Chaucer's Cecilia embodies nothing of what the female virgin martyr should. By taking away Cecilia's humanism

through his abridgement to the Legenda Aurea, Chaucer ironically presents an "unvirtuous" virgin martyr. Because the Nun states that she is working from the humanist text of the Legenda Aurea yet strays from the message of that text to the point of deleting the fundamental values of humanism it espouses, the Nun herself becomes a point of satire. Chaucer does not valorize the Second Nun's "busy" Cecilia; instead, he ridicules the Nun herself for misinterpreting the humanist values of Christian conversion. Although various scholars propose that the inclusion of the Cecelia legend in The Canterbury Tales is the result of scribes' intrusions, Chaucer's use of the previously written Cecelia Legend for lack of anything else, or as a commentary on his own piously religious views, the questions that The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale raise tend to negate many of these more conventional suppositions.

Although it is possible that Chaucer meant to temper his bawdier and satirical tales in The Canterbury Tales with the religious Second Nun and Lyf of Seinte Cecelie, it is also possible, given Chaucer's propensity for satire and humor, that Chaucer mocks the "piety" of the Second Nun. Chaucer later attached a "Retraction" to The Canterbury Tales in which he states that he wishes his readers only to pay attention to the "legendes of seintes, and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun . . .and let falle the chaf"; perhaps Chaucer, late in his life, wanted to point his readers to the morality he espouses in his most well-known "legende of seintes." Perhaps Chaucer is pointing his readers to the commentary on the virtuous medieval woman which he makes specifically through his portrayal of the Second Nun and her telling of the Cecelia Legend. In the Book of the City of Ladies, Lady Justice asks: "as far as the poets of whom you speak are concerned, do you not know that they spoke on many subjects in a fictional way and that often they mean the contrary of what their words openly say?" Like the poets to whom Lady Justice refers, Chaucer presents Saint Cecilia in an ironic way to slip his approval of the humanist virtue of women into the minds

of his readers, both medieval and modern.

Endnotes

1.. De Pizan's Book of the City of Ladies, though written after Chaucer's, is key to the analysis of Medieval proto-feminism. Because there were so few female writers during the late 1300s and early 1400s, de Pizan allows a glimpse into the opinions of a medieval woman on the subject of the proper conduct for a humanist Christian woman.

2. In A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms, Richard A. Lanham defines "antiphrasis" as meaning "expression by the opposite." Lanham further states that the term is known also as a "broad floute." (14)

3. Malina argues that the use of the word "idle" in the prologue parallels Chaucer's use of the word "idol" in the Tale itself. Thus, Malina argues, the Nun's spiritual battle against "idleness" may also be a battle against "idolness."

4. This obsolete definition is listed under definition number six in the OED.

5. McGerr's citations of various sources, both critical analyses of Augustine's writings as well as Augustine's writings themselves, are extensive; these sources are listed in McGerr's footnotes.

6. Further, the concept of idleness connects Chaucer to the Romance of the Rose. In Chaucer's translation, the personification of Idleness opens the gates to the garden of love. Idleness is personified in the shape of a beautiful young woman who is richly clothed and appears in a rather negative light (Chaucer 531-628). Needless to say, this presentation of a female as having little to no virtue, and initiating a premarital love would have most likely been a point of contention with Christine de Pizan in her "Querelle de la Rose." Chaucer would have certainly known the connotations of the word "idle" in reference to women and their treatment in literature. As a result, in choosing to have the Nun focus specifically on the word "idle" Chaucer connects the Tale to the

Romance of the Rose. Perhaps the Nun even has the Romance of the Rose in mind while discussing Cecelia and valorizing her "bisynesse."

7. Most of Reames's sources in the three articles which are used in this paper are based upon her analyses of the primary sources which she believes Chaucer used in writing the Cecelia Legend. Reames's sources are listed in her footnotes, and also offer insights into her methods and discoveries in her textual analyses.

8. De Pizan's description of the actions of the Virgin saints occurs in Book III of the Book of the City of Ladies. Although Saint Cecilia is not specifically focused on, the importance that de Pizan places on the Virgin saints is evident in the length of this section.

9. The complete sermon concerning the Passion of Christ as it appears in Voragine's Legenda Aurea is as follows:

> "Then she began to instruct him about the coming of the Son of God and his passion, and to show the many ways in which his passion was fitting. 'The Son of God was held in bonds,' She said, 'in order to free humankind from the bonds of sin. He was accursed, that accursed mankind might be blessed. He allowed himself to be mocked in order to free man from being made a mockery by the demons. He submitted to receiving a crown of thorns on his head so as to lift the capital sentence from us. He tasted the bitter ball to cure our taste for the sweet things of life. He was stripped of his garments to cover our first parents' nakedness. He was hung upon a tree to undo the evil done at the tree!'" (321).

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