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‘PENOLOPĒES TROUTHE’: FEMALE FAITHFULNESS IN LATE MEDIEVAL
ENGLISH LITERATURE

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

‘Penelopëes Trouthe’: Female Faithfulness in Late Medieval English Literature

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This dissertation examines the figure of the faithful woman in late medieval English literature. Medieval writers who hark back to classical and Biblical sources to construct moralized exempla of faithful women often simplify and alter their stories to fit specific agendas and give themselves moral authority. This study argues that, by the later Middle Ages, English authors self-consciously referenced and critiqued this tradition, not only in the service of reconceptualizing virtue, but also as an avenue through which to rethink literary and social hierarchies. Late medieval English authors use faithful women, like Penelope, to reconceive ethical authorship or virtuous living. The dissertation takes Penelope as its guiding figure for investigating how authors engaged with female faithfulness because, thanks to a distinctive medieval commentary tradition, she was taken by nearly all later medieval readers as a paragon of wifely faithfulness. Chapter One argues that the long literary tradition of engagement with Penelope points to a moralizing program of writing classical women’s lives that lends ethical importance to authors and their works. In Chapter Two, I show that Chaucer explores literary value and authority through engagement with the tradition of moralizing references to Penelope in several of his poems, including *Anelida and Arcite*, *Book of the Duchess*, and *The*

Franklin's Tale. Each of these poems engages with the *Romance of the Rose* and Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* to comment on the possible uses and drawbacks of referring to traditionally exemplary female figures like Penelope. The chapter ends with Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, in which the poet takes a somewhat bolder approach to making use of Penelope. Rather than showing his narrator as confined by traditional views of classical women, Gower's Genius rewrites Penelope's letter from the *Heroides* to reconceive literature as authorized and even made necessary by morality and experience. In the third chapter the dissertation turns to the *Man of Law's Tale*, which stages a shift in the *Canterbury Tales* from classical female virtue toward a more explicitly Christianized, English literature; in doing so, it explores the use-value of the literature of female fidelity and virtue in the vernacular. Through this move to non-classical female exemplarity, the *Man of Law's Tale* reveals that simply replaying female suffering and virtue, even in the context of Christian history, does not solve the problems inherent to Ovidian pity and suffering. Custance is read by her peers and by the Man of Law in ways that perpetuate her suffering and wandering. Her instability, imposed from without, mirrors the vagaries of vernacular transmission and reader response, calling into question the ability of Middle English to serve as a literary, national language. Finally, Chapter Four examines another Middle English text, the Digby *Mary Magdalene* play, that stages a movement of cultural transmission from the ancient world to medieval Western Europe through an icon of female faithfulness. The play uses Mary's social transgressions and eventual fealty to Christ, as well as the Queen of Marseilles' negotiations of religious and marital fidelity, to explore the implications of religious, sexual, and political faith for the lives of everyday medieval Christians.

By examining Penelope, Custance, and Mary Magdalene, this dissertation historicizes medieval moralizing rhetoric and shows that its uses go beyond the banal to address the relationship of author to audience, the value of literature, and the interplay between literary history and human history. These late medieval iterations of conservative-seeming “good women” stories turn out to contain seeds for challenging tradition and rethinking medieval readers’ relationship to the past.

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Dedication

For my mother, Grandpa, and Sprout

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Introduction

My melancholy is the most faithful mistress I have known; what wonder, then,
that I love her in return.

-Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*

To yow broughte I noght elles, out of drede,
But feith, and nakednesse, and maydenhede.

-Chaucer, *Clerk's Tale*, IV.865-66

For modern readers, the scandal of the *Clerk's Tale* lies in the relentlessness of Walter's tests of Griselda. Despite the fact that Griselda never wavers in her devotion to him, Walter continues to try her. Finally, he concludes,

I have thy feith and thy benygnytee,
As wel as evere womman was, assayed,
....
Now knowe I, dere wyf, thy stedfastnesse.¹

Griselda's position as a "good woman" in Walter's eyes relies on her ability to suffer greatly while still maintaining her virtues, including "feith," "benygnytee" (kindness), and "stedfastnesse," the first and last of which are nearly synonymous. Griselda's faithful suffering inspires the sympathy of her countrymen and readers alike, but it is hardly unique – it stands in relation to many other depictions of faithful women in late medieval literature, including perhaps most famously the Ovidian heroines in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, which the prologue claims is written at the command of Alceste to depict

¹ Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), lines IV. 1053-56. All subsequent citations from Chaucer's works will appear parenthetically.

“goode wymmen, maidenen and wyves, / That weren trewe in lovyng al hir lyves” (484-5). It must also be read against misogynist claims against women’s faithfulness, like those voiced by the Jealous Husband in the *Romance of the Rose* (“Penelope neïs predroit / qui bien a lui prendre entendroit” - “Even Penelope could be taken by a man who applied himself seriously to taking her”),² and by an incredulous narrator in Lydgate’s *Troy Book*, decrying the treachery of Medea against her father:

For who was euer ȝit so mad or wood,
 Þat ouȝt of resoun conne ariȝt his good,
 To ȝeue feith or hastily credence
 To any womman, with-oute experience,
 In whom is nouthur trust ne sikernesse.
 Þei ben so double & ful of brotilnesse,
 Þat it is harde in hem to assure;
 For vn-to hem it longeth of nature,
 From her birth to hauen alliaunce
 With doubilnes and with variaunce.”³

As these quotations show, the concept of women’s faithfulness is a site of negotiation and tension in late medieval texts – its existence can only be proven by trial and suffering, and even then might be denied.

This dissertation aims to shed light on the late medieval literary phenomenon of the “faithful woman” and the uses to which it is put. ““Penelopëe’s Trouthe”” begins by examining the figure of Penelope, a touchstone for female faithfulness in medieval literature, because examining her literary history and the ways that Chaucer and Gower use her gives us an idea of the importance of female faithfulness to the project of

² Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*, vol. 2, Classiques français du Moyen Age (Paris: H. Champion, 1973), lines 856-57; translated in Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, ed. and trans. Frances Horgan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 132.

³ John Lydgate, *Lydgate’s Troy Book*, ed. Henry Bergen, Early English Text Society extra series 97, 103, 106 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, 1906), l.1845-54.

translating classical literature and classical authority to Middle English literature. The dissertation then turns to Custance in the *Man of Law's Tale*, theorizing that this tale dramatizes Chaucer's own project of coming to grips with the problem of female virtue and literary authority – Custance represents both a turn away from translation of classical texts, and the reconciliation of classical virtues and the tradition of *translatio studii et imperii* with the problems of reader response and textual circulation. Finally, I turn to Mary Magdalene, whose fall into promiscuity seems to put her on the opposite end of the spectrum from faithful Penelope, but who, in the Digby play and in medieval sermons, represents Christian faith as it is transferred to Europe historically, much as classical literature made its way to Northern Europe, and models how faithfulness is lived out by medieval laypeople. Like Penelope and Custance, the Magdalene is a site of negotiation and translation between static, authoritative virtue and the dynamic ways it must play out in medieval, vernacular literature and life.

“Penelopëes Trouthe” argues that, by the late fourteenth century, English authors were using the traditions of classical and Biblical feminine exemplarity, most particularly feminine faithfulness, not only as tools for conceptualizing women's virtue or the virtues of femininity, but as avenues through which to rethink social, political, and literary hierarchies in light of the rising literary importance of Middle English and the changing social dynamics of medieval English life. The texts examined here do not make straightforward recommendations for feminine behavior, as we see in conduct books like *What the Goodwife Taught her Daughter*, although many do gesture toward social prescriptions.⁴ Rather, this study focuses on late medieval texts by Chaucer, Gower, and

⁴ Felicity Riddy, “Mother Knows Best: Reading Social Change in a Courtesy Text,” *Speculum* 71, no. 1 (1996), 66-86, argues that this conduct book was written in late medieval England as a form of social

the Digby *Mary Magdalene* playwright(s) that retell stories of good or faithful women toward other ends. Faithful women in these texts often provide opportunities for authors to establish their own authority as creators or compilers of morally uplifting works, or to reconceive ethical authorship or virtuous living altogether. Faithful female characters act as nodal points in these texts around which ideas about feminine virtue, social hierarchy, political fidelity, literary tradition, and authorial identity coalesce. They lend moral force to the works in which they appear and ethical authority to their authors. Chaucer uses faithful women to problematize literary authority; Gower uses them to reconceive it; and the Digby playwright(s) show the potential of feminine faithfulness to lend social and religious authority to laypeople's lives.

The terms that pertain to our topic here include faith, faithfulness, *trouthe*, loyalty, and constancy. All of these words contain meanings beyond the purely interpersonal to encompass monetary, religious, and political connotations, and all could apply to either gender. Isidore of Seville's definition of constancy in his *Etymologiae* shows the interconnectedness of these terms and the variety of values they carry: "Constans dictus quod undique stat, nec in aliquam partem declinari potest. Confidens, quod sit in cunctis fiducia plenus." (Constant is so called because one 'stands firm' in every situation, and

control over servant women in bourgeois households whose unmooredness from their own families endangered the emerging household-based, bourgeois ethos. For an interpretation of a Chaucerian "good woman" text with social implications, see Nicole Nolan Sidhu, "Weeping for the Virtuous Wife: Laymen, Affective Piety and Chaucer's 'Clerk's Tale,'" in *Medieval Domesticity: Home, Housing and Household in Medieval England*, ed. Maryanne Kowaleski and P.J.P. Goldberg, 177-208 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Sidhu argues that the tale provokes laymen to see themselves as responsible for protecting and nurturing the women in their community, as the men in Griselda's community failed to protect her.

cannot deviate in any direction. Trusting, [because] one [is] full of faith in all matters.)⁵

Isidore's definition shows that he connects language and reality, or abstract principles and physical action in the world, and betrays the blurred line between moral and monetary value, as he uses *fiducia* in only one other place, in a section on terms for different types of loans, and defines it there as "the transference of property on trust."⁶

Constans, *confidens*, and *fiducia* all gesture toward the same concept of faithfulness.

Middle English uses of *feith* also bear witness to the multivalence of the word. Authors used it to refer to belief in God, loyalty to any person, and specifically loyalty to a spouse or fealty to a ruler or lord.⁷ The Middle English word *trouthe* encompasses these ideas, and many others: as the editors of the *MED* point out, the word's definitions "defy rigid categorization" but encompass various interpersonal loyalties, including marital, religious, and political affiliations.⁸ *Trouthe* signifies, among other things, chivalric honor and integrity, as well as spousal fidelity. Hence in the *Knight's Tale* Arcite lists it among the knightly virtues he hopes to embody in his dying recommendation of Palamon to Emelye ("trouthe, honour, and knyghthede, / Wysdom, humblesse, estaat, and heigh kynrede, / Freedom, and al that longeth to that art" (I.2789-91)), and the priest who marries January and May in the *Merchant's Tale* encourages the bride (in a twist of irony) to "be lyk Sarra and Rebekke / In wisdom and in trouthe of marriage" (IV.1704-05).

⁵ Isidore of Seville, *Isidori Hispalensis episcopi Etymologiarum sive Originum libri XX*, ed. W.M. Lindsay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), X.C.40; Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, ed. and trans. Stephen Barney, et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), X.C.40.

⁶ Isidore, *Etymologiarum*, V.xxv.23. Classically, *fiducia* can be a synonym for *fides* when it is not used in a legal context. Elsewhere, Isidore uses the more common and general *fides* for "faith."

⁷ *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. "feith."

⁸ *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. "treuth."

As the quotations above from the *Canterbury Tales* show, these terms for faithfulness can have special gendered meanings. Chivalric *trouthe* and wifely *trouthe* represent specific masculine and feminine iterations of the ideology of faithfulness, for example. Classical and medieval writers often emphasize faithfulness as a primary feminine virtue, or decry its absence as a peculiarly feminine vice. The texts this study examines take up the idea of female faithfulness and explore its implications for authorship, ethics, and social relations.

Faithful women in medieval texts often work as moralized exemplars, especially women from the biblical and classical traditions. Medieval scholastic readers of classical texts classified poetry under the category of ethics; in other words, mythology was to be mined for the moral lessons it could offer medieval Christians.⁹ The connection of exemplary characters to moral value provided vernacular authors with cultural capital. In Larry Scanlon's words, "[t]he classical exemplum persuaded by appealing to heroic figures and *auctores* the audience already venerated. This appeal was never static because it was precisely the capacity to produce moral authority which the figures being appealed to embodied."¹⁰ The nature of this "moral authority" and the strategies authors use to employ it are the topics of the first two chapters of this study. Many late medieval authors composed catalogs of exemplary classical figures whose stories give readers lessons for living – Petrarch's *De viris illustribus* sets the tone for later collections like Boccaccio's *De casibus* and *De mulieribus claris*, and Machaut's *Jugement dou roi de Navarre* and

⁹ Judson Boyce Allen, *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages: A Decorum of Convenient Distinction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 10-11. Allen argues that most medieval readers saw poetry in general in this way. See also J. Allan Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004).

¹⁰ Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 33.

Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* dramatize the narration of exemplary women as a vehicle for authorial identity formation and cultural power.¹¹ Reinterpreting female exemplars from a woman's viewpoint gives Christine de Pizan authorial prerogative and justification in *The Book of the City of Ladies*. Biblical and saintly women provide moral lessons to medieval Christians in sermons, hagiographies, and dramatic texts to a great degree in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

This study builds on work by many others on female virtue and classical stories in Middle English texts and, I hope, pushes it a bit further by suggesting that Penelope provides a specific model for feminine faithfulness that Chaucer, Gower, and the Digby playwright(s) found particularly productive for thinking about history and authorship. I take up A.J. Minnis's idea that Chaucer was less prone to moralizing classical stories than his contemporaries;¹² however, rather than rejecting moralization whole cloth, this study finds that Chaucer (and Gower) did engage with traditional moralized readings of Penelope in such a way as to probe the usefulness of that tradition for writing ethically and effectively. They seem to ask, how do stories of faithful women like Penelope help characters who read them, like the Black Knight and Dorigen, to live their lives ethically and express genuine emotion? I follow Lee Patterson's finding that, for Chaucer, classical tradition provided an avenue to "recognize the mutual interdependence of subjectivity

¹¹ Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 193, argues that the *Legend of Good Women* participates in a scholastic tradition of moralizing classical stories, and shows Chaucer not only translating, but *reinterpreting* his source texts in a way that recalls the scholastic mode of reading; "through auto-exegesis [the *Legend*] confers full authorial status on the vernacular translator." We might argue that the same is true to a degree for the *Monk's Tale*, although it owes its form to Petrarch's *Decasibus*.

¹² A.J. Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1982), 6.

and history” in his poetry.¹³ Characters in Chaucer’s and Gower’s works make use of Penelope’s story in order to mine literary history for adequate models of expression, action, and authorship; the same is true of the Queen of Marseilles in the Digby play, who takes the example of Mary Magdalene as authorization of her own wifely holiness.

The dissertation also depends on seminal feminist scholarship that argues Chaucer often wrote his female characters as vehicles for thinking through philosophical problems, like human pity, patience, and the refusal of stasis, or the gendered nature of authorship.¹⁴ I am indebted to similar studies by Carolyn Collette, Holly Crocker, Nicole Nolan Sidhu, and others, which see depictions of women’s virtue (or vice, as the case may be) in Middle English poetry as pointing to a consideration of the uses of the past for ethical living and writing in medieval England.¹⁵

One rhetorical strategy medieval authors use in engaging with exemplary women consists of the insertion of a truncated, catalog-style list into a larger narrative. Female characters like Lucretia and Penelope often appear as mere names alongside the outstanding qualities that they traditionally signify in a type of abstraction that separated well-known figures from the circumstances that constituted their stories as authors sifted them to emphasize specific virtues, like faithfulness. In the words of Holly Crocker,

¹³ Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 61.

¹⁴ Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002); Mann suggests that Chaucer refused to moralize women in favor of thinking about traditionally feminine virtues as applicable to men as well, thereby rethinking masculinity. Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), claims for Chaucer an awareness of the highly gendered nature of authorship and a willingness to overturn it at times.

¹⁵ Carolyn P. Collette, *Rethinking Chaucer’s Legend of Good Women* (New York: York Medieval Press, 2014); Holly A. Crocker, “‘As false as Cressid’: Virtue Trouble from Chaucer to Shakespeare,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 43.2 (Spring 2013), 303-34; Nicole Nolan Sidhu, *Indecent Exposure: Gender, Politics, and Obscene Comedy in Middle English Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

writers who use female exemplars in this way “[abstract their] narratives..., distilling particular virtues by separating them from the specific conditions of their emergence,” with the result that “the complex moral agency of model heroines is dispersed to constitute favored feminine conduct.”¹⁶ Chapter One takes up the problem of the “distilled” classical story of female faithfulness, tracing the many medieval iterations of Penelope’s name as a by-word for faithfulness in the absence of her larger story. This kind of truncation participates in a larger, ancient catalog tradition, which Glenda McLeod notes often pops up in late medieval literature as a place where form and content, and individual authorship and authority, meet in tension.¹⁷ Chaucer iterates the catalog tradition in his mentions of Penelope and other faithful women, which I trace in Chapter Two. I argue that Chaucer uses Penelope’s name to call up literary tradition, specifically the *Ars Amatoria* and the *Romance of the Rose*, often to show its inadequacy to the story he is trying to tell or to the ethical thrust of the text.

The social value of literature is at stake for Chaucer, Gower, and the Digby *Mary Magdalene* playwright in their depictions of female steadfastness. As Carolyn Collette points out in her study of the *Legend of Good Women*, the fact that so many authors used exemplary women for different ends shows the “adaptability of the trope of women’s fidelity to exemplify a variety of social and ethical issues... The topic of women’s fidelity

¹⁶ Crocker, “‘As false as Cressid,’” 310-311. Crocker gives the specific example of Caxton’s *Book of the Knight of the Tower*, which converts the spiritual virtue of the Virgin Mary into social submission to men. Thus, “Abstract ideal is converted into the good behavior recommended for late medieval women.” Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Reading Myth: Classical Mythology and its Interpretations in Medieval French Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 6-8, calls this a “clerkly” mode of reading that “reduced [texts] to mere instruments for the exercise of the interpreter’s ingenuity” and read myths “in a one-dimensional moral way.”

¹⁷ Glenda McLeod, *Virtue and Venom: Catalogs of Women from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 2.

and steadfastness in love functions in exemplary narratives as an umbrella theme for all kinds of social relations between men and women, parents and children, and between generations.”¹⁸ Chaucer’s treatment of women overall is much more complex than his catalog-style naming of Penelope attests, especially when female characters like Dorigen and Criseyde struggle with the social embeddedness of their *trouthe*. The negotiations these characters must enact point to the ethical ambiguities of an authorship that requires female steadfastness and suffering for its moral force. The Chaucerian works I examine here use female faithfulness to ask, what does it mean to write “moral” stories for a vernacular audience? What are the consequences of these stories in the world?

For Chaucer and the *Mary Magdalene* playwright, the moral good of literature often includes reevaluating social hierarchies, including marriage, to include the possibility of agency for women and non-noble men. Female faithfulness is a central part of Chaucer’s re-conception of social relations. In her study of comedic texts, which often treat unfaithful wives, Nicole Nolan Sidhu argues that “English writers of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries use obscene comedy to develop what might be called a ‘vernacular political theory’ to account for and examine the power relations of their world.” She suggests that depictions of domestic relationships in comedic texts, especially “disobedient wives” and their husbands, reveal economic and political influences upon the domestic sphere. These texts move toward “a re-evaluation of marriage and gender roles that reflects the new emphasis on conjugality and the development of companionate marriage that historians have seen emerging in Northern Europe in the later Middle

¹⁸ Collette, *Rethinking Chaucer’s Legend of Good Women*, 34.

Ages.”¹⁹ I argue that Chaucer’s reevaluation of marriage, especially in the *Franklin’s Tale*, dovetails with his project of using and reckoning with literary tradition. The power of traditional authority both constrains Dorigen and gives her an avenue for enacting her will to be true to Arveragus. Like Chaucer, she must negotiate a way through traditional forms of social and literary power to keep her promise of “trouthe” to Arveragus. In a similar way, the Digby *Mary Magdalene* engages with social problems in its depiction of the Queen of Marseilles, who negotiates the conjunction of religious and social authority in her bid to become both a mother and a baptized Christian. Her faithfulness to husband, child, and Christ, though dangerous (she appears to die on the way to the Holy Land), results in a miracle and gives audience members a model for lay female devotion.

Much like the figure of Penelope in Chaucer’s oeuvre, the *Legend* hovers in the background of “‘Penelopëe’s Trouthe’” as an important point of reference for female faithfulness. The collection dramatizes classical female faithfulness as lending writers authorization, even moral authority. The stories themselves purport to tell of “wommen trewe in lovyng al hire lyve” (F 438), and all are classical exempla. Alceste herself is a figure for faithfulness, especially in the G Prologue,²⁰ and she demands that the narrator produce stories of faithful women as penance for telling Criseyde’s less wholesome tale. The narrator moves from moral turpitude, accused by the God of Love of sins against

¹⁹ Sidhu, *Indecent Exposure*, 13-14. See also Glenn Burger, *Chaucer’s Queer Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), and Emma Lipton, *Affections of the Mind: The Politics of Sacramental Marriage in Late Medieval English Literature* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007) for the idea that Chaucer explores a new model of marriage brought about by the social, economic, and ideological changes of late fourteenth century England.

²⁰ Robert R. Edwards, “Ricardian Dreamwork: Chaucer: Cupid and Loyal Lovers,” in *The Legend of Good Women: Context and Reception*, ed. Carolyn Colette (D.S. Brewer, 2006), 69-71, argues that the G Prologue more firmly situates Alceste as an exemplar for fidelity, in a shift toward the idea of political loyalty to the God of Love (and, by extension, to Richard II).

love, to borrowed authority, lent to him by an exemplar of faithfulness, Alceste.

Women's faithfulness governs the structure and impetus of the collection. Chaucer's treatment of female faithfulness in the *Legend* is complex, however, and shows that the trope provides a flexible, contested site for authorial invention and social engagement in the Middle Ages. The individual legends themselves do not always carry out the straightforward moral program promised by the Prologue, a fact that has been variously interpreted as authorial failure, triumph over classical tradition, or deliberate playfulness.²¹ Instead, the stories reveal the "dishonest selectivity" of an author struggling to create good women out of complex characters to answer a social ill he has perpetuated – the uses of texts for misogynist ends.²² The legends' foibles, including clumsy moralizations, truncations or erasures of their heroines' voices, and over-the-top demonization of male lovers, indicate that the God of Love's prescribed dogma of virtuous womanhood fits imperfectly with the requirements of courtly authorship and the specificities of the stories themselves. The God of Love's attempt to corral the power of "olde apprevd stories" (F 21) for his own purposes shows that he misunderstands the true power of female exemplarity, which is not to prove a static point (i.e. women are good and love is a worthwhile venture), but to lend authority to vernacular authorship and provide a venue for thinking through philosophical and social problems.

²¹See, respectively, Robert Worth Frank, Jr, *Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), John Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), and Lisa J. Kiser, *Telling Classical Tales: Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics*; and Florence Percival, *Chaucer's Legendary Good Women* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 326, for these interpretations.

²² Kiser, *Telling Classical Tales*, 100.

This study takes Penelope as its guiding figure for examining a certain kind of wifely faithfulness in late medieval literature. It hypothesizes that Penelope, as the leading figure of the *Heroides* who was extolled by medieval commentators and authors, greatly influenced how readers encountered the collection and how they conceived of female faithfulness in classical texts, and perhaps in general. Penelope's presence in many of the works of Chaucer and in Gower's *Confessio Amantis* draws attention to how these authors depict women and men interacting with literary female faithfulness and reveals that medieval modes of reading contained more possibilities than simple moralizing, or applying literary virtues to one's life in a simple one-to-one fashion. The reactions of characters in these texts to female virtue range from conversion to Christianity, to unrealistic comparisons to living women, to inspiration for writing in the vernacular. In Chapter One, "Medieval Classicism and Feminine Exemplarity," I trace the literary history of Penelope, chronicling the development of rhetorical uses of Penelope by Ovid, by Jerome in his anti-marriage tract *Adversus Jovinianum*, by medieval commentators on Ovid, and in medieval historiographical texts, Jean de Meun's *Romance of the Rose*, and Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*. In many of these texts, Penelope works as a catalog entry, or a simple by-word for faithfulness. Her appearance in Jerome especially attests to the simplification of women's stories in the service of Christianized and sanitized examples. Historiography (with the exception of the *Heroides* translations in the *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César*) also references Penelope as merely the faithful, long-suffering wife of Ulysses rather than as a clever, fully realized character.

Chaucer and Gower react to these influential texts in their treatments of Penelope, as I argue in Chapter Two, “Classical Women and Ethical Authorship in Chaucer’s Poetry and Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*.” The texts treated in this chapter all reference Penelope in service of working through the relationship of fourteenth-century English poetry to the classical past. Chaucer’s uses of Penelope in three poems that span his career suggest that the poet saw a fundamental incompatibility between classical and courtly traditions’ debasement of feminine virtue and the authorization given him by female virtue as a subject of poetry. The argument centers on depictions of women in the *Book of the Duchess*, *Anelida and Arcite*, and the *Franklin’s Tale*. In each poem, the poet dramatizes his narrators’ and characters’ attempts to live and write effectively and ethically, and the methods Chaucer employs have powerful implications for his views on vernacularity and social hierarchy. In *Anelida and Arcite*, Chaucer hypothesizes that a lost literary past can be partially recuperated through Ovidian pity for an exemplary woman; on the other hand, he also shows that this project has limited poetic possibility because of Ovidian pity’s dependence on female death rather than rescue. Not surprisingly, the poem ends unfinished. Chaucer further explores the limitations of exemplary feminine death in the *Book of the Duchess*, wherein the Black Knight’s comparison of his beloved to Penelope quotes from a misogynist rant in the *Romance of the Rose*. I argue that this reference reveals Chaucer’s discomfort with courtly tradition’s reliance on a form of feminine exemplarity that contradicts its desires for mutual affection between the genders and masculine gentility. In the *Franklin’s Tale*, Chaucer aligns his authorship with the feminine viewpoint when Dorigen finds herself constrained by Ovidian images of women’s fickleness and cannot attain the exemplary status

expected of her. Classical tradition generates and limits Chaucer's female-centered poetics in these works. John Gower uses Penelope's narrative and literary history to think through a different type of ethical authorship that depends upon authorial reliability and reader response. In the *Confessio Amantis*, Gower portrays Penelope not as a simple exemplum of faithfulness, but as a literary voice with the power to inspire action and change history. Both Chaucer and Gower use classical feminine exemplars and their literary histories as springboards for developing new ideas about literature's ideal relationship with the past and with contemporary readers.

In Chapter Three, "'So benigne a creature': Female Constancy and Literary Value in the *Man of Law's Tale*," I argue that the prologue to the tale stages a shift from classical female faithfulness to a more medieval, Christian, English ideal of moral literature based on a woman's virtue. The Man of Law's reverence in his prologue for the stories of Penelope and other faithful women from Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* gives way to a story that addresses English and Christian history much more directly. This shift within the prologue suggests a movement from the classical female virtue of Penelope toward a different paradigm for moral literature. Like Custance herself, who moves from Rome to England (and back), Chaucer implies that literary authority must also move from the ancient world to England, from Latin to the vernacular. The tale uses the traditional figure of the exchanged, accused queen to explore the ways in which this feminine exemplarity, unmoored figuratively and literally from its classical roots, gives moral, monetary, political, and artistic value to literature. In Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*, the value of the female body and female sexuality as a moral example to readers, a commodity in a monetary sense, a politically important item of exchange, and a literary

topos, emphasized in the Introduction to the tale, is associated with the value of tale-telling itself. But shifts in Custance's sexual and social status, and therefore in her value as an exemplar, show the inherent instability of literature's "value," especially when that value rests on pity.

Chapter Four, "Reconceiving Faithfulness in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* Play," broadens the scope of the project by examining dramatic, homiletic, and other texts that had a wider audience than the Middle English poetry considered in previous chapters. This chapter considers how texts that retell the legend of Mary Magdalene emphasize feminine faithfulness and provide opportunities for medieval men and women to conceptualize lay life as participating in Christian holiness. Like the story of Custance, the play is partly about the movement of Christianity from a place of origin to Western Europe, via an icon of feminine faith. Both texts, and I would argue all the texts treated in this dissertation, speak to the continued desire to connect the ancient world to contemporary medieval England, and the impulse to do so through the idea of feminine faithfulness. By placing the fifteenth century drama, along with earlier hagiographies and sermons about Mary Magdalene, next to the poetry of Chaucer and Gower, the dissertation points to the versatility of female faithfulness as a tool for exploring the relationship of the present to the past, in literary, philosophical, and devotional terms.

The Digby play rejects static ideas about female virtue, as represented by figures like Penelope, in favor of a dynamic and negotiable faithfulness that can be lost, restored, and applied to religious and secular aspects of everyday life. The tradition of English preaching and writing about Mary Magdalene sets her up as an important figure for conceptualizing aspects of Christian faith and its conjunction with political and social

modes of faithfulness. In the play itself, Mary Magdalene's pledge of faithfulness to Curiosity brings to the fore the problems inherent in lay faithfulness that is pulled in all directions – toward family, political leaders, and God all at once. After the saint's conversion, however, the play works to reconcile these disparate aspects of faithfulness. The Magdalene speaks of Christ as a faithful lord worthy of allegiance, and the Queen of Marseilles demonstrates that loyalty to family and God can indeed coincide, and provide the occasion for a miracle. The play speaks especially powerfully to lay women, giving them a model for how to attain levels of devotion that might equal those of nuns and anchorites. Rather than lending authority to vernacular authors, as Penelope does, feminine faithfulness in the Digby play presents the possibility of lay moral and religious authority.

The texts in my dissertation teach us to read late medieval narrative and rhetorical forms in the context of a literary and social culture that was rethinking its relationship to tradition. “*Penelopëes Trouthe*” unearths the potential of medieval rhetorical modes to address issues central to literary criticism: the relationship of an author to his or her audience, the value of literature, and the interplay of literary history and social change. I show how seemingly conservative and restrictive images of women in early literature may in fact hold the seeds for challenging tradition and ultimately prove to be powerful forces for effecting social and aesthetic change.

Chapter One – Medieval Classicism and Feminine Exemplarity

In this chapter and the next, I aim to show that Chaucer and his contemporary John Gower used classical female characters to construct visions of authorship through meditations on the exemplarity of these women, which often manifests as faithfulness. The authors' uses of Penelope and Lucretia, especially, reveal how the portrayal of women "trewe in lovyng al hire lyves"¹ opened up avenues of thought and authorial possibility for these authors. These two chapters will suggest that the complicated portrayals of classical women's fidelity in Chaucer and Gower point to moments of authorial assertion, as they create a space of contestation between tradition and creativity that the authors find useful. Classical female virtue figures largely in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, a lengthy poem in which the priest Genius narrates exempla to teach Amans how to avoid the seven deadly sins against love. However, Genius's exempla often fail to support his supposed ethical program and cast into doubt his application of Christian sin to courtly love. In Chaucer's oeuvre, the *Legend of Good Women* claims to portray only the best classical women lovers, and even the narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde* voices his preference for tales of virtuous classical women when he claims, "gladlier I wole wryte, if yow leste, / Penolopeës trouthe and good Alceste" (5.1777-8). The *Troilus* narrator's reluctance reveals the constraining power of a literary tradition that forcefully moralizes the stories of women's lives. Famously, the *Legend of Good Women* sets itself up as penance for the writing of *Troilus and Criseyde*.² This preoccupation was anything but

¹ Geoffrey Chaucer, Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*, in Larry D. Benson, gen. ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), F 483-5/G 473-5. All citations of Chaucer's works will hereafter be cited parenthetically, by line number.

² J. Norton-Smith, "Chaucer's *Anelida and Arcite*," in *Medieval Studies for J.A.W. Bennett: Aetatis Suae LXX*, ed. P.L. Heyworth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 98, claims that the *Legend* is "already promised in a vague form at the very end" of *Troilus and Criseyde*.

simple, however. For instance, despite Alceste's decree in the *Legend* that the collection should show exemplary "women trewe in loving al hir lyve" (438), the focus of the stories themselves shifts to victimization of women and the acts of their male betrayers.³ Straightforward exemplarity does not structure the *Legend* any more than simple anti-exemplarity structures *Troilus*, or any more than the seven deadly sins apply cleanly to the courtly values of the *Confessio's* Amans. As A.J. Minnis has observed, Chaucer's frequent engagements with classical figures bucked the norm, as they often omitted the kinds of moralizing comments that peppered the works of his contemporaries.⁴ Chaucer seems consistently uncomfortable with such rhetorical moves in works like *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Legend of Good Women*, where he counters the commentary tradition's proliferation of moralizations on classical women's stories either by refusing to moralize at all and leaving his stories' aims unclear, as in the *Legend*, or by making his characters cognizant of their status as moral lessons, as in *Troilus*. In the next chapter I will show that Chaucer and Gower use the contested space of classical feminine exemplarity to open up the idea of authorship and to question or even upend the restraints of literary tradition. Their uses of Penelope in particular point out and sometimes aim to undo the violent erasures of antifeminist exegesis. These chapters focus largely on the figure of Penelope, not only because her appearances in Chaucer's and Gower's poems present

³ John Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 109, similarly points out that the spoken desire of the narrator in *Troilus and Criseyde* is not borne out in the *Legend of Good Women* as we might expect. The women do not, as in the *Heroides*, tell their own stories, but the stories are strictly controlled. Fyler observes that Chaucer "puts their towering passions to trivial use," and enacts "a disingenuous manipulation of his sources" in the tales of Medea, Hypsipyle, and Ariadne. Judith Laird, "Good Women and Bonnes Dames: Virtuous Females in Chaucer and Christine de Pizan," *Chaucer Review* 30, no. 1 (1995): 58-70, likewise points out that the exemplarity of the women in the *Legend* relies on their relationships to men rather than their intrinsic goodness, "as if the woman's goodness could be proved in terms of the man's wickedness" (64).

⁴ A.J. Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1982), 6 et passim.

unique problems, but also because of her status in the Middle Ages as the paragon of wifely faithfulness. Lucretia figures alongside Penelope in several poems, and for that reason the chapters will also treat the Roman matron.

If we take seriously the *Troilus* narrator's claim that he would rather tell Penelope's story of faithfulness than Criseyde's more complicated narrative, a gap appears in the poem and in Chaucer's canon itself. Again and again throughout Chaucer's poetry, Penelope's story is invoked but never fully told. Chaucer invokes Penelope's name as an example of wifely faithfulness or goodness in the *Book of the Duchess*, *Anelida and Arcite*, both the F and G Prologues to the *Legend of Good Women*, the *Man of Law's Tale*, and the *Franklin's Tale*, in addition to *Troilus and Criseyde*, but he never tells her story. Not even the extant versions of the *Legend of Good Women* contain Penelope's narrative, despite its obvious applicability to Alceste's demand for stories of women faithful in love.⁵ Lucretia appears alongside Penelope as a name without a story in the *Book of the Duchess* and *Anelida and Arcite*, and as an exemplar with "woundes wyde" (II. 62) in the *Man of Law's Tale* and the *Franklin's Tale*. She does get a full treatment in the *Legend of Good Women*, suggesting that her exemplarity somehow worked better in Chaucer's vision of authorship than did Penelope's. In the next chapter, I hypothesize that Chaucer finds the poetics of female suffering and death (arguably an Ovidian poetics) more amenable to his vision of authorship than Penelope's poetics of stasis, although Chaucer struggles with the ethical implications of such a poetics.

⁵ In the *Canterbury Tales*, the Man of Law claims that the *Legends* treat Penelope (II.75). However, no extant manuscript contains her legend. The *Legends* do appear to be unfinished, but I theorize that it would be more in keeping with Chaucer's project of using Penelope as a spectral presence in so many of his texts to suppose that he never wrote Penelope's legend. We cannot be sure, of course.

Chaucer's writings frequently grapple with the implications and possibilities for authorship that classical female characters offer, and critics have especially focused on Chaucer's use of Dido to establish a specific kind of masculine authorship. For instance, Marilynn Desmond suggests that Chaucer dramatizes the masculinist reading of Dido's tradition in the *House of Fame* and the *Legend of Good Women* by constructing her as an object of male desire and interpretation. In her words, because she is "[g]azed at, interpreted, and 'read' by the Chaucerian narrator in the *House of Fame* and then 'translated' in the *Legend of Dido*, Dido is constructed purely in terms of a masculine understanding of female sexuality."⁶ Chaucer establishes his brand of masculine vernacular authorship through domination of his classical female character, and more specifically through defining her femininity in courtly, masculine terms. Jacqueline Miller suggests that Chaucer's *House of Fame* stages the literary problem of reliance on tradition, which often proves unreliable and multifarious, through Dido. She argues that "[t]he problem for Dido – that 'trouthe' may be betrayed by those who command belief by 'godlyhede in speche' – is also a crucial narrative issue for the story being told. It is presented as a tale about both the betrayal of and fidelity to the different codes of behavior authorized respectively by two other records of the incident: Ovid's account of Aeneas as a traitor to his pledge of love to Dido, and Virgil's interpretation of his heroic character and his allegiance to the gods who 'bad hym goo.'"⁷ Both Desmond and Miller show the usefulness of the classical woman, whose valences are at once courtly and

⁶ Marilynn Desmond, *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the Medieval Aeneid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 161-62.

⁷ Jacqueline Miller, "The Writing on the Wall: Authority and Authorship in Chaucer's *House of Fame*," *Chaucer Review* 17, no. 2 (1982): 105.

historical, current and past, for Chaucer's construction of his own authorship. That authorship, as Miller notes and as I will also argue, contends with the meanings of, and possibilities for, "faithfulness" as both a social and an authorial value.

Like Dido, Lucretia and Penelope also provide important avenues through which Chaucer negotiates his reliance on literary models. His treatment of Lucretia in the *Legend of Good Women* and his frequent oblique references to Penelope reveal that he is interested in, but also wary of, a poetic tradition that relies on the idea of the feminine model. Penelope's continual appearance in his poems as the ultimate exemplar of female virtue without her own narrative points to the inability of the exemplary tradition to fully satisfy the vernacular poet's desire for authorial control. As the traditional exemplum of the faithful wife against whom all women are compared, Penelope functions as a point of stasis that does not always meet the needs of Chaucer's narrative or characters.

Penelope's appearances in works like *Book of the Duchess* reveal that this mode of literature by exemplar is as limited as the exemplarity of the impossibly virtuous woman whose standard is unattainable for real women.

In order to convey the full importance of classical women to Chaucer's and Gower's poems, it is important to understand their specific textual histories. In other words, where did other medieval writers and readers tend to encounter these figures, and how were they encouraged to read them? Even partial answers to these questions can elucidate not only how Chaucer and Gower engaged with literary tradition, but also how medieval readers would likely have understood the poets' allusions. This chapter will treat Lucretia but focus mainly on Penelope because of her frequent appearances in Chaucer's poems and because little work has been done on Penelope's medieval literary

history. Although the chapter will proceed in roughly chronological order, some texts from disparate time periods may be grouped together where literary convergences suggest strong relationships.

I. Lucretia: Reconciling Classical and Christian Faith

A study of Chaucer's encounters with faithful classical women would hardly be complete without a treatment of the *Legend of Lucrece* and the literary history behind Lucretia. Although I do not intend a full study of the *Legend* and its sources here, as others have done this work already, taking account of Chaucer's encounter with Lucretia may prove an important step in constructing a picture of how he used feminine faithfulness to think through the problems of medieval authorship.

The classical sources for Lucretia's story most widely available in the Middle Ages were Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* and Ovid's *Fasti*.⁸ In both versions, Roman noblemen argue over whose wife is the most virtuous and decide to spy on their wives to settle the matter. Lucretia's chaste spinning (in Livy) and words of love for her husband (in Ovid) make her the winner, but also inspire the lust of the prince, Sextus Tarquinius. The prince returns later and rapes Lucretia, causing her to feel such shame that she commits suicide. Her family's outrage at the prince's savagery sparks an uprising that ends the monarchy and establishes the Roman Republic.⁹ Both Livy and Ovid emphasize Lucretia's virtuous chastity, but Ovid's version especially focuses on Lucretia as an

⁸ Shutters, "Marital Affection," 64. For a detailed treatment of Lucretia's literary history, see Shutters, 64-8, and Craig Bertolet, "From Revenge to Reform: The Changing Face of 'Lucrece' and Its Meaning in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *Philological Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (1991): 404-10.

⁹ For the differences between Ovid's and Livy's versions of the legend, see note 17.

individual whose virtue inspires readers' pity.¹⁰ Ovid's emphasis on Lucretia as a sentimental character whose virtue takes primacy over other elements of the story influenced how later Christian writers used her.

Augustine's take on Lucretia also influenced medieval depictions of the Roman matron. In the *City of God*, Augustine questions Lucretia's motives for suicide and deems her pagan virtue unworthy of Christian acclamation.¹¹ In other words, he "transforms Lucretia from a virtuous Roman into a bad Christian, possessed of pagan vanity."¹² On the other hand, many medieval commentators ignored, rejected, or did not know about Augustine's condemnation of Lucretia, opting instead to view her as a paragon of faithfulness and virtue.¹³ Andrew Galloway investigates several English commentators' takes on Augustine's treatment of Lucretia in *City of God*. He concludes that, for these authors, "Lucretia's self-destruction becomes the occasion for a late-medieval theory of *mentalité* or ideology which at least implicitly helps define the authors' own intellectual authority." Trevet, Waleys, Ridevall, and Higden all emphasize the historical context in which Lucretia found herself and critique that context as having limited her choices. In other words, the constraints of Roman society limit Lucretia's ability to choose how she reacts to her situation. This critique of pagan ethics gives the authors intellectual authority over their subject matter.¹⁴ These male writers' views of Lucretia were also

¹⁰ Shutters, "Marital Affection," 66.

¹¹ Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, I.19.

¹² Leah Schwebel, "Livy and Augustine as Negative Models in the *Legend of Lucrece*," *Chaucer Review* 52, no. 1 (2017): 31.

¹³ Wolfgang P. Müller, "Lucretia and the Medieval Canonists," *Bulletin of Medieval Canon Law* 19 (1989): 13-32.

¹⁴ Andrew Galloway, "Chaucer's *Legend of Lucrece* and the Critique of Ideology in Fourteenth-Century England," *ELH* 60, no. 4 (1993): 824.

shaped by gender: they saw “women as epitomizing a state of selfhood subsumed by and in history and culture.”¹⁵ Such views may have helped shape Chaucer’s own approach to his work, since his *Legend* borrows especially from Higden’s account;¹⁶ moreover, in a similar way to the earlier commentators, Chaucer enacts social critiques through taking on a (limited) female perspective. In Galloway’s words, “Glimpsing a practical critique of ideology through a feminine point of view indeed constitutes Chaucer’s most characteristic contribution to what we have come to see as a Renaissance or modern critical vision; Chaucer frequently uses a feminine perspective for establishing a critique of masculine or pagan or clerical social assumptions.”¹⁷

The concept of faithfulness is central to Chaucer’s critique of ideology in the *Legend of Lucrece*. Near the end of the *Legend*, the narrator claims that he has told the story because of Lucretia’s faithfulness:

I telle hyt for she was of love so trewe,
 Ne in hir wille she chaunged for no newe;
 And for the stable herte, sadde and kynde,
 That in these wymmen men may alday fynde.
 Ther as they kaste hir herte, there it dwelleth.
 For wel I wot that Crist himselve telleth
 That in Israel, as wyd as is the lond,
 That so gret feyth in al that he ne fond
 As in a woman; and this is no lye. (1874-82)

Lucretia’s faithfulness signals or symbolizes the capacity of all women for outstanding faith. Chaucer even connects Lucretia’s pagan faith to Christian faith, giving her the “ultimate stamp of approval” and implicitly critiquing Augustine’s view.¹⁸ The womanly

¹⁵ Galloway, “Chaucer’s *Legend*,” 825.

¹⁶ Galloway, “Chaucer’s *Legend*,” 826.

¹⁷ Galloway, “Chaucer’s *Legend*,” 825.

¹⁸ Schwebel, “Livy and Augustine,” 44.

faithfulness praised by the narrator contrasts with men's "tirannye" (1883), which imperils and impedes it. The narrator shows that faithfulness, a female virtue praised by Christ himself, comes under attack by the (male) forces of history and politics. Leah Schwebel suggests that Chaucer's invocations of, and immediate deviations from, Livy and Augustine set them up as "interlocutor[s] on the subject of female virtue."¹⁹ Thus, Lucretia, like Dido, works as a site of authorial choice and agency, centered around the notion of faithfulness.

II. Penelope: Classical Texts and Medieval Commentaries

Penelope and Lucretia have separate, complex literary histories, but they both work as exempla for faithful wifely behavior in many medieval texts. Lynn Shuttters's observation of Lucretia holds true as well for Penelope: they are "palimpsest figure[s] on whom classical, patristic, and medieval interpretive traditions all left their mark."²⁰ I argue that Chaucer's and Gower's uses of Penelope must be understood in terms of these fuller literary histories, but most especially their appearances in Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum*, Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, and Jean de Meun's section of the *Romance of the Rose*. By recognizing the interplay of misogyny and exemplarity at work in authors' citations of Penelope, we can more fully understand her importance to the medieval texts I treat in the next chapter.

Penelope appears most fully in Homer's *Odyssey*, although later readers simplified her character for their own purposes. The *Odyssey* itself was not available to

¹⁹ Schwebel, "Livy and Augustine," 45.

²⁰ Lynn Shuttters, "Marital Affection and the Medieval Lucretia," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 45, (2009): 64.

Western medieval readers, who knew her only from her appearances in Latin literature. Penelope's story as told in the *Odyssey* presents her as a faithful, clever, capable woman. She manages her household alone for twenty years while waiting for Odysseus, her husband, to return. She is able to fool a group of rowdy, dangerous men for many years using nothing more than her weaving loom and her wits. Penelope's characterization in the Greek poem is rather complex. Marilyn Katz argues that the *Odyssey* shows Penelope's beauty and cleverness to be as important to her *kleos*, or fame, as is her faithfulness, especially since she displays "a *mētis* [wisdom or skill] that entails the appearance of her yielding to the suitors' importunities while in actuality remaining faithful to Odysseus."²¹ However, Penelope is misread as a straightforwardly faithful wife by Agamemnon, whose interpretation of the Ithacan matron differs drastically from what the text itself suggests. According to his misreading, Penelope's *kleos* is founded upon her faithfulness alone.²² It is almost as if Agamemnon had prophesied Penelope's eventual literary fate, since later ancient, medieval, and modern readers repeat this misreading over and over again. In the tradition of Latin citations of Penelope, the misreading of Agamemnon takes on a new form. Ancient Roman writers like Cicero and Ovid in the *Tristia* and *Ex Ponto* skew or truncate Penelope's story so that she becomes a neat symbol of *fides*, the loyalty to family and state nostalgically associated with the vanished period of the Republic.²³ Penelope's faithfulness begins to subsume her

²¹ Marilyn A. Katz, *Penelope's Renown: Meaning and Indeterminacy in the Odyssey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 6.

²² Katz, *Penelope's Renown*, 5.

²³ Marie-Madeleine Mactoux, *Pénélope: Légende et Mythe* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1975), 127-140, esp. 136. Mactoux claims that Ovid's association of Penelope with *fides* only developed after his exile, in works like the *Tristia* and *Ex Ponto*, and therefore the Penelope of the *Heroides*, written in his youth, remains more Homeric than Roman. However, I have to believe that the writers before or contemporary with Ovid who began using Penelope as a marker for *fides* influenced the *Heroides* a bit (as I will show,

character and her narrative in Roman literature, and this phenomenon sets the stage for later Christian writers to coopt her as a uniquely chaste exemplum.

Penelope in the medieval West is but a shadow of Homer's character, reduced in many cases to a symbol for fidelity.²⁴ Because the *Odyssey* was not translated from Greek in the Middle Ages and therefore inaccessible to most Western European readers, the ancient sources for Penelope's story most accessible to Chaucer were Ovid's *Heroides I* and the Latinized retelling of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* attributed to Dictys of Crete. The medieval inheritors of these texts, namely the schoolroom commentaries on the *Heroides* and Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troie*, respectively, carried the legend of Penelope into the literary consciousness of medieval Europe as an exemplar of wifely virtue.²⁵ But Penelope's story suffered in most of the medieval Latin, French, and Italian texts that name her, where her Homeric fullness is reduced to one-dimensionality. These texts chop Penelope's narrative down or omit it altogether, usually in the name of moralized exemplarity. Chaucer's citations of Penelope are also citations of this latter tradition. The dynamics of Penelope's literary history give us some insight into how and why Chaucer and Gower engaged with classical feminine exemplarity as they did.

Chaucer would likely have known the story of Penelope most fully from *Heroides I*, Ovid's epistolary poem in the voice of Penelope. The Latin poem makes much of both

Penelope's letter does begin to emphasize her faithfulness over her other virtues, though not to the extent that medieval treatments of her often do). Other Romans who used Penelope as an example of *fides*, according to Mactoux, include Cicero, Propertius, Catullus, and (to an extent) Horace.

²⁴ For details on the classical tradition of misreading / truncating Penelope's character, see Katz, *Penelope's Renown*, and Mactoux, *Pénélope: Légende et Mythe*. For a survey of Penelope's appearances in literature up to the ninth century, see R. Natasha Amendola, "Penelope's Odyssey to Ninth-Century Ireland," *Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association* 4 (2008): 9-17.

²⁵ For a clear, engaging explanation of the medieval textual tradition of the Trojan War, see Mary Elizabeth Meek's introduction to Guido delle Colonne, *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, ed. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974).

Penelope's faithfulness and her cleverness, but Ovid puts greater emphasis on her fidelity. Penelope's letter begins with a *tour de force* of mythological allusion as it names heroes and events from the *Iliad*, reports of which have struck fear into Penelope's heart as she waits at home. The paragon of faithfulness fears that Ulysses may be unfaithful (as readers, we cringe knowing that her fears have been realized). The poem gives readers a Penelope plagued by fear, first as a domestic householder whose husband is away at battle, and then as a lover with a lost beloved. She claims, "quid timeam, ignoro – timeo tamen omnia demens" (what I am to fear I know not – none the less I fear all things, distraught).²⁶ Penelope's fearfulness overshadows her ingenuity in the letter – only a couple of lines very early in the poem mention her "pendula tela," or hanging web, and her attempts to "spatiosam fallere noctem" (deceive the spacious night).²⁷ The cleverness that is so important to Penelope's characterization in the *Odyssey* fades into the background and stays there for most of the poem. Ovid devotes more space to Penelope's faithfulness. Penelope calls her devotion *castus amor* (chaste love) and answers her own father's encouragement to remarry with a simple but firm reply: "Penelope coniunx semper Ulixis ero" (Penelope, the wife of Ulysses, ever shall I be).²⁸ Ovid's epistolary poem does not omit Penelope's story altogether, nor does it reduce her to her later status as an epithet. However, it does alter the focus of the story to emphasize Penelope's love-lorn state and her faithfulness. Chaucer's reticent gestures toward Penelope always reference her fidelity as a defining attribute, clearly in the tradition of the *Heroides*.

²⁶ Ovid, *Heroides and Amores*, trans. Grant Showerman, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), line 71. Translations are Showerman's.

²⁷ Ovid, *Heroides*, l. 10 and 9.

²⁸ Ovid, *Heroides*, l. 23 and 84.

Educated men like Chaucer would likely have encountered the *Heroides* as schoolboys, in manuscripts that included extensive introductions and commentaries. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski notes that commentators like Fulgentius, Servius, and Isidore of Seville influenced how medieval readers encountered the classics, having shaped the clerical approach to literature that “judged [it] by its usefulness,” or moral value.²⁹ The tradition of introductions offered lessons one might learn from Ovid’s poems, and thereby modeled various methods of moralized reading. These introductions “enhanced the prestige of secular literature – mainly the work of pagan philosophers and poets – within the standard frameworks of knowledge as defined in the twelfth century.” They placed these ancient works in the philosophical category of “ethics,” connecting what were basically grammar schoolbooks to moral living.³⁰

In the commentaries on Ovid’s *Heroides*, Penelope takes on the status of the ultimate exemplar of legitimate female love and faithfulness. Introductions to the letters set out a program of moralization to shape students’ responses, and these introductions make Penelope a paradigm against whom the other *Heroides* speakers must be compared. The introductions, or *accessus*, to the *Heroides* contain exercises in categorization and moralizing, sometimes providing multiple, conflicting schemata in the same introduction but consistently painting Penelope as an exemplar of womanly love. Ralph Hexter analyzes the *accessus* and commentary on the *Heroides* in one twelfth-century German manuscript (Munich clm 19475) that he suggests is representative of a tradition of

²⁹ Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Reading Myth: Classical Mythology and its Interpretations in Medieval French Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 6-7.

³⁰ A.J. Minnis and A.B. Scott, eds., *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism, c. 1100 – c. 1375: The Commentary Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 13-14.

commentary and schoolroom reading of Ovid's texts.³¹ The manuscript contains three *accessus*, or general introductions to the *Heroides*, in addition to several of the letters themselves and accompanying commentary. We can surmise that Chaucer would have experienced the *Heroides* in a similar schoolbook manuscript. The *accessus* provide various interpretations of authorial intent and of the ethical usefulness of the letters, "reveal[ing] more explicit moralizing than any of the *accessus* on the *Ars amatoria* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*" (two of Ovid's other works) within the same manuscript.³² Hexter's *accessus* I insists that "intentio huius operis est reprehendere masculos et feminas stulto et illicito amore detentos" (the intention of this work is to hold back men and women from stupid and forbidden love),³³ while *accessus* II and III detail both a tripartite and a four-part scheme for categorizing the letters.³⁴ *Accessus* II, for example, details the divisions as follows: "Intentio sua est legitimum commendare conubium vel amorem, et secundum hoc triplici modo tractat de ipso amore, scilicet de legitimo, de illicito et stulto. de legitimo per Penelopen, de illicito per Canacen, de stulto per Phillidem" (The intention [of the work] is to commend legitimate marriage or love, and secondly it treats in a tripartite way this love, namely concerning legitimate, illicit and stupid love. About legitimate love [it speaks] through Penelope, about illicit love through Canace, and about

³¹ Ralph J. Hexter, *Ovid and Medieval Schooling: Studies in Medieval School Commentaries on Ovid's Ars Amatoria, Epistulae ex Ponto, and Epistulae Heroidum* (München: Ardeo-Gesellschaft, 1986), 144. The *accessus* to the *Heroides* are also translated in Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, 20-24, and in Stephen Wheeler, ed., *Accessus ad auctores: Medieval Introductions to the Authors (Codex latinus monacensis 19475)*, TEAMS Secular Commentary Series (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2015).

³² Hexter, *Ovid and Medieval Schooling*, 156.

³³ Hexter, *Ovid and Medieval Schooling*, 157. All translations from Hexter are my own.

³⁴ Hexter, *Ovid and Medieval Schooling*, 146.

stupid love through Phyllis).³⁵ But the author's or authors' moralizing in these introductions exists quite apart from what Ovid's letters themselves warrant. As Hexter points out, the many women of the *Heroides* do not fit neatly into the three categories represented by Penelope, Canace, and Phyllis. The two intentions set forth here conflict as well – for instance, Canace's story of incestuous love flies in the face of the work's supposed overall goal of “commend[ing] legitimate marriage or love.” Nor do the commentaries on the individual letters consistently address their place in any moralized scheme.³⁶ The *accessus*' conflicting schemata reveal the impossibility of deducing an overriding moral program for Ovid's collection, which he himself did not preface or address holistically at all. The divide between the moral categories of the *accessus* and the actual letters reveals the inadequacy of exemplarity as a mode of hermeneutics. I would argue that Chaucer encountered this kind of moralized introduction and understood its pitfalls, and that when he questions the tradition of exemplary and anti-exemplary women's stories, he is in part reacting against this tradition.

As the quotation above from *accessus II* reveals, the *Heroides* commentary tradition presents Penelope as a unique exemplar of feminine love and faithfulness. She is the only figure in the list of three whose letter can possibly fulfill the stated purpose of “commend[ing] legitimate marriage or love” (from Ulysses's perspective, anyway). Furthermore, each of the general introductions to the *Heroides* included in Munich clm 19475 also contains an introduction to Penelope's letter. These repeated introductions to Penelope come out of the compiler's “[d]esire to make commendation of legitimate love

³⁵ Hexter, *Ovid and Medieval Schooling*, 157.

³⁶ Hexter, *Ovid and Medieval Schooling*, 157 and 163.

the overarching aim of the entire collection,” a desire that may be impossible to fulfill but that leads to the repeated treatment of “the canonical example of legitimate love.”³⁷

Penelope works as the ultimate womanly exemplar in the *Heroides* commentary tradition by virtue of the repeated introductions to, and moralizations of, her story. The *accessus* are examples of texts that used classical women as exemplars divorced from their contexts, which “reduced [classical texts] to mere instruments for the exercise of the interpreter’s ingenuity. It also reinforced the kind of ‘catalog thinking’ so influential in the use of mythological figures as exempla. Once separated from their narrative context, gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines, were often read in a one-dimensional way.”³⁸ Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women* could be referencing the *Heroides* commentary tradition, with its introduction detailing authorial intent (or the intent of a patron) and the divergence from that intent in the collection of women’s stories that follows. Copeland points out the parallels between the G Prologue and academic discourse like that in Munich clm 19475. She argues that Chaucer was familiar with the scholastic commentary tradition of the *Heroides* and very possibly of Penelope’s letter in particular.³⁹

On the other hand, vernacular use of classical women paints a much more complex and interesting picture. Some authors continued to use these women as de-contextualized exemplars, and others chose not to moralize them.⁴⁰ Penelope’s

³⁷ Hexter, *Ovid and Medieval Schooling*, 157. Hexter assumes that Penelope’s exemplarity is already “canonical.” I would agree, but argue that the commentary tradition helped to solidify her status for later readers and writers, especially writers in the European vernaculars whose encounters with Ovid may have been mediated through commentary manuscripts like Munich clm 19475.

³⁸ Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Reading Myth*, 7-8.

³⁹ Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁴⁰ Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Reading Myth*, 10-11 et passim.

appearances in vernacular poetry, however, showcase the allegorical moralizations to which classical female characters were often subjected.

The courtly poems of Chaucer's contemporary Eustache Deschamps represent the late medieval vernacular trend of praising women through classical examples. Like the ancient love-poets, Deschamps lists women from classical mythology and history as paragons of virtue to whom he compares his beloveds.⁴¹ These exempla do not work directly to spur readers to ethical action, as the female subject of the poem is already on par with her virtuous foremothers; rather, they serve to classify the beloved as an outstanding specimen of her sex who makes the Golden Age of womanhood present for the speaker. Implicitly, this Golden Age points out the depravity of contemporary women. Deschamps employs Penelope and Lucretia in his *balades amoureuses* that compare ladies to classical exemplars. Poem 482, for example, spends two of its three stanzas listing exemplary women and their attributes, and each stanza ends with the refrain, "Dydo, Palas, Juno, Penelopée."⁴² Poem 474, subtitled by the editor "Éloge d'une dame" (praise of a woman), begins its second stanza with a comparison to Lucretia: "Ferme est de cuer plus que ne fu Lucesse" (She is firm of heart more so than was Lucretia).⁴³ Several other poems repeat Penelope and many other figures, including

⁴¹ Patricia Watson, "Mythological Exempla in Ovid's 'Ars Amatoria,'" *Classical Philology* 78, no. 2 (1983): 117, points out that Ovid, and Propertius before him, used exempla to make "a comparison between the poet's *puella* and the heroines of mythology," in addition to other uses.

⁴² Eustache Deschamps, "CCCCLXXXII," *Oeuvres Complètes*, 11 vols. (Paris: Société des Anciens Textes Français, 1878-1903), III, 303-4, lines 8, 16, 24. Here the editor subtitles the poem "Comparaison d'une dame avec les héroïnes de l'antiquité." The very last line of the poem lists "Menelopée" rather than Penelope, but this must be a typo in the edition or a scribal error in the original. The other possibility is that Deschamps meant to refer to Menalippe, but there is no reason for the poet to suddenly include Menalippe at the end of the poem, nor does the index list Menalippe as appearing in this poem.

⁴³ Deschamps, "CCCCLXXIV," *Oeuvres Complètes*, III, 294, line 11.

Lucretia, as either equal to, or lesser than, the lady whom the poet praises.⁴⁴ Deschamps ignores the alternate traditions and complications of all the stories of the women he cites, including Medea and Semiramis, in favor of using them as by-words for certain virtues valued in medieval courtly poetry. John L. Lowes uses these poems to support his argument that the *Legend of Good Women* could only have been straightforwardly attempting to provide exemplary women's stories, because even eccentric figures like Medea were put to use as exemplars in the medieval tradition. Lowes assumes that readers either remained unaware of, or agreed to ignore, the peculiarities of the stories behind the names.⁴⁵ While few critics would agree with Lowes's assessment of the *Legend* today, the fact remains that Deschamps and others did use Penelope and other figures as straightforward exemplars. The poet tightly controls his definition of exemplary womanhood (and, at times, manhood as well) by excising narrative altogether. The classical figures, including Penelope, serve their purpose as ethical and rhetorical signals and nothing more.⁴⁶

As we will see, many other medieval texts also use Penelope as the ultimate classical exemplar of faithfulness, while others question Penelope's exemplarity: for instance, Boccaccio references a tradition in which Penelope gives in to the suitors.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ For example, Deschamps, "DXLVI," *Oeuvres Complètes*, III, 389-90, lines 9, 19, 29; "MCCLXXIV," VII, 14, line 4; "XLII," X, xlix, line 1.

⁴⁵ John L. Lowes, "Is Chaucer's 'Legend of Good Women' a Travesty?," *JEGP* 8 (1909): 513-569.

⁴⁶ Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Reading Myth*, 138, notes that for Deschamps, "mythology was never in the forefront;" rather, "[t]he themes that seemed more urgent to him – war, the city, the corruption of the times and of his own body, ... did not open themselves up to classical mythology in the way the themes of Machaut's and Froissart's *dits* did." Perhaps Deschamps's perfunctory lists of classical exemplars rather than full engagement with them stems from this disinterest.

⁴⁷ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, ed. and trans. Virginia Brown (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001). See below for fuller treatment of Boccaccio's take on Penelope.

Placing Penelope on a pedestal of faithfulness was a choice made by the composers and copiers of the academic *accessus* to the *Heroides*, as well as by many later medieval writers, including Chaucer, whose treatment of Penelope in the *Book of the Duchess* offers real insight into his views on the ways in which scholastic categories like exemplary faithfulness can overshadow the particularities of individual stories. In these texts, Penelope's faithfulness signifies virtue, legitimacy of desire, and even pagan superiority (in the case of Deschamps). For others, Penelope's faithfulness has special relevance for the idea of bodily purity and spiritual loyalty.

III. Classical Women as Christian Exemplars

Medieval use of Lucretia's and Penelope's stories as exempla was influenced, directly or indirectly, by Jerome's citation of them as exemplars of feminine virtue in *Adversus Jovinianum*. In Lynn Shutter's words, "Jerome views female purity as a construct continuous across the pagan and Christian eras,"⁴⁸ and he lists many pagan women whose sexual purity or fidelity could serve as a model to Christian women. Many poets followed suit by using Lavinia and Penelope as exemplars, including Jean de Meun, Boccaccio, Deschamps, and Chaucer. Jerome's list of exemplary pagan women proved influential for later medieval clergy and secular poets who write about female virtue.

Jerome's catalog of pagan women sets in motion a very specific kind of ethical writing and reading that prescribes chastity and faithfulness as feminine virtues. He hopes his list will change Jovinian's mind about virginity being "contra naturam" (contrary to

⁴⁸ Shutter, "Marital Affection," 68.

nature),⁴⁹ but also aims to influence widows who, he thinks, are sinning by remarrying.

He concedes,

Sentio in katalogo feminarum multo [me] plura dixisse quam exemplorum patitur consuetudo et a lectore eruditio iuste posse reprehendi. Sed quid faciam, cum mihi mulieres nostri temporis apostoli ingerant auctoritatem; et necdum elato funere prioris viri, memoriter digamie precepta decantent? Ut que Christiane pudicitie despiciunt fidem, discant saltem ab ethnicis castitatem.

(I know that I have included far more in this catalogue of women than the conventions of examples allow, and that I may be justly blamed by a learned reader. But what else can I do, when women these days will push the authority of St. Paul at me, and recite the rules about multiple marriage by heart before their first husband is even buried? If they despise the fidelity that Christian chastity dictates, maybe they will at least learn chastity from the pagans.)⁵⁰

For Jerome, women's sexual behavior, even after a husband's death, is always bound up with ideas of faith and faithfulness (*fides*). Jerome's program of using classical exemplars as models of feminine virtue participates in, and helps establish, the Christian mode of reading pagan works that would mine them for moral lessons. It also initiates the antifeminist tradition of writing about ancient women to show the depravity of contemporary women.⁵¹

Jerome mentions Penelope together with Alceste at the end of a section on non-Roman pagan wives. He writes, "Alcesten fabule ferunt pro Atmeto sponte defunctam, et Penelopsis pudicitia Homeri carmen est" ([t]he fables claim that Alcestis died voluntarily

⁴⁹ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, 41.5, in Ralph Hanna III and Traugott Lawler, eds., *Jankyn's Book of Wikked Wyves* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 160-61.

⁵⁰ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum* 47.231-7, in Hanna and Lawler, *Jankyn's Book*, 174-75.

⁵¹ Jerome's theory of reading pagan texts in *Adversus Jovinianum* is highly gendered, as Carolyn Dinshaw points out. Jerome compares the alien woman in Deuteronomy to a pagan text, which must be stripped, shaved, and domesticated, i.e. its seductive exterior must be discarded in favor of the ethical truth beneath. Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 22-25.

in place of Admetus, and Homer's song concerns Penelope's chastity).⁵² Chaucer's echo of these two exemplars together in *Troilus and Criseyde* ("And gladlier I wol write, yif yow leste, / Penolopeës trouthe and good Alceste" (V.1777-8)) bears witness to the impact of Jerome's mode of reading classical stories on later texts. While not all the women in Jerome's catalogue of faithful wives receive full treatment, few are treated as cursorily as Penelope. Moreover, Jerome's masterful display of synchysis leaves his meaning rather obscure. "Penelopsis pudicitia Homeri carmen est" translates more literally to "the shame (or chasteness) of Penelope is the song of Homer" (more usually one would use "esse *de*" to show one means a work is *about* something). Jerome indicates that, for the Christian reader, Homer's song as a whole amounts to a story about Penelope's chasteness. He uses the same word, *pudicitia*, for both Penelope's virtue and for the Christian virtue he extols in the later section (quoted above) – both exhibit *shame* that corresponds to *fidem*, or faithfulness. Jerome's disregard for the preservation of Penelope's narrative beyond calling it her *pudicitia* shuts down the story as a whole in favor of a clear-cut, tidy message about feminine sexuality. We could say that her faithfulness is what allows Ulysses to wander without losing his kingdom and family, but Jerome's sentence suggests something simpler. For him, and presumably for any reader devoted to the Christian hermeneutic, the ultimate lesson of Ulysses's story is taught by Penelope, a figure for the suffering wife and, by analogy or allegory, the suffering Christian awaiting the return of Christ, like the ten virgins awaiting the return of the bridegroom in the gospel of Matthew.

⁵² Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, 1.45, in Hanna and Lawler, *Jankyn's Book*, 172-73.

A couple of sentences after his treatment of Penelope, Jerome mentions Lucretia as a model of wifely virtue: “Ad Romanas feminas transeam; et primam ponam Lucretiam, que violata pudicitie nolens supervivere, maculam corporis cruore delevit” (Let me move now to Roman women; and I put Lucretia first, who, not wishing to outlive her violated chastity, removed the spot from her body with her own blood).⁵³ Jerome writes of Lucretia’s suicide as a kind of self-salvation, perhaps typologically anticipating Christ’s more efficacious salvation: having been tainted by the sin of sex, Lucretia washes the spot, *maculam*, away with her blood, much as Christ’s blood washes sinners clean.⁵⁴ Jerome’s implication that Lucretia’s actions anticipated Christian salvation suggests that he, along with Augustine, “begins the shift [away] from the social meaning of Lucretia” found in Livy, where she works as a symbol for the foundation of republican government and the evils of tyranny.⁵⁵ Jerome’s equation of Lucretia’s sexual penetration with human sin more generally begins a more insidious trend. Women’s sexuality, especially their penetration by men, amounts to sinfulness in itself, and can only be

⁵³ Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, 1.46, in Hanna and Lawler, *Jankyn’s Book*, 172-3.

⁵⁴ *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam versionem*, ed. Roger Gryson et al., 4th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994). *Macula* is used at least twice in Jerome’s Vulgate to mean sin. In 1 Timothy 6:14, Paul charges Timothy “ut serves mandatum sine *macula*, inreprehensibile, usque in adventum Domini nostri, Iesu Christi” (that thou keep the commandment without *spot*, blameless, unto the coming of our Lord, Jesus Christ), and in Apocalypse 14:4-5, in reference to the 144,000 virgins: “Hi sunt, qui cum mulieribus non sunt coinquinati: virgines enim sunt... Et in ore eorum non est inventum mendacium, sine *macula* enim sunt ante thronum Dei” (These are they who were not defiled with women: for they are virgins... And in their mouth there was found no lie, for they are without *spot* before the throne of God) (*italics mine*). Christ’s blood as washing sinners clean is a trope that appears, for example, in Apocalypse 1:5, where John reminds readers that Christ “lavit nos a peccatis nostris in sanguine suo” (washed us from our sins in his own blood). All Biblical translations are from *The Vulgate Bible: Douay-Rheims Translation*, ed. Swift Edgar and Angela M. Kinney, 6 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁵⁵ Bertolet, “From Revenge to Reform,” 407-8. See also Schwebel, “Livy and Augustine.”

redeemed through death. Sex as sin is a doctrine that falls especially hard on women, as the misogynist uses to which Jerome's text was put in the Middle Ages shows.⁵⁶

Craig Bertolet points out that Jerome's interpretation of Lucretia as superbly virtuous impacted medieval clerical use of her as an exemplum. I argue that the influence went even wider to include vernacular writers as well. The clerical focus on Lucretia was repeated by authors like Boccaccio and Chaucer, who use Lucretia's great virtue to elicit readers' sympathy.⁵⁷ But Jerome's cooptation of classical figures like Penelope and Lucretia also enlarged the trend of classical female exemplarity, begun a few centuries earlier in Roman poetry, to include overtly misogynous moralization like that of the *Rose's Jealous Husband* (and misogynist writers before him).

IV. Moralizing and Cataloging Women: Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*

Boccaccio follows a Hieronymian strategy in his depiction of Penelope as a saintly exemplar of womanly faithfulness. The Italian author's works were often important sources for many of Chaucer's poems, so it is plausible that Chaucer would have been at least somewhat familiar with Boccaccio's treatments of Lucretia and Penelope.⁵⁸ Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*, a collection of biographies of ancient and mythical women, may have served as a model for Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*,

⁵⁶ For treatment of the misogynist legacy of the *Adversus Jovinianum*, see Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer* (Rochester: D.S. Brewer, 2002), Chapter 2, especially 39-40.

⁵⁷ Bertolet, "From Revenge to Reform," 408-11.

⁵⁸ Edmund Reiss, "Boccaccio in English Culture of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries," *Il Boccaccio nella cultura Inglese e Anglo-Americana*, ed. Giuseppe Gagliani (Florence: Olschki, 1974), 20, points out that none of the individual legends in Chaucer's poem show indebtedness to Boccaccio's treatments of the same women, but use Ovid and Vergil as sources instead. He does concede, however, that the *de mulieribus* and the *de casibus* "parallel" Chaucer's text. Reiss, 23, notes that the *De mulieribus claris* was less well-known in England even in the fifteenth century than was the *De casibus viris*, though the former was often seen as a continuation of the latter.

and the individual stories it presents may have influenced Chaucer's portrayals of ancient women in other texts as well. Although the *De mulieribus* was not officially published until 1374, and Chaucer's first known trip to Italy occurred in 1372-3, Boccaccio had been at work on the collection for several years already by 1372. It is conceivable that Chaucer encountered some version of the text during his trip.⁵⁹ Boccaccio's importance to English literature blossomed in the fifteenth century, especially after Lydgate wrote the *Fall of Princes*, a version (albeit based on a French translation) of the *De casibus viris*.⁶⁰ Edmund Reiss notes that Boccaccio's fame arose not from his association with humanism, but from his writings as a "moralist, in the tradition of and comparable to Boethius and Seneca."⁶¹ Even if Boccaccio's depictions of Penelope and Lucretia did not directly influence Chaucer, they can still help provide an overall picture of the possibilities for thinking about classical feminine virtue that existed in the medieval period.

The picture of authorship in the *De mulieribus claris* makes feminine virtue redound upon its author. By writing about virtues, Boccaccio himself becomes a figure of moral authority. Like their male counterparts in great Ancient epics like the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, and like the saints, pagan women desire glory, and this spurs them to virtuous action. In his words, "He quippe ob eternam et veram gloriam sese fere in adversam persepe humanitati tolerantiam coegere... ubi ille, seu quodam nature munere vel instinctu, seu potius huius momentanei fulgoris cupiditate percite, non absque tamen acri

⁵⁹ For details of Chaucer's travels, see Martin M. Crow and Virginia E. Leland's "Chaucer's Life" section of the Introduction to the *Riverside Chaucer*. On Boccaccio's writing of the *De mulieribus*, see the introduction to Boccaccio, *Famous Women*.

⁶⁰ Reiss, "Boccaccio in English Culture," 22.

⁶¹ Reiss, "Boccaccio in English Culture," 21.

mentis robore, devenere” (Hebrew and Christian women commonly steeled themselves for the sake of true and everlasting glory to an endurance often at odds with human nature... Pagan women, however, reached their goal, admittedly with remarkable strength of character, either through some natural gift or instinct or, as seems more likely, through a keen desire for the fleeting glory of this world).⁶² Both groups of women desire glory, and this desire leads them toward virtuous endurance, or faithfulness to a cause. Boccaccio points out that Christian women have achieved their glory, because not only do they “in meritam eternitatem ... clarissime vivunt” (live gloriously in their deserved immortality), but their trials and triumphs “ipsarum meritis exigentibus, singulis voluminibus a piis hominibus, sacris literis et veneranda maiestate conspicuis, descriptas esse” (have been described in individual works, as their merits required, by pious men outstanding for their knowledge of sacred literature and revered for their dignity).⁶³ As a writer working on a similar project, then, Boccaccio himself becomes “outstanding for his knowledge” of *ancient* literature. By giving the pagan women their due, Boccaccio himself becomes a figure of importance.

In keeping with this project of authorial self-assertion, the *De mulieribus* equates Penelope’s pagan chastity with Christian saintliness. Thus, Boccaccio approaches the “dignity” and “reverence” of the hagiographers he extolls in his preface. Boccaccio’s section on Penelope begins by claiming that the Greek matron is a shining example to married women: “illibati decoris atque intemperate pudicitie matronis exemplum

⁶² Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, 12-13. All translations are Brown’s. Cf. Augustine’s view of pagan virtue as “glittering vice,” or corrupted by pride. Boccaccio seems to accept pagan desire for glory as a virtue whole cloth.

⁶³ Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, 12-13.

sanctissimum et eternum” (For married women she is the most sacred and lasting example of untarnished honor and undefiled purity).⁶⁴ Stephen Kolsky points out that Penelope’s is one of only three biographies in the *De mulieribus* that Boccaccio explicitly cites as *exempla*. Penelope sets an example for married women and she is spoken of in terms that recall Christian sainthood.⁶⁵ Penelope’s exemplary action was to decide, upon hearing of Ulysses’s supposed death, to “in castissimam et perpetuam viduitatem senescere firmato animo” (maintain... a chaste and perpetual widowhood until she herself grew old).⁶⁶ Unlike many of the women of the *De mulieribus*, Penelope performs no great acts of ancient military or political import – rather, she embodies the most Christian and medieval of feminine virtues, chastity and endurance. Her great feat lies in maintaining her chastity, prolonging it beyond when she herself would be desirable to men, with a *firmitas animus* (strong or hardened spirit). Boccaccio continues to speak of Penelope in saintly terms, for instance detailing her fear that the resolution of “sancti pectori” may be violated. Brown translates this phrase as “her chaste breast,” but it more specifically means “holy breast,” and *sanctus* was also the word used for “saint.”⁶⁷ Penelope’s project to remain faithful to her husband, even if he is dead, is one Boccaccio deems worthy of the terms of saintly resolve. Further, the idea to put off the suitors by her weaving trick comes to Penelope because she is “divino profecto illustrata lumine,” that is, “enlightened by a divine light,” or as Brown translates, “by divine inspiration,”

⁶⁴ Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, 158-59.

⁶⁵ Stephen D. Kolsky, *The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio’s De mulieribus claris* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 131-2. Kolsky points to “exemplum sanctissimum et eternum” as evidence for Penelope as a lay saint.

⁶⁶ Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, 160-1.

⁶⁷ Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, 160-1.

and Ulysses's return in the nick of time occurs because of "Dei pietate" (divine mercy).⁶⁸ Ulysses's return "suamque Penelopem ab insidiis procantium liberavit" (freed Penelope from the plottings of her would-be lovers), much in the manner of the God of the virgin martyr stories, who saves his saints from being violated time after time.⁶⁹ Boccaccio, unlike other Latin authors before him, does emphasize Penelope's cleverness, but in his version of the story it works in service of her saintly faithfulness. Even though the program of *De mulieribus claris* extols all kinds of pagan virtue in support of its humanist program "to grant space to the intervention of women in the public domain and allow them to share in the glory of the humanists' hall of fame,"⁷⁰ Boccaccio uses traditional Christian ethics to emphasize the importance of Penelope's chastity. He turns Penelope's story into a pagan hagiography, supporting his own position as learned and moral author and marking Christian womanhood as defined by chastity. But his methods also invite readers to ponder the applicability of Christian ethical categories to emerging humanist ideas about gender and morality. They may even, as Margaret Franklin suggests, "promote traditional notions of sex-specific virtue and thereby work to sustain the social order" threatened by the changes of early humanist Florence.⁷¹

V. Penelope in Medieval Historiographical Texts

Medieval writers and readers took interest in the Trojan War and its characters, including Penelope, using them in historical and romance contexts. In the absence of

⁶⁸ Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, 160-1.

⁶⁹ Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, 162-3.

⁷⁰ Kolsky, *Genealogy of Women*, 3.

⁷¹ Margaret Franklin, *Boccaccio's Heroines: Power and Virtue in Renaissance Society* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), 8.

access to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the most trusted sources for events surrounding the Trojan War were Dares of Phrygia and Dictys of Crete, or rather, Latin renderings of their texts (the Greek originals are either lost or mostly lost to us, if indeed they existed at all).⁷² Only Dictys speaks of the Greeks' return to their homeland and of Penelope, and his treatment of Penelope is only cursory as the story focuses on Ulysses's point of view. He devotes no time to Penelope's experiences or her cleverness in holding off the suitors, but reduces her to a one-dimensional paragon of wifely faithfulness. Penelope rejoices at the return of her husband, but her story ends with the perfunctory comment, "As for Penelope, her reputation for virtue is famous."⁷³ The most accessible sources for Dictys's narratives in the later European Middle Ages were Benoît de Sainte-Maure's 12th-century *Roman de Troie*, a lengthy, romanticized version of the events found in Dares and Dictys, and Guido delle Colonne's shortened, early 13th-century Latin version of the *Roman*, the *Historia Troiae*.⁷⁴ Benoît's retelling of Dictys of Crete describes Penelope's plight rather more fully, including treatment of Penelope's own feelings and experiences, perhaps because of his program of romanticizing the Troy narrative.⁷⁵ However, like Dictys he omits Penelope's clever weaving trick. Penelope is, finally, defined by her faithfulness to Ulysses: "dreite fei voleit porter / A Ulixès, son chier seignor" (she wished to keep true faith toward Ulysses, her dear lord) and "Lui desirot e nuit e jor" (she desired him both

⁷² R. M. Frazer, Jr., trans., *The Trojan War: The Chronicles of Dictys of Crete and Dares the Phrygian* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966).

⁷³ Frazer, *The Trojan War*, 124.

⁷⁴ Mary Elizabeth Meek, Introduction to Guido delle Colonne, *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, ed. and trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974).

⁷⁵ For treatment of the romance genre's interest in women and its rhetorical dependence on the feminine principle, see, for example, Patricia Parker, *Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender, Property* (New York: Methuen, 1987), especially Chapter 2, "Literary Fat Ladies and the Generation of the Text," 8-35.

night and day).⁷⁶ Her goodness is that of a romance heroine, described in the terms of French courtly lyric as “De fin cuer e de bone amor” (of fine heart and of good love.)⁷⁷

In his retelling of the Penelope episodes, Guido delle Colonne shortens them substantially, saying little apart from “O quam facta est ylaris Penelope in aspectu sui domini, quem tanto videre tempore anxia peroptavit!” (Oh, how happy Penelope was made at the sight of her lord, whom she had longed anxiously to see for such a long time!)⁷⁸ Guido’s shortened version of the *Roman de Troie* is an attempt at historiography, according to Meek; she seems to mean that Guido’s brevity signals historiography rather than the fuller romance version found in Benoît. However, Dictys, Benoît, and Guido all gloss over Penelope’s cleverness at the loom in favor of comments that reduce Penelope to a one-dimensional paragon of wifely faithfulness. None of the authors treat Penelope’s cleverness in holding off the suitors, but they imply that readers need only know that Penelope is extremely virtuous. On the other hand, these historiographies overall, along with the English tradition of Troy narratives that follows Guido’s text, including the alliterative Middle English *Destruction of Troy* (1385-1400) and Lydgate’s *Troy Book*, mostly refuse moralizing truncations of women’s stories. Women like Polyxena, Cassandra, and Andromache appear in these texts as “the victims of brutal and improper appropriation by men.”⁷⁹ James Simpson notes that “[t]he larger narrative of the

⁷⁶ Benoît de Sainte-Maure, *Le Roman de Troie*, ed. Léopold Constans, 6 vols. (Paris: Firmin-Didot et Cie., 1904-1912), IV, lines 28970-2. The lines that tell Penelope’s story are 28960-29038. Special thanks to Mary B. Speer for her generous help with the translation.

⁷⁷ Benoît de Sainte-Maure, *Le Roman de Troie*, IV, line 29037; Mary B. Speer, e-mail message, October 18, 2013, notes that the phrase *fin cuer* is a courtly idiom borrowed from the French lyric tradition. It is “relatively new in *lange d’oil* and reinforced here by *bone amor*.”

⁷⁸ Guido de Columnis, *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, ed. Nathaniel Edward Griffin (Cambridge: Medieval Academy of America, 1936), 262; Translation is from Meek, *Historia*, 251.

⁷⁹ James Simpson, “The Other Book of Troy: Guido delle Colonne’s *Historia destructionis Troiae* in Fourteenth-and Fifteenth-Century England,” *Speculum* 73, no. 2 (1998): 416. For the dating of the

Destruction... is unflinchingly conscious of a hideous, male-driven, historical process that demands female sacrifice,” and that it “takes the lid off static anti-feminist exemplarism.”⁸⁰ Perhaps Penelope’s geographical and narrative position relatively far outside of Troy makes her story less amenable to full treatment. Lydgate does not mention her at all.⁸¹

Penelope also appears in some fourteenth-century manuscripts of the *Histoire ancienne jusqu’à César*, a universal history written in Northern France in the thirteenth century and revised in Italy in the fourteenth. The *Histoire* contains many of Ovid’s *Heroides* inserted into the larger narrative of the Trojan War. Marilynn Desmond argues that their appearance in the middle of the Troy narrative situates the *Heroides* within history, rather than using them for pure rhetorical, ethical, or allegorical ends as in the commentaries. The *Histoire* nestles each letter inside descriptions of the battles of the Trojan War, inviting analogy between the deeds of war heroes and the “heroic agency of the women who express their willingness to die for love.”⁸² Penelope’s letter in this context allows her a historical and political importance that is lost in the commentary tradition. She becomes not a static exemplar, but a part of ancient and European history.

These traditions of reading and writing Penelope suggest that medieval readers would have recognized Penelope as an exemplar of faithfulness, whether as a speaker of

alliterative poem, see 405; for the text, see G. A. Panton and David Donaldson, eds., *The Gest Hystoriale of the Destruction of Troy*, Early English Text Society 39, 56 (London: Oxford University Press, 1968). See also C. David Benson, *The History of Troy in Middle English Literature: Guido delle Colonne’s “Historia destructionis Troiae” in Medieval England* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1980).

⁸⁰ Simpson, “The Other Book of Troy,” 415-16.

⁸¹ John Lydgate, *Lydgate’s Troy Book*, ed. Henry Bergen, Early English Text Society, extra series 97, 103, 106, 126 (Millwood, NY: Kraus Reprint, 1973).

⁸² Marilynn Desmond, “The *Translatio* of Memory and Desire in the *Legend of Good Women*: Chaucer and the Vernacular *Heroides*,” *Chaucer Review* 35 (2013): 191.

the *Heroides*, as a tangential figure to Ulysses's story, or as a romance heroine in her own right.

VI. Misogynist Satire: *Ars Amatoria* and the *Romance of the Rose*

Ovid cites Penelope's faithfulness in the *Ars Amatoria* for satirical ends and demonstrates the instability of traditional exempla for modeling behavior. Ovid's poem is an ironic takedown of Augustan sexual politics – in the face of Augustus's legislative program to outlaw adultery and require heterosexual reproduction in marriage, Ovid's *Ars* suggests that heterosexual pleasure can exist *only* outside marriage and does not acknowledge reproduction at all.⁸³ But medieval readers did not have the benefit of contextualizing the text within Augustan politics and therefore took it quite seriously.⁸⁴

Although Ovid's predecessors and contemporaries often used figures from Greek and Roman mythology "to lend credibility" to their arguments, Ovid's use of exempla in the *Ars* is quite different. In Patricia Watson's words, they almost always "fail to fulfill their ostensible, corroborative function, either because the myths themselves are not treated seriously, or because they are essentially inappropriate to the context. In both cases, the superficially serious purpose of the exempla is intentionally undercut by the intrusion of wit."⁸⁵ Ovid's citation of Penelope as a supporting exemplum influenced how many subsequent works depicted her, especially the *Romance of the Rose* and its

⁸³ Marilyn Desmond, *Ovid's Art and the Wife of Bath: The Ethics of Erotic Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 36.

⁸⁴ Desmond, *Ovid's Art*, 37, points out that "medieval readers treat the *Ars* as an ethical treatise on love and seduction."

⁸⁵ Patricia Watson, "Mythological Exempla in Ovid's 'Ars Amatoria,'" *Classical Philology* 78, no. 2 (1983): 120. At 117, Watson points out that Ovid, and Propertius before him, used exempla to make "a comparison between the poet's *puella* and the heroines of mythology," in addition to other uses.

successors. In the *Ars* the narrator encourages his male readers to keep after their prospective beloveds, even after their advances are rebuffed. He voices incredible skepticism about women's ability to withstand men's advances, comparing women to rocks worn away by waves, to tamed oxen and horses, and to Penelope: "Penelopen ipsam, persta modo, tempore vinces!" (You will conquer Penelope herself in time – just persist!)⁸⁶ In the *Ars*, Penelope works to prove the inability of *all* women to be steadfast, rather than functioning as a paragon of faithfulness to inspire real wives' good behavior or to which poets could compare their beloveds.

Penelope and Lucretia appear together in the *Rose*, a work that Chaucer himself translated and that significantly shaped his poetry. The *Rose* cites the *Ars Amatoria*'s misogynist lines on Penelope and adds Lucretia for good measure, and the *Book of the Duchess* cites the *Rose*'s line, as I will show in Chapter Two.⁸⁷ The *Rose* itself was the most widespread and elaborate of the French vernacular engagements with the *Ars*, and Marilyn Desmond claims that, "[w]hile the *Rose* poets produce much more elaborate versions of the *Ars*, they share with [its more direct] translators the purpose of adapting Ovid's discourse on desire and *amor* to a vernacular audience, however loosely and however digressively."⁸⁸ As an inheritor of the *Ars*, the French poem reproduces the violence of heterosexuality endemic to Ovid's text.⁸⁹ In Jean de Meun's portion of the

⁸⁶ Ovid, *The Art of Love and Other Poems*, trans. J.H. Mozley, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), line I.477. My translation.

⁸⁷ Jerome's influence on this section of the *Rose* is well-attested. See, for example, Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, 40.

⁸⁸ Desmond, *Ovid's Art*, 75.

⁸⁹ Desmond, *Ovid's Art*, 73-115.

Rose, Friend (*Ami*), who in many ways embodies the speaker of the *Ars*,⁹⁰ reveals the violence of heterosexuality most frighteningly in his narration of Jealous Husband's misogynist diatribe.⁹¹ Friend's anti-exemplum showcases traditional misogynist arguments against women, and, according to Peter Allen, reveals the hidden, nasty side of Friend's personality in the process. Jealous Husband merely makes explicit the misogyny behind Friend's violent advice to the narrator:

though Ami protests at length against dominance, which he presents as a rebuttal of the Jealous Husband's arguments, he has already let slip some highly misogynistic – if traditional – advice of his own. 'Pluck the rose with all your force, to show that you are a man,' he advises the narrator: 'women want to give by force that which they will not give freely.'⁹²

Friend's physically violent heterosexuality engenders more physical violence, but also a violent mode of reading in Jealous Husband's speech – traditionally virtuous exemplars become whores in his wrenching exegesis, "plucked" from their pedestals to do the sexual work of misogyny. Like Jerome, Jealous Husband (and Friend by extension) takes classical stories and pares them down for his own programmatic ends.

The husband's diatribe takes the promiscuity of women for granted, and negates even the most exceptional female exemplars to support his case. Violence structures the metaphorical war of the sexes, as well as the rhetorical strategy of the speech. When it comes to wives, Jealous Husband claims,

S'el rest lede, el veust a touz plere.
Et comment porroit nus ce fere

⁹⁰ Desmond, *Ovid's Art*, 80.

⁹¹ Desmond, *Ovid's Art*, 83 points out that although *Le Jaloux* does not appear in the *Ars*, "glosses in the *Art d'amours*," the thirteenth-century prose translation of the *Ars*, "form the source for Ami's long digression on the Jaloux as a negative exemplum."

⁹² Peter L. Allen, *The Art of Love: Amatory Fiction from Ovid to the Romance of the Rose* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 87. Allen quotes *Rose* ll. 7656-70, and points out their similarity to *Ars* ll. 1.664-79.

qu'il gart chose que tuit guerroient
 ou qui veust touz ceuz qui la voient?
 S'il prent a tout le monde guerre,
 il n'a poair de vivre en terre.
 Nus nes garderoit d'estre prises,
 por tant qu'il fussent bien requises.
 Penelope neïs prendroit
 qui bien a lui prendre entendroit,
 si n'ot il meilleur fame en Grece;
 si feroit il, par foi, Lucrece,
 ja soit ce qu'el se soit occise
 por ce qu'a force l'avoit prise
 li filz le roi Tarquinius;
 n'onc, ce dit Tytus Livius,
 mariz ne peres ne parant
 ne li porent estre garant,
 por peine que nus i meist,
 que devant eus ne s'oceïst.

If [...] she is ugly, she will want to please everyone. And how could anyone keep a creature whom everyone is fighting for or who wants all those who see her? If he makes war against the whole world, he will be unable to live on earth. No one could prevent a woman from being captured, once she had been well solicited. Even Penelope could be taken by a man who applied himself seriously to taking her, and yet there was no better wife in Greece; so could Lucretia, by my faith, even though she killed herself because Tarquinius' son had taken her by force; Titus Livy tells us that neither her husband nor her father nor her relatives could save her, however hard they tried, from killing herself in front of them.⁹³

The husband's rhetoric mirrors the unruliness of human desire. The diatribe veers between chastising women and blaming men for making war on them. Not only do women desire every man, but every man desires them, and a husband must wage war against not only his wife's desires, but the desires of other men, too, if he is to keep her unsullied. Penelope and Lucretia, paragons of chastity, are casualties of this war, too,

⁹³ Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*, vol. 2, Classiques français du Moyen Age (Paris: H. Champion, 1973), lines 8567-86; translated in Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, ed. and trans. Frances Horgan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 132.

even though their virtue amazes (and the husband tells Lucretia's full story to emphasize that fact). But, in the end,

Si n'est il mes nule Lucrece,
ne Penelope nule en Grece,
ne preude fame nule an terre,
se l'en les savoit bien requerre;
n'onc fame ne se deffandi,
qui bien a lui prandre antandi,
ainsinc de dient li paien,
n'onques nus n'i trova maien.
Maintes neïs par eus se baillent,
quant li requereür defaillent.

([t]here is no Lucretia now, nor any Penelope in Greece, nor any worthy lady anywhere on earth if they are properly solicited; the pagans say that no woman ever defended herself against a man who made a serious effort to conquer her, and no one ever found a compromise. Many even give themselves of their own accord when suitors are lacking.)⁹⁴

The husband actively erases Penelope's and Lucretia's stories even as he tells them.

Blame for this war of desires, seemingly shared by men and women alike, finally falls squarely on women for their inability, or refusal, to defend themselves against men's attacks. The war imagery and erasures of Jealous Husband's speech show that heterosexual violence structures both sex and exegesis in the *Rose*. Friend's ostensible lesson in telling the exemplum of the abusive husband is that love and mastery cannot coexist, but Friend's own violent tendencies undermine this lesson. Feminine exemplarity shifts under the reader's feet as its constructedness and the misogyny that underlies its basic assumptions about gender difference emerges.

Lucretia and Penelope, along with many other classical figures, functioned as exemplars of womanly virtue, and, from the time of Tertullian and Jerome, of specifically

⁹⁴ Jean de Meun, *Roman de la Rose*, lines 8621-30; *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Horgan, 133.

Christian female virtue. The *Heroides* and Livy's history were mined for Christian lessons in the Middle Ages, and Penelope and Lucretia came to stand for the pinnacle of lay womanhood in that they exhibit faithfulness to their husbands and, in Lucretia's case, to an ideal of bodily integrity. Their use as exemplars in romance texts like the *Roman de Troie* and the *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à Caesar* also gives them a courtly valence, since their chastity and sympathetic trials make them ideal figures of courtly womanhood. Both figures also worked as historical touchstones, connecting contemporary ideas about femininity and good governance to an authoritative, classical past. Chaucer and Gower draw on the multiplicity of these characters' traditions in their poems.

Chapter Two – Classical Women and Ethical Authorship in Chaucer's Poetry and Gower's *Confessio Amantis*

Chaucer and Gower use Penelope to think through problems they face as medieval authors, as well as to engage with the changing social problems of late medieval England. The literary tradition that undergirds Penelope especially provides opportunities for these authors to engage with, and work against, traditional literary and social hierarchies. Penelope is especially important for the deployment of classically-inflected femininity, with all the baggage that that brings in its relationship to Roman poetry, especially Ovidian poetry and its medieval commentary tradition, as well as to French and Italian traditions, as outlined in Chapter One. Penelope's appearances in *Anelida and Arcite*, the *Book of the Duchess*, the *Franklin's Tale*, and Gower's *Confessio Amantis* reveal the usefulness, and sometimes inadequacy, of female virtue for these poets' projects of defining the relationship of medieval poetry to the past. In the *Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer uses the figures of Penelope and Lucretia to comment on the fault lines between textual tradition and effective, productive poetics. Specifically, he questions the tradition of using classical women as ethical exemplars. Because they are stripped of their classical background and made to embody "female" virtues or vices, narrowly defined, classical women in medieval texts are especially likely to raise the specters of "absent narratives," stories and traditions replaced and displaced by the present text – specifically, in this poem the *Romance of the Rose* and *Ars Amatoria*. The *Book of the Duchess* critiques exemplarity as a mode of reading and writing that cannot escape its misogynist history; in doing so, it brings poetic tradition at large into question. This questioning of tradition also has consequences for the Black Knight's courtly, masculine identity, based as it is in part on classical models of gender and class. In

Anelida and Arcite, Chaucer again references Penelope alongside Lucretia, this time as part of his program of rescuing a feminized classical past from obscurity. However, the project seems to fail because it depends on the suffering and death of the very heroine whose voice it resurrects. Chaucer's use of faithful classical women reveals the pitfalls of a poetics that depends on feminine suffering for its enactment. In the *Franklin's Tale*, Dorigen must navigate a world populated by material and literary objects that thwart her desires to remain faithful to her husband at every turn – the rocks at the shore recall Ovid's rocks from the *Ars Amatoria* that are worn away by the sea, just like a woman who eventually gives in to a suitor; and the heroines she looks to as models of faithfulness provide only suicide as a way out of her predicament. Classical tradition looms large for Dorigen, as for the narrator, constraining the narrative and driving it toward cuckoldry. Only Arveragus's pronouncement, an adherence to a very contemporary, medieval model of companionate marriage, can rescue Dorigen and erase the classical misogyny that constrains her and the narrative itself. Finally, the chapter turns to the *Confessio Amantis*. John Gower uses Penelope's narrative and literary history to think through one possible model of ethical authorship that depends upon authorial reliability and reader response. Penelope's letter rewrites literary history, as it compels Ulysses to return home from the Trojan War with immediacy. This revision of the traditional story signals to Amans that his own reluctance to write amounts to a sin against love, in that it fails to do good work in the world.

I. Courtly Identity and Misogyny in the *Book of the Duchess*

Chaucer's interest in classical feminine exemplarity is especially pronounced in the *Book of the Duchess*, a poem that mourns a virtuous woman by invoking classical paragons of feminine virtue. The literary histories of Penelope and Lucretia, including their appearance in the *Roman de la Rose*, work as "absent narratives" in the *Book of the Duchess*. According to Elizabeth Scala, "absent narratives mark the site of contestation between the narrator (or author) and the workings of narrative itself. Structurally, the present text... displaces and replaces the absent narrative" but also contains it.¹ In the *Book of the Duchess*, both the full narratives and the textual traditions of Lucretia and Penelope intrude upon the Black Knight's speech. Penelope and Lucretia draw readers' attention to the aspects of literary and historical background that must be repressed in order for the *Book of the Duchess*, and courtly poetry more generally, to be written.

Classical female faithfulness in Chaucer's poem conjures up the misogyny of the exemplary tradition in spite of its speaker's good intentions. During his encomium to Whyte, his deceased beloved, the Black Knight laments,

She was as good, so have I reeste,
As ever was Penelope of Grece,
Or as the noble wyf Lucrece,
That was the beste – he telleth thus,
The Romain Tytus Livius –
She was as good, and no-thing lyke,
Thogh hir stories be autentyke;
Algate she was as trewe as she.²

¹ Elizabeth Scala, *Absent Narratives, Manuscript Textuality, and Literary Structure in Late Medieval England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 13. Scala's treatment of the *Book of the Duchess* focuses on the narrator's own story of his eight-year illness as the absent narrative of the text, but I would add that Penelope's and Lucretia's narratives and textual histories work in a similar way.

² Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Book of the Duchess*, in Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), lines 1080-87. All subsequent citations from Chaucer's works will appear parenthetically.

The knight uses Penelope and Lucretia, traditional figures for wifely faithfulness, to convince his listener of his beloved's outstanding qualities. Like Jerome, the Black Knight marshals impossibly virtuous classical women to illuminate feminine virtue.³ Penelope and Lucretia set up a category to which Whyte can claim membership. And yet, the two icons of female virtue that seem to reaffirm Whyte's *trouthe* end up subtly questioning it. In these lines, Chaucer alludes to Jealous Husband's misogynist invocation of this exemplary pair in the *Romance of the Rose*, treated in the previous chapter. Whether a woman is ugly or beautiful, the husband claims, she will always say "yes" to her suitors. Penelope and Lucretia are no exception.⁴ Chaucer's poetic lines echo

³ Nancy Ciccone, "The Chamber, the Man in Black, and the Structure of Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*," *Chaucer Review* 44, no. 2 (2009): 216, argues that the repetition of Lucretia's name here recalls her very different appearance as a politically and historically significant figure in the painted chamber scene, and reveals the Black Knight's "self-absorption in understanding White's death only in terms of his own loss."

⁴ Jealous Husband claims that

Nus nes garderoit d'estre prises,
 por tant qu'il fussent bien requises.
 Penelope neïs prendroit
 qui bien a lui prendre entendroit,
 si n'ot il meilleur fame en Grece;
 si feroit il, par foi, Lucrece,
 ja soit ce qu'el se soit occise
 por ce qu'a force l'avoit prise
 li filz le roi Tarquinius.

([n]o one could prevent a woman from being captured, once she had been well-solicited. Even Penelope could be taken by a man who applied himself seriously to taking her, and yet there was no better wife in Greece; so could Lucretia, by my faith, even though she killed herself because Tarquinius' son took her by force). The husband goes on to say that

Si n'est il mes nule Lucrece,
 ne Penelope nule en Grece,
 ne preude fame nule an terre,
 se l'en les savoit bien requerre.

(There is no Lucretia now, nor any Penelope in Greece, nor any worthy lady anywhere on earth if they are properly solicited). Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*, vol. 2, Classiques

not only the praise poems of Deschamps and other uses of Penelope and Lucretia as models of goodness, but also, and more clearly, the negative use of Penelope in Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, and its reverberation in the *Romance of the Rose*. Penelope, Lucretia, and Livy are mentioned in succession in the French poem; Chaucer's knight repeats the Jealous Husband's claim that "Penelope in Greece" (the *Rose*'s "in" becomes the knight's "of") and Lucretia are the most virtuous women in history, and reproduces his citation of "Titus Livius" as the authority on this virtue. To quote this iteration of Penelope brings antifeminist baggage to the text that directly contradicts the eulogizing spirit of the Black Knight's speech. The Black Knight's repetition of Jealous Husband's rhetorical strategy aligns him with a tradition that opposes his project of loving remembrance of a woman.

The use of exemplary women to support Jealous Husband's claims reveals that the exemplary mode of reading can become a predatory act of misappropriation. For him, history serves to provide impossible models of feminine virtue that either fail when tested, or put real women in sharp relief. Chaucer's pairing of Penelope and Lucretia in the *Book of the Duchess* points to this moment in the *Romance of the Rose* wherein the masculine mode of reading women as exemplars does violence to history and its hearers alike, like the Jealous Husband who physicalizes his verbal assault when he beats his wife. I argue that Chaucer has his Black Knight employ the exemplary tradition to show the constraints and limitations of literary and cultural traditions more broadly, where the underlying misogyny of courtly, aristocratic expectations hinders the Black Knight's production of his poetic lament and of his own identity as a courtly mourner. Lucretia's

français du Moyen Age (Paris: H. Champion, 1973), lines 8573-81; translated in Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, ed. and trans. Frances Horgan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 132-33.

appearance alongside Penelope in Chaucer's poem elicits sympathy for the woman they are compared to, but at the same time these figures carry with them the antifeminist baggage of the *Rose* and its predecessor, Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*. Reference to Penelope and Lucretia interrupts the Black Knight's mournful encomium to his dead beloved, forcing him to contend with the misogyny of the tradition of classical exemplarity, and of the system of courtly values to which it contributes.⁵

The knight himself acknowledges the failure of his analogy: Lucretia and Penelope are "no-thing lyke" Whyte. He twice claims "She was as good" to emphasize to the doubtful narrator, and seemingly to himself, that Whyte's excellence was not only in his own mind, but real. And yet, he continues to rely on an inadequate analogy. His protestations reveal discomfort with his comparison of his beloved to classical women. This failure, in addition to the close relationship between the Black Knight's poetic encomium to his beloved and a sarcastically misogynist section of the *Rose*, further signals Chaucer's desire to question the value of exemplarity as a mode of reading and of human relationship and brings to the fore Chaucer's own concerns about the limitations of literary and courtly traditions. By writing a knight who fails to create a courtly lament that adequately expresses his intentions and feelings, Chaucer comments on the difficulty of navigating poetic and cultural traditions, and on the danger of ignoring the dark aspects that undergird them, like misogyny.

⁵ Cf. Lisa Kiser, *Telling Classical Tales: Chaucer and the "Legend of Good Women"* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 136-40 et passim. Kiser argues that the Prologue to the *Legend* shows a desire for an intermediate poetry between "makyng" and "poesye" – between Latinate classicism and vernacular poetry that was more socially engaged. In her view, the legends themselves are a reaction to misinterpretation and moralization of *Troilus and Criseyde*, a kind of cautionary tale about what happens when classical stories are forced into the service of clear-cut moral lessons. I suggest that the *Book of the Duchess* makes a similar move, but shows that the consequences are also personal and psychological rather than just literary.

The literary histories of Penelope and Lucretia, especially as written by Jerome, Ovid, and Jean de Meun, work as “absent narratives” in the *Book of the Duchess*. Chaucer’s iteration of these exemplars inserts the poem into a specific literary history that shaped courtly literature in fourteenth-century France and England, and that should also shape our response to his poem. Through these absent narratives, the capabilities of courtly poetics and identity-formation are tested. As the mourning knight strives to produce courtly verse to mourn his beloved and debate the narrator about her goodness, his terse reference to Penelope and Lucretia reveals the limitations of genre and tradition. The Black Knight’s references to Penelope and Lucretia, in their mimicry of the abusive husband’s lines from the *Romance of the Rose*, conflict with the knight’s project of praising and mourning a woman. Penelope and Lucretia showcase the difficulties of working in a literary tradition that limits an author’s emotional and textual scope. These figures represent the allegorized, moralized mode of reading and writing that undergirds courtly representations of women and severely limits poetic possibility. As I argued in Chapter One, the fact that the *Rose* uses these two paragons of feminine virtue to support an antifeminist argument, however tongue-in-cheek, reveals the instability of exemplary rhetoric about women. The pairing of Penelope and Lucretia in Chaucer’s poem further reveals the instability of courtly identities based in part on these conceptions of femininity, and draws attention to limitations of violent mastery of texts and lovers endemic to authorial and courtly conceptions of masculinity.

Readers have noticed the tension between the traditional courtly setting and courtly rhetoric of the knight, and the knight’s need to convey and come to terms with his own personal interiority and history. I add that Penelope and Lucretia work in this poem

as signposts of one specific aspect of this disjunction, namely, the gulf between traditional misogyny and masculine courtly tenderness toward a beloved woman. In Chaucer's courtly dream vision, the dreamer wakes in a chamber decorated with scenes from the *Romance of the Rose* and the Trojan War. The chamber establishes the importance of the French text and the Trojan War tradition to the poem's program of courtly art and identity formation.⁶ The dreamer then wanders into a forest where he finds a mourning knight dressed in black. After listening to the knight's lament for a while, the dreamer approaches him and asks that he tell his story so that the dreamer might find a way to help him. Most of the remaining lines contain the knight's mournful tale of his grief, interrupted periodically by the dreamer's queries. Many critics have suggested that the knight fails to find precise language to describe or come to grips with his grief because he adheres to traditional lyrical and elegiac forms that are full of clichés and imprecise metaphors.⁷ The knight's utterances are limited by his reliance on, or

⁶ Ciccone, "The Chamber," 208, argues that the scenes in the painted chamber "call up their sources, disrupt the plot focused on the narrator, and set the stage for the man in black's revivification of the dead White, that is, for reading the past into the present and the present into the past." Lucretia herself appears in the narrator's description of the painted chamber as a politically important figure well before the Black Knight mentions her.

⁷ Barbara Nolan, "The Art of Expropriation: Chaucer's Narrator in The Book of the Duchess," in *New Perspectives in Chaucer Criticism*, ed. Donald M. Rose (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1981), 213, sees the narrator as the practical foil to the stylized knight, and the poem as questioning the value of "the poetry of feeling and the platitudes of bookish, high-toned consolation." See also Ciccone, "The Chamber," 221; Glenn Burger, "Reading Otherwise: Recovering the Subject in the Book of the Duchess," *Exemplaria* 5, no. 2 (1993): 330-1; Michael St. John, *Chaucer's Dream Visions: Courtliness and Individual Identity* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2000), 47-50; and L.O. Aranye Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 94. On the other hand, Ardis Butterfield, "Lyric and Elegy in the Book of the Duchess," *Medium Aevum* 60 (1991): 33-60, shows that the knight's elegiac and lyric verses differ significantly from those of contemporary French poets, especially Machaut and Froissart (whom Chaucer echoes in other parts of the poem). She argues that elegies written in the late fourteenth century usually had a clear public purpose, and that lyrical complaints had an intricacy of form and a public nature that helped the speaker or singer achieve consolation. The knight's poems are neither public nor intricate, and for these reasons, she suggests, they give him no consolation.

entrapment in, tradition.⁸ Some critics have seen the knight not as simply choosing to employ the French tradition, but as shaped by it at his very core.⁹ Courtly discourse and even Whyte herself have shaped the knight's interiority, or "discursive consciousness."¹⁰ But this constructed courtly identity fails the knight. Glenn Burger shows that the knight desires to base his own subjectivity on Whyte, herself a product of institutionalized discourse (as she is described in the most traditional and familiar terms). However, such consciousness turns out to be very unstable because of "the gaps and disjunctures that become visible between practical and discursive consciousness," or between identity based on life and that based on literature.¹¹ I argue that misogyny is one of those disjunctures, in that it both undergirds courtly literature and is hostile to its program of loving real women, especially the Black Knight's individual program of loving remembrance. The knight's performance of courtliness contains moments of slippage, revealing the instability of identity that is based on poetic tradition and institutionalized discourse.

During his conversation with the dreamer, the knight's uses of exemplars, and especially his references to Penelope and Lucretia, interrupt his autobiography and call attention to the pitfalls of relying on traditional or transmitted stories to legitimize present

⁸ St. John, *Chaucer's Dream Visions*, 47.

⁹ St. John, *Chaucer's Dream Visions*, 59, suggests that the knight even becomes aware that courtly rhetoric shapes his memories.

¹⁰ Burger, "Reading Otherwise," 333. Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, 106, suggests that the knight's poetic autobiography is a kind of Foucauldian confession, that is, both an examination of his own interior and a mode of establishing courtly sociality based on a discursive tradition. In Fradenburg's reading, classical and courtly stories and forms carry with them the currency of traditional courtliness that undergirds the knight's identity.

¹¹ Burger, "Reading Otherwise," 330.

feeling or to establish identity.¹² The knight's reference to Penelope and Lucretia reveals the fault lines in the system of classically-inflected, courtly masculinity on which this type of poetry relies. The knight begins to use classical and Biblical examples to support his claim that Whyte was uniquely good. Having relied on courtly and philosophical descriptions of the lady's many physical, spiritual, and social virtues, near the end of his long description of the lady he claims that "she was, to myn ye, / The soleyne fenix of Arabye, / For ther livyth never but oon, / Ne swich as she ne knowe I noon" (981-4). The phoenix is the first classical reference that the knight makes, closely followed by a Biblical reference to Esther's "debonairte" (986). The knight resorts to the imprecision of metaphor to try and explain just how wonderfully unique and exemplary Whyte was. The narrator, unconvinced, questions the validity of the knight's claim for Whyte's unique virtues. After all, no one could possibly live up to the outstanding classical and Biblical exemplars the knight presents. The narrator insists that the knight's viewpoint is a subjective one: "I leve yow wel, that trewely / *Yow thoghte* that she was the beste / And to beholde the alderfayreste, / Whoso had loked hir with *your* eyen" (1048-51, my emphasis). The narrator points out the disconnect between the knight's psychology, or interiority, and courtly tradition. Steeped in courtly rhetoric as he is, the Black Knight imagines classical and Biblical examples will correspond to every listener's reality; the

¹² Ciccone, "The Chamber," 207, sees the dreamer as setting up the cultural importance of classical stories in the chamber scene, and the knight as showing how they can be relevant to individual lives and experiences. My paper takes a slightly different tack by suggesting that the knight's faltering citations of classical stories actually show the difficulty of applying them to lived experience. My argument is more in line with that of critics skeptical of the poem's use of classical and French tradition. See, for example, Nolan, "Art of Expropriation," 217, who argues that Chaucer refuses the posture of most retellers of classical tales, such as the narrator of the *Ovide Moralisé*. This refusal "implies a rejection of authoritative verbal sententiousness and moralizing books generally as a means of dealing satisfactorily with the problem of death."

narrator, kept at a distance from courtly masculinity by socioeconomic status, profession, or both, questions the knight's easy equation of reality and courtly rhetoric.

The knight's answer to the narrator's charge of skewed subjectivity reveals his difficulty with using traditional materials to convey his own emotionally-charged truths. He begins to stumble in his answer to the narrator's challenge, even admitting "I gabbe now" (1075). The disjuncture here between tradition and interiority also reveals the chasm between classical exemplars and realistic characters. Whyte can never be a fully-fledged character as long as she remains confined to analogies and comparisons. The Black Knight supports his assertion of Whyte's uniqueness using classical examples, but the effort is clumsy. After a list of heroes that does little to shore up his argument (1052-74), the appearance of Penelope and Lucretia further destabilizes the focus on Whyte and reveals the ways in which she is a product of traditional discourses rather than a fully realized woman.¹³ These classical stories, as "autentyke" as they may be, do not fully capture the essence of Whyte's specific, unique goodness. Exemplarity, or allegorization, and lived experience are at odds here. Like Jerome, Deschamps, and the other authors who used ancient women to signify the virtues of contemporary women, the knight intends Penelope and Lucretia's applicability to exceed the specificity of their "autentyke" stories as he allegorizes them into "good" and "trewe" women. However, the allegorization of Penelope and Lucretia mirrors the way in which Whyte herself threatens to fade into allegory.¹⁴ The knight attempts to undo Whyte's allegorization by protesting

¹³ At 1067-71, the strange appearance of Achilles's death by the treachery of his Trojan love object in the knight's list of heroes reveals the instability of the knight's rhetorical project. Perhaps his emotions compel him to tell a story of tragic love, even when it does not serve his immediate purpose.

¹⁴ On the knight's failure to fully memorialize Whyte, see Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, and Lisa J. Kiser, "Sleep, Dreams, and Poetry in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 19, no. 1 (1983): 3-12.

her uniqueness, claiming that she was “no-thing lyke” the classical exemplars. His debate with the narrator about Whyte’s objective goodness are thwarted by his attachment to Whyte as a unique object of his experience. The objective and the subjective cannot exist together at once – like an optical illusion, focusing on one blurs the other into obscurity. The knight’s reference to Penelope’s and Lucretia’s stories and the unlikeness of Whyte’s story to them begin to undo the allegorizing erasures of all three female figures and call to mind the specifics of the classical tales. The excesses of these exemplary narratives suggest that Whyte herself must similarly have exceeded the knight’s careful courtly blazon of her.

The knight’s citation of the *Rose* participates in the tradition of exemplarity that renders women into one-dimensional figures, specifically here the misogynist tradition of the *Rose*, in stark contrast to his commemoration of Whyte. The traditional nature of the knight’s utterances necessitates “replacing memories with memorializations” that belie the lived experience of the mourner.¹⁵ The knight adheres to the generic and textual traditions that place his verses in conversation with French courtly poetry, but in so doing he nearly erases his beloved. The intrusion of the *Rose*’s misogyny into Chaucer’s poem also points to the limitations of female characterization in the poem more generally. The *Rose* is an important source for the *Book of the Duchess* and for the mode of courtly dream visions, but the knight’s moment of hesitation makes clear that textual transmission often brings with it connotations that cannot be reconciled with the intentions of the current work. The knight’s stumbling citation reveals that Chaucer

¹⁵ Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, 22.

thought critically about the tradition of using classical exemplars to illuminate contemporary life or undergird representations of emotion.¹⁶

The courtly lady's description structures the knight's autobiographical versifying, and thus his self-construction. The dead beloved becomes "a memory and also ... the matrix of remembering."¹⁷ Because the lady functions as the "matrix" of the poem, intrusions of misogyny threaten the poem's very foundations. The knight employs traditional (French) courtly language to memorialize his lost lady, but also to tell the story of his own blossoming into a courtly lover. These two goals seem to be at odds in Chaucer's poem, as one is predicated on deep, heartfelt love for a woman, and the other on misogyny, as the *Romance of the Rose* shows. Even the form of the question-and-answer debate that the narrator institutes, perhaps in an echo of Machaut's *Jugement* poems, does not provide the knight with a tenable position to inhabit. In Machaut's poems, the interlocutor is a woman, and misogyny (or at least a gender battle) undergirds the discussion.¹⁸ The knight's rhetorically clumsy use of classical figures like Penelope

¹⁶ Nolan, "Art of Expropriation," 218, similarly argues that the poem proffers a "new poetics" in the prologue, one that acknowledges traditions of *fin amour* and classical stories but also relies on everyday experiences to structure poems. I suggest that the Black Knight dramatizes the poet's struggle to inhabit this poetics.

¹⁷ Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, 96.

¹⁸ Guillaume de Machaut, *Le Jugement du roy de Behaigne; and, Remede de fortune*, ed. James I. Wimsatt and William W. Kibler (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), and *The Judgment of the King of Navarre*, ed. and trans. R. Barton Palmer (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988). In *Le Jugement du roy de Behaigne*, the narrator hears the laments of a lady whose lover has died, and a knight whose lover has been unfaithful, to judge which is more sorrowful. He chooses the knight. In *Le Jugement du roy de Navarre*, the narrator is called to task for his previous judgment in *Behaigne* and must debate a lady and her many allegorized ladies-in-waiting. See James Wimsatt, *Chaucer and the French Love Poets: The Literary Background of the Book of the Duchess* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968) for a thorough study of Chaucer's debts to French poetry in the *Book of the Duchess*. Wimsatt, 102, argues that Machaut's "debate poems... provide impressive precedents to the *Book of the Duchess: Behaigne* for the Black Knight's situation and story, *Navarre* for the character of the narrator, and both poems for the debate element in the work."

and Lucretia reminds us that authorship, dependent as it is on traditional forms and rhetoric, does not always reflect interiority.

In fact, the *Book of the Duchess* sets up the problem of tradition from its start. The poem's staged difficulty with the Seys and Alcyone story mirrors the knight's wrestling match with tradition. Chaucer's retelling of Seys and Alcyone both resurrects Seys, and omits Alcyone's lament when it moves straight to her death.¹⁹ Chaucer's point is that old tales are both "a wonder thing" (61) and of questionable use, as they fail to bring consolation; in Aranye Fradenburg's words, "dazzling technologies of transmission are always going to bring back the corpse they are supposed to talk our way out of."²⁰ On the one hand, the narrator draws ridiculous conclusions from Ovid's tale that have little to do with living (his only desire is to sleep, an activity as near death as one can get and still return without the help of the gods); on the other hand, it is through reading this story that the narrator is able to sleep and dream, through which he finds a mechanism for survival in poetic production, however fraught.²¹ Like the narrator, the Black Knight wrestles with how to apply classical love stories to his own life as he struggles with how to understand his dead beloved's faithfulness in terms beyond the exemplary.

¹⁹ Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, 95, notes that Chaucer's source for this episode, Machaut's *Dit de la fontienne amoreuse*, does not omit the queen's lament. R. Barton Palmer, "Rereading Guillaume de Machaut's Vision of Love: Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* as Bricolage," in *Second Thoughts: A Focus on Rereading*, ed. David Galef (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 191-2, suggests that this omission is a symptom of Chaucer's larger program of "a rewriting that is also the writing out of the female presence" so important to Machaut's *Fontienne amoreuse* (the beloved in *Fontienne* comes to the knight in a dream to console him). As a result, the poem can maintain a narrow focus on only the male side of love and grief, after showing Alcyone's utter inability to find saving consolation.

²⁰ Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, 95.

²¹ If the narrator is to be believed, the tale itself caused him to sleep: "I had be dolven everydel / And ded, right thurgh defeaute of slep, / Yif I ne had red and take kep / Of this tale next before" (222-5).

Investigating the tradition behind the knight's use of these figures reveals that, at least in this poem, Chaucer viewed classical and courtly material as inadequate to the task of memorializing the dead, finding consolation, or establishing masculine courtly identity. Penelope and Lucretia point us to Chaucer's larger poetic program, which sought to reveal and often criticize the absent narratives that shored up traditional poetic and historical identities. The poem suggests further that authorship itself need not follow tradition too closely. Faithfulness to tradition may give way to a different kind of poetic faith – faithfulness to lived experience and social needs. In fact, in the *Book of the Duchess*, faithfulness to classical and courtly tradition leads the Black Knight toward an unfaithful depiction of his beloved, and a betrayal of his own poetic project of consolation and memorialization. The poem's questioning of tradition emerges with even greater clarity in some of Chaucer's other poems, such as in the *House of Fame*. In *Fame*, the narrator leaves the palace of Lady Fame, which is literally supported by classical authors like Vergil and Homer, who sit atop its columns, to embrace instead the whirling, labyrinthine "Domus Dedaly" (1920), the structure whose impermanence is part of its appeal and whose origins are *both* classical and contemporary.

In the *Book of the Duchess*, as elsewhere, Chaucer uses classical exempla to stage his own embrace or rejection of different kinds of secular authority, including the authority of classical authorship, courtly tradition, and aristocratic identity.²² Penelope's and Lucretia's presence in the *Book of the Duchess* points to the necessary, but increasingly inadequate, nature of secular historical ethics as a basis for identity and

²² Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), esp. 137-47.

poetics. Critics have viewed Chaucer's use of ancient texts as indicative of his rejection of the moralizations of allegory and embrace of pure history; his concern with the "dialectic relationship between the subject and history" writ large; and his dramatization of poetry's ability to mask secret truths while still speaking them.²³ Our exemplars' appearance touches on all of these. They are the epitome of female secular virtue, and yet Chaucer employs them to reveal what is absent from, or suppressed by, the exemplum tradition, as well as to consider the fundamental disconnect between a modern, courtly individuality and the historical and exemplary narratives on which it relies. Chaucer's rejection of French and classical models in his late career, as seen in his *Canterbury Tales*, may signify an independence from court patronage and culture, as Lee Patterson argues;²⁴ it certainly suggests that English identity, for the nobility and others, must at some level rethink its reliance on classical and French courtly foundations.

II. Chaucer's Masculine Poetics in *Anelida and Arcite*

As I have shown, the *Book of the Duchess* reveals the pitfalls of classical feminine exemplarity as a literary mode by critiquing a specific tradition that truncates and moralizes Penelope's story. The Black Knight's reproduction of lines from the *Romance of the Rose* and *Ars Amatoria* undermines his intention of praising his deceased spouse. This failure showcases the need for a different mode of literary production that does not malign or oversimplify feminine virtue and constrain the poetry it engenders. *Anelida and*

²³ A. J. Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1982), 6 et passim; Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 10; Jane Chance, *The Mythographic Chaucer: the Fabulation of Sexual Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 6.

²⁴ Patterson, *Subject of History*, 10.

Arcite searchees for such a mode. In this poem, Penelope returns as a reminder that the limitations of literary tradition require poets to reconceive their relationship to the past. Penelope and other classical female figures work to feminize a classical past that can be rescued by a masculinized vernacular poetics.

Chaucer's early poem *Anelida and Arcite* tells the story, and dramatizes the lament, of a queen tormented by an unfaithful lover. Penelope works as the specter of a kind of pitiless, exemplum-based reading of the classical past that has all but devoured it. Far from recuperating a feminine voice or a piece of antiquity, Penelope's presence in the text replays the one-dimensional readings of antique women that filled antifeminist literature with exempla and anti-exempla, making women either epitomes of virtue or evil incarnate. The narrator describes Anelida as having "passed ... Penelope and Lucesse" in "stidfastnesse" (81-2). These exemplars' presence in the text reminds us of the pitfalls of Anelida's specific brand of love that results in female suffering or death. Their presence in the text begs the question, is radical faithfulness beneficial for anyone in the end? As in the *Book of the Duchess*, the pairing of Penelope and Lucretia harks back to Jealous Husband's diatribe in the *Romance of the Rose*. The misogynist assumptions that undergird the narrator's brand of praise, and the instability of classical female exemplarity, come to the fore as a result. As I have shown, the *Rose* plants Penelope in the middle of Jealous Husband's antifeminist rant, revealing the predatory nature of the exemplary mode of reading women's stories. For him, history serves to provide impossible models of feminine virtue that either fail when tested, or put women of his own day in sharp relief. *Anelida and Arcite*'s pairing of Penelope and Lucretia points to the *Rose* and reminds readers of the pernicious uses to which history reduced to

exemplarity can be put. The *Riverside Chaucer*'s note on Penelope and Lucretia here reiterates the text's erasure, detailing only that the two women are "exemplars of womanly virtue," and that "Penelope was the faithful wife of Ulysses" and Lucretia's story can be found elsewhere (377, note to line 82). This modern, critical simplification continues Agamemnon's misreading in the *Odyssey* and other misreadings throughout Penelope's literary history. Penelope's reputation for faithfulness is a misreading of her character that ignores the incredible cleverness, trickery, and indeterminacy of her story.²⁵

The narrator's emphasis on these women's steadfastness glosses over the political importance of all three women. Penelope ruled as a regent for Ulysses, Lucretia inspired the overthrow of monarchy and establishment of the Roman republic, and Anelida, as leader of Armenia, forged an alliance with Creon, the tyrant of Thebes (64-70).²⁶ Penelope's and Lucretia's absent narratives haunt this comparison and call attention to Anelida's own backstory. They also point to the erased stories of the other women in the first lines of the poem, Hippolyta and her sister Emelye. Jennifer Summit argues that the poem "continually sets up the desire for recovery against the material threat of loss," which manifests in the loss of women's voices and writing.²⁷ She suggests that Chaucer places himself in the position of the marginalized, feminized writer whose work threatens

²⁵ Marilyn A. Katz, *Penelope's Renown: Meaning and Indeterminacy in the Odyssey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 6.

²⁶ When Creon took over Thebes "by his tyrannye, / [he] dyde the gentils of that regioun / To ben his frendes and wonnen in the toun. / So, what for love of him and what for awe, / The noble folk were to the toun idrawe" (62-63, and 67-70). Anelida is among these "gentils." Whether Anelida's alliance with the tyrant Creon makes her a bad political actor rather than a good one, seems not to matter to the narrator.

²⁷ Jennifer Summit, *Lost Property: The Woman Writer and English Literary History, 1380-1589* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 40.

to be obliterated. I argue, rather, that the poem suggests the vernacular poet can act as a masculine rescuer of the feminized voice of the past.

Penelope reminds readers of the mode of reading proliferated by Jerome, Deschamps, and others that chops up classical stories, utilizes the convenient bits for moral lessons, and consigns the rest to the scrap heap of history.²⁸ Her appearance points out the inadequacy of merely mentioning exemplary figures to illuminate the qualities of another female figure. On the other hand, it also invites a comparison with the *Heroides*, a text that dramatizes female lament in a mode similar to that of *Anelida and Arcite*. Anelida, like Penelope and other female speakers in Ovid's collection of epistolary poems, voices her desire for an absent or delinquent lover. But, as Marilyn Desmond points out, a large majority of Ovid's female speakers die, and so the "epistles commemorate death as the constitutive category for female desire."²⁹ The Middle English poem's truncated reference to Penelope shows not only that exemplary reading cannot coexist with a desire to recuperate the ancient female voice, but also that the Ovidian rhetoric of antique feminine desire necessarily leads to its destruction.

As Marjorie Curry Woods points out, the *Heroides* were school-texts in the Middle Ages, used as lessons in how to write female characters, who were seen as emotional creatures, like Ovid's heroines, and (presumably) deserving of sympathy.³⁰

²⁸ Sarah Van der Laan, "'What Virtue and Wisdom Can Do': Homer's Odyssey in the Renaissance Imagination" (PhD diss., Yale University, 2009), 38-88, sees Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* performing a similar critique of the exemplar mode of reading that "chops up" a character to focus only on one or two virtues.

²⁹ Marilyn Desmond, "The *Translatio* of Memory and Desire in *The Legend of Good Women*: Chaucer and the Vernacular *Heroides*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 35 (2013): 181.

³⁰ Marjorie Curry Woods, "Boys Will Be Women: Musings on Classroom Nostalgia and the Chaucerian Audience(s)," in *Speaking Images: Essays in Honor of V.A. Kolve*, ed. Robert F. Yeager, Charlotte C. Morse, and V. A. Kolve (Asheville: Pegasus Press, 2001), 143-66.

Chaucer's text of Anelida's complaint, connected to the *Heroides* through its literary form as a female-voiced complaint and through reference to Penelope, suggests that the author himself must feel sympathy in order to write a pitiable heroine - his desire to preserve Anelida's story requires that he do so "With pitous hert in Englyssh" (9). And yet, pity as an authorial motivation results in elision of all but the complaint, and thus it requires suffering for its poetic enactment. The stories of Hippolyta and Emelye, which (apparently) are not pitiable, or the politically significant aspects of Penelope's and Lucretia's narratives, cannot become poetry if the poet relies on pity as his primary form of remembrance.

While Chaucer seems to have been fully aware of the limitations of feminine exemplarity and authorial pity in the *Book of the Duchess*, I argue that *Anelida and Arcite* shows a narrator, and perhaps an author, not yet fully cognizant of these complications. The narrator here embraces the poetics of pitiable remembrance of the past through women's stories. From the beginning of the poem, the narrator indicates his desire to memorialize the past through a feminine poetics. The poem begins firmly in the Latin tradition with epic invocations to Mars, Athena, and the Muses in stanzas one and three. Stanza two interrupts the invocations with a meditation on how a vernacular poet can rescue the past from oblivion. The narrator claims that he wants to write Anelida's Latin story "With pitous hert in Englyssh" (9), because "elde," or age, "which that al can frete and bite, / As hit hath freten mony a noble storie, / Hath nygh devoured [it] out of oure memorie" (12-14). These lines suggest that the Latin poetics of the gods and muses is not enough to preserve the swiftly disappearing past. Translation into the vernacular, into

“Englyssh,” must also occur to undo the ravages of time,³¹ to stop the greedy devouring maw that can “frete,” or devour, stories from the past.³² The terms used to describe how history fades “out of oure memorie” are violent and reminiscent of medieval *memento mori* literature’s descriptions of how the body in decay is eaten by worms.³³ Here, ancient story replaces the body, but can be rescued from the worms to some degree. The “frete and bite” method of historical decay implies a kind of consumption that relegates narrative to the refuse pile to be forgotten. Benjamin’s Angel of History provides a similar image. In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* he imagines an angel with “[h]is face ... turned towards the past. Where *we* perceive a chain of events, *he* sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed.”³⁴ Benjamin’s desire for a more holistic, inclusive sense of the past replays what the narrator of *Anelida and Arcite* hopes to enact through his remembrance of this story. The invocation to *Anelida and Arcite* shows us a poet who desires, much like Benjamin’s angel, to “make whole” the history of an age that has been devoured and mostly forgotten. For Chaucer, what has been forgotten takes the form of the ancient female voice.

³¹ Patterson, *Subject of History*, 64-5. While Patterson claims that the poem “recapitulates an unforgettable past by unwittingly reliving it in the present,” I argue that the poem strives to remember but achieves only a limited remembrance.

³² *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “freten.” The first entry lists the following definitions: under 1a., “(a) To devour (something), to eat up; (b) to eat (something); esp., to eat hungrily or greedily; ... (c) to bite (something), to tear (with the teeth), to chew or gnaw; of a dart: to pierce; (d) to gnash the teeth.” 1b. “Fig. To consume, swallow up; destroy.”

³³ See, for example, “A Disputation Between the Body and the Worms,” in *Middle English Debate Poetry: A Critical Anthology*, ed. John Conlee (East Lansing, MI: Colleagues Press, 1999), 50-62.

³⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 257.

The making whole of history takes on gendered significance in *Anelida and Arcite*, and in several moments throughout Chaucer's canon where Chaucer is concerned with preserving or ventriloquizing the female voice. Here and in many of his poems the voices of the past are feminine or feminized, and this feminization of the past is in contrast to a masculinized vernacular and its ability to rescue the past. In *Anelida and Arcite*, the description of the past as akin to a decaying body, and its rescue through becoming vernacular text, puts history and woman in the same category. As Carolyn Dinshaw and others have shown, the body and its decay were often associated with the feminine principle in medieval thought, as was the written text.³⁵ In this poem particularly, it is Anelida's feminine history that the narrator pities and hopes to resurrect or rescue from oblivion. Even before Anelida makes her appearance, the invocation to the muse Polyhymnia sets up and feminizes the emphasis on remembrance. Stanza three asks for the favor of the muse, who "Singest with vois memorial in the shade, / Under the laurer which that may not fade" (18-19). Chaucer's muse does more than inspire – she speaks poetically, making possible a masculine authorship of her feminine voice that undoes the devouring ravages of time. Finally, the invocation ends with an acknowledgment of classical source authors: "First folowe I Stace, and after him Corynne" (21). Statius, author of the *Thebaid*, shares pride of place with a female author. Although the identity of Corinna is unclear, what is clear is that Chaucer intentionally

³⁵ For these ideas see especially Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 3-27, especially 9, where she explains that medieval "literary activity has a gendered structure, a structure that associates acts of writing and related acts of signifying – allegorizing, interpreting, glossing, translating – with the masculine and that identifies the surfaces on which these acts are performed, or from which these acts depart, or which these acts reveal – the page, the text, the literal sense, or even the hidden meaning – with the feminine."

places her in his text as the feminine voice of the past preserved in the poem itself.³⁶

Although Statius is well-known, and is in fact quoted in Latin in an epigraph immediately following the Invocation, Corinna represents a different kind of classical tradition, one that is obscure (as Corinna herself is), difficult to resurrect and in danger of being forgotten. As Lee Patterson asserts, her “name signifies a presence that devouring time has taken away, leaving behind only a verbal image.”³⁷ However, the poem aims to resurrect that presence through Anelida’s complaint. The preponderance of female voices representing the classical past sets up the poem as a rescue mission for a feminized antiquity. As he indicates in line 9, and as the supposed translation of Anelida’s lament shows, this remembrance requires pity for its enactment. Chaucer views the classical pagan past with sympathy, as Patterson and others have argued. I contend that this sympathy takes the form of a male author’s sympathy for a feminized past.

And yet, the feminine voice of pitiable exemplarity shuts down narrative in the poem. By taking Anelida’s doomed faithfulness as its driving force, the poem limits itself to complaint and an unhappy ending. Once Anelida’s complaint finishes, the narrator (or Chaucer himself) seems to realize there is no further narrative possible for Anelida, other than death. After writing her letter she swoons, “With face ded, betwixe pale and grene” (353). Like many of her *Heroides* counterparts, Penelope excepted, Anelida seems to be undone by her own complaint. The narrator attempts to resurrect her and sends her to the temple of Mars to vow a “sacrifise” (355), perhaps a self-sacrifice. But the poem stops

³⁶ See Patterson, *Subject of History*, 63-4 for a different interpretation of Corinna as representative of “female romanticism,” a counterpart to Statius’ ancient epic. See his note 59 for possible identifications of Corinna.

³⁷ Patterson, *Subject of History*, 79. I disagree that the poem shows a complete skepticism about poetic origins – rather, I see the poem as exploring the possibilities of constructing origins that legitimize the use of the vernacular.

abruptly after promising that we “shal after here” the nature of Anelida’s vow (357). The mechanism of poetic pity is not enough to save the feminine classical past, it turns out, because it actually leads to feminine death in the end. Female faithfulness as a pity-generating engine for literature sputters out quickly.

III. Literary Tradition, Narrative, and Cuckoldry in the *Franklin’s Tale*

In the *Franklin’s Tale*, Chaucer explores the interplay between predetermined, moralized narratives of classical women and the indeterminacy of a narrative shaped by the threat of cuckoldry, a central element in Penelope’s story. Classical female figures, as well as Ovid’s specific reference to Penelope in the *Ars Amatoria*, figure prominently in this tale’s portrayal of a woman struggling to achieve exemplary feminine faithfulness as defined by figures like Penelope and Lucretia – she must either fend off a suitor with guile or commit suicide to avoid shame. The tale dramatizes the negotiations of tradition, temporality, and geography that are necessary for an emerging vernacular authorship in fourteenth-century England through an examination of the narrative possibilities and limitations of feminine faithfulness. It also explores whether authorial identity can coincide with lay male identity, and to what extent both identities depend on the idea of the faithful woman for their construction.

The tale’s narrative hinges on whether Dorigen can maintain the promises she has made to her husband to be a “humble trewe wyf” and give her “trouthe” to him (V.758-59), and what the consequence of breaking those promises would be. Criticism on *The Franklin’s Tale* has, for much of its history, focused its energies on ascertaining the viability of its version of marriage. Following from Kittredge’s concept of the “Marriage

Group” of tales and of *The Franklin’s Tale* as providing an end to the debate with its presentation of a marriage based on mutuality,³⁸ much writing has focused on the tale’s depiction of medieval marriage, or on proving or disproving Kittredge’s idealization of Arveragus or Dorigen. Related strains of questioning include determining the Franklin’s own level of gentility, or, similarly, answering the narrator’s question of “Which was the mooste fre” of the characters (V.1622) by investigating medieval strains of thought on *trouthe* and *gentillesse* and their applicability to the tale.³⁹ Flake, Ganze, and others connect *trouthe* to social status and reputation, suggesting that the tale dramatizes a marriage that takes this masculine chivalric virtue to heart.⁴⁰ On the other hand, the tale’s engagement with Ovidian themes and heroines suggests that literary tradition and female sexuality also play important roles in the tale’s message about *trouthe*.

The near-mutual marriage agreement between Dorigen and Arveragus demands faithfulness on the part of the woman, and good rulership on the part of the husband. It

³⁸ Glenn Burger, *Chaucer’s Queer Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 38-40, provides a treatment of Kittredge’s “Marriage Group” concept, and its limiting imposition of heterosexual assumptions on the *Tales*.

³⁹ D.W. Robertson, “Chaucer’s Franklin and His Tale,” *Costerus: Essays in English and American Language and Literature* 1 (1974): 1-26, sets the stage for both lines of inquiry. He sees the Franklin and his characters as bad readers who set up a rather un-medieval model of marriage. Other, recent works on the idealization or flawed nature of characters and the Franklin include Alcuin Blamires, “Problems of Patience and Equanimity: ‘The Franklin’s Tale’, ‘The Clerk’s Tale’, ‘The Nun’s Priest’s Tale,’” in *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 152-180 (esp. 152-171); Timothy H. Flake, “Love, Trouthe, and the Happy Ending of the *Franklin’s Tale*,” *English Studies* 77, no. 3 (1996): 209-26 (which also touches on the questions of *trouthe* and *gentillesse*); Anthony E. Luengo, “Magic and Illusion in *The Franklin’s Tale*,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 77, no. 1 (1978): 1-16; and Effie Jean Mathewson, “The Illusion of Morality in the Franklin’s Tale,” *Medium Ævum* 52 (1983): 27-37. Works on the nature of the marriage in the tale include Cathy Hume, “‘The name of soveraynetee’: The Private and Public Faces of Marriage in *The Franklin’s Tale*,” *Studies in Philology* 105, no. 3 (2008): 284-303; Derek Pearsall, “Romances: The Franklin’s Tale,” in *The Canterbury Tales* (New York: Routledge, 1985), 144-160; and Velma Bourgeois Richmond, “Pacience in Adversitee: Chaucer’s Presentation of Marriage,” *Viator* 10 (1979): 323-54.

⁴⁰ Mary J. Carruthers, “The Gentillesse of Chaucer’s Franklin,” *Criticism* 23 (1981): 283-300; Flake, “Love, Trouthe;” Alison Ganze, “My Trouthe for to Holde – Allas, Allas!”: Dorigen and honor in the *Franklin’s Tale*,” *Chaucer Review* 42, no. 3 (2008): 312-329; and Douglas Wurtele, “Chaucer’s Franklin and the Truth about ‘Trouthe,’” *English Studies in Canada* 13, no. 4 (1987): 359-374.

establishes an identity for Arveragus as a benevolent ruler. Louise O. Fradenburg points out that marriage relationships served as models for relationships between rulers and the ruled, emphasizing that the legitimacy of power rested on “choice rather than coercion.”⁴¹ Her notion of the centrality of marriage to the conception of rulership in the Middle Ages applies to Chaucer’s tale. The Franklin’s vocabulary suggests that Arveragus’s aristocratic marriage might serve as a model for his relationships with his social and political underlings, at least in the fantasy of the Franklin, who himself was an “underling” to aristocratic social superiors. I would suggest that the intractability of social status is nicely replayed by the intractability of gender hierarchy in the tale – while both are modified to a degree, neither disappears completely. Glenn Burger connects the marriage agreement to the rising middle estate’s desire for a new paradigm of masculine subjectivity. He theorizes that marriage subtends this vision of subjectivity in much of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, which uses “wife... as a conceptual marker conceived as an extension of embodiment of husbandly authority, of lay male self-identification, and as ground for an authoritative household identity.”⁴² The rising, “middle” estate could thus imagine a new space of masculine subjectivity for itself outside of, or between, the two hegemonic definitions of masculinity: a clerical, celibate definition, and an aristocratic one based on lineage and property.

If Dorigen’s *trouthe* is rhetorical and philosophical and works to establish Arveragus’s identity, it also plays out in the bodily materiality and temporality of the tale. Alison Ganze argues that the *appearance* of fidelity is what matters in the tale to all three

⁴¹ Louise O. Fradenburg, *City, Marriage, Tournament: Arts of Rule in Late Medieval Scotland* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 15.

⁴² Burger, *Chaucer’s Queer Nation*, 44.

main characters; similarly, Glenn Burger suggests that “[i]t is not the body of woman that the men *really* want, [...] but rather the ownership of the *ideal* of female constancy.”⁴³ Dorigen, on the other hand, has a different understanding of her body’s importance in the configuration of masculine subjectivity: her question to Aurelius, “What deyntee sholde a man han in his lyf / For to go love another mannes wyf, / That hath hir body whan so that hym liketh?” (1003-5), assumes a greater concern for the physical experiences of the female body than this romantic suitor conceives. The desiring female body, then, persists in excess of the needs and definitions of masculine married subjectivity. Female sexuality’s persistent unknowability and excess connects to its status as, in the words of Elizabeth Grosz, always “contained in the *next* sexual encounter, rather than the synthesis of all one’s past sexual activities.”⁴⁴ The consequences of cuckoldry, although of course containing the possibility of impact on the wifely body in the form of pregnancy, find another physical imagining in the fabliau convention of cuckold’s horns, the branding of the husband as having been fooled by an uncontrolled wife. The consequences of adultery are imagined to affect the male body, too. Additionally, Chaucer’s (or the Franklin’s) choice of romance, or rather its shorter cousin, the Breton lay, would seem to emphasize the frightening possibility of cuckoldry to undo masculine lay subjectivity. In romance, male (aristocratic) identity is socially constructed,⁴⁵ and therefore dependent on public display. Arveragus’s request that Dorigen give him sovereignty in name only, for the sake of appearances, not only supports his aristocratic need for social display but also

⁴³ Ganze, “My Trouthe for to Holde,” 314; Burger, *Chaucer’s Queer Nation*, 117.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005): 213.

⁴⁵ Susan Crane, *Gender and Romance in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 17.

indicates the necessity of marriage's duality if it is to act as a basis for identity – it must be *both* private and public.⁴⁶ Cuckoldry, then, is a preconceived narrative of marriage that always exists in the background or, we might say, hangs at the horizon threatening to be enacted, always a possible future and a potential humiliation for the husband and thus a danger for both the aristocratic ruler's identity, and the bourgeois, lay husband's identity, which takes many of its cues from the former. The threat of cuckoldry is also a key feature of Penelope's story, and in fact the tale connects the two women by implication through the rocks on the shore of Brittany.

Dorigen's obsession with the rocks on the shore of Brittany, a much-treated aspect of the *Franklin's Tale*, holds the key to understanding the ways in which female faithfulness and cuckoldry's threat shape the tale and its anxieties about masculine identity and vernacular authorship. Dorigen's prayer to God decrying the very existence of "the grisly feendly rokkes blake" (V. 868) immediately follows her desire for a ship to bring home her beloved (V. 8854-56) and emphasizes the danger they pose to the human body – "An hundred thousand bodyes of mankynde / Han rokkes slayn" (V. 877-78). She wishes that they "Were sonken into helle for [Arveragus's] sake" (V. 891-2). But the rocks in actuality pose little danger to Arveragus – he has no trouble returning home near the end of the tale and avoiding them. The rocks seem to symbolize more than anything else the absence of Arveragus, that is, the delay and wandering of the chivalric quest, as

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Of his free wyl he swoor hire as a knyght
 That nevere in al his lyf he, day ne nyght,
 Ne sholde upon hym take no maistrie
 Agayn hir wyl, ne kithe hire jalousie,
 But hire obeye, and folwe hir wyl in al,
 As any love to his lady shal,
 Save that the name of soveraynetee,
 That wolde he have for shame of his degree. (V. 745-52)

well as the unmoving, long-suffering qualities demanded of the courtly lover. Dorigen's difficulties seen in this light have more to do with her frustrations with and negotiations of the structure of her romantic narrative, especially her desire to speed up the return of Arveragus and forego the suffering she must endure until his return. Dorigen's fixation on the rocks, then, amounts to what we might call a proleptic desire, a desire to fast-forward, to skip ahead, to evade narrative structure in favor of resolution and union. For Dorigen, the woman's mandate to suffer contained in Ovidian and romance poetics is reified in these rocks.⁴⁷

The narrator explicitly connects Dorigen's endurance with rocks, and yet questions the solidity of that endurance:

By proces, as ye knowen everichoon,
Men may so longe graven in a *stoon*
Til som figure therinne emprented be.
So longe han they confortid hire til she
Receyved hath, by hope and by resoun,
The emprentyng of hire consolacioun,
Thurgh which hir grete sorwe gan aswage;
She may nat alwey *duren* in swich rage. (V. 829-36, my emphasis)

The exhortation to patience and suffering for one's lover means, metaphorically, that one becomes like a rock, hard and immovable. The word "duren," or endure, from Latin *durus*, meaning "hard," further emphasizes the stasis and solidity required of Dorigen's position. Andrea Rossi-Reder points out the connection between Dorigen's need for rock-like stability and the exemplary *Donna Petrosa* of the Italian tradition.⁴⁸ Penelope is

⁴⁷ Barbara Fuchs, *Romance* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 63, points out that "a perverse truth about romance" is that "it often measures excellence in terms of the capacity for suffering."

⁴⁸ Andrea Rossi-Reder, "Male Movement and Female Fixity in the *Franklin's Tale* and *Il Filocolo*," in *Masculinities in Chaucer: Approaches to Maleness in the Canterbury Tales and Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. Peter G. Beidler (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1998), 105-116.

another example of this rock-like stability. On the other hand, the tale makes clear that even the strength of a stone, while appearing to be a good foundation or ground on which to build, succumbs eventually to a certain amount of “emprentyng.” The tradition that Boccaccio cites in which Penelope *does* give in to the suitors makes her emblematic of this wavering line between stability and instability. The rocks on the shore become emblematic for Dorigen of her inability to be faithful to Arveragus and suffer for him.⁴⁹ Like the commonplace knowledge about rocks cited by the narrator, who insists that we “knowen everichoon” how the process goes, woman’s unstable nature appears as common knowledge in many misogynist texts. But Chaucer complicates the picture here. Are the rocks on the shore technically removed by the clerk of Orleans’ magic, or not? Even if the littoral rocks are not moved, their symbolic analogues are imprinted, according to the narrator. Does Dorigen’s imprinting signify instability? If rocks represent Dorigen’s ability to be faithful, they show her virtue’s complexity. Although the rocks never move, and Dorigen never *truly* stops suffering even if she manages to crack a smile or two because of the “imprint” of consolation,⁵⁰ Dorigen’s anxiety about the rocks is an anxiety about her power to remain in stasis like Penelope, which signals more broadly an authorial anxiety about the ability to resist traditions of narrative and antifeminism that would drive the story toward cuckoldry.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Flake, “Love, Trouthe,” 217; see also Linda Charnes, ““This Werk Unreasonable”: Narrative Frustration and Generic Redistribution in Chaucer’s *Franklin’s Tale*,” *Chaucer Review* 23, no. 4 (1989): 305, who argues that the rocks stand for Dorigen’s rage against Arveragus, and more broadly for “female hostility toward male literary experience.”

⁵⁰ Charnes, “This Werk,” 304, and others have argued this point; for an alternative view, see Flake, “Love, Trouthe,” 217.

⁵¹ Charnes, “This Werk,” 300, similarly argues that the *Franklin’s Tale*’s focus on Dorigen’s grief, alongside the undercurrent of threatened violence in the text, “undermines the viability of heroic and courtly romance themes.” My argument makes a broader case for the tale’s negotiation of narrative tradition itself.

If the rocks signal Dorigen's steadfastness, Dorigen's desire to remove the rocks could be read as indicating her desire to be unfaithful. I argue, however, that Dorigen's wish shows her desire to forego the narrative of delay and suffering altogether. Dorigen sees the rocks as preventing her husband's return, or, we might say, allowing his absence. The sterile and static *Donna Petrosa* of the Italian tradition is a daunting model to embrace. Dorigen's ability to suffer in stasis enables Arveragus's fulfillment of the chivalric ethos of adventure and martial deeds, the aristocratic or romantic aspect of Arveragus's social identity, but Dorigen *desires* a prolepsis, a skipping over of the delay that necessitates her suffering. Such a desire amounts to a kind of proleptic futurity that focuses not on the heterosexual mandate of procreation or even on the teleological eventuality of heaven, but on the pleasure of (heterosexual) partnership and presence. In defiance of the temporality of narrative, which requires delay for its very existence, Dorigen's desire for prolepsis, her attempt to refuse the sequentiality of narrative time, enacts what Grosz calls "the surprise of [female] sexuality, its liability to unpredictability."⁵² This unpredictability suggests the ability of the outside, "other" element to free narrative from the constraining hegemony of tradition. Dorigen's proleptic desire signals her, and perhaps also Chaucer's, desire for a certain kind of authorship, for the power to shape her own narrative progression and the limitations of tradition that fourteenth-century authors were beginning to refuse as the vernacular gained its own authoritative voice.⁵³ But ultimately Dorigen's position is that of a rock to

⁵² Grosz, *Time Travels*, 214.

⁵³ Dorigen does attain a certain level of "authorship" in her complaint, which inserts a delay into her narrative that allows her to wait for the second return of Arveragus before acting on Aurelius's demands, even though, as Susan Crane and Glenn Burger have noted, this deferring complaint reveals that Dorigen's rhetoric is constrained by the conventions of romance. Susan Crane, *Gender and Romance*, and Glenn Burger, *Chaucer's Queer Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

be sculpted, a kind of “Galatea in reverse” who has no power over her own narrative. Susan Crane suggests that the Franklin, too, has little control over the tale’s plot. In her words, “It is as if the Franklin begins with a desire to reinterpret or alter romance, yet soon submits to the passive role designated for him in the genre.”⁵⁴ I suggest that Chaucer writes the Franklin, and Dorigen, in this powerless way as a commentary on the limitations that certain social hierarchies place upon what can be imagined in literature.

The materiality of the rocks Dorigen identifies with emphasizes the physicality of the female body and its importance to the idea of wifely faithfulness. *The Franklin’s Tale* engages the possibilities and limitations of masculine subjectivity based on the body. Glenn Burger points out that the *Canterbury Tales* engages the idea of masculine subjectivity’s subjection to the body. For instance, in the *Miller’s Tale* the instability of such subjectivity arises from the possibility of the body’s slippage into the realm of the feminine. Alisoun stands for this fear in the tale, “mark[ing] the physicality of the feminine as that ‘other’ without which masculine identity could not ‘be’ and that place of shame and humiliation that the *Miller’s Tale* keeps returning us to as readers.”⁵⁵ Similarly, in the *Franklin’s Tale* instability in conjugality-based masculine subjectivity can stem from the wifely body upon which the husband’s self-definition depends – conjugality, after all, implies a mutual *desire* for marriage, and yet female desire in medieval (and other) discourses of sexuality is notoriously hard to pin down. Using the wife as “ground” for subjectivity, in light of the scathing discourse of the (admittedly rather clerical, but arguably ubiquitous) antifeminist tradition ventriloquized by the Wife

⁵⁴ Crane, *Gender and Romance*, 109.

⁵⁵ Burger, *Chaucer’s Queer Nation*, 30.

of Bath and the sexual behavior of women in the fabliaux (cf. tales by the Miller, Reeve, and Merchant) might amount to building one's house upon the sand, to echo the metaphor from the Sermon on the Mount. This metaphor has special relevance for the *Franklin's Tale's* own rocky metaphors.

Omnis ergo qui audit verba mea haec, et facit ea, assimilabitur viro sapienti, qui aedificavit domum suam supra petram, et descendit pluvia, et venerunt flumina, et flaverunt venti, et irruerunt in domum illam, et non cecidit: fundata enim erat super petram. Et omnis qui audit verba mea haec, et non facit ea, similis erit viro stulto, qui aedificavit domum suam super arenam: et descendit pluvia, et venerunt flumina, et flaverunt venti, et irruerunt in domum illam, et cecidit, et fuit ruina illius magna.

(Every one therefore that heareth these my words, and doth them, shall be likened to a wise man that built his house upon a rock, And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and they beat upon that house, and it fell not, for it was founded on a rock. And every one that heareth these my words, and doth them not, shall be like a foolish man that built his house upon the sand, And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and they beat upon that house, and it fell, and great was the fall thereof.)⁵⁶

Founded upon the "sand" of female faithfulness, which is always in question, it is only a matter of time before the house of masculine subjectivity comes crashing down. Burger pairs *The Merchant's* and *The Franklin's Tales* as responding to the Wife of Bath's presentation of "the fearfulness of a society in which change and presentism could feminize and disorganize male power" even as that very presentism can suggest and even enact social inclusivity for bourgeois people.⁵⁷ Both tales take issue with the Wife of Bath's radical presentism by examining the usefulness of established, aristocratic values, and both direct readers' attention to the instabilities of conjugality-based subjectivity by

⁵⁶ Matt. 7:24-27 (Vulgate / Douay Rheims Bible).

⁵⁷ Burger, *Chaucer's Queer Nation*, 100.

foregrounding the importance of temporality in married life, a temporality that the misogyny of literary tradition makes into the temporality of cuckoldry.

One of the most important contributors to this misogynist literary tradition that takes for granted the instability of a woman's faithfulness, as we have seen, is Ovid. The metaphor of the imprinted stone recalls lines from Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, which crops up a couple of times in the tale. Ovidian antifeminism here and elsewhere emphasizes the inevitability of women's acquiescence to men who proposition them. The speaker of the *Ars*, in encouraging men to pursue women who have rejected them, suggests,

Si non accipiet scriptum, inlectumque remittet,
Lecturam spera, propositumque tene.
Tempore difficiles veniunt ad aratra iuvenci,
Tempore lenta pati frena docentur equi:
Ferreus adsiduo consumitur anulus usu,
Interit adsidua vomer aduncus humo.
Quid magis est saxo durum, quid mollius unda?
Dura tamen molli saxa cavantur aqua.
Penelopen ipsam, persta modo, tempore vinces.⁵⁸

(If she will not accept your letter, and returns it unread,
Keep hoping that she will read it, and hold on to your resolution.
In time stubborn oxen come to the plow,
In time horses are taught to endure the supple reins:
An iron ring is consumed by continuous use,
The curved plowshare wears away by continual contact with the earth.
What is harder than a rock, what softer than a wave?
Nevertheless hard rocks are hollowed out by soft water.
You will conquer Penelope herself in time – just persist!)⁵⁹

Women, the *Ars* assures its readers, always give in. The Franklin's comparison of Dorigen to a rock imprinted by consolation places her in uncomfortable proximity to the women imagined by the *Ars* speaker. Dorigen as rock provides no guarantees of her

⁵⁸ Ovid, *The Art of Love and Other Poems*, trans. J.H. Mozley, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), I.469-76.

⁵⁹ My translation.

faithfulness, nor indeed does Dorigen as Penelope. If even Penelope cannot remain faithful, how can Dorigen? Ovid's satirical advice reveals that the male pursuit of women, made possible by the assumption that they will succeed, structures narrative. Sexual pursuit becomes the very time that enables the proliferation of narrative. Antifeminist assumptions about women's pliability make narrative possible, even if those assumptions must rewrite tradition in order to continue. Ovid and antifeminism have the authority to rewrite literary tradition; a female character, on the other hand, seemingly does not in Chaucer's tale. Chaucer points us to the limitations of antifeminism and the need for a new set of assumptions to structure poetics.

The only authorial powers available to characters in this tale are repetition and reuse of traditional sources, as we see in Dorigen's recitation of classical female exemplars in an effort to delay the fulfillment of her vow to Aurelius, and feigned magic, which the clerk of Orleans uses to great effect at some moments but which is revealed to be totally dependent on lies and the movements of planets that are inevitable anyway.⁶⁰ Dorigen looks to classical female exemplars for strength to end her life, having decided, or been convinced by literary tradition, that her only options are "deeth or elles dishonour" (V. 1358).

Hath ther nat many a noble wyf er this,
 And many a mayde, yslayn hirself, allas,
 Rather than with hir body doon trespass?
 Yis, certes, lo, thise stories beren witnesse... (V.1364-66)

⁶⁰ Susan Crane, *Gender and Romance*, 132-150, examines the role of clerical magic in the tale. At 148, she notes that the tale's "resistance to magical solutions in favor of interpersonal negotiations returns protagonists from the illusion of transcendence to the demands of community." Of course, this is a community of *men* in which Dorigen can only be a conduit or an accessory, despite the illusory equality of her marriage with Arveragus.

Classical exemplarity offers her no viable models, however, as she seems to know them only through the truncated, moralized medieval tradition. Most of the examples she cites are women who died rather than be dishonored, like Lucretia, or who died for their husbands, like Alceste. Even Penelope's cleverness in tricking her suitors does not provide Dorigen with a possible model, as she only cites Dictys's terse simplification: "What seith Omer of goode Penalopee? / Al Grece knoweth of hire chastitee" (V. 1443-4). Dorigen either only knows about the simplified Penelope as Jerome and other writers used her, or can only imagine her chastity as a model and not her cleverness. The moralized classical women of medieval literary tradition nearly undo Dorigen. In the end she does not attempt suicide, but looks to Arveragus to save her. Despite its claims to model good female behavior, literature on faithful women fails to help Dorigen stay true to Arveragus. It is only through the mutual agreements of the men in the story that cuckoldry is avoided and the story altered.

Dorigen's desire to fast-forward her tale meets resistance from other temporalities in the poem, which remind her, and us, of the intractability of tradition and history. The Franklin's insistence from the beginning of the tale that the story comes out of the Breton Lay tradition emphasizes the cyclicity of literature, which returns again and again to its origins even as it alters the tradition by its very repetition. Chaucer's Franklin calls attention to the historicity of his tale's genre: "Thise olde gentil Britouns in hir dayes / Of diverse aventures maden layes" (V. 709-10), one of which he will pass along to the Canterbury pilgrims and to us, Chaucer's readers. Already from these first two lines of his prologue an emphasis on literature's collapsed temporalities asserts itself. The simultaneity of the far-off (even mythical) past of Celtic chivalry with both the late

fourteenth-century Franklin, who somehow accesses the past through “remembraunce” (V. 714), and the current, ever-advancing historical moment of the reader puts stress on the seams of temporal linearity and subordinates the idea of literary succession to an overriding poetics of repetition and cyclicity.⁶¹

Astronomical time in the *Franklin's Tale* also reminds readers of the cyclicity of narrative time and antifeminist literary tradition; it also connects the tale to its near-cousin in plot and character, the *Merchant's Tale*, which borrows from the antifeminist fabliau tradition in its depiction of a woman as inevitably unfaithful to her husband. There, the wifely body, subject as it is to the cycles of the seasons and of the moon and associated with both the physical world and the unknowable interior of the body, undermines a husband's attempts at control. Both tales consider the causes and consequences of female infidelity. V.A. Kolve reads the cuckoldry of January, an elderly knight, by his young wife May, as multivalent, both comical and signaling a fecundity and temporal awareness that conforms to medieval concerns for reproduction and nature, though not strict Christian morality. The names of the characters January and May clearly recall calendar months and the traditional calendar iconography associated with them, images of “fertility, fecundity, and renewed generation that bypass moral judgment.”⁶² Such emphases put January's cuckoldry into the perspective of the imperative of reproduction. Kolve also connects the image of May and her lover in the tree to calendar

⁶¹ Kathryn Hume, “Why Chaucer Calls *The Franklin's Tale* a Breton Lai,” *Philological Quarterly* 51 (1972): 373, argues that the popularity of the genre in the late fourteenth-century signals that we need not think of the lay itself as a nostalgic genre; however, because of the Franklin's own insistence on the past-ness of the lay form and on “remembrance” as an important element of its production, I maintain that, at least in this instance, the lay genre *is* meant to indicate an encounter with, and even the constraints of, literary history.

⁶² V.A. Kolve, *Telling Images: Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative II* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 170.

illuminations of male and female “Gemini” figures, who appear in June and signal the fecundity of life; thus, the episode in the tree connects to “goals larger and more important than the exposure of an old man’s folly, or the forwarding of youthful lust.”⁶³ January’s fear of being cuckolded determines his actions before the offending act itself ever takes place - his insistence to keep a “hond on hire alway” (2091) and his attempt to keep the garden closed both fail in the end.

Kolve notices (but dismisses) the reappearance of the figure of Janus, the elderly figure for the new year, in the *Franklin’s Tale* at line 1252, upon Aurelius’s return to Brittany:

The bitter frostes, with the sleet and reyn,
 Destroyed hath the grene in every yerd.
 Janus sit by the fyr, with double berd,
 And drynketh of his bugle horn the wyn.” (V.1250-53)

This appearance of Janus near the middle of the tale recalls the cuckolded husband of the *Merchant’s Tale* and therefore contains the possibility of Dorigen cuckolding Arveragus, a possibility that has been threatened but not actualized at this point when Aurelius arrives with his magician friend back in Brittany. This time, however, cuckoldry has lost the valence of fecundity it had in the *Merchant’s Tale*, since the narrative time of the tale is late December and even the grass has died. Cuckoldry in the *Franklin’s Tale* cannot be the light, fruitful, springtime cuckoldry of the fabliau – no deservingly jealous husband or ill-fated love between the parties inspires positive feelings toward it, nor does the mention of need for an heir imply a different set of ‘rules’ for the lovers. Instead, cuckoldry threatens to be actualized despite the best efforts and desires of the heroine,

⁶³ Kolve, *Telling Images*, 170.

which would upend the nobility of the family and the mutual trust of the marriage. The fabliau's antifeminism creeps into the Franklin's romance narrative and undermines its vision of mutuality.

The antifeminist tradition in which many of the fabliaux participate makes the assumption that a woman will be unfaithful. Despite its appearance, the supposedly mutual agreement between Arveragus and Dorigen also betrays the tale's assumption of Dorigen's impending infraction. In contradistinction to the reciprocal marriage vows between the lovers, Arveragus keeps his power as a husband in reserve rather than refuse it altogether. The Franklin hints as much to readers in his seemingly off-topic speech about patience in lines 771-84. From discussing the necessity of freedom in love, the Franklin moves to discussing how patience "venquysseth" (V. 774) where force cannot, and the fact that patience is necessary "To every wight that kan on governaunce" (V. 786). He claims that everyone makes mistakes and one must learn to suffer others' foibles, since "On every wrong a man may nat be wreken" (V. 784). In a narrative supposedly so concerned with freedom and mutuality, it is strange that the Franklin still speaks in terms of vengeance and forbearance. Susan Crane suggests that the terms of romance simply have no language to deal with the kind of mutual relationship Arveragus and Dorigen attempt to establish,⁶⁴ and it is certainly true that Arveragus keeps his position as masculine head of the household, as Glenn Burger's theory on the tale's vision of bourgeois subjectivity would indicate. However, the Franklin's vision of the relationship between ruler and ruled here belies an assumption of feminine weakness and fallibility. The implication of the Franklin's "sermon" is that Arveragus must put up with

⁶⁴ Crane, *Gender and Romance*, 63-65, 109-110.

Dorigen's potential imperfections, not the other way around. The assumptions of misogynist writings against marriage are maintained, as the tale suggests that Dorigen will likely mess up, and Arveragus's best course of action is to grin and bear it rather than wield the power of punishment that he still has. Dorigen's position appears to be one of weakness from the get-go.

Resolution of Dorigen's predicament is only achieved by a kind of erasure, similar to that of Penelope in Gower's tale, as I will show. Aurelius's act of *gentillesse* releases Dorigen from her supposed obligations to him, from "every serement and every bond / That ye han maad to me as heerbiforn, / Sith thilke tyme which that ye were born" (V. 1534-6). Dorigen receives permission to return to a form of infancy, that is, to a time before the making of vows. Similarly, the clerk releases Aurelius from his obligation, saying, "I releesse thee thy thousand pound, / As thou right now were copen out of the ground, / Ne nevere er now ne haddest knowen me" (V. 1613-15). Aurelius, too, gets the chance to return to the beginning. These pronouncements permit the characters to rewind their narratives. Aurelius and the clerk have the power to undo what has been done and permit a retreat to the infancy of pre-narrativity. Before the courtship of Arveragus and Dorigen, before the establishment of masculine identity based on marriage and of feminine identity inflected by exemplarity, before the Franklin's narration or even Chaucer's, lies the silence of the blank page. This refusal of narrative and memory could signify the possibility of a radical presentism, a break with the traditions of antifeminism and exemplarity. The historicity of the tale's existence, which the Franklin insists upon in his prologue, becomes irrelevant, the values and conventions of medieval narrative merely constructions. Perhaps this idea of rebirth helps to explain the Franklin's

insistence on the Boccaccian question of “Which was the mooste fre” character in the tale. The erasure of narrative implied by the retreat to infancy granted to Dorigen and Aurelius suggests that the most free person is the one who can return, the one whose mistakes or even entire personal history cease to matter. The language of rebirth recalls the rhetoric of baptism and penitence, both ritual cleansings of the soul. Perhaps it is fitting that the next tale in the Ellesmere sequence is the *Physician’s Tale*, which takes the consequences for women of the narrative tradition’s insistence on female faithfulness and purity to the extreme and shows retrospectively the wisdom of the *Franklin’s Tale*’s subtle exploration and hope for indeterminacy or erasure.

IV. Penelope in the *Confessio Amantis*

Chaucer’s contemporary John Gower employs female exemplars in several ways to consider the ethical implications of vernacular authorship in his great collection of stories, the *Confessio Amantis*. His rewriting of *Heroides I*, Penelope’s letter to Ulysses, uses the Greek paragon of faithfulness to model vernacular authorship that can effect social change. Gower uses classical women to imagine the limits of vernacular authorship, as Amanda Leff suggests, but I argue that he also sees possibilities in female exemplarity as a model for a new ethics of authorship.⁶⁵ According to Leff, Gower’s treatment of characters like Philomela and Canace reflects growing concern about

⁶⁵ Amanda M. Leff, “Writing, Gender, and Power in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*,” *Exemplaria* 20, no. 1 (2008): 29-30 cites several previous studies to establish women’s participation in the literary scene. She provides examples like the production of religious texts by Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe and the prevalence of women’s patronage of manuscript production as evidence for women’s growing importance to English literacy. She also cites Hoccleve’s poem to Sir John Oldcastle, which decries the participation of women in scriptural exegesis, as evidence of English anxiety about women’s increasing literacy and literary participation. On the other hand, I hesitate to apply Gower’s depictions of women to real contemporary English ideas about women, since (as I have suggested throughout the chapter, and especially in my introduction), women (and men) in literature often represent other concerns.

women's authorship in fourteenth-century England. She claims that, "[b]y revealing the potential subversiveness of women's writing, Gower's *Confessio* generates the cultural anxiety that it simultaneously reflects."⁶⁶ Philomela and Canace, for instance, use writing to turn their stories to their advantage in the struggle against patriarchal forces – Philomela's weaving inspires her sister to conspire with her to exact revenge on Tereus, her rapist, and Canace's letter deflects blame away from her and establishes a limited agency in the face of her father's wrath. On the other hand, as a woman who wields power over a man whose criminal acts deserve punishment, Philomela might represent the positive possibilities of female authorship rather than simply the feared power of "woman on top." Women like Philomela use writing to overturn the evil aspects of patriarchy, namely sexual violence (which Genius decries again and again in the section against Lechery), in a way similar to the vernacular poet's upending of tradition. As Diane Watt reminds us, "From the late Middle Ages to the Renaissance and beyond, writing in the vernacular has been associated with daring intellectual experimentation."⁶⁷ Gower's experiment mirrors Philomela's in its use of the everyday to create change (Gower's vernacular parallels Philomela's weaving). I argue that, like the tale of Philomela, Gower's story of Penelope shows the vernacular author's obligation to write. But, whereas Philomela's authorship has macabre and damnable consequences (she and her sister serve Tereus his own children in a stew), Penelope models an equally effective form of authorship that avoids the terrors of Philomela's story. Through Penelope, Gower

⁶⁶ Leff, "Writing, Gender, and Power," 31.

⁶⁷ Diane Watt, *Amoral Gower: Language, Sex, and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xi.

suggests that authorship, coupled with sensitive and sympathetic readers, can create social change.

As we have seen, the literary tradition presented Gower with a Penelope whose exemplarity was in tension with itself. She was both a paragon of faithfulness and always in peril, both a model and an easy mark for antifeminist jokes. I argue that Gower's text meditates on these tensions between virtue and feminine weakness within Penelope's exemplarity as productive for authorship. It does so most forcefully in its shift of authorial control to Penelope herself, which Penelope wields with authority. If the Penelope of the *Heroides* can be made an exemplar, she is also in a more literal sense a writer. Gower's erasure of Ulysses's wanderings is also hers, and the erasure makes her not only the embodiment of feminine exemplarity, but also its promulgator. Gower's text explores the space between agency and victimization, activity and passivity, and finds it a space ripe for authorial invention.

Gower's Penelope takes control over her own story, extending her specific brand of feminine moral authority and vulnerability into authorship that gets results. Apart from the *Heroides*, only the *Histoire ancienne* positions Penelope as a writer before Gower does. Unlike the *Histoire* letter, Penelope's letter in the *Confessio* distills the wide-ranging *Heroides* original down to a focused, authoritative complaint that gives Ulysses no choice but to act. Penelope takes the stance of a moral authority right away by delivering a maxim on men's duties to their beloveds:

Mi worthi love and lord also,
It is and hath ben evere so,
That wher a womman is alone,
It makth a man in his persone
The more hardi for to wowe,
In hope that sche wolde bowe

To such thing as his wille were,
 Whil that hire lord were elleswhere. (IV.157-164)

In writing these lines of wisdom, Penelope takes an authoritative position that relies on her history as an exemplar of virtue. Her perseverance in the face of threatening suitors makes her an expert on opportunistic seducers, and she speaks magisterially, delivering her wisdom to Ulysses without hesitation. No authoritative moment of this sort appears in the *Heroides* or elsewhere. In the remainder of the letter, Penelope applies her maxim to her own life, emphasizing that she is vulnerable to rape and forced marriage to incite Ulysses's pity and fear. The authoritative tone Penelope adopts at the beginning of the letter, together with the threat of her virtue's ruination, act upon her reader, Ulysses, whom Genius describes as so overcome with love for Penelope that he decides to return home. The combination of outstanding virtue and feminine frailty produces a text that inspires moral action. Penelope takes control over her life through leveraging her own complicated literary tradition into authorship that acts upon her reader.

I suggest that, in positioning Penelope as an effectual and authoritative author, Gower also considers the interdependence of the male author and the female exemplar. In giving Penelope authorial power over her own story, Gower acknowledges the power that stories of feminine exemplarity can have over readers through their particular combination of literary authority and sympathetic feminine weakness. Penelope's authorship is made possible by the authority that stories of virtuous women carry, and the letter's effectiveness hinges on the precariousness of that virtue. This power transfers to male authors who tell Penelope's story, including Genius and Gower himself. Peter Nicholson suggests that Amans, Genius' listener, is meant to follow the example of Ulysses, who most clearly embodies Genius's stated lesson of overcoming sloth; but I

suggest that Penelope provides a model for Amans as he struggles to express himself to his beloved. Penelope models authorship for Amans, Genius, and Gower, because she taps into the power of feminine exemplarity's literary tradition to inspire readers to action.

Gower writes a Penelope who takes control of her own unruly literary history. She uses the exemplary status that Jerome and other Christian writers bestow upon her to establish an authoritative position from which to rewrite her story. Even her feminine weakness, which the *Ars Amatoria* and the *Romance of the Rose* exploit for comic effect, serves her authorial purposes. I have proposed that, in writing this episode, Gower meditates upon the unique combination of weakness and virtue, passivity and authority endemic to feminine exemplars, and the power this combination might give to male authors. In this and other stories in the *Confessio*, Gower shows his commitment to rethinking how medieval literature could make use of classical stories.

As Diane Watt suggests, “[e]thics, writing, and reading certainly intersect” in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*.⁶⁸ She agrees with J. Alan Mitchell that Gower’s exempla work not to close down interpretation, but to elicit intricate ethical thought-processes from readers.⁶⁹ Watt and Mitchell provide avenues for modern readers to access the complexities of Gower’s deployment of stories under moral rubrics. Mitchell shows that the philosophy of casuistry, in which specific instances take precedence over broad “truths” or general rules, sheds light on Gower’s technique in the *Confessio*. The poem functions as a “*liber exemplorum* that is comprehensive rather than coherent,” that is, as a

⁶⁸ Watt, *Amoral Gower*, xii.

⁶⁹ J. Allan Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004).

collection of stories that require readers to apply their own moral reasoning rather than providing straightforward lessons about morality.⁷⁰ The *Confessio* takes “a *rhetorical* approach to morals that is case-based, copious, and taxonomical and a *pragmatic* orientation to ethics that is improvisatory even as it remains imitative.”⁷¹ The onus falls to readers to make of each tale what they can, or to read for the moral.⁷²

Gower’s text achieves its ethical ambiguity in part through its use of classical source material. Gower’s reliance on Ovid shows his desire for extraclerical authority, according to Matthew McCabe.⁷³ He points out that, like the moralizations found in manuscripts of the *Metamorphoses* produced by clerical writers, “Genius’s lessons [...] present a reader with shifting perspectives and the necessity of making choices,” but unlike the medieval Ovidian texts, the *Confessio* leaves open opportunities for disagreement or questioning by Amans.⁷⁴ McCabe argues that this strategy is “vernacular” and “extracclerical.”⁷⁵ Stories from Ovid and other ancient writers provide Gower with avenues for thinking about virtue and vice that are not totally subject to the Church’s authority. In this way, Gower achieves a unique type of vernacular authority.

The book in which Penelope’s letter appears, Book IV, Genius’s treatment of the sin of sloth, has special relevance for Gower’s view of authorship. Creators both successful and doomed pepper the book, including letter-writers Dido and Penelope,

⁷⁰ Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, 37.

⁷¹ Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, 39, italics original.

⁷² For a similar view, see Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power*.

⁷³ T. Matthew N. McCabe, *Gower's Vulgar Tongue: Ovid, Lay Religion, and English Poetry in the Confessio Amantis* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011), 9 and 43.

⁷⁴ McCabe, *Gower's Vulgar Tongue*, 60.

⁷⁵ McCabe, *Gower's Vulgar Tongue*, 61.

Pygmalion the sculptor, and Daedalus the infamous craftsman. At the beginning of the book Amans confesses that he has succumbed to “lachesce” (IV.4), or procrastination in his own obligation to compose a declaration of his love.⁷⁶ The lover’s heart remains true, but against his will he fails to either write the beloved lady a letter (IV. 38) or to speak his desire directly to her:

Bot yit is noght the love lassed
Which I unto mi ladi have;
For thogh my tunge is slowh to crave
At alle time, as I have bede,
Min herte stant evere in o stede
And axeth besiliche grace,
The which I mai noght yit embrace. (IV. 52-58)

The separation between what Amans wills in his heart and what he can produce in speech or writing he blames on Sloth, or here specifically, procrastination. He is, in effect, constrained by a kind of writer’s block.⁷⁷ Throughout the section, Amans reveals that he his anxieties about reception and authorization keep him from writing. He can get no appointment with his beloved in which he would have permission to lay out his feelings (“me was nevere assigned place, / Wher yit to geten eny grace, / Ne me was non such time apointed” (IV.271-3)), and is too “ferful” (IV.360) and “overcome” (IV. 592) to perform in her presence. I suggest that the lover’s would-be performance of his desires can be classed as a kind of thwarted artistic production, or in other words, an aborted love poem. The poem begins to coalesce in Amans’s mind, but never takes physical form, as

⁷⁶ *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “lachesse.” All references to the *Confessio* refer to John Gower, *The English Works*, ed. G.C. Macaulay, 2 vols., Early English Text Society, extra series, 81-82 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957).

⁷⁷ Although I do not wish to equate writing and performance uncritically here, I believe Gower’s work itself suggests the connection between written and spoken word in its emphasis on the written laments of Dido and Penelope, and the craftsmanship of Pygmalion and Daedalus.

we see when Amans makes notes on what he would like to say, but never gets up the courage to compose the actual lament. He claims,

And so recorde I mi lecoun
And wryte in my memorial
What I to hire telle schal,
Riht al the matiere of mi tale. (IV. 562-65)

Amans composes the *matter*, but never the *form* of his lament. It never becomes a speech or poem. Nicholson points out that Amans “compares his lady’s effect upon his wits to the erasing of a book,” making him not just a procrastinator, but paralyzingly subject to the imagined reception of his intended reader or listener.⁷⁸

Lich to the bok in which is rased
The lettre, and mai nothing be rad,
So ben my wittes overlad,
That what as evere I thoughte have spoken,
It is out fro my herte stoken,
And stonde, as who seith, doumb and def,
That all nys worth an yvy lef,
Of that I wende wel have seid. (IV. 580-87)

Amans’s unstable “Book of Memory,” to borrow Mary Carruthers’s apt phrase, yields readily to his anxieties in the presence of his beloved.⁷⁹ Nicholson suggests that the difficulties Amans has are not really sins against love, as such, but merely impediments to his success.⁸⁰ I argue, rather, that Amans’s failure to produce a love lament does amount to a sin against love, since love in this text requires the production of art. The tales of Dido, Penelope, Pygmalion, and Daedalus and Icarus all have in common a bold

⁷⁸ Peter Nicholson, *Love and Ethics in Gower’s Confessio Amantis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 212.

⁷⁹ Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study in Medieval Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁸⁰ Nicholson, *Love and Ethics*, 212.

attempt at artistic craft. What makes them successes or failures differs, but the exempla all point to art as required by love.

These stories of artistic creation that Genius tells invite readers to consider the obligations and dangers attendant upon authorship. Genius encourages Amans to overcome his sloth and act at the beginning of the chapter, and tells the story of Aeneas and Dido first, then Penelope and Ulysses. Nicholson suggests that these stories are paired to show the differences between the two male lovers (“Eneas provides the example to avoid, Ulysses the model to be followed”),⁸¹ but that the tales’ true lesson is to persevere in love no matter what the obstacles.⁸² I suggest that another, complementary lesson emerges here about speaking and writing, especially through the figure of Penelope. Amans complains that his lover erases his book, but Genius gives Amans examples of lovers who write, or speak, despite their lovers’ intransigence. We need only allow the possibility that it is not, or not only, Eneas and Ulysses who are the possible models for Amans, but also the epistolary authors Dido and Penelope. I suggest that Genius shows Amans two possible results of his speaking to his lady – one is death, as Dido shows, and the other requited love and desirable action, as Penelope’s letter inspires. While Gower remains fairly true to the *Heroides* in his rendition of Dido’s letter, the story of Penelope takes an unprecedented turn that suggests its particular importance for this book’s picture of love-inspired authorship.⁸³

⁸¹ Nicholson, *Love and Ethics*, 214.

⁸² Nicholson, *Love and Ethics*, 214-18.

⁸³ For Gower’s close dependence on the *Heroides* for his story of Dido, see Gotz Schmitz, “Gower, Chaucer, and the Classics: Back to the Textual Evidence,” in *Recent Readings: Papers Presented at the Meetings of the John Gower Society at the International Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, 1983-88*, ed. R.F. Yeager, *Studies in Medieval Culture* 26 (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University, 1989), 95-111.

Gower's use of Penelope in the *Confessio Amantis* relies on the simultaneous absence and proliferation of her narrative. Such doubleness is characteristic of Gower's work, which employs a multiplicity of voices and narrative silences to create a structure of what Elizabeth Scala calls "contradiction and equivocation."⁸⁴ Gower reproduces *Heroides I* in which Penelope writes a letter to Ulysses urging him to come home. But in Genius's version of the story, Ulysses is so inflamed with love for Penelope that he does, in fact, go straight home after the sack of Troy. This outcome conflicts directly with Book VI's treatment of Ulysses's adulterous liaisons with Circe and Calypso, and of course with the traditional version of Ulysses's story in which he takes ten years to arrive home after the war. Although Nicholson, Peck, and others caution against comparing iterations of characters and stories in different parts of the *Confessio*, surely readers' knowledge of the Ulysses myth would make them balk, or at least wonder, at such a blatant revision of the story.⁸⁵ By revising the story so thoroughly, Genius has accomplished what the *Troilus* narrator seemingly could not or would not do with Criseyde's narrative – risk unfaithfulness to his sources.

Genius's revision of *Heroides I* shows that Amans's debilitating fear can become the productive fear of Penelope and Ulysses in the face of their enemies. Penelope's letter effectively erases Ulysses's narrative in this episode by inspiring him to return home, an erasure that speaks to the narrative power of love, particularly the threat of losing one's spouse and being cuckolded. Penelope resorts to euphemism to describe the

⁸⁴ Scala, *Absent Narratives*, 139.

⁸⁵ See Peter Nicholson, "Irony v. Paradox in the *Confessio Amantis*," in *John Gower, Trilingual Poet: Language, Translation, and Tradition*, ed. Elisabeth Dutton, John Hines, and R. F. Yeager (Woodbridge, England: Brewer, 2010), 206-216, and Russell A. Peck, "The Problematics of Irony in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *Mediaevalia* 15 (1993): 207-229.

consequences of Ulysses's continued absence: these suitors want to have "here wille" (IV. 175) and to "werche thinges" (IV. 177) that Penelope fears. In other words, Penelope is afraid of these men and what they will do to her. One thinks of the modern "have one's way with a woman," a euphemism for sex or even rape. Like Chaucer's Dorigen, Penelope sees that her will has little power when confronted by the wills of the men around her. Faithfulness is contingent upon social context. Penelope refers to her own unreddened cheeks as proof that nothing sexual has happened yet, but reminds Ulysses that "no man...scholde amende" it if it did (IV. 189). These are not the suitors of the *Heroides*, who eat Ulysses's flocks and drain his wealth – these suitors are after one thing only, Penelope herself. Her outstanding virtue makes the situation a dire one. The love-longing and the creativity and destruction of Penelope's weaving found in Ovid's text are reduced to a one-dimensional voicing of the vulnerability of woman writ large, and the phenomenal faithfulness that undergirds the letter authorizes its fearful plea for action. Penelope's virtue makes the fear believable and authorizes its ethical imperative.

Penelope provides a specific model of authorship as rhetorically crafted and undergirded by virtue. In Gower's version of the story, authorship takes the place of Penelope's weaving trick. Her weapon against the suitors is her artistic production, coalesced into the form of a letter. As the pinnacle of feminine faithfulness, she utilizes authorship to maintain her position as faithful wife. Penelope crafts just the right kind of letter to inspire Ulysses to ethical action by playing up her own vulnerability and the possibility of his dishonor. The story suggests that love inspires not (or not only) emotional, personal laments, like Dido's, but also, and perhaps more suitably, well-

crafted pieces of rhetoric intended to persuade audiences to ethical action.⁸⁶ As the author of the *Miroir de l'Homme* and the *Vox Clamantis*, Gower himself epitomizes this kind of authorship. Additionally, an element essential to the success of Penelope's letter is the correct interpretation performed by its reader. It is Penelope's careful rhetoric that leads Ulysses to interpret correctly. Ulysses's reaction to the letter suggests that he is motivated by love, but also by fear – "In part he was riht inly glad, / And ek in part he was desesed" (IV. 208-9). Both love and "pure ymaginacioun" (IV. 211) compel him to return to Ithaca. Perhaps "ymaginacioun" bothers Ulysses because Penelope has encouraged him to imagine the awful shame he would feel as a cuckold. The threat of being cuckolded is, at least in part, what compels Ulysses's return and enacts the erasure of his notorious wanderings. Penelope's exemplary value in Gower's text is as an author whose virtue and rhetorical skill make her writing productive of ethical reform.

In this chapter I have shown that Chaucer and Gower use classical feminine exemplarity in several ways to conceive of the ethics of authorship. For Gower, Penelope's exemplarity signals an author's own need for credibility and fortitude. Gower's Penelope stands for one possibility among several for an ethics of authorship in the *Confessio*. For Chaucer, the specific kind of exemplarity attached to Penelope and Lucretia works as avenue through which to contend with the forces of both literary history and contemporary society. The *Book of the Duchess* and the *Franklin's Tale* use Penelope and Lucretia to make apparent the incompatibility of Ovidian misogyny with certain aristocratic ideals and the literatures they aspire to produce. The appearance of

⁸⁶ For a discussion of the medieval view of Dido as overly emotional, see Marilyn Desmond, *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the Medieval Aeneid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 10.

classical feminine exemplars in *Anelida and Arcite* signals the poem's search for an alternative poetic ethics. The narrator settles upon Ovidian pity, which rests on a type of misogyny different in kind but more pernicious in result. Chaucer's search for an ethical, efficacious authorship turns to a less classically-inflected, more Christian feminine exemplarity in the *Man of Law's Tale*, as the next chapter will suggest.

Chapter Three – “So benigne a creature”: Female Constancy and Literary Value in the *Man of Law’s Tale*

This chapter turns to Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale* to interrogate how female virtue works in Middle English literature outside the system of classical references and the traditions they carry. The introduction and prologue to the tale stage a reconsideration of feminine virtue as the basis for authorship. The Man of Law moves deliberately from the tradition of Ovidian classical women to a story more situated in the medieval world – Custance’s movement to England and her Christian faith provide connections to English readers that the *Heroides* women lack. If Penelope works as a figure for the fraught relationship between English literature and its classical and French antecedents, Custance is her saintly, Anglo-Norman or English counterpart. Where Penelope remains a static representative of tradition, Custance’s movements gesture toward the problems of translation and transmission, not only in the sense of *translatio studii et imperii*, but also at the level of language. I suggest that the tale and its prologue stage a test of movement from classical female virtue to a more medieval vernacular ideal. Can a vernacular feminine virtue overcome the problems of Ovidian pity and suffering? How does the classical ideal of female faithfulness transfer to a Christian English readership? The tale’s heroine, called “Custance” by Chaucer but “Constance” in his source text, Trevet’s history, references female steadfastness by her very name. Chaucer’s revision of the name may be a broadening of her signification, *custe* meaning excellence or virtue more generally; or, in keeping with the thrust of the tale, as this chapter will argue, the fact that Constance’s very name refuses to be constant may also signify the instability of literary value, especially when it depends on female virtue. In the end, the movement that

Custance stages partially fails; she herself does not stay in England, but is expelled by bad reading and malicious interpretation. The vagaries of transmission and reader response undermine the project of English literature to an extent.

As the first tale in the second fragment of the *Canterbury Tales*, the *Man of Law's Tale* marks the collection's turn toward the contemplation of literature's value and its connection to depictions of women's bodies and their virtue. The *Miller's*, *Reeve's*, and *Cook's Tales*, which precede the *Man of Law's Tale* in most of the manuscripts, are comical, and the first two are notoriously bawdy, marked as they are by cuckoldry, rape, and other forms of sexual shaming. Seemingly out of discomfort with the tales he has just heard, the Host begins to worry that "time's a-wastin'" in the *Introduction* to the *Man of Law's Tale*.

"Lordynges," quod he, "I warne yow, al this route,
The fourthe party of this day is gon.
Now for the love of God and of Seint John,
Leseth no tyme, as ferforth as ye may.
....
It wol nat come agayn, withouten drede,
Namooore than wole Malkynes maydenhede,
Whan she hath lost it in hir wantownesse.
Lat us nat mowlen thus in ydelnesse.¹

Time, the Host claims, is slipping away from the pilgrims irrevocably. The Host's sudden preoccupation with wasted time suggests that he views the bawdy tales he has just heard as without value, as wastes of time themselves. Extending his complaint against time ill-used, he observes that time wasted is like the irrevocable loss of a woman's virginity given up in lust. This metaphor recalls the bawdiness of the previous tales in its

¹ Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, in Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), lines II. 16-32. All subsequent citations from Chaucer's works will appear parenthetically.

presentation of a lustful maid who has exchanged her virginity for pleasure instead of putting it to “good use” (either losing it on her wedding night or maintaining it in devotion to God). The equation of illicit sexuality with wasted time strikes home the Host’s disdain for the sexually explicit *Miller’s* and *Reeve’s Tales*, and shows us that the Host desires a different kind of tale, one whose value makes it worth listeners’ time. Presumably, such a tale would avoid detailing sexual exploits and opt to narrate sexually moral women in the tradition of narratives about faithful women.

The Man of Law answers the Host’s concerns by assuring him that he wishes to tell a “thrifty” tale (II.46), which he equates with stories of classical women faithful in love as they appear in the *Heroides* and Chaucer’s individual stories in the *Legend of Good Women*.

I kan right now no thrifty tale seyn
 That Chaucer, thogh he kan but lewedly
 On metres and on rymyng craftily,
 Hath seyde hem in swich Englissh as he kan

 For he hath toold of loveris up and doun
 Mo than Ovide made of mencioun
 In his Episteles, that been ful olde.
 What sholde I tellen hem, syn they been tolde?
 In youthe he made of Ceys and Alcione,
 And sitthen hath he spoken of everichone,
 Thise noble wyves and thise loveris eke. (II. 46-59)

The Man of Law hopes to participate in a tradition of telling morally valuable tales about female virtue. He lists the “noble wyves” who appear in Chaucer’s *Legend* (and a few who don’t, including Penelope) as examples of subjects for valuable narratives. Tales that are valuable, he suggests, are those that do not depict bad women, but instead tell of women who are faithful in love. In other words, the Man of Law considers the most valuable kinds of narratives to be tales of classical feminine exemplarity, that is, stories

of women who do not waste their sexuality but maintain their morality through spiritual and bodily faithfulness. On the other hand, he notes that these classical stories have already appeared in English. The Man of Law wants to present “thrifty” tales from a tradition different from the Ovidian one. His choice of a story from Trevet’s *Chroniques* foregrounds his focus on the vernacular and on concerns closer to home for medieval readers.

The Host’s concern with narrative time well spent and the Man of Law’s reverence for stories of good women set the tale up to comment on the importance of feminine virtue to literature’s moral value. The confluence of economic, social, and literary value systems in the Introduction, Prologue, and Tale encourages readers to reevaluate what they know about narrative value.² The story both extols and questions the value of feminine virtue as a literary good. It problematizes the moral value of women’s virtue and narratives that depend on it, especially when bodies must be circulated, imperiled, and degraded, and in so doing it suggests that narrative itself does not always have stable value. The tale also interrogates feminine virtue as the basis for the moral worth of narrative when that virtue is dependent on a specific mode of interpretation.

In most of the manuscripts this tale precedes the *Clerk’s Tale*, the *Physician’s Tale*, and other tales that present uncomfortably exemplary women (or, in the case of the

² Many critics have commented on the tale’s juxtaposition of different kinds of value. See, for example, Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 88-112; Kathryn L. Lynch, “Storytelling, Exchange, and Constancy: East and West in Chaucer’s ‘Man of Law’s Tale,’” *Chaucer Review* 33, no. 4 (1999): 409-22; Gania Barlow, “A Thrifty Tale: Narrative Authority and the Competing Values of the *Man of Law’s Tale*,” *Chaucer Review* 44, no. 4 (2010): 397-420; and Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 199. Heng notes late feudal authors’ penchant for “using female figures to give utterance to inchoate but coalescing ideas on the power of money, capital, circulation, and fluidity of status.” These changing values are not unrelated to the changing nature of vernacular authorship, a problem that the tale grapples with extensively.

Wife of Bath's Prologue, a woman who defies all the traditional prescriptions for feminine behavior). It thus sets up a major theme that runs through many of the tales, namely, the power of female virtue (or vice) to provoke readers' reactions. The *Man of Law's Tale* probes the link between narrative valuation and tropes of feminine suffering to reveal the contingency of authorial power to create specific reader reactions. Once Custance lands in England, the pity that feminine suffering inspires plays an important role in the conversions there, but also points to the instability and vulnerability of feminine virtue and texts that get their moral value from it. The *Man of Law's Tale* interrogates the mechanisms by which authors can claim value and power for their narratives, using the common narrative trope of female virtue under siege.

Many scholars have seen the tale as an exploration of human power's fragmented nature.³ Critics see political and colonial power, economics, and gender as intertwined in the tale, with various results.⁴ Jill Mann points out that the narrative variously ascribes agency to the emperor, the stars and planets, and Fortune, but none of these entities can wholly control events. Power is dispersed and ephemeral.⁵ The form of power that Mann

³ The tale's fragmented elements include the strange segue from the Prologue to the Tale that condemns poverty and praises wealth, the tale's combination of hagiographic and romance elements, and its rhetorical leaps from narrative exposition, to apostrophe, to exegesis, to prayer, and back again throughout the narrative.

⁴ To give just a few examples, Heng, *Empire of Magic*, 189, argues that the various iterations of Custance's story show "the enactment of a successful crusade, cultural-style, feminine-style" after the military failures of the crusades; Susan Schibanoff, "Worlds Apart: Orientalism, Antifeminism, and Heresy in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*," in *Chaucer's Cultural Geography*, ed. Kathryn L. Lynch (New York: Routledge, 2002), 248-80, claims that the *Man of Law* reunifies the Canterbury pilgrims after the divisiveness of Fragment I by positing proximate, dangerous Others, including Easterners, women, and heretics; Kathy Lavezzo, *Angels on the Edge of the World: Geography, Literature, and English Community, 1000-1534* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 103, argues that Custance works as "a sign of England's national geographic sublimity" and sovereignty, especially in its relationship with Rome; Sarah Stanbury, "The *Man of Law's Tale* and Rome," *Exemplaria* 22, no. 2 (2010): 119-37, suggests that the tale critiques the merging of commerce and religion, especially in Rome.

⁵ Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), 106-110. The power of Custance to inspire pity will be important to the argument of this chapter.

overlooks, and that I suggest that tale explores profoundly, is authorial power. Both Fortune and the power of pity, two important forces in the tale, require the absolute degradation of the heroine, and that degradation occurs at the author's behest. Other forms of power constrain the Man of Law's choices, including the primacy of the Christian narrative and the authority of source texts. But even when an author relies on sources, he makes choices about what to include and what to alter. Those choices, as the Man of Law makes clear, come out of considerations about audience, patronage, and the political and moral message the author wishes to convey.

The nature of authorial power in the *Man of Law's Tale* depends to a large degree on the story's ability to elicit pity through the degradation of its heroine. This degradation has a patriarchal flavor. Carolyn Dinshaw sees the Man of Law grappling with the requirements of a certain kind of patriarchy in his tale. For her, the tale's gaps and disjunctions "reveal the energy of suppression and exclusion, and the efforts at reconciliation of contradictions, that are necessary to patriarchal ideology's construction of itself as a seemingly seamless, coherent, and natural whole."⁶ Commerce, tale-telling, and male dominance over women make up the three major aspects of this fantasized patriarchy. In her view, the Man of Law's mode of narration shows that he desires to uphold this model of patriarchy.⁷ Dinshaw specifically references Custance's subjection to God, her father, her husband(s), and other male actors within the tale as reflective of the Man of Law's commitment to patriarchy, but I suggest that the Man of Law's Introduction also draws our attention to a more fundamental subjection found in the

⁶ Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 90.

⁷ Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 89. Dinshaw claims a more nuanced position for Chaucer himself, arguing that he understands the "limitations of the Law, of patriarchy as a system of narration."

patriarchal nature of male authorship about women. The Man of Law makes a conscious choice to write a story about a beleaguered woman when he fantasizes about imitating the *Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer's own collection of pitiable women. The *Man of Law's Tale* furthers the *Legend's* use of religious rhetoric to elevate tales of female virtue under duress.

This chapter takes as a starting point the Host's connection of female bodies and virtue to tale-telling in the tale's Introduction. He directs us toward the connection between feminine virtue and literary value upon which the Prologue and Tale elaborate, not only for their common moral efficacy but also in their status as contested and unstable. The Man of Law eagerly grabs onto feminine virtue as a guarantee of literary value, or "thrift," proposing to narrate a tale of womanly morality akin to the stories in the *Legend of Good Women*. By interrogating the Man of Law's easy connection of the *Legends* and feminine virtue more generally with moral certitude, we begin to see that Chaucer himself may have taken issue with the trope of feminine virtue that had given him so much literary material to draw on. The chapter then takes its cues from Carolyn Dinshaw and R.A. Shoaf in viewing Custance as a text.⁸ It explores the ways in which characters within the tale "read" Custance and her virtue, and how those readings succeed or fail in accomplishing the work of moral narratives, that is, leading readers toward moral action or belief.⁹ The first part of the tale gives us two ways of narrating and reading female virtue: through reputation, and through desire. Neither literary mode

⁸ Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 95, suggests Custance works as a story or a narrative; R.A. Shoaf, "'Unwemmed Custance': Circulation, Property, and Incest in the Man of Law's Tale," *Exemplaria* 2, no. 1 (1990), 287-302, analyzes Custance more physically as a text.

⁹ For the medieval view that narratives about virtue should provide models for readers' own ethical behavior, see the Introduction.

results in lasting moral action or geopolitical conversion. The English people model a more reliable mode of reading in their pity for Custance. However, the radical degradation and physical instability of the heroine, upon which pity for her is founded, also make her an unreliable basis for moral uplift. The instability of literature's moral center further erupts in the forged English letters, which circulate without clear authorship and are read improperly. Despite his vow to tell a "thrifty" tale, the Man of Law ends up telling a story about the unreliability of literature to convey morality.

I. "Thrifty" Narratives: Classical Faithfulness and *The Legend of Good Women* as Exemplary Precedents

In the Introduction to the *Man of Law's Tale*, the Host and Man of Law set up concerns about literary value that the tale explores. Herry Bailly's anxieties about the timeliness and value of narration begin Fragment II and set the stage for the Man of Law's exploration of "thrifty," or valuable, tale-telling. The Host's insistence on a tale that is not a waste of time spurs the Man of Law to muse on what he considers Chaucer's own canon of useful, moralized tales of female suffering, especially the *Legend of Good Women*. The equation of women's suffering with moral usefulness should give us pause, as I believe it did Chaucer. The interplay between the Host and the Man of Law encourages readers to read the tale proper as a meditation on the value of these kinds of narratives, and especially on how non-classical narratives of female suffering contain and transmit value as they are circulated. As his tale progresses, the Man of Law moves between different genres or modes of speaking, including romance, hagiography, exegesis, and prayer, each mode with its own system of value. The common thread that

holds all these modes together is the most “thrifty,” the most value-laden subject of Chaucer’s canon – the exemplary, suffering woman.

The Host begins Fragment II very concerned with time and its accurate valuation. He notices the movements of the heavens and calculates the exact date and hour, and this calculation makes him very anxious to get on with the tale-telling game. His measurements are quite precise and reveal his uneducated (“nat depe ystert in loore” (II.4)) attempt at scientific accuracy – the sun has completed its celestial arc “The ferthe part, and half an houre and moore” (II.3), and the shadows of the trees are the exact length of the trees’ height (II.7-9). The sun has climbed above the horizon “Degrees [...] five and fourty” (II.12), leading the Host to “conclude” (II.14), or deduce, that, at least “in that latitude” (II.13), it is ten o’clock. The almost obsessive description of astronomical time here reveals the Host’s obsession with precise calculation and wasted time. The Host’s supposedly uneducated knowledge of the sun’s movements reveals a deep concern with precision in valuing his time, and, as we will see, valuing stories as well.¹⁰ Moral, narrative, and even economic value overlap in the Host’s celestial gaze.

The Host’s private observations of the sun’s progress across the sky are translated into his short diatribe on the irrevocable passage of time and the need to preserve it, and all things of value, and use them as best we can. Time, he claims, is slipping away from us while we sleep and while we are idle, like “the streem that turneth nevere agayn, / Descendynge fro the montaigne into playn” (II.23). The loss of time is worse, he says, than the loss of money, for it cannot be reclaimed. Thus, he encourages the pilgrims, “Lat

¹⁰ Lynch, “Storytelling, Exchange, and Constancy,” 412, points out that in the lead-up to the tale “not only money, but time, sexuality, and even storytelling, are commodified in a system of exchange that makes loss and diminishment the inevitable results,” and that the Man of Law takes up this view in the tale as well.

us nat mowlen thus in ydelnesse” (II.32). For the Host, idleness is not a courtly virtue, as it was sometimes depicted in medieval literature, but something to be avoided.¹¹ His disparagement of “ydelnesse” is perhaps tinged with irony, given his occupation as an innkeeper whose livelihood depends on the eating, drinking, and relaxation of his guests. A common negative view of idleness is represented by the Parson, who includes it in his treatment of *Accidie*, or Sloth: “ydelnesse, that is yate of alle harmes [...] Certes, the hevene is yeven to hem that wol labouren, and nat to ydel folk” (X.713, 715). The Parson shares a view of moralized labor with antimendicants like Richard Fitzralph, who quotes II Thessalonians 3:10 in his invective against the friars: “if any would not work, neither should he eat.”¹² The Host also conceives of idleness as something to be replaced with hard work, here specifically the labor of narrating and listening to a worthy, moral tale. Robert Pratt suggests that the Host’s claim that the pilgrims have “mowlen thus in ydelnesse” refers to the fabliau tales in Fragment I as “idle,” that is, as valueless.¹³ The

¹¹ Idleness was a courtly virtue in some contexts, though not in an uncomplicated way. For instance, in the *Romance of the Rose*, Lady Idleness leads the dreamer into the walled garden, acting as a kind of gatekeeper to the courtly way of life. On the other hand, few medieval moralists would have agreed that a lady who, by her own admission, has

nule rien je n’entens
qu’a moi jouer et solacier
et a moi pigner et trecier

(no care but to enjoy and amuse myself, and to comb and braid my hair) could represent virtue in any real sense. Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*, vol. 1, Les classiques Français du moyen age (Paris: H. Champion, 1970), lines 584-86; translated in Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, ed. and trans. Frances Horgan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 11.

¹² Maria A. Moisa, “Fourteenth-Century Preachers’ Views of the Poor: Class or Status Group?,” in *Culture, Ideology and Politics: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm*, ed. R. Samuel and G. Stedman Jones (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 166.

¹³ Robert A. Pratt, “The Order of the Canterbury Tales,” *PMLA* 66 (1951): 1147. In the Explanatory Note to line 32 of the *Man of Law’s Tale* in the *Riverside Chaucer*, Patricia J. Eberle sums up Pratt’s findings: “Pratt [...] notes the parallel with [*Parson’s Tale*] X.715 and suggests that the word may refer to the type of tale represented by [*the Miller’s Tale*, *Reeve’s Tale*, and *Cook’s Tale*].”

Host desires a valuable narrative, and for him this seems to mean a story that is *not* naturalistic or bawdy, like the fabliau-style *Miller's*, *Reeve's*, and *Cook's Tales*, but one that leads the teller and his hearers to “hevene.”¹⁴ The tale that follows the Host’s diatribe against idleness showcases several different kinds of morally valuable narrative, most especially hagiography, but settles on none of them.

The Host’s concern with idleness and wasting time seems at odds with his characterization in the General Prologue as “right a myrie man” (I.757). However, these competing qualities unite in the Host’s desire for tales that combine joy and (monetary) value. Although some scholars see the Host’s concern with money as indicative of the avarice he shares with the Man of Law, I argue that in the *Prologue* to the *Man of Law’s Tale* the Host shifts his definition of literary value. This shift encourages us to see the tale’s value quite broadly and to question how tales can be valued not only economically, but also in political, religious, and especially ethical ways.¹⁵

The Host’s connection of the tale-telling game with mirthful value appears already in the General Prologue. When the Host suggests the tale-telling game, he repeatedly assures the pilgrims that his goal is playful. He claims to want to bring the company “myrthe” (I.766, 767), to have them “pleye” (I.772) and to “disport” (I.775) and

¹⁴ The Cook may have offended the Host by telling a tale that paints innkeepers in a negative light. Such an insult appears to have been the last straw for the Host, who in his turn to considering the heavens, time, and morality, signals a desire for less personal, naturalistic tales. The Man of Law obliges with a tale about an ancient princess.

¹⁵ For example, Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 92-93, says that for the Host and the Man of Law, wealth and morality are “indissolubly linked” as systems of value under patriarchal control, and that “Tale-telling is thus an activity homologous to – even metaphorically equated with – paternity, kingship, and commerce.” Shoaf, ““Unwemmed Custance,”” 289-91, suggests that the Host and the Man of Law share a greedy compulsion to preserve things, including time, and that they view narrative as one way to do so. Gania Barlow’s assertion in “A Thrifty Tale,” 398, that the Man of Law uses the language of economic value to lay claim to secular and spiritual “currencies of power” is closer to my own argument.

to “be myrie” (I.782). As he further explains the rules of the game, however, his concerns with precision and value complement his playfulness. Whoever tells the best tale, he decrees, “Shall have a soper at oure aller cost” (I.799). Moreover, he himself will ride with them “Right at [his] owene cost” (I.804), and whoever disagrees with his judgment of the tales “Shal paye al that we spenden by the weye” (I.806). As Gania Barlow asserts, the Host organizes things so that the tales in Chaucer’s collection are “valuable commodit[ies] to be traded among laymen.”¹⁶ The merry game of tale-telling is not mere idle play, but sets up from the beginning a system of trade in which tales have monetary value.

Herry Bailly’s insistence on tales as a kind of currency links the concept of narration with time and money, a connection that extends further to the value of the female body. The female body becomes a complicated figure through which to contemplate how literary and economic values are caught up together. Herry’s pronouncement that time “wol nat come agayn, withouten drede, / Namooore than wole Malkynes maydenhede, / Whan she hath lost it in hir wantownesse” (II.29-31) equates the irrevocable passage of time with changes in a common woman’s status brought on by illicit sexuality. Proverbially, a virgin once touched is ruined forever, just as time once experienced can never return.¹⁷ But more specifically here, virginity lost to prodigality

¹⁶ Barlow, “A Thrifty Tale,” 410.

¹⁷ See Bartlett J. Whiting and Helen W. Whiting, *Proverbs, Sentences, and Proverbial Phrases from English Writings Mainly Before 1500* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), M20, “Maidenhead.” The Whitings cite *Hali Meidenhad* 14.131-2: “Meithhad is thet tresor, thet, beo hit eanes forloren, ne bith hit neaver ifunden,” as well as Chaucer’s *Parson’s Tale*, in which men who “bireve a mayden of hir maydenhede” are decried as terrible sinners, since “namooore may maydenhede be restooored than an arm that is smyten fro the body may retourne agayn to wexe” (X.867, 870). These quotations point to the medieval notion that both men and women must restrain their sexuality for the preservation of valuable female virginity. The Host focuses on female restraint, but, as I will show, the tale itself suggests that male sexual threat is a necessary component of a narrative that relies on female exemplary restraint for

and lust is a total loss, just like time lost to idleness. In the Host's metaphor, the frightening losses that humanity must endure are less financial than temporal, social, and sexual. But time preserved or filled through narrative is like virginity put to good use, perhaps preserved indefinitely or else "filled" in the service of producing children.¹⁸ The Host's clear-cut equation of wasted virginity with wasted time puts female bodies and tales in the same category of things that he believes ought to contain moral and social value. Both tale-tellers and women must take care to dispense their wealth, time, and virginity in good ways. It is no coincidence, then, that the *Man of Law's Tale* uses a woman whose body is exchanged and threatened, and whose virginity is put to good use in the production of a child, to consider how tales are valued.

On the other hand, the Host's metaphor glosses over the fact that medieval views on female sexuality and sexual status often conflicted. The host assumes that the female body is fully knowable in its sexual status – one is either a virgin, or not. In fact, in medieval as well as in modern thought, the status of virginity is open to interpretation. Anke Bernau chronicles the longstanding preoccupation, beginning in classical times, with discovering the signs of and testing virginity.¹⁹ The virginity of the Virgin Mary herself was questioned in legend and theology, and it took some fancy doctrinal footwork

its moral value. Moreover, *Hali Meidenhad's* equation of virginity with treasure shows that the Host's equation of money and morality is far from original or unusual.

¹⁸ In contrast, Dinshaw sees virginity as only properly *preserved* in patriarchal systems (94). In fact, the different attitudes toward virginity are a crucial difference between the patriarchy of the church and that of laymen, who were more concerned with the proper way to end virginity so as to preserve masculine lines of descent. Among the many studies on the contested status of medieval virginity, see the Introduction to Sarah Alison Miller, *Medieval Monstrosity and the Female Body* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001); and Anke Bernau, *Virgins: A Cultural History* (London: Granta Books, 2007).

¹⁹ Bernau, *Virgins*, 1-9.

to explain how she remained an ‘enclosed’ vessel after giving birth. The *Legenda Aurea* gives five “proofs” of the holy mother’s virginity, including two midwives’ tests. The midwife Salome, disbelieving the first midwife’s conclusion, tries to test the Virgin Mary’s virginity by feeling for the hymen, and has her hand shriveled as a consequence.²⁰ Salome’s distrust mirrors the medieval misogynist attitude toward female sexuality more generally. A woman’s status as virgin was always in question, given her supposed proclivity to licentiousness and trickery. In Bernau’s words:

Virginity and promiscuity, though presented as polar opposites, are actually similar: both are perceived as difficult to control and are therefore potentially disorderly and threatening. The fear of the woman who pretends to be something she is not is found in many medieval [texts]... In the case of virgin martyrs, for example, virginal integrity is ‘proven’ in countless narratives through the torture and dismemberment of the virgin body. In fact, much of this material focuses on women whose main aim is to maintain their intactness. Chastity and virginity caused anxiety almost more than any other female identity because they were always subject to doubt.²¹

Even women whose virginity was lost by force occupied an unclear status. Theologians as influential as Jerome, Augustine, and Aldhelm took up the question of whether a raped woman could still be a virgin, and their conclusions varied.²² The Host’s metaphor participates in a broader cultural question about controlling and enumerating the value of

²⁰ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 38.

²¹ Bernau, *Virgins*, 99-100.

²² Jane Tibbetts Schulenberg, *Forgetful of their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500-1100* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 131-33, analyzes several of the Church Fathers’ views on the subject, including Jerome’s and Augustine’s. She notes that Jerome encourages women to maintain chastity at all costs. He names several virgins who died to retain their status in *Adversus Jovinianum*, and claims in his *Commentary on Jonah* that suicide is only lawful “when one’s chastity is jeopardized” (St. Jerome, *Commentariorum in Jonam Prophetam liber unus*, PL 25:1129). Schulenberg notes that Augustine takes a more flexible approach in the *City of God*, proposing that if a woman *wills* to remain a virgin, even if she is raped, she remains morally pure. But, Augustine warns that if any moment of sexual pleasure takes place during the rape (which Augustine seems to think is likely), the woman is blameworthy (St. Augustine, *The City of God*, ed. David Knowles, trans. Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth, 1972), book 1, 413-26). For a thorough discussion of patristic and medieval attitudes toward rape and suicide, see Schulenberg, *Forgetful of their Sex*, 127-176.

female bodies, and, by extension, of tales as well. Again, Anke Bernau points out the traditional connections between virginity and tale-telling: “virginity raises some of the same questions as literature: how is it to be read? Who is able to discern its signs and meanings? Who can interpret correctly? Is it a truthful narrative, or does it seduce its readers with falsehoods and empty promises?”²³ These kinds of questions are brought up by the Host, and explored in the *Man of Law’s Tale*. Custance’s virginal body gets read in different ways within the tale, and the narrator himself directs readers toward certain interpretations of it. Anxiety about the proper reading of the female body mimics authorial anxiety about readers’ interpretations.²⁴

A slippage appears in the Host’s metaphor of timely virginity that further reveals the difficulty of determining the value of bodies and of texts. Not only is virginity ultimately unknowable in itself, but the Host specifies that this is Malkyn’s maidenhead, proverbially not valuable at all, to either herself or others.²⁵ Malkyn appears in the A-text of *Piers Plowman*, for example: “Ye nave no more merit in masse ne in houres Then Malkyn of hire maydenhod that no mon desyreth.”²⁶ The Host’s reference to Malkyn specifically reveals that not all virginity carries value, or at least not as great a value as it might, either because of the carelessness of its holder, her status (Malkyn being usually a name for a peasant girl),²⁷ or her general lack of desirability. From a spiritual perspective,

²³ Bernau, *Virgins*, 72.

²⁴ For the medieval connection between the textual and the female body, see Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*.

²⁵ *Riverside Chaucer*, Explanatory Note to II.20-31.

²⁶ Langland, *Piers Plowman* A i. 157-8; quoted in Whiting, M511, “To have no more Merit than Malkin of her maidenhead.”

²⁷ Jacqueline de Weever, *Chaucer Name Dictionary: A Guide to Astrological, Biblical, Historical, Literary, and Mythological Names in the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 231.

the virginities of all women have a value equal to the well-being of their souls. But, from a social standpoint, different women's virginities were in fact valued differently.

Similarly, the prologue to the *Man of Law's Tale* suggests that different kinds of tales may also be valued differently according to the kinds of value systems applied to them. In the tale, Custance's loss of virginity marks a moment of crisis in her valuation as a virtuous, virginal woman, and signals a shift readers must make toward a broader system of values that includes the expectations of husbands in lay society:

They goon to bedde, as it was skile and right;
For thogh that wyves be ful hooly thynges,
They moste take in pacience at nyght
Swiche manere necessities as been plesynges
To folk that han ywedded hem with rynges,
And leye a lite hir hoolynesse aside,
As for the tyme – it may no bet bitide. (II.708-14)

Custance's value has to this point been caught up in her virginity, but this textual moment reveals that it has never depended on virginity alone. Here, and throughout the tale, Custance is subject to varying modes of judgment about how she should be valued. These shifts in valuation, especially obvious as I will show at the tale's shift of setting from Syria to England, signal the fact that different systems of value produce different narratives as well as different kinds of effects on readers.

The Man of Law extends the Host's connection of time, tales, female bodies, and value in his Prologue by pointing to tales about faithful women as the epitome of valuable narration. He sees Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* as the ultimate repository of what he calls "thrifty" tales (II.46). These tales of "noble wyves" (II.59) chronicle the goodness of women in the face of suffering, sometimes through suicide, but almost always through loyalty, sexual and otherwise, to a lover or husband. The Man of Law

believes, as I argue did most medieval readers, that tales of exemplary women carry intrinsic value, like female virginity and sexuality themselves. The comparison of the legends to saints' lives (the Man of Law calls them the "Seintes Legende of Cupide" (II.61)) reveals that the Man of Law sees classical stories of female suffering and virtue as morally important, even if they were not hagiographical narratives in the strictest sense.

On the other hand, the Man of Law misrepresents the *Legend of Good Women* when he claims that Chaucer wrote more stories of lovers than appear in Ovid's *Heroides*, and that he has written about "everichone, / Thise noble wyves and thise loveris eke" (II.58-59). The Man of Law's overestimation of Chaucer's collection of stories calls into question the aesthetic and moral valuation of stories of female suffering and exemplarity.²⁸ The Man of Law's estimation of Chaucer's literary output exceeds the reality. Even his list of specific women includes several that do not come down to us in the *Legend of Good Women* or in any of Chaucer's other works (including Penelope, as I point out in Chapter One). John Fisher suggests that this hyperbole indicates Chaucer's own weariness with the kinds of classical moralized stories that appear in the *Legend of Good Women* – "By this time, Chaucer *felt*, at least, as though he had 'toold of loveris up and doun / Mo than Ovide made of mencioun' [II.53-4]. He had done enough in that

²⁸ Shoaf, "'Unwemmed Custance,'" 289, claims that, given the Man of Law's concern with precision elsewhere, his mistakes in listing Chaucer's works indicate that his voice is fallible and that Chaucer intended him to be read ironically. For example, the Man of Law of the *General Prologue* is punctilious in his writing ("Ther koude no wight pynche at his writyng," I.326), and has memorized the huge canon of the Common Law (I.327). While I avoid assuming the hyper-continuity of character through *General Prologue*, *Introduction* and *Tale* that would lead to the type of dramatic monologue reading that A.C. Spearing warns against, I do agree with Shoaf that the "mistakes" made in the *Introduction* point us toward the tale's meditation on authorship and circulation of stories. A.C. Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 101-36.

vein!”²⁹ I argue, rather, that the emphasis on female sexuality’s value in the Host’s speech, followed by the Man of Law’s paean to the *Legend*, encourages us to see the stories in the *Legend* and the story of Custance as intricately connected, though from different traditions, and to begin to question the “thrift” of these kinds of narratives. If female sexuality itself can have both incredible value, and none at all, as the Host’s metaphor of Malkyn’s maidenhood reveals, then, as the Man of Law suggests in his hyperbolic mis-valuation of the *Legend*, stories of women’s virtue more generally may also be subject to different systems of valuation.

I want to suggest that the Man of Law’s “mistakes” point us toward a critique of feminine virtue that the *Legend* tales and *Troilus and Criseyde* also display.³⁰ The Man of Law’s praise of the *Legend of Good Women* not only exceeds its value in terms of number and specificity of tales, it also ignores the way the *Legend* refuses to be constrained by exemplarity.³¹ The Man of Law’s simplistic and hyperbolic reading of the

²⁹ John H. Fisher, *John Gower: Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer* (New York: New York University Press, 1964), 288. At 290, Fisher connects Chaucer’s cheeky denigration of his own work to the supposed disagreement between Chaucer and Gower over the value of stories: “If Chaucer had been influenced by Gower to desist in his cultivation of naturalism and return to more ‘moral’ literature, and if he were even slightly annoyed at the implication that, by finishing the *Confessio*, Gower had somehow surpassed him in poetic achievement, what would have been more natural than that he demonstrate both his return to the strait [sic] and narrow and his poetic superiority by outdoing Gower at one of his own stories?” While I do not follow Fisher in attributing Chaucer’s turn to moralization to a feud with Gower, I do take his point that the *Man of Law’s Tale*’s abrupt turn from the naturalism of Fragment I points to its concern with moral value.

³⁰ Crocker, “‘As false as Cressid,’” 313-14, argues that *Troilus and Criseyde* critiques the oversimplifying of virtuous women’s stories seen in conduct books (and, as I show in Chapter One, in courtly poetry as well). Instead of extolling feminine virtue that is completely removed from social circumstance, Chaucer explores the problem of actual *performed* feminine virtue in *Criseyde*: “Rather than situate her as a creation of social discourse, Chaucer vests *Criseyde* with moral complexity. And while her character is molded by social training..., *Criseyde*’s performance is credited to her moral autonomy.” I see the *Man of Law’s Tale* as similarly exploring and critiquing the literary tradition of depicting feminine virtue as completely separate from historical and social circumstance, but from the reader’s vantage point.

³¹ For a fuller treatment of the *Legend*’s fraught exemplarity, see, among others, the articles in Carolyn P. Collette, ed., *The Legend of Good Women: Context and Reception* (Cambridge, England: Brewer, 2006).

Legend suggests that Chaucer viewed tales of exemplary, suffering laywomen as over-valued, or wrongly valued. The women in the *Legend* cannot be valued as saints, just as Custance herself cannot work as a saint, despite the Man of Law's (and Custance's own) best efforts to shoehorn her into that category. The Man of Law gets the genre of the *Legend of Good Women* wrong, or takes Chaucer's tongue-in-cheek title seriously, and misreads its "thrift." I argue that this misreading sets up a tale that tries, and fails, to embrace several modes of female exemplarity and thus calls into question the efficacy of the suffering woman as a vessel for moral uplift.

The *Man of Law's Prologue* and *Tale* suggest that the subject matter of a tale gives it its value, although that value is far from stable. The Man of Law's praise of wealth and merchants further points to a reevaluation of the idea of what is valuable. Rather than telling a classical tale like those in the *Legend of Good Women*, the Man of Law chooses a tale whose origins are outside the line of descent from classical antiquity – "a marchant" (II.132) has given the speaker his tale. Custance's story comes to the Man of Law, and to the pilgrims in turn, by word of mouth, through the vernacular. On the other hand, this movement toward vernacular origins is not so much a rejection of classical authority as it is a translation or transfer of it to a new literature – much as Custance herself is transferred to England, at least temporarily. Classical female virtue, as established in classical texts and extolled by the Man of Law, translates into Custance's virtue – still Roman, but also Christian and moveable to the far reaches of Northumbria.

Part of the Man of Law's movement away from classical authority entails an approach to other kinds of value, including monetary value. The Man of Law uses the

language of commerce and exchange to explain where the tale of Custance comes from.³² The tale is told to him by a merchant, just as Custance's reputation becomes a story circulated through this commercial conduit in the tale proper. But, as with the Canterbury pilgrims' tale-telling game itself, in the *Man of Law's Tale* monetary value functions as a part of the commercial, moral, sexual, political, and literary system of value that governs the exchange and interpretation of tales. The merchants within the tale are bearers of different kinds of value – their dealings with customers are “sadde and trewe” (II.135), a combination that indicates steadfast virtue.³³ Tale-tellers, the text suggests, should be upright in their commerce in tales, dealing forthrightly with listeners and exchanging commodities whose value is clear. Just as the Man of Law desires to tell a “thrifty” tale, these merchants' dealings with customers are “thrifty” in both the economic and the moral sense. Their “chaffare was so thrifty and so newe / That every wight hath deyntee to chaffare / With hem, and eek to sellen hem hire ware” (II.138-40). The first definition of “chaffare” in the MED is “Trade in goods, buying and selling, commerce, bargaining.” A figurative meaning exists as well: “Anything valuable or desirable, such as virtue, love, etc.; a moral or intellectual possession.”³⁴ The poetic lines repeat “chaffare” in both noun and verb forms, emphasizing its importance for the Man of Law's project. The tale plays on the connection between the two definitions of “chaffare” by describing the merchants

³² Barlow, “A Thrifty Tale,” 413, suggests that the tale's “spiritual ‘thrif’ makes it exchangeable within the Host's economy” where a classical story, even one of an exemplary woman, would not be so valuable.

³³ In the *Canterbury Tales*, the *Manciple's Tale* also contains it – Phoebus regretfully describes his wife after murdering her as “so sad / and eek so trewe” (275). A proximity search for “sad*” and “trew*” in the *Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse* lists one religious poem, a couple of Wyclif's tracts, and Wyclif's translation of Proverbs 22:21 as the only instances of this combination apart from the *Tales*. The religious overtones of this combination might be worth exploring.

³⁴ *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “chaffare.”

not only as economically advantageous for their customers (who desire to trade with them, to sell them their goods in return), but also as morally valuable.

The exchange value of narrative also appears in the Prologue's reinterpretation of Innocent III's *De Miseria Humane*, which has puzzled critics in its condemnation of poverty. At first, the straightforward summary of Innocent III's lamentation on the suffering of poverty leads readers to believe that a similar diatribe against wealth will follow, as it does in the Latin original. Instead, we encounter praise of wealth and, specifically, of merchants. Some claim that this strange turn reveals the Man of Law's own inappropriate love of wealth.³⁵ However, in both the Introduction and the tale wealth works in concert with other modes of valuation. Taken as a whole, the Introduction, Prologue, and Tale do not obsess over wealth as much as they do over the idea of value itself, and especially the value of narratives. The rewriting of the *De Miseria* has the effect of suggesting that tales, like other aspects of human life, *do* have value in themselves.

The *De Miseria* is a miserable tract to read, as it is completely pessimistic about mankind's experiences on earth. As Robert E. Lewis points out, the tract was a popular one for several centuries after its composition, and exhibited a strain of ascetic thought current in the Middle Ages that we know as *contemptus mundi*, or contempt for the world.³⁶ In other words, it shows that the concerns of worldly life are utterly lacking in value. The fact that the *Man of Law's Tale* is prefaced by a clear rewriting of a popular

³⁵ See, for example, Shoaf, "'Unwemmed Custance,'" as well as Spearing's list of critics who see the Man of Law as avaricious.

³⁶ Lotario Dei Segni (Pope Innocent III), *De miseria condicionis humane*, ed. and trans. Robert E. Lewis, The Chaucer Library (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978), 3-4.

contemptus mundi tract points to something broader than merely the greed of the Man of Law. I argue that the praise of wealth and merchants points to a reevaluation of value itself. As the Host makes clear in the *General Prologue* and the *Introduction* to the *Man of Law's Tale*, tales and the time we take to hear them have monetary and moral value. The very existence of the *Canterbury Tales* takes issue with the *contemptus mundi* philosophy. The tale itself takes up the problem of how we read tales for moral value by portraying good and bad readers of feminine virtue.

II. Custance and the “commune voys” – Reading Female Reputation and the Circulation of Narrative

The failure of Custance's mission to Syria is a failure of narrative and a failure of reading. Custance is the carrier of literary morality, akin to the heroines of the *Legend of Good Women*. As a suffering woman, Custance stands for the kind of “thrifty” narrative that the Man of Law extols in the *Prologue*. Custance functions like a narrative herself, circulated between Rome, Syria, and England. Her virtue invites people within the tale to read her for her moral value. Her position as a female body whose value, or “thrift,” gets read and misread throughout the tale points to Chaucer's critique of women's virtue as a stable literary value.³⁷ The modes of reading that Romans and Syrians use to understand Custance do not result in positive social change. Both groups rely on Custance's reputation for virtue, but her reputation alone is not enough to effect conversion. As we will see in the next section, proper reading of female virtue requires pity, which can only

³⁷ Cf. Crocker, “Virtue Trouble,” 316, who notes “Chaucer's skepticism about the potential for [women's] virtuous action in a mutable present.”

be inspired by a womanly body debased by circumstance. Custance shows that a tale of lay female exemplarity can either fail or succeed in conveying moral value, symbolically represented in her ability to carry the story of Christ and convert nations. Its failure in Syria shows that feminine exemplarity itself is not enough to create change in the minds and hearts of the would-be converted. This is not a straightforward morality tale or exemplum, where the actions of the exemplary woman mold the world around her into a more virtuous place and can be easily emulated. The stars must be metaphorically aligned for her mission to Syria to succeed: listeners must be receptive and ready to defend their conversion, and Providence must guide events.³⁸ The different results of Custance's encounters with the Syrians and the English, and the different strategies of storytelling that are employed in these instances, reveal the benefits and drawbacks of different models of storytelling and conversion. In the Roman and Syrian episodes, Custance's story circulates orally, her reputation defining her and determining her value and her fate. But Custance's reputation cannot create a Christian nation. The Syrian sultan reads Custance, via her noble and virtuous reputation, as a romance object of lust rather than a carrier of Christian value. In other words, for him, Custance represents the pleasure of the female body and of the narrative it carries and represents for their own sakes rather than for their moral meaning.

In Chaucer's version of the Custance story, Custance begins as a tale circulated by the Roman people. She is a figure of "excellent renoun" (II.150), or reputation, and this

³⁸ Cf. Helen Cooney, "Wonder and Immanent Justice in the 'Man of Law's Tale,'" *Chaucer Review* 33, no. 3 (1999): 267 et passim, who argues that the tale follows Trevet in its historical project of presenting the "providential view of history" in which God directs events and metes out divine punishment and reward, or "immanent justice," in real time. While Cooney sees the tale as showing God's guiding hand in history, I add that the tale shows the importance of *story* in conversion and other historical changes.

good reputation circulates apart from Custance herself at first. Her renown “Reported was, with every circumstance, / Unto thise Surryen marchantz in swich wyse, / Fro day to day” (II.151-4). Her existence is determined by how she is perceived by the people, who “report” her good reputation in great detail every day. She is on the lips of everyone, it seems, including the “the commune voys of every man” (II.155) and the narrator of the *Man of Law’s Tale* itself. The tale emphasizes Custance’s reputation over any actual action at first, as it is only in the voice of the people that we hear about her outstanding virtues (although the narrator assures us “al this voys was sooth, as God is trewe” (II.169)).

The fact that readers first encounter Custance as an oral story reflects the power of reputation in fourteenth-century England to determine one’s fate. Medieval people’s reputations were often their making or undoing, whether their actual actions and character merited it or not. By the fourteenth century, the limits of oral accounts were beginning to inspire more reliance on written records, as Barbara Hanawalt notes, but the power of reputation continued to determine many of the workings of society, shaping the results of criminal trials, the ability to travel freely, and social relationships.³⁹ Moreover, Anke Bernau points out that a woman’s “[r]eputation was taken very seriously in medieval society,” especially her sexual reputation, as evidenced by the fact that “court records show that women suffered disproportionately from sexual defamation.”⁴⁰ Reputation, especially a woman’s reputation, was a form of oral storytelling in fourteenth century society that determined how people “read” each other. It was a mode of

³⁹ Barbara Hanawalt, *‘Of Good and Ill Repute’: Gender and Social Control in Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), ix et passim.

⁴⁰ Bernau, *Virgins*, 100.

interaction with special relevance to the feminine virtue women were supposed to embody. Women's social lives hinged particularly on how their stories travelled from one person to another. Custance's good reputation sets her up as an exemplar, with saintly and courtly overtones. But reputation could be sinister, too.

Custance's fame travels via oral narrative, a dynamic that Chaucer connects to the phenomena of rumor and gossip in the *House of Fame*. In the labyrinth at the end of that poem, stories are passed from one person to another:

And than he tolde hym this and that,
And swor thereto that hit was soth –
“Thus hath he sayd,” and “Thus he doth,”
“Thus shal hit be,” “Thus herde y seye,”
“That shal be founde,” “That dar I leye.” (2051-5)

The proliferation of voices and their claims to truth mirror the voices in the *Man of Law's Tale*. Custance's reputation proliferates via “the commune voys of every man” (II.155), and the narrator himself claims that “al this voys was sooth, as God is trewe” (II.169). Just as the stories in the *House of Fame's* labyrinth grow “As fyr is wont to quyke and goo” (2078), Custance's fame spreads throughout the Roman empire and even to Syria. The similarity between the spread of Custance's reputation and the cacophony of rumors in the *House of Fame* has a couple of important resonances. First, as the House of Rumor represents a rejection of the classical authors who support Fame's palace, so the spread of Custance's story through word of mouth signifies the movement of vernacular stories, unlike the classical stories the Man of Law refers to in his prologue. Second, the cacophony of rumors in the labyrinth amount to gossip, and the spread of Custance's virtuous reputation also verges on gossip.⁴¹ Susan Phillips points out that, while in the

⁴¹ Margaret Schaus, ed., *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 330, notes that gossip was often associated with women, as evidenced by stories like the

House of Fame “Chaucer acknowledges pastoral rhetoric about gossip throughout the poem, calling attention to gossip’s idleness, its capacity for unchecked proliferation, and its tendency toward distortion, he does so in order to appropriate those characteristics for his poem.” At the end of the poem, the gossip of the labyrinth provides new material for literary production.⁴² The circulation of gossip has positive and negative valences in the *House of Fame*, as, I would argue, it does in *The Man of Law’s Tale*. The tale and its prologue draw our attention to the methods by which stories circulate, not all of which are wholly positive. Although the story of Custance’s virtue is not “idle speech” in the mouths of merchants and Romans but does good work in the world by leading to the conversion of the Syrian merchants and the Syrian prince, it does not achieve the lasting conversion of Syria as a geopolitical entity. The limited power of Custance’s reputation points to a critique of stories of women’s virtue as vehicles for moral uplift, precisely because they are dependent on the adequacy of readers’ interpretations.

Further pointing to this inadequacy is the fact that the power of Custance’s reputation to convey knowledge and even salvation gets nullified once she leaves Syria. Custance’s reputation cannot follow her to England as she loses her history on the way, not only through her own forgetfulness (“she forgot hir mynde, by hir trouthe” (II.526-7)), but also because she is separated from the society that once spread her fame so widely. The power of reputation and orality has its limits. Where the chain of messengers

one of Tutivillus, the demon who listens to women gossiping in church and runs out of parchment attempting to record all their words. Of course, Custance’s reputation circulates mainly via the mouths of *men* – the merchants, the Roman “man,” and the Man of Law himself (and Chaucer).

⁴² Susan E. Phillips, *Transforming Talk: The Problem with Gossip in Late Medieval England* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 71. Phillips acknowledges that her view contrasts with that of many other critics, who point out that the poem decries the dangers of gossip for Dido in Book 1.

or merchants breaks down, the story cannot go. Chaucer presents Custance first through reputation in order to show the fallibility of this kind of storytelling to change readers' actions and beliefs (even when it is truthful).

In addition to reading female virtue through reputation, the Syrians also read Custance as a romance heroine and a desirable female body. The latter strategies fail as miserably as the first. To her Syrian readers, Custance is a romance heroine first and foremost, a woman made desirable for her virtues but not for her religion. The system of value that dominates the scene in which the merchants relay Custance's virtue to the sultan is courtly, but not at all religious. For instance, it is desire to please the sultan that motivates the merchants to tell him about Custance, not devotion to Christianity. In Trevet, it is only *after* defending their new faith that the merchants "began to praise the maid Constance, who had converted them."⁴³ Christianity has primacy over romance in the Anglo-Norman chronicle. In contrast, in Chaucer's tale the merchants and the Sultan prioritize narrative over faith. No mention of the merchants' new faith, or Custance's role in its adoption, appears in the merchants' narration. The merchants begin their story with Custance's "greet noblesse" (II.187), and the Sultan immediately falls in love. The Sultan loves Custance as a courtly story, not as a Christian woman. Moreover, Chaucer's Sultan, "of his benigne curteisye" (II.179), always asks returning merchants for tales of "wondres" (II.182) from faraway lands. His desire for adventurous narrative aligns him with the chivalric kings of romance, like King Arthur in *Sir Gawain and the Green*

⁴³ Nicholas Trevet, "Of the Noble Lady Custance," trans. Robert M. Correale, *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, vol. II, ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), 297-8.

Knight who demands a game or a tale before beginning the Christmas feast.⁴⁴ Although courtly literature does not preclude considerations of faith, as *Sir Gawain* itself proves, this scene of the *Man of Law's Tale* makes clear that in the Sultan's court, courtly stories, and more broadly the pleasures of narrative, take precedence over Christian faith.

It is only after the Sultan decides to marry Custance and gathers his advisors that the "problem" of Custance's Christianity comes up. Here again, much of the religious importance of Trevet's narrative is excised from Chaucer's version. The debate at court in Chaucer's tale centers on the suitability of the Sultan's decision to marry, whereas in Trevet the merchants debate courtiers on the merits of Christianity. Trevet's account emphasizes the religious conversion process: "after they were brought before him they were rebuked by their wise men for their faith, that they should believe in a crucified and mortal man. But after they had sufficiently defended the religion of Jesus Christ against

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And also anoþer maner meued him eke,
 þat he þurȝ nobelay had nomen: he wolde neuer ete
 Vpon such a dere day, er hym deuised were
 Of sum auenturus þyng, an vncouþe tale
 Of sum mayn meruayle þat he myȝt trawe,
 Of alderes, of armes, of oþer auenturus.

(And also a point of pride pricked him in heart,
 For he nobly had willed, he would never eat
 On so high a holiday, till he had heard first
 Of some fair feat or fray some far-borne tale,
 Of some marvel of might, that he might trust,
 By champions of chivalry achieved in arms.)

Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, eds., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), 90-95; translated in Marie Borroff, trans., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2010). *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. "courteisie" lists as the first definition "The complex of courtly ideals; chivalry, chivalrous conduct." More generalized definitions follow, but given the other romance elements of the Sultan's characterization, I maintain that courtly courtesy is the main meaning here.

the heathens, who no longer knew how to contradict it, they began to praise the maid Constance...”⁴⁵ Chaucer’s Syrians, by contrast, do not debate over Christianity but over how to save the Sultan from his lovesickness. The Sultan

...charged hem in hye
To shapen for his lyf som remedye.
Diverse men diverse thynges seyden;
They argumenten, casten up and down;
.....
But finally, as in conclusioun,
They kan nat seen in that noon advantage,
Ne in noon oother wey, save mariage. (II.209-17)

The scene of great debate, repeated from Trevet’s chronicle account, here is altered to privilege the romance hero’s predicament rather than the primacy of Christianity over heathenism.⁴⁶ Only after the debate is concluded do the “diverse men” consider the possibility of conversion. The text employs the deictic “Thanne” to emphasize the lateness of their move toward Christianity. Only “Thanne” do they see “therinne swich difficultee” for the Sultan because of the emperor’s religion, and only “Thanne” does the Sultan decide to convert (II.218). As Gania Barlow puts it, the merchants

bring [the Sultan] news of Custance not as the ‘good news’ of the Christian faith, but rather as simply any other valuable information they pick up on their travels. In this case, Custance’s ‘greet noblesse’ (II 185) – her Christian, feminine, and social virtues – combine to make her very valuable. Her ‘hoolynesse’ becomes commodified in the same way that femininity and material wealth are. It is merely one more source of value among others, rather than having a particular and different value in its own right.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Trevet, “Of the Noble Lady Custance,” 297-8.

⁴⁶ Heng, *Empire of Magic*, 190, points out that Trevet’s version of the Sultan handing over Jerusalem is part of the European cultural fantasy of colonizing the Holy Land. Chaucer shifts the focus of the story away from this fantasy to focus more clearly on questions of authorship, although resonances of Eurocentral colonial views of virtue certainly remain in the text.

⁴⁷ Barlow, “A Thrifty Tale,” 406.

The Sultan and his courtiers misread Custance's value and the lesson it should teach. The *Man of Law's Tale* further truncates the religious meaning of Custance for the Syrians by omitting Trevet's account of how Custance herself actively "preached the Christian faith to" the Syrian merchants and "had them baptized and instructed perfectly in the faith of Jesus Christ," and that the Sultan agreed to give the Roman Christians "free passage to travel safely for trade, and to visit the holy places of the Sepulchre, Mount Calvary, Bethlehem, Nazareth, the Valley of Jehoshaphat, and all other holy places within the boundaries of his control" and to "[surrender] the city of Jerusalem to the lordship of the Christians to live in" and to allow them to preach, baptize, and destroy pagan idols freely.⁴⁸ Chaucer's omissions suggest, at least to listeners familiar with Trevet, but perhaps also to listeners well-versed in the history of the Crusades, that the Sultan, the merchants, and possibly also the narrator, have valued the tale of Custance not as a history but as a romance; not as a story of Christian triumph, but as a tale of female virtue that inspires admiration, but not religious fervor. The sultaness interprets Custance correctly as a carrier of Christianity, but pledges, "The lyf shal rathe rout of my body sterte / Or Makometes lawe out of myn herte!" (II.335-6) Had the sultan correctly understood the implications of his marriage to Custance, he might have anticipated his mother's murderous reaction. Ultimately, the sultan's failure to read feminine virtue and vice, in the figures of Custance and his own mother, leads to the failure of the Christian mission in Syria. Scholars have suggested that Custance's first marriage fails because it is orchestrated by men, as opposed to her second marriage, which is clearly set in motion by

⁴⁸ Trevet, "Of the Noble Lady Custance," 296-8. Gower gives Custance full responsibility for the conversion of the merchants, as Trevet does (*Confessio Amantis* II.601-10). He does not detail the Sultan's political agreements with the emperor, but he also does not call attention to his omissions.

God.⁴⁹ I add that the first part of the tale shows readers a story of female reputation that does not retain its Christian value.

The post-Syria sections of the tale take up the problem of how to read female virtue and proffer a solution in the form of pity. The debasement of Custance from princess to anonymous shipwreck survivor help the English read Custance in a way that produces conversion, but at the same time presents us with the problem of the imperiled female body, an unstable basis for morality.

III. “Haveth som routhe”: Reading with Compassion and the Limits of Pity

Any examination of proper reading in the *Man of Law's Tale* would be incomplete without treating the tale's injunctions to compassion. Both R.W. Frank and Douglas Gray include the *Man of Law's Tale* among Chaucer's works in the pity-inspiring mode, which “make their moral point by means of sentiment or pathos [and] present their audience with the pitiful sight of goodness in a cruel and oppressive world.”⁵⁰ The narrator's repeated calls for readers to pity Custance and his diatribes against pitiless characters direct us to read in this compassionate mode. Jill Mann notes that Custance's power in the tale is in part the power of pity. In her words, “[t]he pathetic mode of the tale is thus a means by which the reader can be ‘educated’ into pity, can

⁴⁹ See, for example, Kathy Lavezzo, *Angels on the Edge of the World: Geography, Literature, and English Community, 1000-1534* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 101-2. It is important not to leave out the culpability of the Sultaness, but the tale spreads out the blame so much that the Sultaness seems to work merely as a convenient device to enact the fate that Custance was already doomed to suffer.

⁵⁰ Robert Worth Frank, Jr., “The *Canterbury Tales* III: Pathos,” in *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*, ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 143-58; see also Douglas Gray, “Chaucer and ‘Pite,’” in *J.R.R. Tolkien, Scholar and Storyteller: Essays in Memoriam*, ed. Mary Salu and Robert T. Farrell (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 188.

relinquish neutrality and independence in an imaginative surrender to the story.”⁵¹ On the other hand, the narrator voices discomfort with the fact that the specific brand of pity that Custance inspires has its moral and narrative value predicated upon the endangered body of a virtuous woman. In other words, this brand of pity requires a body under duress for its enactment. The unstable nature of knowledge about the body, as shown in Anke Bernau’s work and in the wild movements of Custance from one geographical region to another throughout the tale, reveals the contradiction at the heart of virtue inspired by this kind of pity. The bodily danger that produces pity also threatens to destabilize the virtue on which it depends. In its dealings with the female body, the tale proffers pity as a mode of reading that produces moral value, but not without some misgivings.

Narratives intended to elicit pity from their readers were common in the Middle Ages, from religious texts that scripted compassionate responses to Christ’s suffering to stories of suffering women like the Griselda legend and the *Legend of Good Women*. These works’ “aim is to involve the audience and persuade them to an empathetic posture.”⁵² Gender often plays a role in the way pity works in these texts. Affective piety was most relevant to women, as it encouraged readers and listeners to imagine themselves taking on traditionally feminine roles in the Holy Family like caring for the Christ child or serving the Virgin.⁵³ In religious literature like Richard Rolle’s early fourteenth century works and Nicholas Love’s 1410 *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus*

⁵¹ Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, 110.

⁵² Frank, “The *Canterbury Tales* III: Pathos,” 144. He notes especially the rise of emotion-filled devotion to Mary, the humanization of Christ and meditation on his wounds, and so on as evidence for the prevalence of pathos as a literary mode.

⁵³ Nicole Nolan Sidhu, “Weeping for the Virtuous Wife: Laymen, Affective Piety and Chaucer’s ‘Clerk’s Tale,’” in *Medieval Domesticity: Home, Housing and Household in Medieval England*, ed. Maryanne Kowaleski and P.J.P. Goldberg (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 190-91.

Christ, a translation of an older Franciscan text, compassion is often gendered female. As Sarah McNamer observes, “Imagining that one is a woman [...] becomes a core mechanism for cultivating compassion in late medieval England; it is a ‘robust’ performance feature of Middle English affective meditations in both prose and verse.”⁵⁴ More secular texts also gender pity as feminine. Susan Crane points out that, in many romances, pity is coded as a feminine trait that men can absorb. In her words, “Identifying pity, patience, and tenderness with women, even as it defines masculinity by opposition, prepares for an idea of masculinity that itself encompasses oppositional traits in subordinate relation to severity and decisiveness.”⁵⁵ Feelings of compassion and mercy were coded feminine in many medieval texts, but were nevertheless considered important to a proper devotional mindset for both men and women, and necessary to masculine governance of home and country. Pity’s moral worth lay in its ability to connect a person to God and to his fellow man.⁵⁶

The courtly mode of pity in medieval texts often connects men in a community of feeling, the basis of which is female death or suffering. L. O. Aranye Fradenburg shows how Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess* positions White’s death as the occasion for the formation of courtly sociality between the Black Knight and the dreamer, a sociality

⁵⁴ Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 18.

⁵⁵ Susan Crane, *Gender and Romance in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 23. Cf. Paul Strohm, *Hochon’s Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth Century Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 95-120, who observes that real and literary queens’ intercessory roles allowed kings to show mercy and still keep their reputations for strong, masculine governance.

⁵⁶ Sheila Delany, “Womanliness in the ‘Man of Law’s Tale,’” *Chaucer Review* 9, no. 1 (1974): 64, 70, suggests that Custance’s pitiable state makes her an “Everywoman,” and that her humiliation creates a community of the English subjects and reaffirms the value of hierarchy after the rebellions of the fourteenth century.

founded on tragedy and pity.⁵⁷ Classical heroines in the *Legend of Good Women* and other texts also connected readers to one another through feelings of compassion. The *Heroides*, from which Chaucer takes many of his legends, were school texts that encouraged young boys to empathize with classical women as equally subject to the whims of adult men. As adult readers, men may have remembered their childhood empathy and felt camaraderie with other men who also had the privilege of classical educations, in addition to feeling compassion for the heroines.⁵⁸ Similarly, the *Clerk's Tale* creates a community of readers in its appeal to laymen to pity Griselda, just as they would have felt an obligation to pity and protect female relatives and dependents.⁵⁹ Pity as a literary mode both addresses and creates communities of readers, especially masculine readers. Where the Sultan's desire for Custance limits her direct appeal to himself only, as a potential lover and husband, with some benefit possibly trickling down to the subjects in having a virtuous queen figure, the English people's pity for Custance unites them even before she catches King Alla's eye.

In contrast to Chaucer's other great pitiable heroine, Griselda, Custance elicits the pity of readers regardless of gender or rank. Where the *Clerk's Tale* calls up the need for

⁵⁷ L. O. Aranye Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 79-112.

⁵⁸ Marjorie Curry Woods, "Boys Will Be Women: Musings on Classroom Nostalgia and the Chaucerian Audience(s)," in *Speaking Images: Essays in Honor of V.A. Kolve*, ed. Robert Yeager and Charlotte C. Morse (Asheville, N.C.: Pegasus Press, 2001), 145-46. Although Woods suggests that the impulse to male community would have been stronger than the pull of pity, she does not rule out compassionate reactions to these texts.

⁵⁹ Nicole Nolan Sidhu, "Weeping for the Virtuous Wife," 177-208. At 180, Sidhu argues that Walter's cruelty toward Griselda "invites its lay male audiences to intervene imaginatively in the Walter-Griselda household as protectors and defenders of the quasi-saintly Griselda."

men to pity women in domestic situations much like their own, the *Man of Law's Tale* presents readers with situations far removed from everyday experience and open to the pity of all. Custance's noble rank, the geographical sweep of her travels, and the high rhetoric of the narrator's prayers and philosophical interventions put the *Man of Law's Tale* in a category approaching epic rather than domestic narrative. Moreover, the narrator imagines that readers both masculine and feminine will pity Custance.

Custance's own female coterie of friends, servants, and relatives models pity upon her departure from Rome when her father will not. Like the Trojan women at the fall of Troy, or Roman women during Hannibal's siege of the city, these women exhibit "tendre wepyng for pitee" in Custance's rooms (II.292). Feminine pity models the proper reading that the narrator begs of his readers. He even addresses specifically female readers to make this point: "O queenes, lyvyng in prosperitee, / Duchesses, and ye ladyes everichone, / Haveth som routhe on hire adversitee!" (II.652-4) Since there are in fact no queens or duchesses or "ladyes" in the high-born sense among the Canterbury pilgrims, this apostrophe emphasizes the transferability of feminine pity to any reader.⁶⁰ He asks readers or listeners,

Have ye nat seyn somtyme a pale face,
Among a prees, of hym that hath be lad
Toward his deeth, wher as hym gat no grace...

.....

So stant Custance, and looketh hire aboute. (II.645-7, 651)

These lines guide readers to tap into their lived experience in order to read Custance with pity, whether they are male or female. They also call up mental images of Christ on his

⁶⁰ *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. "ladi(e)" lists ten entries for the word, the first eight of which imply a woman of noble or genteel rank.

journey toward the cross, “a pale face, / Among a prees.” The narrator’s appeal to all readers to recall their pity for the falsely accused emphasizes that pity, while essentially feminine, can be adopted by anyone of either gender.

Characters within the tale who pity Custance model its efficacy for medieval readers as well. For these characters, the moral worth of pity in the *Man of Law’s Tale* lies in its ability to lead to conversion. Custance’s role as virtuous carrier of narrative is most efficacious in England, where the ruler and his subjects employ pity. Directly following the narrator’s appeals to his readers and to the “queenenes, ... Duchesses, and ... ladyes everichone,” he notes that Alla himself had great pity on Custance, and this pity leads Alla directly to the scripture.

This Alla kyng hath swich compassioun,
As gentil herte is fulfild of pitee,
That from his eyen ran the water down.
“Now hastily do fecche a book,” quod he,
“And if this knyght wol sweren how that she
This womman slow, yet wol we us avyse
Whom that we wole that shal been oure justise.” (II.659-65)

The immediacy of the king’s call for the book after his tearful contemplation of Custance clearly connects pity and devotion, as well as pity and good governance. Alla’s pity inspires him to seek the help of a higher authority, here named simply “a book” but that turns out to be the most authoritative Book of all, in making his judgment against Custance. That the king’s combination of pity and justice calls up the gospels reminds readers of the mercy and judgment of God himself. The scenes in England dramatize the workings of narratives of female suffering in eliciting pity and directing readers toward Christ and toward good governance. Pity succeeds where reputation and desire failed in Syria, planting the seeds for a Christian nation and a political relationship between

England and Rome that puts England squarely in the history of European empire. Pity is what allows England to become a Christian nation.

Custance's suffering and humility are integral to her ability to elicit pity and also facilitate the conversion of the English. She works upon their hearts much as a saint or a holy text might, proving to be "so diligent, withouten slouthe, / To serve and plesen everich in that place / That alle hir loven that looken in hir face" (II.530-2). Custance's humble servitude toward everyone inspires them to love her, especially Hermengyld, who "loved hire right as hir lyf" and was the first to convert in England (II.535). In addition to Custance's sad situation, her humility works to inspire both pity and love. Pity for Custance works in concert with Christ himself to convert the English. But Custance herself is so debased that she cannot even work the conversion and miracles that a saint would. Geraldine Heng notes that Custance's agency is much diminished in Chaucer's account, especially her lack of volition in converting the English. She does not exhibit the clear intent to "recruit" converts that Trevet's Constance shows.⁶¹ Custance's sorrow, devotion to Christ, and relationship with Hermengyld allow Christ, not the heroine, to convert Hermengyld:

Hermengyld loved hire right as hir lyf,
And Custance hath so longe sojourned there,
In orisouns, with many a bitter teere,
Til Jhesu hath converted thurgh his grace
Dame Hermengyld... (II.535-39)

The agency is divided between Custance and Christ. Custance's example prepares Hermengyld to receive Christ's grace, but does not actively work the conversion itself. Similarly, Custance encourages but does not directly work the miracle of healing the

⁶¹ Heng, *Empire of Magic*, 191, 196.

blind man. When the man commands Hermengyld to heal him, she hesitates, but Custance “made hire boold, and bad hire wirche / The wyl of Crist, as doghter of his chirche” (II.566-7). Custance’s power here is one of inspiration and teaching rather than direct action. Similarly, she teaches the constable the meaning of the miracle, inspiring his conversion as well (seemingly with more agency on her part this time): “And so ferforth she gan oure lay declare / That she the constable, er that it was eve / Converteth, and on Crist made hym bileve” (II.572-4). These last two quotations mimic the effects that a devotional text might have upon a reader – to make one bold, remind one of one’s position as part of the Church, and teach the story of Christ to inspire conversion. All of these effects are made possible by the love that the constable and Hermengyld have for Custance, a love that is rooted in pity and that leads toward grace and conversion. Interestingly, the use of the word “lay” here to indicate the story of the gospels points to the power of literature more generally. In Middle English, “lay” usually means a song of adventure or a lyric, even birdsong.⁶² Christ’s story becomes “oure lay,” a story that belongs to Christians in general and to the pilgrims in particular. The story of Christ is the intertext that lends Custance’s life, and the Man of Law’s story, their power.

The necessity of Custance’s humility to her conversionary and literary power reminds us that pity requires the debasement of the female body for its enactment. We have only to look to the non-pitiable women in the tale to see this dynamic at work. The narrator decries the villainous, powerful queens Sultanness and Donegild as women who

⁶² *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “lai”: “A short narrative poem of love, adventure, etc., to be sung and accompanied on instruments, especially the harp; [...] also, a tale; a song, lyric; the song of a bird.”

have lost her femininity.⁶³ The Sultanness is described as “feyned womman” (II.362), and Donegild as “mannysh” (II.782), before the narrator rethinks his epithet (perhaps not wishing to demean men as a group) and calls her “feendlych spirit” (II.783).⁶⁴ Dinshaw supposes that the wicked queens must be de-feminized to fit the Man of Law’s definition of womanhood as without agency, a necessary prerequisite of the patriarchal system of woman-exchange central to the tale.⁶⁵ I propose that this move also provides a counterpoint to exemplary womanliness, setting it in relief as necessarily humbled, debased, and in peril. The tale relies on Custance’s continued humiliation and geographical unmoored-ness for its exaltation of the newly Christian England. Custance can never rise to the level of acting queen – she suffers an attempted rape, near starvation, exile from her husband, and anonymity even after the conversion of Northumbria. Where Custance’s trials before her marriage are necessary to the Christianization of the kingdom, her continued suffering strikes us as superfluous, even cruel. I suggest that, in his presentation of mannish queens and a debased heroine, Chaucer also wants us to see the trope of the pitiable woman as a piece of the patriarchal system of reading and writing that should be questioned.

Nothing alerts us to the decidedly non-hagiographical nature of Custance’s debasement like her suicidal request upon washing up on England’s coast. Custance’s

⁶³ For more on the Man of Law’s treatment of the two wicked mothers-in-law, see Rodney Delasanta, “And of Great Reverence: Chaucer’s Man of Law,” *Chaucer Review* 5, no. 4 (1971): 288-310, and Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, 106-110.

⁶⁴ The Man of Law’s careful exclusion of the threatening queens from womanhood fits into the *Canterbury Tales*’s program of defining womanhood as a new category open to reinterpretation, which Tara Williams treats in *Inventing Womanhood: Gender and Language in Later Middle English Writing* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2011).

⁶⁵ Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, 106. I find Williams’s careful treatment of gendered power much more convincing.

first words to the constable are quite pitiable but verge on the heretical – she asks that he be merciful to her by killing her, “The lyf out of hir body for to twynne, / Hire to delivere of wo that she was inne” (II.517-18). Such a request would be out of place in a true saint’s life. Most saints revel in their suffering, which they see as glorifying God. As Frank observes of Chaucer’s version of the life of Saint Cecilia, saints exhibit “willing, even joyful, acceptance of the torments of martyrdom in witness of [their] faith’s truth and power.”⁶⁶ The aim of the narrative is not straightforwardly hagiographical, although many of the elements of hagiography are present; rather, the tale shows us the power of even non-saintly female debasement and hints at its cruelty.⁶⁷

As the tale insists on the humbling of its heroine, it worries the line between imperiled virtue and destroyed virtue. That line is located at the boundaries of the female body. While Custance’s body undergoes physical trial at sea and the dangers of near-starvation, it never suffers violation by torture or rape. The narrator insists that sex between Custance and her husband Alla does not affect her virtue. This insistence belies his worry about the humbling of a heroine whose virtue is so tied up in the body.

IV. Corrupted Messages: Donegild and the Dangers of Reading

Even though Chaucer shows discomfort with a tale whose moral center is the humbled, debased heroine, the forged letters in the tale reveal the dangers of reading and

⁶⁶ Frank, “The *Canterbury Tales* III: Pathos,” 148. On the other hand, Michael R. Paull, “The Influence of the Saint’s Legend Genre in the ‘Man of Law’s Tale,’” *Chaucer Review* 5, no. 3 (1971): 193 claims that saints’ lives and tales derived from them, like the *Man of Law’s Tale*, or what he calls “melodrama[s],” refuse empathy. Characters are allegorical exemplars, and the tale “is predetermined to illustrate, typologically, a God ordered, Christian universe.” I don’t agree that saints’ exemplarity makes them wholly without pathos, however; in fact, the power of many saints’ narratives lies in their (often outrageous) demands for readers’ pity.

⁶⁷ For full treatment of the tale’s hagiographical elements, see Paull, “The Influence,” 179-94.

writing when no traditional model of morality anchors the text. The agency of tale-telling is muddled in the description of the forged letters in England, just as the truth of the situation is muddled, calling into question who is responsible for tales and their effects. The letters show that circulation and the murky nature of medieval authorship can corrupt narrative, with devastating consequences.

Although most readers of the tale have put the blame for Custance's exile from England squarely on Donegild, the tale's rhetoric suggests that the messenger is equally at fault. The messenger admits that he should be carrying the first letter "with al the haste I may" (II.737), just before he stops for a night of binge-drinking and heavy sleeping, "as a swyn" (II.745), at Donegild's house. The messenger's clear understanding of his duties makes his failure all the more awful. On his return, the messenger again succumbs to drunkenness, and the narrative makes clear its condemnation of him in a full stanza that begins, "O messenger, fulfild of dronkenesse, / Strong is thy breeth, thy lymes faltren ay," and so on (II.771-2). The diatribe against drunkenness, emphasized by a marginal gloss that cites the *De Miseria*, shows that the messenger is the embodiment of this sin and largely to blame for what happens to Custance.⁶⁸ Unlike Custance, whose exemplarity gives her enough value that it negates the *contemptus mundi* genre, the messenger embodies the sinfulness and wretchedness that inspired the genre in the first place.

Of course, the narrative also condemns Donegild, but in less specific terms. She has shown "malice" and "tirannye" (II.779), and of course loses her femininity, but no marginal gloss supports a clear correlation between Donegild and a specific sin. The specifics about Donegild's actions are not revealed or not known. We, along with the

⁶⁸ See *Riverside Chaucer*, Explanatory Note to lines 771-77.

narrator and King Alla, assume that she has stolen the true letters and forged new ones of her own. But the agency is muddled, as the narrative describes the events without clearly giving us the details. “[S]tolen were his lettres” (II.744) on the first night, and the new “letter spak” (II.750) of Custance’s monstrosity. On the way back from Scotland, once the messenger is in a drunken stupor, “Eft were his lettres stolen everychon, / And countrefeted lettres in this wyse” (II.792-3). The descriptions here are in passive voice, making the exact nature of Donegild’s role in the forgery unclear, although we are assured a few lines later that “Donegild cast al this ordinance” (II.805). The precise role played by Donegild is perhaps unimportant to the hagiographical scheme of this part of the tale, but its disappearance from the grammar of these passages signals its relevance to the tale’s treatment of authorial agency. Although there is little doubt who is responsible for the forged letters, the tale’s rhetoric shows that literature almost always has multiple influences, or even multiple authors. If, in the course of circulation, a text can be coopted and ghost-authored by a “feendlych spirit,” how can readers rely on narratives to convey morality and truth? The easy answer is that only Christ’s narrative and tales that lead toward it can be trusted. The moral worth of extra-Biblical literature is in question. The unreliability of writing revealed in the letters to Alla undermines the trial scene’s triumphant vision of female exemplarity’s literary power.

Paradoxically, the letters cannot change the English people’s love and feelings of pity for Custance, even though they drive the narrative, and Custance, away from England. Rather than accepting Custance’s humility and suffering as proof of her virtue, as it seems everyone else in England has, Donegild sees her as “strange” (II.700). The first letter to Alla creates a narrative to that effect: “The lettre spak the queene delivered

was / Of so horrible a feendly creature,” and “The mooder was an elf, by aventure / Ycomen, by charmes or by sorcerie” (II.750-1, 754-5). The letter attempts to drag Custance back into the world of romance and “aventure” and out of the realm of exemplary narrative. It re-reads Custance, ignoring her virtue and vacating its authority to impose its own program of political expediency on the reader. But Alla does not immediately believe and act on this new narrative. Rather, he defers to Christ, saying, “Lord, welcome be thy lust and thy plesaunce; / My lust I putte al in thyn ordinaunce” (II.762-3) before refusing to condemn his wife or the “child, al be it foul or feir” (II.763). Alla thus enacts the most proper Christian reading by depending on Christ, the highest authority, to interpret the text of the letter. In response, Donegild learns her lesson and forges a second letter that claims Alla’s authority. This letter has the power to enact change, but, like the first letter, cannot change the hearts of its readers. The constable is constrained to obey what he can only interpret to be the King’s command, but his lament for Custance (II.810-18), along with the tears of “bothe yonge and olde in al that place” (II.820), makes clear that Donegild’s letter has only limited power. It cannot overturn the pity and love for Custance that have so inspired the entire kingdom toward Christianity. Nevertheless, the letter does accomplish its mission of getting rid of Custance, at least for a time. The fact that even forged letters have the power to create real-life changes in the world points out the danger of literature without a clear moral center and without properly attentive readers.

The tale’s explorations of the power and limitations of tales of exemplary feminine suffering suggest that Chaucer continued to find these types of narratives useful, albeit in limited ways. Even divorced somewhat from the tradition of classical female

virtue, Custance's tale has limited moral power, subject as it is to the vagaries of vernacularity – oral and manuscript transmission, and incorrect or inadequate reader response. The power of pity gave these medieval stories the ability to convey messages about morality and, as critics have shown the tale suggests, about other issues as well, including authorship, sexuality, politics, and economics. On the other hand, this power depends largely on the ways readers value the tale, a contingency that an author cannot control given the vagaries of circulation and human perspective. Chaucer continued his exploration of the value of different kinds of female exemplarity outside the classical tradition in other *Canterbury Tales*, including poignantly in the *Second Nun's Tale* and the *Clerk's Tale* (and staging a more vehement rejection of classical female virtue in the *Physician's Tale*), with varying conclusions, but certainly with the thought that exemplary women's stories continued to be powerful, if flawed, venues for thinking through ethical and literary problems.

Chapter Four – Reconceiving Faithfulness in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* Play

If the *Man of Law's Tale* plays with the idea of saintly faithfulness in the figure of Custance, hagiography addresses it directly. This chapter centers on the fifteenth century *Mary Magdalene* play, along with earlier sermons and hagiographies that treat the saint, to trace how some of the major themes Penelope and Custance provided to Chaucer and Gower worked in an alternative model of female faithfulness, separate from the classical poetic models in previous chapters. That similar conceptions of female faith and faithfulness might have relevance for hagiographic, as well as more “secular,” lay-centered literature, is the working hypothesis of this chapter. The play’s explicit dealings with the idea of faithfulness make it a uniquely fruitful place to interrogate the trope of female fidelity in an explicitly religious context. Like the English poems of Chaucer and Gower, the play addresses a lay audience in the vernacular, albeit a broader one (and a century later, in East Anglia); it also addresses the connection between the past (here, the Biblical past) and the medieval reader’s present. Mary Magdalene’s early struggles with faith and faithfulness emphasize her importance as a model for Christian conversion and penance, and reveal the interconnectedness of lay and religious modes of faithfulness. As Mary Magdalene moves from the Holy Land to Marseilles, from the ancient world to the medieval, she brings a model of female faithfulness that replaces, or at least revises, the romance relationship that the Queen and King of Marseilles maintain.

This chapter’s scope moves from the relatively insular poetry of fourteenth-century London to the public drama of fifteenth-century East Anglia, and makes a claim for fifteenth-century drama’s broader use of female faithfulness. Rather than focusing on the authority of the individual author, the play treats lay devotional authority in general,

and feminine devotion in particular. The play itself may be in some ways a response to the story of Custance and Penelope that applies it to the social world of lay life.

Mary Magdalene's swift fall into promiscuity makes her a kind of anti-Penelope. Rather than a static exemplar whose story lends itself to simplified moralization, Mary Magdalene is a dynamic figure whose struggles and triumphs come to stand for the lived experiences of medieval Christians attempting to live out their faith. The Digby *Mary Magdalene* play portrays two women, Mary Magdalene and the Queen of Marseilles, who negotiate and explore the facets of Christian, and especially female, faithfulness in the context of a medieval society with competing religious, social, and political values.

In the late Middle English *Mary Magdalene* play, the king of Marseilles, accompanied by his visibly pregnant queen, attempts to hire a ship to the Holy Land. The ship's captain questions the king's hastiness and besmirches the queen. He exclaims, "I trow, be my lyfe, / Thou hast stolllyn sum mannys wyffe! / Thou woldyst lede hyr owt of lond!"¹ This moment of comic relief, found in no other English versions of the legend, foregrounds the play's overriding concern with faithfulness in all its forms, most especially as lived by laywomen. The sailor assumes that a visibly pregnant woman would not undertake (or be allowed to undertake) a perilous sea journey, unless she were compelled by extraordinary or untoward circumstances. In this scene, the queen's body, marked so obviously by pregnancy that begs to be interpreted, is a crisis point for faithfulness. The sailor's assumptions raise the specter of unfaithful wives (and unsociable male behavior) at the beginning of the pair's miraculous pilgrimage, signaling

¹Donald C. Baker, John L. Murphy, and Louis Brewer Hall, eds., *The Late Medieval Religious Plays of Bodleian MSS Digby 133 and E Museo 160*, Early English Text Society 283 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), lines 1733-5. All further citations from the play will be parenthetical.

the importance of embodied faithfulness to their story. The sailor understands that the pregnant body on its pilgrimage goes outside social and physical bounds, but misinterprets its meaning as sinister. It is in fact the queen's faithfulness to both God and her husband that prompts her to undertake this pilgrimage, which is an expression of desire for baptism and desire to be with her husband. The result is a miraculous rescue and spirit-journey which bears witness to Mary Magdalene's power and the power of religious faith as expressed through the body and in coordination with sociological faithfulness. The queen models the possibility of this coordination, as well as its difficulty.

Another interpolation into the traditional narrative of Mary Magdalene's life and miracles likewise emphasizes the play's concern with the socially contextualized female body to its concept of faith and faithfulness. The scene in the tavern, a unique moment in the English narrative tradition that surrounds the saint, imagines Mary Magdalene's fall into sin. A figure called Curiosity woos Mary by asking her to dance. She initially replies with scorn: "Why, syr, wene ze þat I were a kelle [prostitute]?" (520).² She clearly recognizes the social and sexual danger of succumbing to a gallant like Curiosity.³ However, Curiosity's persistence convinces Mary to reinterpret her relationship to him, based on her fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of faithfulness. She reasons that

² Baker, Murphy, and Hall gloss "kelle" in their glossary as "prostitute" and note that its literal meaning is "a fishnet or a woman's cap." For the view of prostitutes in medieval England, see Ruth Mazo Karras, *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

³ Theresa Coletti, "'Curtesy doth it yow lere': The Sociology of Transgression in the Digby Mary Magdalene," *ELH* 71, no.1 (2004): 1-8, argues for the social nature of Mary Magdalene's sin and fall, pointing out that Curiosity is a traditional gallant figure who tricks women into relationships unsuited to their station. Coletti connects Mary Magdalene's social sin to the late medieval development of bourgeois society and its attendant anxiety about the status of unmarried women.

Curiosity is a man, and so should be obeyed: “a man at alle tymys beryt reverens” (533). Mary’s blind adherence to gender roles leads her to succumb: without consideration for Curiosity’s class or his degree of virtue, or indeed his alignment with any religious precepts, she yields to his wishes and is thus brought under the rule of the devil’s minions, including Lady Lechery. After giving in to Curiosity’s seduction, Mary promises to be faithful to him: “Thowe ze wyl go to þe wordys eynd, / I wol neuyr from yow wynd, / To dye for your sake” (544-6). Her instincts lead her toward faithfulness and submission, but not to the correct lord. Faithfulness to Curiosity is an oxymoron. The word itself implies an interest in all manner of people or things; the *MED* defines it as “idle or vain interest, esp. in worldly affairs.”⁴ Mary Magdalene’s faithfulness to Curiosity is a faithfulness to idleness, to variance, and to a manic delight in the world and its pleasures. Mary has misplaced her feminine obedience and faithfulness, which should be directed toward God and authorized male protectors, like a father or legitimate husband. Mary Magdalene falls because she misunderstands where to place her faith. Her mistake is both social and theological.

These two moments are part of the play’s larger project to show the importance of faithfulness, especially female faithfulness, to the conjunction of sociopolitical life and Christianity. These cruxes emphasize the interconnectedness of human and divine relationships. The women’s bodies work as signs of social and religious fidelity (or lack thereof). To read them properly, the play insists that we take into account both social and religious aspects of faith. I suggest that Mary Magdalene and the queen presented important validation to medieval audiences of their own attempts to combine religious

⁴ *Middle English Dictionary*, s. v. “curiousite.”

and social desire. The play shows a combination of devotion to God and society that would have given audiences, and especially laywomen, a fairly radical paradigm for thinking about their own lives as holy, and perhaps even comparable to female monastic life. The Queen of Marseilles especially offers a model for lay devotion that achieves both familial and religious fulfillment.

The play's treatment of lay faith and faithfulness extends beyond the familial to include the political aspects of lay life. The importance of faithfulness in relationships between lords and their subordinates looms large in several scenes, most notably the first "boastful ruler" scenes, unique and seemingly incongruous additions to the play. I argue that the play's focus on faithfulness should inform our reading of these scenes. As I will show, the addition of these scenes makes more sense when we take into account Mary Magdalene's rhetoric to and about Christ, which paints him as a kind and faithful ruler over his subjects and God as king whose good work of creation merits allegiance. The Digby play puts both women and men in subordinate roles to Christ, but it also suggests that, like Christ, men must also be good rulers over their subjects. Faithfulness goes both ways.

This chapter asks how the Digby play engages with the tradition of texts surrounding Mary Magdalene to develop its ideas about faithfulness and gender. I argue that the Digby play engages faithful Mary Magdalene of medieval hagiographical and homiletic texts to present a view of medieval faith that is compatible with lay life. The play builds on a tradition that depicts the sinner-saint as uniquely faithful to Christ. English sermons and hagiographies from the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries extol Mary Magdalene as the most faithful follower of Christ, surpassing all but the Virgin

Mary in her capacity for steadfast love and faith. Gregory the Great's influential sermon on Mary Magdalene at Christ's tomb emphasizes the saint's loving persistence in seeking Christ there.

etiam discipulis recedentibus, non recedebat. Exquirebat quem non invenerat, flebat inquirendo, et amoris sui igne succensa, ejus quem ablatum credidit ardebat desiderio. Unde contigit ut eum sola tunc videret, quae remansit ut quaereret, quia nimirum virtus boni operis perseverantia est...

(When even the disciples departed from the sepulchre, she did not depart. She sought for him whom she had not found, weeping as she searched; being inflamed with the fire of her love, she burned with desire for him who she believed had been taken away. So it happened that she who stayed behind to seek him was the only one who saw him. Surely the essence of every good work is perseverance...) ⁵

For Gregory, the Magdalene's faithful persistence at the tomb is a "good work."

Medieval writers took up the idea that Mary Magdalene was an exemplar of faithfulness to Christ. Bokenham's narrative, for example, claims that the saint was rewarded for her perseverance at the tomb with the first sighting of the resurrected Christ.⁶ Mary Magdalene embodies the paradox of the dissolute sinner who becomes the most beloved and most devoted follower of Jesus. She exemplifies a particular view of femininity that sermons and other texts on the Magdalene bring to the fore – inherently weak and prone to sin, yet also capable of more steadfast love and devotion than its masculine counterpart. Femininity accomplishes much when it is faithful because it overcomes a more sinful nature, according to this view. Feminine faithfulness therefore seems nearly

⁵ Gregory the Great, *Homilia 25*, in *XL homiliarum in Evangelia libri duo*, ed. J. P. Migne, in *Patrologia Latina*, 221 vols., 76, 1544-45 (Paris, 1844-1900); translated in Gregory the Great, *Forty Gospel Homilies*, trans. Dom David Hurst, Cistercian Studies Series 123 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 188.

⁶ Osbern Bokenham, *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, ed. Mary S. Serjeantson, EETS o.s. 206 (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), 156: "And for-as-myche as she so parseueraunth was / In abydyng whan opir wentyn a-weye, / Therefore she had þat special grace / That first of alle owre lord she seye, / Apperyng, as hym had lyst to pleye..."

miraculous; the play emphasizes this point. Mary Magdalene and the Queen of Marseilles model the conjunction of feminine weakness with miraculous strength of faith, as well as the combination of faith in Christ with social, political, and marital faithfulness.

The anonymously-authored *Mary Magdalene* drama survives in only one manuscript, Oxford Bodleian Library Digby MS 133. The manuscript was produced between 1515 and 1530, but the play's language suggests it was composed in the late 1400s in East Anglia.⁷ The play was part of a larger flowering of female-centric religious thought and worship in the region, and Mary Magdalene herself figures in many of the works that came out of this movement, including Julian of Norwich's *Revelations*, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, and Osbern Bokenham's *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*.⁸ The play is lengthy and ranges through allegorical, Biblical, and legendary scenes, incorporating liturgical language and farce into the traditional narrative of Mary's fall, conversion, ministry, and death. Many studies of the play focus on its sprawling geography and staging, and on the feminized version of European conversion history that it proffers.⁹ Theresa Coletti has argued that the play engages late medieval debates about women's spiritual authority and devotional participation. For Coletti, the play suggests

⁷ Theresa Coletti, *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints: Theater, Gender, and Religion in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 36.

⁸ Coletti, *Mary Magdalene*, 5, gives a fuller summary of the art and literature of this movement.

⁹ See, for example, D.K. Smith, "'To passe the see in shortt space': Mapping the World in the Digby *Mary Magdalen*," *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 18 (2005): 193-214, who argues that the play reflects the new geographical sensibility made possible by travel and trade in the late Middle Ages; Victor I. Scherb, "Worldly and Sacred Messengers in the Digby *Magdalene*," *English Studies* 1 (1992): 1, who argues for the unity of the play's subject, "which is nothing less than the Christianization of the European world;" and Scott Boehnen, "The Aesthetics of 'Sprawling' Drama: The Digby *Mary Magdalene* as Pilgrims' Play," *JEGP* 98, no. 3 (1999): 328, who claims that the play's "implicit question" is "what constitutes a spiritually correct pilgrimage?" Joanne Findon, *Lady, Hero, Saint: The Digby Play's Mary Magdalene* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2011), 160, reads the play optimistically through a feminist lens as "challeng[ing] gender stereotypes and the relationship between center and margin, enclosure and liberation."

that “personal knowledge, interior will, and individual experience,” all gendered feminine by medieval thinkers in opposition to the male authority of scripture and the priesthood, play important roles in individual spiritual devotion.¹⁰ Mary Magdalene’s and the queen’s negotiations of social and spiritual faithfulness fall into Coletti’s individualist categories. Coletti connects the play’s vision of feminine spiritual power to the rhetoric of a growing group of female mystics in the late Middle Ages, who drew attention to “ambivalences within orthodoxy itself as well as the inherent contradictions of a church whose hegemonic claims to universal truth and clerical privilege officially excluded female experience and authority even as its foundational narratives made an important space for feminine participation.”¹¹ The play “capitalizes on the propensity of late medieval holy women to invoke Mary Magdalene’s patronage and example to authorize their own spiritual impulses and acts.”¹² I argue that the play also engages lay life, especially lay women’s lives, in its treatment of social and spiritual faith. While the Church remains present in the play in the figure of Saint Peter and the priest who gives Mary Magdalene the eucharist before her death, it takes less precedence than in other versions of her *vita*. Bishop Maximin, who usually accompanies the saint to Marseilles and baptizes the royal couple, does not appear in the play at all, for example. The play prioritizes lay experience and individual will, which, as I will argue, manifests in its treatment of faithful action.

We can situate the play in its time and place even more fully by comparing it to the larger tradition of devotion to Mary Magdalene in England. Additions and alterations to the tradition reveal the play’s unique concerns, especially with the problem of living

¹⁰ Coletti, *Mary Magdalene*, 23.

¹¹ Coletti, *Mary Magdalene*, 128.

¹² Coletti, *Mary Magdalene*, 129.

out faith and faithfulness in lay life. The saint must have loomed large in the imaginations of English worshippers in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. By the end of the Middle Ages she had nearly two hundred English churches dedicated to her. She was frequently depicted in stained glass windows, on church walls, and in manuscript paintings, and was the first female figure to have a college named for her at Cambridge.¹³ Middle English and Latin sermon manuscripts from Durham to Winchester contain sermons on Mary Magdalene,¹⁴ and hagiographies from the thirteenth century onward chronicle the saint's story.¹⁵ A tradition of saint plays spanned most of England as well, especially in the

¹³ Sherry L. Reames, ed., *Middle English Legends of Women Saints*, TEAMS Middle English Texts Series (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2003), 52; see also Clifford Davidson, "The Middle English Saint Play and Its Iconography," in *The Saint Play in Medieval Europe*, ed. Clifford Davidson (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1986), 72 for the primacy of the Magdalene in medieval religious culture.

¹⁴ Holly Johnson, "The Imaginative Landscape of an English Monk-Precacher: Robert Rypon and the Court of Memory," *Mediaeval Studies* 75 (2013): 179-80 gives background information on Robert Rypon, who preached in and around Durham in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries and composed several Latin sermons that focus on the saint; Siegfried Wenzel, *Verses in Sermons: Fasciculus Morum and its Middle English Poems* (Cambridge, Mass: Medieval Academy of America, 1978), 16-25, details that manuscripts of the *Fasciculus Morum*, a manual for preachers that features Mary Magdalene, are listed as present all over England as far south as Winchester; comparison of the sermons that feature Mary Magdalene listed in the index of *A Repertorium of Middle English Prose Sermons*, ed. V.M. O'Mara and Suzanne Paul (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), vol. 4, 2842-43, with the *Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English*, vol. 1, ed. Angus McIntosh, M.L. Samuels, and Michael Benskin (New York: Aberdeen University Press, 1986), reveals the manuscripts have provenances as far flung as Somerset and Yorkshire.

¹⁵ Carl Horstmann, ed., *The Early South English Legendary, or Lives of Saints: MS Laud 108*, EETS o.s. 87 (London: N. Trübner and Co., 1887; reprint, Millwood, New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1973), xiii, notes that the Magdalene's story in Bodleian Library MS Laud 108 predates the rest of the saints' lives in the volume. The Laud manuscript itself is the oldest of all the extant *South English Legendary* copies, dating from around 1285-1295, or roughly the same time that Jacobus de Voragine composed the *Legenda Aurea* (viii). Many sermons and hagiographies take their cues from the *Legenda Aurea*: Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, ed. Giovanni Maggioni, 2nd ed. (Tavarnuzze: SISMEL – Edizione del Galluzzo, 1998), and Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). Later versions of Mary Magdalene's life include a new version of the saint's story in other manuscripts of the *South English Legendary*, Caxton's version of the story, after Jacobus de Voragine, which appears in his *Golden Legend* and was printed and circulated widely, and Bokenham's version of the Life. Charlotte D'Evelyn and Anna J. Mill, eds., *The South English Legendary, edited from CCCC MS 145 and British Museum MS Harley 2277, with variants from Bodley Ashmole 43 and British Museum MS Cotton Julius D. IX*, vol. 1, EETS 235 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956); David A. Mycoff, *A Critical Edition of the Legend of Mary Magdalena from Caxton's Golden Legende of 1483* (Austria: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1985).

fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, though none were surely as elaborate as the Digby *Mary Magdalene*.¹⁶

Katherine Jansen has looked to sermon literature as a fruitful source for how the Magdalene was presented in medieval culture. As she points out, “Sermons ... had the ability both to shape popular opinion and to reflect it,” and were “the vehicle which transported the contents of the gospels to ordinary people.”¹⁷ Sabine Volk-Birke argues that sermons are even more important to our view of late medieval piety and devotion than hagiographies like Bokenham’s. In her words, the sermon was

the most important and influential medium of religious instruction and it was a major factor in medieval orality. It retold and explained the gospel, it gave catechetical and moral instruction, it exhorted, threatened and promised, and pointed out a Christian way of life to the congregation, using emotional as well as rational techniques of persuasion.¹⁸

While sermons and religious drama differed in rhetoric, their aims were often the same – present an audience with a biblical or hagiographic narrative whose example is spiritually edifying.¹⁹ Pedagogical rhetoric in the sermons tied Biblical lessons to everyday life; in a

¹⁶ Davidson, “Middle English Saint Play,” 31-71, lists plays that appear in extant records from York to Lydd in Kent, Chester to Colchester, spanning most of the country as far west as Morbath in Devon. Catherine Sanok, *Her Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints’ Lives in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 145, points out that the Digby *Magdalene* and *Conversion of Saint Paul* are the only extant saints’ plays in English, and they are “surely too elaborate to be typical of the genre.”

¹⁷ Katherine Ludwig Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 7-8. Where Jansen uses mostly Italian sources, supplemented by some French manuscripts, I focus on English sources. Many of the twelfth and thirteenth-century sermons cited by Jansen would have been known to and would have influenced English sermon writers and preachers in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, but to trace this influence is not my project here.

¹⁸ Sabine Volk-Birke, *Chaucer and Medieval Preaching: Rhetoric for Listeners in Sermons and Poetry* (Tübingen: Narr, 1991), 42-3.

¹⁹ Alexandra F. Johnston, “Didacticism in the York Cycle: ‘In Worde, In Werke,’” in *Drama and Pedagogy in Medieval and Early Modern England*, ed. Elisabeth Dutton and James McBain, *Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature* 31 (Tübingen: Narr, 2015), 38, points out that the York plays were also “part [...] of the didactic campaign to educate the laity in the stories and doctrines of the faith.” I suggest that most religious drama of the period has this aim.

similar way, the *Mary Magdalene* drama's inclusion of psychomachic or allegorical scenes suggests to audiences that Mary's struggles are also their own. The play, like the *Legenda Aurea*, indicates that Mary's wealth, her sorrow over her father's death, and the weakness of femininity lead to the saint's fall into sin. However, it also adds that on an abstracted, spiritual level, the culprits are the ability of Flesh (tied to femininity), World, and Satan to exploit humanity's blind spots. These three forces are traditionally the principal spiritual enemies of mankind.²⁰ Mary's struggles against them reflect the universal struggle of all Christians to live faithfully. Mary Magdalene's connection to lay Christian life surpassed that of more esoteric saints. As Clifford Davidson points out, Mary "was closely associated with the idea of the Church itself. As such, she was seen as an exemplar of the Christian life in its ideal form, providing a pattern for all to follow in movement from a fallen state to penitence and then to carefully introspective contemplation." This connection becomes especially pertinent in the Digby play, which calls for multiple stages probably surrounding the audience and including action that moves between them. In a way, Mary Magdalene "may in the end be said to encompass the members of the audience as the action of the play, performed on the East Anglian place-and-scaffold stage, may in turn have seemed physically to encompass them."²¹

²⁰ Eric G. Stanley, "The Devil, the World, and the Flesh, and the Politics of Medieval and Modern Understanding," in *Texte et Contexte: littérature et histoire de l'Europe médiévale*, ed. Marie-Françoise Alamichel and Robert Braid (Paris: Houdiard, 2011), 37, traces them back at least as far as a homily in the 12th/13th century manuscript Cotton Vespasian A. xxii, which expounds upon Ephesians 6:11 (*Induite uos armatura dei*): "Ælc cristen man, anon se stepð up of ðe funte, wer he ifulled his ipicches, he madeð him þri ifon... Se forme is se deofol & his igeng; se oðer þes middennard. Se þridde is we nieh þe cristen men, þat is his azon flesch" (Every Christian, at once as he steps up from the font, where he is baptized clean of his sins, makes for himself three foes... The first is the Devil and his host; the second, this earth. The third is very close to the Christian, that is, his own flesh.) Stanley quotes the Old English from Richard Morris, ed. and trans., *Old English Homilies and Homiletic Treatises* (*Sawles warde, and þe wohunge of Ure Lauerd: Ureisuns of Ure Louerd and of Ure Lefdi, &c.*) of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries, EETS o.s. 34 (London: N. Trübner, 1868), 241-3.

²¹ Davidson, "Middle English Saint Play," 71, 97.

Further elucidating the play's spiritual and pedagogical aims, Chester N. Scoville suggests the purpose of saintly personae in dramas was "to unite the community of the audience in its desire for holy living."²² For Scoville, Mary's main function in the play is that of a preacher whose *ethos*, or virtuous character, authorizes her words and allows them to achieve the conversion of others within the play, as well as to inspire audience members to ethical action.²³ I argue that the play's emphasis on fidelity forms an important component of the play's overall pedagogical message.²⁴

I. Sermons

Sermons present unique interpretive difficulties that can make comparison to other textual artifacts precarious.²⁵ For example, the precise relationship between a manuscript text of a sermon and the actual sermon that was performed can rarely be deduced. Some sermons preserved in Latin indicate that they were preached in the vernacular, and whether a preacher wrote down his sermon before the performance of it, or afterward, perhaps with embellishments and corrections, or whether it was written down by an audience member, we rarely know.²⁶ Pinning down a sermon's audience

²² Chester N. Scoville, *Saints and the Audience in Middle English Biblical Drama* (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 7.

²³ Scoville, *Saints and the Audience*, 31 and 53-54.

²⁴ The play's connection to the liturgy is a separate avenue of inquiry worth exploring. The drama stages a pagan priest's mock-liturgy, and William Tydeman, ed., *The Medieval European Stage, 500-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 85, notes that Mary Magdalene is at the heart of the foundational *quem quaeritis* liturgical re-enactment during Easter services, including those performed by nuns and priests at Barking Abbey in the late fourteenth century.

²⁵ L.J. Bataillon, "Approaches to the Study of Medieval Sermons," *Leeds Studies in English* 11 (1980): 19-35, sets out many of the issues sermons present to the historian and literary scholar.

²⁶ Bataillon, "Approaches," 21-23, details some of the difficulties of sermon authorship, language, and textuality.

often poses problems as well. Although it seems logical that Latin sermons would be meant for clergy, who were more likely to understand them, they may also have been heard by lay audience members.²⁷ Robert Rypon reveals such a scenario when he laments that lay listeners take pleasure in a preacher's reprimands of the clergy: "si predicator peccata ecclesiasticorum publice reprehendat, tunc rident laici, non tamen quia reprehendit, set quia ecclesiastici sunt rei in eisdem peccatis quibus et ipsi... ubi tamen de ratione verecundarentur et dolerent tam de sua quam de proximorum tali miseria" (when a preacher publicly reprimands the sins of the clergy, then the laity laugh, yet not because he reprimands, but because the clergy are guilty of the same sins that they also are... yet rationally they should be ashamed and grieve both for their own wretchedness and the wretchedness of their neighbor).²⁸ A sermon's audience often depended on the occasion and locale, as well. Sermons could be performed at various types of gatherings, including at universities; during a preacher's visitations to chapels and churches; during synods, or official meetings of religious houses; during specifically set-aside Sunday afternoon preaching appointments; and most frequently during the Mass. The audiences for each of these occasions would have varied, but many of the sermons would have been

²⁷ Siegfried Wenzel, *Latin Sermon Collections from Later Medieval England: Orthodox Preaching in the Age of Wyclif* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 240-52, treats the problem of deducing whether particular sermons' audiences would have been lay, clerical, or mixed. At 244-45, he warns that even sermons preached to the clergy "were in fact meant to serve as models of what and how parish priests should preach in their parishes, so that even a good many pieces directed to "Reverendi" can be taken to reflect an intended preaching *ad populum*." See also G.R. Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England: an Introduction to Sermon Manuscripts of the Period, c. 1350-1450* (Cambridge: University Press, 1926), 150.

²⁸ London, British Library, Harley MS 4894, fol. 174v; all translations and transcriptions of this manuscript, unless otherwise noted, are from Holly Johnson's forthcoming edition of Rypon's sermons, Dallas Medieval Texts and Translations Series (Louvain, Belgium: Peeters Publishers). Many thanks to Holly for allowing me to access her work in progress.

witnessed by lay and religious people alike.²⁹ The difficulties of language and audience complicate the picture of devotion to the Magdalene that sermons present, but I argue that correlations between sermons and other devotional artifacts reveal that there was more cultural interchange between the clergy and laity than has been recognized, and between educated and simple preachers. Symbols and ideas set forth in complex Latin sermons could have filtered down to the educated laity through sermons composed and given in the parishes by clerics who had heard them. Just as Ruth Mazo Karras suggests that John Bromyard's preaching manual, "as transmitted by preachers, helped construct the mental world of Chaucer, of Margery Kempe, and of the people who underwent the demographic and social changes of the post-plague century,"³⁰ so I suggest the Latin and vernacular sermons of late medieval preachers inflected how laypeople understood Mary Magdalene as an exemplar of faithfulness.

One relatively transparent preacher and his sermons may give a helpful picture of the relevance of sermons to everyday life for many people in England in the later Middle Ages. Thomas Brinton's sermons should be considered alongside the Digby *Mary Magdalene* and Mirk's Middle English sermons as important texts affecting lay piety in the late Middle Ages. Brinton, a Benedictine bishop and important figure in the politics of late fourteenth century England, wrote several sermons for the Magdalene's feast day

²⁹ Wenzel, *Latin Sermon Collections*, 227-310. Many vernacular sermons are quite short and simple narratives and were certainly given during Mass. Other sermons, especially Latin ones but also a few in the vernacular, are longer and more theologically complex. These could have been given at universities, or perhaps during the afternoon sermon time as described by H. Leith Spencer, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1993), 71-73.

³⁰ Ruth Mazo Karras, "Gendered Sin and Misogyny in John of Bromyard's 'Summa Predicantium,'" *Traditio* 47 (1992): 257. John Bromyard's fourteenth-century collection of sermon exempla survives in several manuscripts and early printed editions. For more on Bromyard and the *Summa*, see Karras, "Gendered Sin," 235, Owst, *Preaching in the Middle Ages* 224 ff., and Leonard E. Boyle, "The Date of the *Summa predicantium* of John Bromyard," *Speculum* 48 (1973): 533-37.

that are extant in the manuscript collection of his homilies. The circumstances of the preaching of these sermons provide a glimpse of clerical and lay devotion in late fourteenth-century England that improves our understanding of medieval piety, especially piety surrounding Mary Magdalene.

Thomas Brinton's involvement in the political matters of his day is reflected in many of his sermons, and suggests that his influence as an orator may have given his ideas, including those about feminine exemplarity, currency that ran beyond the confines of London or his own parish in Rochester.³¹ Brinton was a monk at Norwich and probably spent time at the pope's court before his appointment as bishop of Rochester, some thirty miles from London, in 1373.³² He was a figure of some importance at court and in parliament from 1376 to 1382, possibly as a preacher and confessor at the courts of Edward III and Richard II, certainly as a hearer of parliamentary petitions and member of various committees, a participant at the trial of the Peasants' Revolt rebels in 1381, and a member of the council that condemned Wyclif's heresies in 1382.³³ Brinton's activities suggest that he had frequent contact with many of the most influential lay and religious officials in late fourteenth century England. Moreover, Brinton seems to have maintained ties to his home region of Norwich, the very region that produced plays like the Digby *Magdalene* some decades later. For example, Brinton arbitrated a lawsuit between two Norwich families in 1374, he employed Norfolk men in his household, and he left a considerable portion of his money to the religious establishments at Norwich

³¹ Sister Mary Aquinas Devlin, introduction to *The Sermons of Thomas Brinton, Bishop of Rochester (1373-1389)*, 2 vols., ed. Sister Mary Aquinas Devlin (London: Offices of the Royal Historical Society, 1954), 1.xxi-xxxii.

³² Devlin, introduction to *The Sermons of Thomas Brinton*, 1. xiii.

³³ Devlin, introduction to *The Sermons of Thomas Brinton*, 1. xiv-xvi.

cathedral.³⁴ His views on Mary Magdalene were part of the religious culture that produced the Digby *Mary Magdalene*.

Although Devlin assumes that Latin sermons like Brinton's would have addressed mainly clerical audiences, historical evidence suggests that laypeople could also have attended Brinton's sermons. Writers like Chaucer and Gower show that religious texts had currency beyond the prelacy and its Latin body of work. The evidence points toward a mixed audience for Brinton's Mary Magdalene sermons, and suggests that scholars ought to consider the ways in which drama, hagiography, and sermons intersect. I propose that the audience for sermons like Brinton's, and probably some of Robert Rypon's visitation sermons as well, would have included laymen and women.³⁵

The manuscript that remains of Brinton's sermons, MS Harley 3760, indicates that its sermons were all preached between 1373 and 1383. The sermons dedicated to Mary Magdalene were preached on her feast day, July 22, at the college at Cobham, about three miles from Rochester.³⁶ Sir John de Cobham founded the college, "a monastery in miniature" originally supporting five priests, in 1362, and dedicated it to

³⁴ Devlin, introduction to *The Sermons of Thomas Brinton*, 1. xvii.

³⁵ Robert Rypon was an Oxford-educated monk who served in various capacities, including as Almoner and Subprior, for the Benedictine priory at Durham between 1381 and 1422. He was sent several times on visitations to the Convent's countryside churches in the region, and these trips often included preaching duties. He also preached frequently at the priory itself, and his audiences there often included laity as well as monks. David Rollason and Lynda Rollason, eds., *The Durham "Liber Vitae": London, British Library, MS Cotton Domitian A. VII: Edition and Digital Facsimile with Introduction, Codicological, Prosopographical and Linguistic Commentary, and Indexes*, Vol. 3 (London: British Library, 2007), entry C.985, p. 292-93; see also A.B. Emden, *A Biographical Register of the University of Oxford to A.D. 1500*, Vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955-57), 1618; and other works cited in Johnson, "Imaginative Landscape." As Johnson, 180-81, points out, Rypon's service record and the documentation that survives of his many sermons reveal that Rypon was well-trusted by his colleagues, and the well-organized, beautiful manuscript in which Rypon's sermons are preserved, British Library Harley 4894, suggests that "Rypon [...] had a reputation amongst his contemporaries as the priory's finest preacher."

³⁶ Devlin, introduction to *Sermons of Thomas Brinton*, 1. xviii-xix.

Mary Magdalene.³⁷ The spiritual purpose of the college was to provide for “perpetual post-obit intercession” that would lessen the purgatorial suffering of the souls of Cobham family members.³⁸ I suggest that a secondary purpose for the college was to contribute to the spiritual lives of all members of the surrounding community. Devlin proposes that bishop Brinton preached in Latin, seemingly only to the chantry clergy,³⁹ but it seems unlikely that Brinton would have been speaking to an audience of only five men.⁴⁰ As bishop he might have drawn a crowd of clerics from surrounding establishments, including his own cathedral at Rochester. A crowd of laypeople seems just as likely. The people living in the surrounding area saw the chapel as important to their devotional lives, as evidenced by the fact that villagers of Cobham gave money to complete the chapel after John Cobham’s death. Laypeople in Cobham like Elena James, who in 1436 gave 6s. 8d. “for the making of stalls in the church,” clearly saw the college chapel as part of their community and would surely have visited the site.⁴¹

Moreover, papal indulgences would have encouraged laypeople to visit the chapel on important feast days, especially that of Mary Magdalene, for whom the chapel was named. The pope granted indulgences to people who visited the chantry on five separate occasions.⁴² For example, in 1366 a papal letter decreed “Relaxation, during ten years, of

³⁷ Nigel Saul, *Death, Art, and Memory in Medieval England: The Cobham Family and their Monuments, 1300-1500* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 43.

³⁸ Saul, *Death, Art, and Memory*, 42.

³⁹ Devlin, introduction to *Sermons of Thomas Brinton*, 1. xx.

⁴⁰ Saul, *Death, Art, and Memory*, 44, points out that the original foundation of the chantry allowed for five clerics, and was increased only in the years after 1389.

⁴¹ Saul, *Death, Art, and Memory*, 54, calls the village people’s donations a “communal endeavor.”

⁴² “Colleges: Cobham,” *A History of the County of Kent: Volume 2*, ed. William Page (London: Victoria County History, 1926), 231-232. British History Online. Web. 25 August 2015. <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/kent/vol2/pp231-232>. Papal letters decreeing indulgences for visiting the chantry chapel were issued in 1364, 1366, 1367, 1391, and 1405. See *Calendar of Papal Registers*

a year and forty days of enjoined penance to penitents who on the principal feasts of the year and on the feast of St. Mary Magdalen, and of a hundred days to those who on certain of the said feast days, visit and give alms to the parish and collegiate church of St. Mary Magdalen, Cobham, in the diocese of Rochester,” and again in 1367 a proclamation granted “Relaxation, during ten years, of a hundred days of enjoined penance to penitents who on the principal feasts of the year visit the collegiate church of St. Mary Magdalen, Cobham, in the diocese of Rochester, founded by John de Cobeham [sic], knight.”⁴³ The eleven years during which these indulgences were in effect overlap significantly with the period of Brinton’s own preaching there. It seems likely that local pilgrims would have attended Brinton’s sermons, and that the educated among them would even have understood his Latin, if indeed he preached in Latin at all. As a brief glance through the pages of the *Calendar of Papal Registers* shows, indulgences of this type were quite ordinary. So were lay visitations to devotional sites other than their own village churches or parish cathedrals. Robert W. Shaffern explains, “most medieval pilgrimages consisted of short journeys to local shrines and churches.” This type of devotional travel made for “a treasured, convenient, and safe pilgrimage, and offered the laity more participation in the annual rhythms of the liturgy.”⁴⁴ A site like the college chapel at Cobham, named for one of the most popular saints of the later English Middle Ages, must surely have drawn devotees from all over Kent. Those who listened to Brinton’s sermons on the feast days

Relating to Great Britain and Ireland, vol. 4, 1362-1404, ed. W H Bliss and J A Twemlow (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1902), 42, 61, 62, 396, and *Calendar of Papal Registers*, Vol. 6, 27.

⁴³ “Regesta 253: 1363-1364,” *Calendar of Papal Registers*, vol. 4, 36-47.

⁴⁴ Robert W. Shaffern, *The Penitents' Treasury: Indulgences in Latin Christendom, 1175-1375* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2007), 57.

of Mary Magdalene would encounter an interpretation of the saint's applicability to Christian life that emphasized her outstanding love and her penitence.

Late medieval English sermons tend to emphasize Mary Magdalene as a model of Christian penitence and penance, especially through her weeping.⁴⁵ These sermons also privilege the Magdalene as an outstanding example of faithfulness, and many of them, like the Digby play, tie this faithfulness to her gender. For example, Thomas Brinton explains several reasons why a woman was chosen as the messenger of Christ's resurrection.

Sexus muliebris fuit Christo deuocior quam virilis probatur. Viris Christum blasphemantibus mulier eum laudauit dicens *Beatus venter* qui te portauit et cetera. *Luce II*. Viris Christum ad crucem ducentibus mulieres lamentabantur. *Luce 23*. Viris Christum crucifigentibus et apostolis fugientibus fides ecclesie in mulieribus stetit. Verum dictum est Magdalene, *Fides tua te saluam fecit. Vade in pace*.

(It is proven that the female gender was more devoted to Christ than the male. When men were blaspheming Christ, a woman praised him, saying, '*Blessed is the womb* that carried you,' etc. (Luke 11) When men were leading Christ to the cross, women were uttering cries of grief (Luke 23). When men were crucifying Christ and the apostles were fleeing, faithful Church stood firm in women. Truly it is said about Magdalene, *Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.*)⁴⁶

The idea that Mary's steadfastness earned her the first vision of the resurrected Christ is not unique to Brinton (cf., for example, Spofford's sermon on Mary Magdalene).⁴⁷

⁴⁵ See, for example, Thomas Brinton, *The Sermons of Thomas Brinton, Bishop of Rochester (1373-1389)*, ed. Sister Mary Aquinas Devlin (London: Offices of the Royal Historical Society, 1954), 1:188, who explains, "sic est Magdalena exemplar penitencie ceteris peccatoribus ne desperent" (thus is Magdalene exemplar of penitence for the rest of sinners, lest they despair), and Saara Nevanlinna, ed., *The Northern Homily Cycle: The Expanded Version in MSS Harley 4196 and Cotton Tiberius E vii*, Mémoires de la Société Néophilologique de Helsinki, vol. 43 (Helsinki: Société Néophilologique, 1972-84), 126, ln. 19677-8, a sermon on Mary's appearance at the Pharisee's feast, which includes a lengthy section titled in the manuscript *exposicio fletis Magdalene* and declares that "Hir teres and hir sare wepeinges / Vs to ensauple of penance bringes."

⁴⁶ Brinton, *Sermons*, 1:188. The word *muliebris* appears as *mulierbris* in Devlin's edition.

⁴⁷ Veronica O'Mara, *Four Middle English Sermons: Edited from British Library MS Harley 2268* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2002), 115: "als þat owre of hys dede, qwen all oper disciplys and apostelys of Cryst went away, scho byrnyd in hys loue and bade þere styllle. And þefore, als þe gospels

However, Brinton goes further to imply that womankind has a greater capacity for faithfulness than men. Each example he gives pits unfaithful or unbelieving men against steadfast and faith-filled women. In Brinton's sermon, feminine faithfulness serves as an example that men should aspire to.

II. Mary Magdalene and Feminine Sinfulness

The Digby play takes up the possibility of superior feminine faithfulness, but acknowledges the tradition of egregious feminine sinfulness as well. Mary Magdalene, the prostitute saint, models both human frailty and the promise of Christian piety. The drama's treatment of faith and faithfulness works out what it means to be capable of both great faith and great sin, in religious, social, and political arenas.

Mary Magdalene models the conversion to fidelity from sinfulness. Sermons mostly gloss over the specifics of her sinfulness, mentioning only her subjection to lechery or the fact that she lost her name.⁴⁸ Hagiographies suggest simple reasons for her fall. The *South English Legendary* and Mirk's sermon attribute her fall to Christ's injunction to John, her fiancé, to follow the path of virginity; the *Legenda Aurea* blames her wealth, for "rerum affluentiam uoluptas comes sequitur" (sensuous pleasure keeps company with great wealth).⁴⁹ The *Early South English Legendary* cites Mary

schewys, Cryst aftyr hys resurreccion fryst aperyd onto hyre and made hyre massengere to hys chosyn apostolys and dscyplys." O'Mara, 9-10, theorizes that these sermons were probably written by Thomas Spofford, Benedictine abbot of St. Mary's in York, between 1414 and 1421.

⁴⁸ John Mirk, *John Mirk's Festial: edited from British Library MS Cotton Claudius A.II*, ed. Susan Powell, 2 vols., EETS no. 334-335 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009-2011), 1:184, in the sermon for the Magdalene, for example, notes that Mary "gaf hyr al to synne and namely to lechery, insomyche that scho loste the name of Magdaleyne and was kallyd the sinful womman." On this point it follows the *Legenda Aurea*.

⁴⁹ D'Evelyn and Mill, *South English Legendary*, 303; Mirk, *Festial*, 184; Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 375, and *Legenda Aurea*, 629.

Magdalene's pride and her beauty.⁵⁰ The play, on the other hand, lingers over the saint's fall into sin, pondering its true source (Satan? Lechery? Curiosity? The Magdalene's own misunderstanding?) and inventing the tavern scene and the scene in the garden to dramatize it. The play emphasizes the saint's lack of faithful stability as the root cause of her sin. Mary's pre-conversion life is marked by instability and inconstancy: the angel who inspires her conversion in the garden remarks three times that she is inconstant, asking, "Woman, woman, why art þou so onstabyll?" (588) and "Why art þou ažens God so veryabyll?" (590). He points out that Mary needs healing for her soul, and demands that she "leve þi werkys wayn and veryabyll" (595). Mary's brother Lazarus remarks that she has "forsakyn synne and varyawns" (767) upon her conversion. Mary Magdalene's initial instability stems from her position outside of Christ's grace on one level. She recognizes the need for grace to be faithful after her conversion when she prays, "Gyff vs grace ewyr to rest in lyth, / In quyete and in pes to serve þe, nyth and day" (774-5). But Mary's pre-conversion variability is also linked to her fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of faithfulness and social hierarchy, as I pointed out in the introduction to this chapter. Mary Magdalene's fall results from her inability to understand where to place her faith. It is a theological as well as a social mistake.

Theresa Coletti sees the Digby play as conversing with other fifteenth century texts that attempt to control women's social behavior, including conduct books like *How the Good Wife Taught her Daughter*. These texts urge women to respect the boundaries of social status and hierarchy. The play's "sociology of sin" emphasizes the importance

⁵⁰ Horstmann, *Early South English Legendary*, 464.

of social hierarchy in maintaining female virtue.⁵¹ Part of what makes Mary Magdalene's faithful vow to Curiosity devastating is that he is a gallant, a traditional figure that tricks women into relationships unsuited to their station.⁵² Mary also frequents taverns, drinks wine with strangers, and talks with a strange man -- activities that conduct books warn women to avoid at all costs.⁵³ Mary has failed to maintain proper social etiquette, and this failure marks her as wayward before her fall into sexual sin even occurs. Coletti connects Mary Magdalene's social sin to the late medieval development of bourgeois society and the attendant anxiety about the status of unmarried women, many of whom worked as temporary servants in wealthier households away from the control of fathers and family.⁵⁴ Where Coletti suggests that the play prioritizes social over spiritual sin in the tavern scene, I argue that it makes use of a particularly gendered, sexualized notion of virtuous fidelity that opens up possibilities for modeling other kinds of faith, too.

Mary Magdalene's social failings read as emphatically feminine. Paradoxically, in their femininity they also stand for the position of any human in relation to God. Katherine Jansen notes that the mendicant orders identified with Mary Magdalene as modeling for them female virtues like humility, faithfulness, and obedience, as opposed to the decadence of other orders.⁵⁵ In Jansen's words,

Symbolic disempowerment allowed the mendicants to construct an identity, gendered female, which was in and of itself a powerful critique of the wealthy and masculinized institutional Church represented by Saint Peter. It was not irrelevant that faithless Peter had three times denied Christ; Mary Magdalen, on the other hand, had been the embodiment of fidelity to the Lord, when she alone stood

⁵¹ The phrase is Theresa Coletti's, "Sociology of Transgression," 2.

⁵² Coletti, "Sociology of Transgression," 7-8.

⁵³ Coletti, "Sociology of Transgression," 4.

⁵⁴ Coletti, "Sociology of Transgression," 1.

⁵⁵ Jansen, *Making of the Magdalen*, 84.

weeping at his tomb. The mendicants identified particularly with her as Christ's beloved and most faithful disciple.⁵⁶

Mary Magdalene's role at the end of Christ's life set her up as a paradigmatic figure of feminine faithfulness. The play applies this tradition to lay life by suggesting that issues surrounding womanhood, like the need for obedience to an authority and the dangers of transgressing hierarchical boundaries, have both spiritual and social applicability.

No transgression could be more stereotypically feminine than sexual sin, which has special relevance in medieval culture to the concept of faithfulness. As Ruth Mazo Karras observes in her study of the prostitute saints, some texts are explicit about Mary Magdalene's sexual sin; others are less explicit, but "[b]y the end of the Middle Ages the identification of Mary Magdalen and women in general with sexual sin had become so pervasive that the dramatists needed only a few symbols to evoke it."⁵⁷ As I mentioned above, Mary foreshadows her sexual sin when she initially replies to Curiosity's advances by referring to a "kelle [prostitute]" (520). Moreover, Mary Magdalene's social position as a woman without an active male overseer would make her a suspicious character in medieval society. In Karras's words, "[a]ny woman not under the dominion of one man – husband, father, master – ran the risk that her independent behavior would lead to her being labeled a whore."⁵⁸ Her father's death leaves Mary unmoored from masculine protection and regulation.⁵⁹ Nor has she yet submitted to Christ, the ultimate

⁵⁶ Jansen, *Making of the Magdalen*, 85.

⁵⁷ Ruth Mazo Karras, "Holy Harlots: Prostitute Saints in Medieval Legend," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1, no. 1 (July 1990): 23.

⁵⁸ Karras, *Common Women*, 3.

⁵⁹ Coletti, "Sociology of Transgression," 6; at 4, Coletti's observation rings true, that the play (and other texts as well) "recognizes how the performance of female vice and virtue is inextricably knit to the masculine, patriarchal forces in her life, ranging from her father Cyrus and brother Lazarus; to the World, the Flesh, and the Devil, all figured as masculine rulers; to the Taverner and suitor Curiosity; and finally to her true lover Jesus." Cf. the *Legenda Aurea*, which connects Mary's fall to Cyrus's death and Lazarus's

male protector. Mary's displacement from proper social and spiritual hierarchies, which are emphatically gendered, makes her vulnerable to Lady Lechery and Curiosity.

Mary's spiritual failure to submit to Christ manifests in her physical sexuality in the play. Curiosity's flattery is a gateway to the "indiscriminate sexuality" that characterizes the "whore" in medieval thought.⁶⁰ The scene in the garden portrays Mary Magdalene as having given herself over to bodily desire. She enters the garden with a twisted courtly love lament that expresses longing for multiple lovers: "A, God be wyth my valentynys, / My byrd swetyng, my lovys so dere! / For þey be bote for a blossom of blysse" (564-6). Mary has taken up the courtly rhetoric of Curiosity and deployed it rather awkwardly to express her wide-ranging lust.⁶¹ The plural "lovys" upends the tradition of courtly devotion to one lover. Mary Magdalene fits the medieval definition of "whore" in this scene not only because she has multiple lovers, but also because her sexual desire is "indiscriminate." When she does not find her lovers, Mary resolves to lie down in the garden and wait "Tyll som lovyr wol apere / That me is wont to halse and kysse" (570-1). The prostitute saint awaits *some* lover – *any* lover, it would seem – who will give her physical connection and pleasure. Like her inability to choose the correct master, Mary Magdalene's lustful errancy signals a mistaken application of allegiance.

busy military life, as well as Mirk, *Festial*, 184, which claims that Mary's fall is the result of her rejection by the apostle John, who took Christ's advice to remain celibate and broke off their engagement as a result. Jansen, *Making of the Magdalen*, 150, also points out that preachers viewed Mary's "unfettered liberty" as a problem leading to her sin.

⁶⁰ Karras, *Common Women*, 3.

⁶¹ Coletti, "Sociology of Transgression," 12, notes that Mary's fall "calls attention to the excesses and contradictions of courtliness... as... a discourse that produced specific gender relationships;" the play critiques those relationships as toxic.

Sexuality's tie to spirituality is a long-established trope by the time of the Digby play's composition in the fifteenth century. Exegetes' interpretations of the Old Testament queen Jezebel linked promiscuity with spiritual waywardness and set a precedent for this kind of misogynist reading. Jan Ziolkowski points out that early Christian interpreters added sexual sin to the litany of Jezebel's crimes, although the scripture never explicitly names her supposed adultery. He sums up the tradition in which Jezebel

was presented by the exegetes first simply on the literal level as a blasphemer, idolater, and persecutor. Later she came to be interpreted in more sophisticated ways as a type of Synagoga or as a symbol of everlasting death, spiritual wickedness, and greed. Finally, whether as a result of the word *fornicationes*, the Old Latin (Vetus Latina) variant of 3 Rg 21.19, or the suggestiveness of the word *hortus*, she acquired the first wisps of a reputation for sexual misconduct. The treatment that her New Testament namesake received from exegetes guaranteed that eventually Jezebel became as notorious for sexual outrageousness as for tormenting Elijah and Naboth.⁶²

Jezebel's crimes against God and his prophets were tied to illicit sexuality in the minds of Christian interpreters. Her spiritual sins took on sexual valence. The fourth-century theologian Tyconius made this connection explicit when he "expound[ed] Jezebel's fornication and idolatry not just literally, but spiritually." For him and for later readers, Jezebel's sin "prefigured both bodily and spiritual adultery."⁶³ Like the early Christian version of Jezebel, Mary Magdalene's non-specific sin in the scripture acquires the tinge of sexuality. Katherine Jansen points out that "a woman's sin was inevitably construed as

⁶² Jan Ziolkowski, *Jezebel: A Norman Latin Poem of the Early Eleventh Century* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 9.

⁶³ Ziolkowski, *Jezebel*, 11. Ziolkowski quotes commentary on Tyconius by Primasius, *Commentaria super Apocalypsim B. Joannis* 1.2 (PL 68.808B): 'Fornicatio autem Jezabelis generalis, et corporale et spiritale adulterium praesignavit, quando sub Christi nomine fornicationem et idolatriam dicebat' (The fornication of Jezebel is universal, and she prefigured both bodily and spiritual adultery, when she preached fornication and idolatry in the name of Christ)."

one involving sexuality,” and so the unnamed sin of the “woman, a sinner in the city” from Luke 7, with whom Mary Magdalene was conflated, became sexual sin.⁶⁴ Pre-conversion Mary Magdalene came to symbolize the idolatrous, adulterous soul that prefers bodily pleasures above God. Jansen asks of the sexual sins associated with Mary,

[H]ow did these things pertain to the sketchy facts of Mary Magdalen’s life as recorded in the gospels? In a word: they did not. ... [P]reachers made them conform to the rather vague biographical facts of her life in order to address exigent questions about the nature of Woman, women’s place in society, the need for female protection, and the problem of prostitution. In other words, preachers and moralists invented a Magdalen in order to address what they perceived to be a woman-problem.⁶⁵

Mary Magdalene’s sexual fall in the Digby play addresses the same issues that the preachers worried over. She is outside the protection of her male relatives, consorting with people below her station, and giving in to inveterate *variaunce*. These female-oriented social problems point to spiritual dangers that transcend gender, even as they are rooted in it.

The spiritualization of women’s sexuality made Biblical figures like Jezebel and Mary Magdalene especially powerful reminders of the relationship between the body and the spirit, and between the soul and God. In a sermon on Mary Magdalene, Robert Rypon, an Oxford-educated monk who served at the Benedictine priory at Durham between 1381 and 1422, uses the verse from Luke 7 to address all sinners. Taking as his scriptural theme the verse, “Mulier erat in ciuitate peccatrix” (A woman was in the city, a sinner), Rypon uses the “mulier,” whom he identifies (after Gregory the Great) with the

⁶⁴ Jansen, *Making of the Magdalen*, 147-8. Gregory the Great, *Homilia* 33, combined the Biblical figures of Mary Magdalene and the sinful woman from Luke 7 into one. Gregory allegorized the seven devils that Christ banished from Mary as the seven deadly sins. Mary thus became a figure of the sinful soul, and her gender meant that her sinfulness was above all sexual sin.

⁶⁵ Jansen, *Making of the Magdalen*, 146-7.

Magdalene, to signify sinners in general. Rypon's interpretation of the "woman, a sinner in the city" as a symbol for the Christian soul participates in a much larger tradition of gendering the self as feminine in its "weakness, [...] lust and unreason."⁶⁶ Rypon explains, "possum generaliter quo ad mundum multitudinem omnium hominum, quo ad angliam omnes homines et mulieres anglie, quo ad ciuitate istam omnes viros et mulieres eius vocare *mulierem* aut propter fragilitatem nature aut propter dispositionem ad peccata" (I can generally call the multitude of all people *a woman*, as far as the world is concerned, either for the fragility of nature or the disposition to sin; as far as England is concerned, all men and women of England; as far as this city is concerned, all its men and women).⁶⁷ He continues to refer to all sinners as "nostre mulieres" (our women) and "mulieres huius ciuitatis" (women of this city) throughout the sermon, making what might have been an insult to his male listeners into a theological point – that all who sin are feminized.⁶⁸ The feminization of all Christians serves as a vehicle for conceptualizing the individual and institutional relationship between believers and Christ in this sermon. Rypon takes the traditional metaphor of the Church as woman to mean that Christians who sin are bad wives of Christ, but that good deeds make them good wives: "Ideo mulier, id est ecclesia, beatificat Christum quando facit voluntatem eius" (the woman, that is the Church, makes Christ happy when she does his will).⁶⁹ By the logic of the sermon, Christians are like women, prone to sin and flawed from the get-go, but good

⁶⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 165, 171.

⁶⁷ BL Harley MS 4894, fol. 86v; trans. in Robert Rypon, *Selected Sermons of Robert Rypon*, ed. and trans. Holly Johnson, 2 vols., Dallas Medieval Texts and Translations Series (Louvain, Belgium: Peeters Publishers, Forthcoming), 16.

⁶⁸ BL Harley MS 4894, fol. 88r.

⁶⁹ BL Harley 4894, fol. 88v; trans. Johnson, 20.

actors when they humble themselves to the will of Christ, the husband figure. The ultimate exemplar of such feminine humility, for Rypon, is Mary Magdalene: “capiamus exemplum de ista muliere de qua sermo et inueniemus in factis eius remedium contra omnia peccata predicta” (let us take an example from this woman about whom the sermon is, and we will find in her deeds remedies against every sin mentioned).⁷⁰ Rypon emphasizes Mary’s humble approach to Christ and her example of penitence as proper models for debased Christian sinners to follow. Like Rypon’s sermon, the Digby play roots spiritual notions of sinfulness and submission to God in femininity.

In a sermon for Mary Magdalene’s feast day by Thomas Spofford, the saint’s steadfast faithfulness contrasts with the sinful soul’s apostasy. The apostate Christian is like an unfaithful wife. Spofford emphasizes Mary Magdalene’s “sothfastnesse,” or ease of belief, by remarking on the ease and swiftness with which the saint came to have faith in Christ, and the fact that she never questioned her faith (a jab at the Lollard penchant for questioning Church teachings and rituals, most likely).⁷¹ Spofford offers a foil to Mary’s faith in a metaphor that compares apostate Christians to cheating wives and whores: “For qwat tyme man or woman hauys resayuyd lely þe trowth of haly kyrke thorow þe sacrament of bapty[m], gif þai halde noght þat þai haue hyth, þe sawle, þe qwylyk be haly bapty[m] is made þe spouse of Cryst, is lykenyd to a woman þat brekys hyre spowsale and som tyme to a woman þat gyuis hyre to bordall or voutre [adultery].”⁷²

⁷⁰ BL Harley 4894, fol. 88v; trans. Johnson, 21.

⁷¹ O’Mara, *Four Middle English Sermons*, 110. In a note to lines 191-200 in the same sermon, which exhorts listeners not to use reason to interrogate God or the sacraments, O’Mara suggests that the sermon responds specifically to the Lollard penchant for questioning beliefs. Mary Magdalene’s unquestioning attitude is exemplary.

⁷² O’Mara, *Four Middle English Sermons*, 111. The homilist claims that the metaphor comes from Augustine’s Sermon 29, but O’Mara finds no such metaphor in Augustine’s sermons.

Faith in Christ equates to faithfulness to a husband; belief and sexuality converge. Both spiritual faithfulness and unfaithfulness are tied to women's actions, but unfaithfulness especially resonates with cultural ideas about women's hypersexuality and social role. In its equation of adultery with apostasy, the sermon shows that the relationship of the soul to Christ is a hierarchical one, and that disavowing Christ threatens the social order in addition to threatening the soul. Just as a married woman submits herself to her husband and therefore receives the benefits of social status and a man's protection, so the soul submits to Christ and enjoys social and spiritual benefits. The traditionally- and socially-constructed category of "Woman" serves as a useful tool through which to think about Christian faithfulness and relationship to God.

III. Sexual and Spiritual Faithfulness

Mary Magdalene's status as a sexual sinner makes her an especially apt figure for exploring the idea of spiritual faithfulness. As this dissertation has shown, literary tradition from classical times on conceived of faithfulness (or lack thereof) as a trait particularly important for women, especially because it defines a woman's social worth. In late medieval treatments of Mary Magdalene, faithfulness has social and spiritual valences. Mary Magdalene's sexual sin marks her as prone to unfaithfulness, but she is also capable of radical faithfulness to Christ.⁷³ Thinkers in the late Middle Ages use Mary Magdalene as a catalyst for thinking about the soul's duties of faithfulness to God. These duties are at once sexual, social, and spiritual.

⁷³ Mirk, *Festial*, I. 184-5, points out in his sermon on the saint that God often makes the holiest people out of the biggest sinners.

Mary Magdalene demonstrates her faithfulness to Christ in the Digby play in a few ways, including through clothing, words, and action. The play's depiction of Mary Magdalene at the cross, at the tomb, and as messenger to the apostles recalls traditional views of her as faithful to Christ. Although the scenes are short and the action is quick, they are enough to remind audiences of traditional readings of the Magdalene as a faithful weeper at Christ's crucifixion and faithful would-be anointer of his body. As the previous excerpt from the Brinton sermon suggests, Mary's reputation for faithfulness stems from these Biblical scenes.

Mary Magdalene's clothing and her description of herself as Christ's "lovyr" emphasize the gendered nature of her faithfulness. Mary approaches Christ's tomb "arrayyd as [a] chast wom[a]n" (stage direction after 992). Likely dressed in plain, dark clothes,⁷⁴ Mary's garments signal a spiritual faithfulness to Christ that manifests in bodily chastity. She appears in white clothes when she visits the king of Marseilles in a dream vision, this time accompanied by angels. Mary interprets the white clothes as "tokenyng of mekenesse" (1607), which could mean humility, suffering, and poverty, but possibly also means obedience to God.⁷⁵ Mary also describes herself as Christ's "lovyr," a term of loyalty that has multiple meanings. For example, while searching for Christ's body to anoint with oil, Mary says, "I have porposyd in eche degre / To have hym wyth me, werely, / ... / And I hys lovyr and cavse wyll phy [believe]" (1065-8). The MED lists a

⁷⁴ Sarah Salih, "Staging Conversion: The Digby Saint Plays and *The Book of Margery Kempe*," in *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women and Saints in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. Samantha J.E. Riches and Sarah Salih (New York: Routledge, 2002), 129.

⁷⁵ Salih, "Staging Conversion," 129-30, notes that the white clothes, which do not appear in the *Legenda Aurea*, *South English Legendary*, or Bokenham's *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, are difficult to interpret. Usually it's *black* clothes that signal humility and poverty. She surmises that Mary Magdalene's "adoption of white shows [her] to have arrived at a stage beyond penitence," and that the clothing "removes [her] from familiar social and sexual categories altogether."

few possible meanings of the word “lovyr,” including a sexual lover, friend, loyal subject, and follower of Christ.⁷⁶ Mary Magdalene’s proclamation encompasses all of these meanings. The sexual meaning gives Mary’s relationship to Christ a gendered importance. As Ruth Mazo Karras observes, “When Mary Magdalen bewailed Christ as her true love, the words would have resonated with the erotic even though the audience understood them spiritually.”⁷⁷ The juxtaposition of sexual love with political loyalty and religious worship in this term lends social importance to Mary’s fidelity as well. Her relationship to Christ is one of subservience in all aspects, and models how female audience members would have likely understood their various duties to God, husbands and fathers, and king. Mary’s terminology also connects love and belief. If indeed the word is “phy” and it means “believe,” the last line’s rather awkward parataxis juxtaposes love and faith.⁷⁸ To be a lover means to have faith; the two ideas are inextricable for Mary.

Homilists similarly pick up on the faithful nature of Mary Magdalene’s love for Christ. Spofford’s sermon connects Mary’s faith with love when it claims that one of the necessary elements of faith, or “trowth,” is “stabylnesse of loue lastyng;” Mary Magdalene exhibits this “parfyte stabyllnesse of l[o]uyng of souerand goodnesse.”⁷⁹ In his sermon on the nature of Mary Magdalene’s love, Thomas Brinton praises its persistence: “Magdalena dilexit Christum perseueranter vsque in finem” (Magdalene loved Christ steadfastly until the end). The bishop offers Mary’s journey to Marseilles

⁷⁶ *Middle English Dictionary*, s. v. “lover(e).”

⁷⁷ Karras, “Holy Harlots,” 21.

⁷⁸ Baker, Murphy, and Hall note the problematic nature of the last word of the line, but are confident in their reading of “phy” and its definition.

⁷⁹ O’Mara, *Four English Sermons*, 109 & 114.

and her time in the desert as proof of this faithful love.⁸⁰ Through all the twists and turns of the legend, Mary remains steadfast in her faith in Christ and love for him. The Digby play also highlights Mary Magdalene's apostolic journey as a journey of faith and a work of love in its omission of the bishop Maximin. In the *Legenda Aurea* and other iterations of the saint's life, Mary Magdalene boards a ship with several companions, including the bishop, and is set adrift by Jews upon the sea. The East Anglian play revises the story to make Mary's journey an obedient response to a divine command (1368-94). The drama shows Mary actively choosing the journey to Marseilles in an act of courageous faith.

The play shows how gender and sexuality come to bear upon Mary Magdalene's faithful journey across the sea even in its depiction of the ship boy's desires. The boy complains of a "cramp" that he attempts to relieve by masturbation ("I ly and wryng tyll I pyssse") (1407 & 9). After the boy declares that he needs "a fayer damsell" to relieve his pain (1412), the master beats him. Dissolute and indiscriminate sexual desire brings only anguish to the boy. This comic scene is interrupted by the arrival of Mary Magdalene, indeed "a fayer damsell" but not quite what the boy had in mind. Mary's arrival relieves the boy anyway by putting a stop to the beating. The audience might well have understood that Mary Magdalene could also relieve the boy's sinful sexual desire by providing an example to him of a soul that leaves behind a hard master for a benevolent one (Christ). Mary's faithfulness in taking the journey is an example both to the boy and to audience members as well.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Brinton, *Sermons*, 188-9.

⁸¹ The boy's sexual desire and frustration also recalls the related story in the Life of Mary of Egypt in which Mary sails aboard a ship and gives herself freely to all the sailors as payment for her journey. Mary Magdalene's chaste and pious presence on the ship is a stark contrast to the other Mary's promiscuity. Theresa Coletti, *Mary Magdalene*, 161, suggests that Mary Magdalene's boarding of the ship enacts a "disciplining of desire" for the crew.

The story of the Queen of Marseilles continues the play's message about faithfulness, and arguably brings it even closer to laywomen's experiences. In the legendary section of the play, the heavily pregnant Queen demands to accompany her husband to Jerusalem to receive baptism from Saint Peter, "A Crestyn womman made to be" (1699). Her pious desire is met with male derision. Her husband the king chalks her demand up to female stupidity, declaring, "þe wyttys of wommen, how þey byn wyll!" (1701); the sailor they hire to take them across the Mediterranean questions her virtue, supposing she is pregnant out of wedlock and needs to flee the country with her lover (1734-5). These insults recall the *Legenda Aurea*'s portrayal of the queen and William Granger Ryan's translation. "Quid est, domine, putasne sine me proficisci? Absit!" ('What's this?' snapped his wife. 'Are you thinking of going without me? Not a bit of it!')⁸² Ryan's shrill translation of the queen's words might be justified by the absence of any mention that the queen desires baptism or pilgrimage for its own sake, and by the narrator's subsequent observation that the queen's nagging persistence typifies her sex: "Econtra illa instabat, femineum nec mutans feminea morem" (she insisted, doing as women do).⁸³ These negative reactions to the queen's desire for pilgrimage stem from the socially rebellious nature of the queen's demand (and Ryan may be picking up on this as well) – these men expect that the queen will put her wifely and motherly duties above all else, including her own soul. They are perhaps also skeptical that she has the capacity for

⁸² Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, 633; *Golden Legend*, 377.

⁸³ Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, 633; *Golden Legend*, 378. We could actually read the *Legenda Aurea* as praising, or at least noting, the capability of women for steadfastness rather than stubbornness (although *instabat* can certainly have a negative, even threatening connotation).

the radical religious faith that would inspire a pregnant woman to make such a perilous journey.

In the play, the queen attempts to reconcile social and religious demands by connecting her pious desire for baptism to her faithfulness and devotion to her husband. She begs not to be left behind without him and appeals to ‘all þe lowys [loves] þat ever ware’ (1706). The queen suggests that her love for her husband and her love for God are compatible, and that these two different kinds of desires nevertheless both lead her to embark on a pilgrimage. A close analogue to the play’s portrayal of the queen is the *Early South English Legendary*, which also shows her combining desire for baptism with love for her husband. After the king denies her request, she appeals to his sense of loyalty and romantic love. “[H]ov miȝhte ich libbe and beon glad : bote we to-gadere wore? / We loueden us so zounge : and nouþe we beoth sumdel hore.”⁸⁴ As in the earlier poetic lines that connect God’s rightful lordship with his act of creation, this moment of female piety and spousal devotion points to the poem’s “baronial concerns,” which would have relevance for late fifteenth-century middle-estate laywomen working to achieve piety in addition to social acceptance.⁸⁵

The queen’s steadfast piety, though questioned by these men, ultimately results in a miracle. Although she appears to die in childbirth on the way to Jerusalem, we later learn that both she and her baby survive for two years on a deserted island and that Mary Magdalene has taken the queen on a spiritual journey to Jerusalem. God rewards the queen’s faith in a way that preserves both her reproductive and religious desires. In fact,

⁸⁴ Horstmann, *Early South English Legendary*, 471.

⁸⁵ Thompson, *Everyday Saints*, 98.

the queen's difficult childbirth is, in Samantha Seal's words, an "exclusively feminine avenue to G[o]d."⁸⁶ The miraculous journey is inextricable from the childbirth experience. The pregnancy makes the undertaking an astounding act of faith, and the birth provides the occasion for the Magdalene's miracle. Religious faith and female social duty reinforce one another, or are avenues toward mutual fulfillment. The queen gets both her longed-for child and saving baptism. The queen's faithful action and its reward are part and parcel of the play's overarching view of faith and faithfulness. The queen acts upon the promise of Mary Magdalene, who assures her that God will save the royal couple from "dred" (1714) when she performs the pious act of pilgrimage; she acts as well on the promise of a loving and faithful God. The queen's intertwining of religious and social faith, that is, of wifely duty with Christian duty, sends a message to female audience members about their ability to simultaneously inhabit social and religious roles. Like the queen, medieval women could go on pilgrimages, even if only in spirit; they might die doing so, but they might also be saved miraculously by Mary Magdalene's intercession. In some ways this is a profoundly conservative message, but it is also a more inclusive message than most saints' lives offer.⁸⁷ It is not only virgins, nuns, hermits, and other saints who have access to the divine, but laypeople as well, through the saints.

IV. Reciprocal Faith: God as Faithful Lord

⁸⁶ Samantha Katz Seal, "Childbed Visions: Medieval Mysticism and the Threat of Death" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Medieval Academy of America, Boston, Massachusetts, February 25-27, 2016).

⁸⁷ Coletti, *Mary Magdalene*, 12, sees the Queen's experience as giving "a socially conservative vision of familial virtue based on the regulation of desire through heterosexual marriage and lawful procreation."

The Digby play also portrays the faithful relationship between Mary Magdalene and Christ as one between a loving lord and his subject. Mary's faith leads her to choose faithfulness to Christ over others, and that means being subject to his rule. God appears in the play as deserving of faithful worship because he is the rightful lord over creation. He is a kind and good lord whose domination actually frees his subjects. Mary Magdalene's joyful proclamation to her siblings after her conversion suggests that God's lordship, and her submission to it, is what has saved her: Mary "was to synne a subiectary" until "Thys Kyng, Cryste, consedyryd hys creacyown; / I was drynychyn in synne deversarye / Tyll þat Lord relevyd me be hys domynacyon" (752-5). Mary speaks of her conversion in terms of a transferred allegiance to a faithful lord. Christ, as lord of creation, has "considered," or looked after, his creature, Mary.⁸⁸ Once Mary submits to the new king's "domynacyon," or authority, she is freed from subjugation to the old lord, sin.

Reciprocal faithfulness between God and man is central to the Digby play's theology. The text pairs descriptions of God as a merciful and faithful lord with reminders that he is also the creator. These pairings produce a vision of human relationship to God as both reciprocal and hierarchical: God acts as a benevolent creator and ruler, and humans should be his loyal creations and subjects. Saint Peter enters the stage with a pronouncement that emphasizes this reciprocation between creator and creation:

Now all creaturs vpon mold,
 þat byn of Crystys creacyon,
 To worchep Jhesu þey are behold,
 Nore nevyr azens hym to make waryacyon. (1811-14)

⁸⁸ *Middle English Dictionary* s. v. "consideren" – 4) "a) To take an interest in (sth.); be solicitous or concerned about; [...] (b) to have regard for (a nation's welfare); respect (a law or commitment); (c) to take care of (sth.), look after."

The very act of creation puts humanity in God's debt, Peter suggests. Humanity owes its faithful allegiance to the creator without "waryacyon." Mary Magdalene's sermon to the heathen people of Marseilles implies a similar view of creation as an act of benevolence meriting faithful service to God. Rather than preach the gospel to these idol-worshippers, Mary's sermon urges them to convert by retelling the creation story from the first chapter of Genesis (1481-1525). The sermon goes day by day through the creative acts of God, "þat nobyll Kyng" (1508), and ends on Sunday (an interesting revision of scripture), the day on which "al shold reverens make / To hyr Makar þat hem doth susteyn / ... / And hym alonly to serve" (1522-4). God the creator and ruler is owed the faithful worship of humanity, not only by the very act of creation itself, which "was for ower hellpyng" (1507), but also because of his faithfulness in sustaining humanity. The creation makes God a ruler worthy of allegiance. The *Early South English Legendary* presents a similar, though shorter, version of Mary Magdalene's sermon to the pagans that also connects God's good lordship to the act of creation.

He is wuryte [creator] of alle þing : he makede heouene and helle,
 Ne may no kayser ne no kyng : his vertues alle telle;
 Þe man þat him seruez wel : ne may him no feond cwelle,
 Ake huy þat wullez a-ȝein him fighte : to grounde he wole heom felle;
 He makede day and eke nyght : steorrene and sonne and Mone;
 Þe man þat trewe is and louez him arigt : he wole graunti him is bone...⁸⁹

The saint intersperses references to God the creator ("wuryte," "He makede day and eke nyght") with rhetoric that would befit a feudal lord who asks his men to "seruez" him and grants boons for good service. The alliterative poem contains many elements that signal its concern with the establishment and maintenance of lordship, especially the section on

⁸⁹ Horstmann, *Early South English Legendary*, 468.

the King and Queen of Marseilles.⁹⁰ The poem's emphasis on good lordship is likely part of this project. I suggest that the Digby play picks up on and refines this idea for its own portrait of lay religious and social faith.

This vision of God as benevolent lord contrasts starkly with the earthly leaders at the beginning of the play who demand allegiance without reciprocation. Tiberius Caesar, for example, boasts that "all þe word obeyit my domynacyon! / That person is nat born þat dare me dysseobey!" (31-2).⁹¹ Herod's boasts are even more egregious: he demands silence, commands that people remove their hats, and declares that he "woll... be obeyyd thorow al the word, / And whoso wol nat, he xal be had in hold" (149-50).⁹² Jerome Bush notes that the tyrants play at being God but are in fact confined to their stages, while Mary and Christ enact world-changing scenes via the *platea*, or space between the stages. The play stages the actual pettiness of tyrants and the triumph of Christ and Mary Magdalene, and Christianity itself.⁹³ I suggest that the play shows us a further contrast between these earthly rulers and God, whose acts of creation and beneficent lordship legitimize his rule. Just as the feudal relationship between a lord and his knights depends on the faithfulness of both parties to the other, so God's relationship to humanity works

⁹⁰ Anne B. Thompson, *Everyday Saints and the Art of Narrative in the South English Legendary* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 98, notes that the many romance elements in the Mary Magdalene narrative point to the "baronial concerns" about rulership and lineage that Susan Crane sees as endemic to insular romance (Susan Crane, *Insular Romance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 13-14).

⁹¹ Although Tiberius does suggest momentarily that his "goodnes" brings his people "blysse" (16-17), tyrannical boasts dominate the scene.

⁹² Findon, *Lady, Hero, Saint*, 20, suggests that this vision of tyrannical male rule contrasts sharply with Mary Magdalene's more feminine mode of rule in Marseilles. There is little in the play to characterize Mary's rule, however, beyond the fact that things are peaceful when the king and queen return. She has, however, miraculously saved the queen from death and led her on a pilgrimage while acting as regent.

⁹³ Jerome Bush, "The Resources of *Locus* and *Platea* Staging: the Digby *Mary Magdalene*," *Studies in Philology* 86, no. 2 (1989): 139-65. See also John W. Velz, "Sovereignty in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*," *Comparative Drama* 2 (1968): 32-43.

because he is a good and faithful lord. The boastful tyrants strike a sharp contrast with Christ, who speaks of his lordship in terms of care for his people and reciprocation for their loyalty.

Jesus emphasizes his hierarchical but reciprocal relationship with Mary Magdalene when he tells Mary that he will reward her obedience and faithfulness: “Be stedfast, and I xall evyr wyth þe be, / And wyth all tho þat to me byn meke” (1094-5). Similarly, he warns his new disciple, “Beware, and kepe þe from alle neclygens, / And aftyr, þou xal be partenyr of my blysse!” (703-4) These commandments emphasize the believer’s duty to show steadfastness and meekness, while also promising a reward in return. Christ’s promises recall scriptural references to the reward Christians will earn for faithful behavior, such as Colossians 3: “Whatsoever you do, do it from the heart, as to the Lord, and not to men: Knowing that you shall receive of the Lord the reward of inheritance. Serve ye the Lord Christ.”⁹⁴ In the play, Christ declares that Mary Magdalene, nearing death, will also “have possessyon, / Be ryth eniryawns a crown to bere” (2073-4). Mary Magdalene’s “eniryawns” (inheritance), a reward for her steadfast devotion, mirrors the inheritance of Colossians 3 and other New Testament verses.⁹⁵ In the play, as in the New Testament, Christ demands faithfulness but promises a reward to the faithful.

Mary Magdalene’s sexualized fall and her gendered faith fade away in the last section of the play, when Mary breaks away from the constraints of traditionally

⁹⁴ Colossians 3:23-24, Douay-Rheims. The Vulgate reads, “quodcumque facitis ex animo operamini sicut Domino et non hominibus scientes quod a Domino accipietis retributionem hereditatis Domino Christo servite.”

⁹⁵ For example, Ephesians 5:5 and Hebrews 6:12.

conceived gender: she preaches, rules a kingdom, and lives as a hermit. Theresa Coletti sees the play as presenting two distinct versions of gender, one profane and limiting, and the other sacred and “fluid.”⁹⁶ In Coletti’s words, “the sacred manifestations of gender associated with the Virgin Mary, the reformed Mary Magdalene, and Jesus supplant conventional, hierarchical constructions of masculinity and femininity with a salvific crossing of roles and attributes, embracing all three participants in a dramatic rendering of a more extended holy family romance.”⁹⁷ In this study, I have been more concerned with the profane side of this binary, as it works as a site of negotiation for the audience’s actual experiences of gender and sexuality.

The Digby play gives us a view of medieval faith that is compatible with lay life. The visions of feminine faith expressed in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* uphold social and political hierarchies, while at the same time tempering their tyranny by showing that lords and masters have obligations to their subordinates. It also suggests that the position of subordination itself contains the possibility for radical virtue. The female body becomes a site of negotiation between sin and virtue, as well as the ground for juxtaposing religious and social obligation through the concept of faithfulness. Mary Magdalene’s exemplary faithfulness only comes to fruition after her devastating fall into lechery; the queen’s artful negotiation of her social and religious duties leads to mystical revelation. Mary Magdalene’s ascent to apostolic sainthood in the second half of the play shifts the narrative toward the lay couple, the king and queen. Their experiences offer a model for

⁹⁶ Coletti, *Mary Magdalene*, 153-5.

⁹⁷ Coletti, *Mary Magdalene*, 184-5.

reconciling competing desires and obligations that give meaning to lay relationships and everyday life.

The Digby Mary Magdalene play imagines faith, or faithfulness, in terms of relation and reciprocation between two parties – between husbands and wives, kings and subjects, God and man. A major message of the play to its audience members is that God is a faithful and loving creator and lord, and that he will show favor to people who show allegiance in return. The play depicts even Mary's promiscuity as a kind of radical faithfulness to sin, an improper master; Mary's salvation is made possible by her transference of faithfulness to Christ. Fifteenth century sermon literature showcases Mary Magdalene's role as an icon of faith – both because she exhibits faithfulness to God, and due to her position as a recipient of his faithful protection and lordship. In the Digby play, homiletic ideas about Mary Magdalene's faithfulness coalesce and develop into a vision of relational virtue and the social and religious reciprocation that result.

Gender shapes how these texts investigate faith in a significant way. Reciprocation of faith with God and man is often made possible through adherence to prescribed gender hierarchies and gendered social roles, as in the case of the Queen of Marseilles. In the play, while male characters often exhibit faithfulness as good governance of political, familial, or professional underlings (subjects, wives, or assistants / apprentices), the faithfulness of women in the play is sexualized. This sexual faithfulness is often under suspicion or in need of active performance. Sexualization and distrust of the women in the play point to a larger literary and exegetical tradition that connects women's spiritual and sexual faithfulness. This tradition helps explain why a clear division between the sexes shows up in the characters' relationships to Christ or

God. While people of both genders exhibit spiritual faithfulness, Mary Magdalene and the Queen of Marseilles are the most direct recipients of radical reciprocation from God. As women, whom misogynist writers often maligned for their supposed spiritual and bodily weakness, their faithfulness signals an outstanding achievement and models the proper position of humanity in relationship with God.

Conclusion

The texts in this study have shown one type of female faithfulness in late medieval Middle English literature, represented by Penelope and Mary Magdalene, and some ways in which it connects medieval writers and readers to the past, and through which they might think through the philosophical and social problems posed by a pre-medieval ideal. As a classical heroine whose story is one of active resistance, Penelope stands in contrast to figures, like Griselda, who undergo extreme debasement to prove their faith. In a similar way, Mary Magdalene forgoes the tortures and bodily debasement of the virgin martyrs, icons of feminine faith of a different sort, and in so doing opens up the possibility for the Queen of Marseilles's lay, wifely virtue. In this study, I have hypothesized that Penelope's and Mary Magdalene's more complex and perhaps more active versions of female faithfulness lend themselves nicely to Chaucer's, Gower's, and the Digby playwright's modes of using, but altering, the literary traditions in which they write. Their uses of traditional virtue go beyond moralized exemplarity. Like Dorigen in the *Franklin's Tale*, these writers shape their ethical messages and at times their authorial personae through actively engaging with classical or biblical versions of female virtue. The uses of feminine virtue in this study may be precursors to the early modern modes of engagement with the subject, since, as Brian Pietras has shown, early modern authors often used classical women writers "to decisively reshape inherited models of authorship."¹ Pietras's view deviates from what others have seen as the early modern tendency to moralize classical stories more forcefully than medieval authors had and reveals that we have not yet understood the full picture of how premodern and early

¹ Brian Pietras, "Evander's Mother: Gender, Antiquity, and Authorship in Early Modern England" (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2016), ii.

modern authors conceived of their own authorship, and how they used gender to think through its problems.² A fuller understanding of medieval engagement with female virtue and stories of classical women more generally may broaden our view of the development of English authorship and readership.

² For example, A.J. Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1982), 6, and Holly A. Crocker, “‘As false as Cressid’: Virtue Trouble from Chaucer to Shakespeare,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 43.2 (Spring 2013), 304.

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