

1999

Representations of Women in Geoffrey Chaucer's "Man of Law's Tale" and "Tale of Melibee"

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REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN GEOFFREY CHAUCER'S
MAN OF LAW'S TALE AND TALE OF MELIBEE

by

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Department of English of the State
University of New York, College at Brockport, in partial

fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

1999

THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN GEOFFREY CHAUCER'S
MAN OF LAW'S TALE AND TALE OF MELIBEE

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This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Matthew, who made it possible for me to pursue my academic dreams; to Dr. Evelyn Newlyn who provided invaluable advice and infinite patience; to Dr. Hale and Dr. McFadden whose recommendations gave me a deeper understanding of my subject; to Mary Ann Giglio, Diana Pask, and the staff at the Student Learning Center who provided emotional and computer support during my graduate years; to Brian Shafer, my 'comrade in arms,' and to Mary Ann McMenamin who, twelve years ago, started me on my academic path.

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Introduction

Medieval art often portrays women as Eve, the 'Devil's Gateway,' a seductress who causes the Fall of humankind, and as Mary, 'Heaven's Queen,' a virgin who assists God in redeeming humankind. Indeed, all through the Middle Ages, the portrayal of women is based upon similar stereotypical representations. These stereotypical images serve, in the twentieth century, the same purpose as they did in the Middle Ages: to pressure women to conform to expectations of meekness and submissiveness and thus to maintain them in a subordinate position.

However, the comparatively new study of feminist criticism discovers in medieval literature female characters who transcend these stereotypical representations. In fact, many critics claim that Geoffrey Chaucer, undoubtedly the most important English poet of the fourteenth century, created female characters who subvert the traditional paradoxical representations of medieval women as both evil and saintly images and instead portrayed women in an assertive, positive manner. The Wife of Bath, one of Chaucer's best known and most discussed characters, confidently vents her anger against male authority and actively pleads for the emancipation of women in the Middle Ages. This thesis, however, after devoting one chapter to analyzing and defining the nature of stereotypical representations of women, devotes a chapter each to applying these findings to two lesser-known and less frequently discussed female characters: Custance, the patient protagonist from the Man of Law's Tale, and Prudence, the authority-quoting character from the Tale of Melibee. Although Custance and Prudence conform to medieval cultural ideals of femininity, they also embody important feminist ideals.

The first chapter defines and discusses the origins of certain misogynistic beliefs that created paradoxical images of women in the Middle Ages. Since the clergy and the aristocracy were the two most dominant groups in medieval society, they were responsible for creating many of the stereotypical images of women. The clergy based its view of women on the Bible and on writings by the Church fathers, who denounced women as sensual beings who continually attempt to distract men from their striving to reach God, but the clergy also established the unattainable cultural ideal of Mary, the Virgin mother. Just as the clergy created these paradoxical images, the aristocracy created an elevated image of women as courtly heroines but at the same time subordinated them to its most prized possession, land. These, then, are the complicated images and ideas that shaped the lives of women in the Middle Ages and, of course, affected their representation in such literature as the Man of Law's Tale and the Tale of Melibee.

Chapter Two discusses Custance, the main character of the Man of Law's Tale, who is not only a saint in the constancy of her faith during her many trials and tribulations but who appears also as an inadvertent seductress whose mere presence causes the death of many people. The subtext of the Man of Law's Tale additionally depicts Custance as a mythological heroine who is linked to the ancient Mother Goddess; as such, Custance becomes an active protagonist who restores the fundamental bonds between the members of her family.

Dame Prudence, the main character of the Tale of Melibee and the subject of Chapter Three, brings to the foreground the traditional representations of women in medieval allegories and courtesy books. Rather than submit to stereotypical images,

Prudence breaks free from societal prejudices as she assumes an active role by becoming her husband's advisor in public affairs. At the same time, Prudence introduces a remarkably different view of medieval society as she rejects patriarchal notions of nobility and honor and instead promotes matriarchal values of unity and interconnectedness.

Indeed, both Custance and Prudence have more in common than seems possible at first glance: both women are ostensibly 'trapped' within the allegorical representations as implied by their names; both women reject patriarchal attempts to keep them in a subordinate position; and finally, both women restore harmony in essential human relationships as Custance reunites her family and Prudence convinces Melibee to forgive his enemies. Clearly, in their response to patriarchal dominance, both Custance and Prudence are two of Chaucer's female characters who possess qualities that allow them to subvert the traditional view of women as inferior. Therefore, in spite of the many religious, social, and legal boundaries, these two medieval women manage to transcend their subordinate role and instead emerge as empowered female characters.

Chapter I

The Paradox of Medieval Woman:

Life between the Devil's Pit and Heaven's Pedestal

An eleventh century poem by Peter Damian, the great reformer, reads,

• That angel who greets you with "Ave"

Reverses sinful Eva's name.

Lead us back, O Holy Virgin,

Whence that fallen sinner came.¹

This poem epitomizes the conflicting and competing images of medieval women, both as Eve, the original sinner, and as Mary, the eternal Virgin. Indeed, many medieval literary productions discuss the paradoxical nature of women: are women good or evil, submissive victims or aggressive furies, passive sufferers or active protagonists (Mann 2). All through the Middle Ages, the representation of women has been filled with paradoxes on religious, legal, and social levels.

An important finding in the study of media suggests that people are perfectly capable of balancing two competing sets of ideas about the world:

- how they think it is generally expected and thought to be
- how they perceive it to be from their own observations.

The first set is based on an awareness of dominant ideologies, while the second set is based on people's own experiences (MacDonald 19). This theory, originally intended to apply to twentieth century thinking, can also be applied to medieval thought processes. In the Middle Ages, people were also very capable of this balancing act, especially in the

way they regarded women. Medieval literature such as Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* reflects for the reader both the dominant medieval ideologies—the first set of ideas --and Chaucer's own observations about the representation of women—the second set of ideas.

At present, much of what is known or surmised about medieval women comes from or is influenced by the history, art, and literature of the Middle Ages. However, in order to understand Chaucer's ideas about his contemporaries, one must look not only at what those ideas were but also from where those ideas came. The *Zeitgeist* of a particular period or generation, that is, the spirit of that age, is usually determined by those classes or people who are the most vocal and the most capable of expressing their opinions. According to Eileen Power, in the early Middle Ages the Church and the aristocracy were the two most dominant groups in society that shaped contemporary opinion (9). However, both the Church and the aristocracy were comprised of two groups of males who probably had the least regular contact with women. Thus, the representations of women were created on the one hand by the clergy, a group of men who were meant to remain celibate and to refrain as much as possible from contact with women, and on the other hand by the aristocracy, a very small and elitist section of society who regarded women primarily as decorative possessions, always subordinating them to that most valuable of all assets, land (Power 9).

These, then, were the two powerful and authoritative groups who determined many dominant contemporary ideologies, including the assertion that medieval women were inferior and therefore subject to the men in their lives. Yet at the same time, the clergy encouraged the development of the cult of the Virgin Mary, and the aristocracy

developed the concept of courtly love that included the adoration of the courtly lady. These complicated, conflicting, and inconsistent representations, separately and in their interaction, shaped the lives of women in the Middle Ages. Yet in spite of severe religious, legal, and social limits, complex literary female characters created by poets such as Chaucer suggest that women sometimes managed to escape the boundaries of medieval prejudices.

Although medieval civilization was a blend of Roman, Germanic, and Christian elements, Christian writings continued to exert the most influence on daily life in the Middle Ages. These writings, which helped to create the paradoxical image of medieval women, are themselves often contradictory in nature, sometimes denouncing women and sometimes treating them as equals. For instance, the first image of a woman in the Bible can be found in the Old Testament, when Eve, the original sinner, causes the "Fall" of humankind from a perfect state into a state of sin. At this point, the Bible prescribes women's 'fate' when God proclaims:

I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; And thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. (Gen. 3:16)

However, in spite of this condemnation, Christianity's earliest view of women was actually quite favorable, perhaps because Christianity needed women's support when it was still a new, growing religion. Also, because of Christianity's message that "the last shall be the first, and the first last" (Matthew 20:16), women possessed the greater potential for salvation because they were further removed from Christ than men and thus had more to overcome in order to be redeemed (Bloch 67). Several other passages in the

New Testament also seem to raise the stature of women, and some biblical writings even give men and women a certain degree of equality. For example, Paul lists thirty-six people who were noted for their courageous effort in the Christian cause; sixteen of these are women (Rom. 16:1-15). In the Gospels, Matthew mentions how Christ allowed women to anoint his body and feet, a right that was usually reserved for a man as the head of the household (26:6-13), while John discusses the positive aspects of a woman as a conversation partner (4:5-41). All four Gospels mention Jesus' active female supporters such as Martha, Mary Magdalene, Junia, Priscilla, and Paul's pupil, Thecla. In fact, Paul himself wrote the founding articulation of spiritual equality, that within the Christian community "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Moreover, one of the most significant women in the Bible is of course the Virgin Mary who became an important intermediary in the process of Christian redemption. Furthermore, as depicted in fig. 1, it was a woman, Elizabeth, wife of Zecharias, who immediately realized that Mary was carrying Jesus, the ultimate Savior of humankind: "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:42-43). And finally, the resurrected Christ first showed himself to a group of women. All of these instances indicate that Christian writings could have had a very positive influence on the shaping of the image of women.

However, during the fourth and fifth centuries, when Christianity was being transformed from a persecuted religion to a state religion, early Christianity's sympathetic views toward women gradually disappeared. This change in attitude was greatly influenced by the concept of the two sexes that was propagated by the early Church



Fig. 1

Elizabeth recognizing Mary's unborn Child,
from the *Hours of Claude Gouffier*, (rpt. in Wieck 61).

fathers. Their view of women was influenced by Neo-Platonism, a philosophy that incorporates the marriage of opposites and regards man and woman as two (equal) halves of a whole (Uitz 153). Man is regarded as the spirit or soul and woman as the body or life-giving force. However, this Neo-Platonic philosophy was eventually interpreted by the Church fathers as equating men with higher instincts such as reason and the struggle for spiritual perfection, and women with lower instincts such as carnality and sensuality. Consequently, the Church fathers determined that women's biological ability to give birth (but in so doing to lose their precious virginity) indicated that women were therefore more associated with the flesh and less with the spirit. One of the Church fathers, St. Jerome, emphasized this belief when he wrote, "As long as woman is birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul" (Wilson and Makowski 57). The Church fathers also linked the relationship of women with sexual activity to the biblical notion that Eve was created not in God's image but from Adam's side. However, in this explanation the Church fathers conveniently ignored the first creation myth in Genesis 1:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. (Gen. 1:27)

This verse clearly indicates that man and female are created together, independent from one another. Instead, the Church fathers based their explanation on the second, much more popular, creation myth in Genesis 2:

And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. (Gen. 2:22)

In this verse, the female is created after the male and out of his body. The Church fathers believed Eve, as a secondary creation, to be inferior, less rational, and more likely to give in to bodily temptations.

In other words, because of Eve's actions in the Garden of Eden and her connections with the flesh, the early Church fathers felt justified in holding women in general responsible for the original sin. They believed that a woman continually attempted to dominate a man's soul and tried to bring him down to her level of carnality, and that desires of the flesh served to distract a man from his striving to reach God. This process, according to the Church fathers, directly connected a woman to the Devil. Therefore, the theologians of the early Middle Ages demanded that a woman be made submissive and obedient to her man in all matters, for, as Paul wrote, "the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man" (1 Cor. 11:8). The Church fathers further argued that because Eve was not made in the image of God, she was therefore once removed from the Divine. Consequently, they felt justified in regarding Eve as Adam's inferior and felt that she was meant to be subordinate to him in all physical, spiritual, and ethical matters. The Church fathers' negative opinions regarding the nature of Eve significantly contributed to the image of women in general as representing Hell's pit.

Although some later Christian writings also reflected a sympathetic view of women, unfortunately these writings did not have a lasting impact on medieval society. The negative but influential writings of theologians such as St. Albertus Magnus (ca. 1200-1280) and St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) on women's role in original sin overpowered the more sensitive approach of the earlier St. Augustine (354-430) who, in

The Marriage Estate, actually concedes that the Bible teaches that a woman, like a man, has the right to the body of the marriage partner and to be the active partner in the relationship and vice versa (1 Cor. 7:4). The writings of scholastic philosopher and theologian Peter Abelard, based on the Genesis 2 creation myth, asserted that God purposefully created Eve from Adam's side (and not from his feet) so that she could be man's companion and friend. However, this assertion also did not withstand the already unfavorable contemporary opinions about women. Instead, Albertus Magnus and Aquinas used the Genesis 2 creation myth as the foundation for their writings on women's subordination: since the female originated as part of the male body, women should be totally obedient to the men in their lives.

Adding to the already complex image of medieval women, early medieval literature and medieval visual arts looked to the animal kingdom in attempting to warn men against the evil falsehood of women. In Chaucer's *Manciple's Tale*, for instance, the narrator first compares a woman to a bird (IX, 163), then to a cat (175), and finally to a wolf (183). Furthermore, in the *Miller's Tale*, Alison is compared to a mouse (I, 3346), described as a "joly colt" (3263) and a "kyde or calf" (3260), and is also said to have a body as fair as any "wezele" (3234). Finally, Uitz quotes the anonymous author of *Proverbia quae dicuntur super natura feminarium* who wrote the following diatribe:

One cannot hope to change the nature of the pig, the cat, nor spin silk from wool. It is also a waste of effort to coax a woman with mild or hard words. . . . The fox has several exits to its lair; [. . .]. So too do women have plenty of loopholes and tricks. . . . The wolf changes his coat in summer, but he never changes his evil character. A woman may

sometimes act simple and pious like a nun, but when it suits her, she may give her fancy free reign [. . .]. Woman's love is no love, but only bitterness: it should rather be called a school for fools. (156)

Although equating women with animals was not a new phenomenon in the Middle Ages such verse was specifically designed to degrade women: it emphasized the low value men attached to women while at the same time served to remind men of women's alleged animal nature.²

In the same manner, the visual arts also portrayed women in animal form when representing women's lower instincts. As a result, the typical medieval representation of evil is a woman, often shown in a revolting posture with her body encircled by serpents that are feeding on her breasts and sexual organs. Figures 2 and 2a show medieval French church facades such as the Church of St. Croix in Bordeaux and Chartreuse-du-val-de-Benedictine in Villeneuve-les-Avignon which feature the Vice of Unchastity as a “hatefully seductive” woman accompanied by her favorite animal, the serpent, and her lover, the Devil (Broude and Garrard 80-81). Furthermore, medieval paintings and drawings also link women with animals. In a drawing called “Temptation of Adam and Eve at the Tree of Knowledge,” the serpent faces only Eve and clearly bears Eve's facial characteristics (see fig. 3). Accordingly, for a medieval population used to attending church services on a daily basis, both the biblical writings of the Church fathers and the visual representations inside and outside the church served as constant reminders of the corrupt nature of women.

Nonetheless, in spite of the misogynistic attitude of the Church during the early Middle Ages, in this period the cult of the Virgin Mary came into full bloom. Although



Fig. 2

Vice of unchastity, from Chartreuse-du-val-de-Benediction,
Villeneuve-les-Avignon, (rpt. in Broude and Garrard 80).



Fig. 2a

Vice of unchastity with Devil, from Church of Sainte-Croix,
Bordeaux, (rpt. in Broude and Garrard 81).

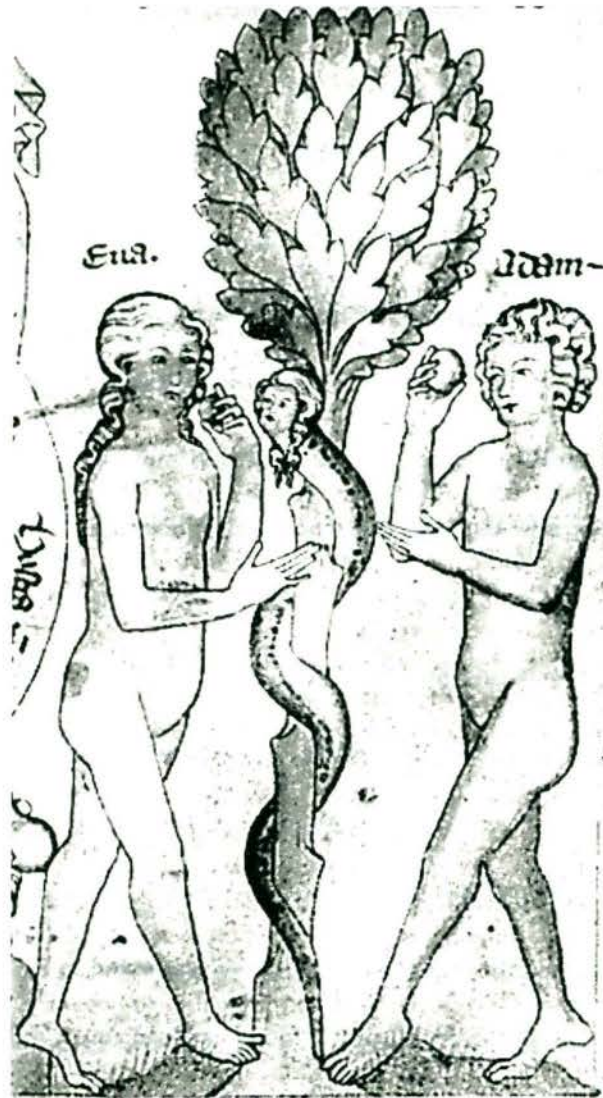


Fig. 3

Fall of humankind, from the *Biblia Pauperum*, *Codex Vindobonensis*,
(rpt. in Uitz 154).

the Eastern Church had celebrated Mary's festival from the earliest recorded times, the Western Church found the early image of Mary so unimportant that once she was left out of the Nativity scene altogether (Broude and Garrard 85). Apart from the Gospel according to Luke that deals with the Annunciation, Mary is scarcely mentioned in the Gospels and the story of her life is only told in the Apocrypha. Clearly, Mary's role in the New Testament was subordinate to that of her son, Jesus. Yet over time, more and more celebrations were created in Mary's honor such as the feasts of the Incarnation, the Annunciation, and the Dormition or Falling Asleep of the Virgin. Finally, by the middle of the seventh century, Mary was given a place of honor in the Christian Church (Baring and Cashford 551). Between the eleventh and the fifteenth century, the cult of Mary reached its height as she was worshiped as Heaven's Queen, and her figure was celebrated in the medieval arts, poetry, and music.

These elevated roles, however, were based on Mary's divine motherhood and her role in the conception of Christ, not on her womanhood. Mary was revered as well for her Virginity, not her femininity, since virgins who offered their body to God were believed to be closer to Him. In sacrificing the body to the spirit, evil would be conquered forever (Baring and Cashford 531). However, Mary's image as a Virgin Mother, as well as Heaven's Queen, put her firmly on a pedestal and thus completely out of reach as a role model for medieval women. Accordingly, the development of respect and reverence for Mary did not necessarily improve the status of ordinary women, who were unable to give birth while remaining a virgin and thus could not replicate the primary accomplishment which made Mary honored.

While the Church fathers were busy propagating their misogynistic opinions of women, the aristocracy developed a cult that was very similar to the devotion of the Virgin Mary, that of *l'amour courtois* or courtly love, a product of the growing affluence of the Middle Ages. This approach toward aristocratic behavior which flowered in the Middle Ages helped to cultivate a more refined society and produced a complex set of ritualized social behaviors which eventually made up the chivalrie code. Courtly love evolved as part of that ideal of chivalry formed in France in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, an idea asserted in the refrain of a fourteenth century ballad, "*En ciel un dieu, en terre une deesse*" ("In Heaven a god, on earth a goddess") (Power 20). Even if courtly love was more important in literature than in daily life (courtly love did not necessarily provide an accurate representation of the everyday life of aristocratic women), its very existence contributed to the increasing importance of the perception of medieval women's emerging role and character.

This newly evolved concept of chivalry required a knight to fulfill certain requirements in order to become perfect, since he was not expected to be merely a fighting machine but was also required to function competently in peacetime, which included knowing how to conduct himself as a courtly lover. Since love can cause an array of different emotions that the knight had to learn to control, the development of courtly love enabled him to search for a newer and nobler identity and inspired him to greater deeds. As a result, the knight's life became a series of battles with evil forces so that good could win out. Consequently, the battlefields of the Crusades were, with the development of courtly love, often replaced by settings where the knight had to battle such emotions as despair, frustration, and resentment over his courtly lady.

However, as in the cult of Mary, courtly love did not so much consist of respect and reverence for genuine womanhood, but rather created an idealized version of a woman whose beauty, purity, nobility, and inaccessibility (often because she was already married) inspired a young man to reach his full potential within the chivalric code. The knight selected the lady he decided to love, or, as Ferrante puts it, he incarnated Love in a lady who became a repository for all the positive images the knight wished to worship; in that sense, the lady was less important for her own, separate identity (66). Thus, although seemingly the courtly lady held a superior position over the knight, courtly love's real purpose was to cultivate the perfect knight and therefore did not do much to improve the inferior status of medieval women. Courtly love, like Mariolatry, served merely as an inspiration to men, elevating the status of one particular kind of woman but not allowing medieval women in general to attain equality to men. The courtly lady was thus some kind of super-personification, an ideal being whom the knight adored; however, she was also a real woman whom the knight wished to possess because his love was both mental and sexual in nature (Ferrante 67). Once again, medieval women were in a paradoxical bind, since in real life men were considered superior, but in courtly love a woman presumably dominated her lover.³ At the same time, however, a woman could be criticized for not showing "mercy" to her lover when he pleaded for her favors. Yet if she yielded to her lover's demands, she was no longer the pure and spiritual being the knight desired her to be and, moreover, by yielding, she also revealed her "true nature" which corresponded to that all-powerful image of Eve as the representation of the lower instincts, carnality, and sexuality.

Certainly, medieval women had to deal with many religious prejudices, but they faced the greatest paradox of their existence in what Chaucer in his writings refers to as a person's *estat*, *degree*, or *condicioun*. G.R. Owst, in his *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, quotes the Dominican preacher John Bromyard's explanation of the medieval hierarchical system:

God has ordained three classes of men, namely labourers such as husbandmen and craftsmen to support the whole body of the Church after the manner of feet, knights to defend it in the fashion of hands, clergy to rule and lead it after the manner of eyes. And all aforesaid who maintain their own status are of the family of God. (554)

Ideally, then, this hierarchical system situated most, if not all, medieval people in a particular *estat* or "place of one's own in a pre-ordained and static hierarchy" along a continuum from higher to lower class (Hallissy 4). For example, in the Church, the hierarchy ranked the Pope at the top, followed by the cardinals, bishops, priests, non-ordained members of religious orders, and finally the laity. Similarly, in secular life, a king outranked dukes, earls, viscounts, barons, and lesser nobles, who, in turn, outranked the commoners. The class of commoners or freemen included merchants, master crafters, artisans, and journeymen who themselves outranked the lower class serfs or villeins bound to the land (Hallissy 4). People were thus divided into the three *estats* for those who prayed, those who fought, and those who labored, with each group performing its task on behalf of the whole. This hierarchy could also be observed in families, where the husband was the head of the family, and even in nature, where the

lion was considered king of the animals, the eagle was king of the birds, and the oak tree was king of the plants.

This hierarchical organization was thought to be of divine, not human origin, and both the Church and the aristocracy actively supported this system which helped to perpetuate the existing social structure. Maintaining this hierarchy required that, as much as possible, each member in an *estat* demonstrate proper behavior, which included correct forms of address, precedence in public places, and obedience to one's superior (Hallissy 4). Consequently, while the lower classes had to obey the higher classes, the higher classes had the reciprocal duty to execute their *maistrye* with justice and mercy. At the same time, however, there seems to have been a continuing debate over whether true nobility resided in birth or behavior, as evidenced by the old woman's argument in the "Wife of Bath's Tale" (Hallissy 4). Indeed, although theoretically the hierarchical system did not allow for movement from one *estat* to another--that is, a medieval peasant could only hope to move from poverty to relative wealth but not to knighthood--Chaucer's pilgrims provide a more realistic image of this complicated hierarchy. For instance, although the Parson approves of Bromyard's dictum, stating that "God ordeyned that some folk sholde be moore heigh in estaat and in degree, and som folk moore lough, and that everich sholde be served in his estaat and in his degree" (X, 770) and even provides a further explanation asserting that without *degree* "the commune profit myghte nat han be kept, ne pees and rest in erthe" (772), the Franklin clearly expresses the hope that his son may "lerne gentillesse aright" (V, 694), implying that in imitating the Squire's manners and virtues, the Franklin's son may possibly move to a nobler *estat*.

The one group that is conspicuously absent from this classification system is of course that of medieval women. Although the hierarchical division of medieval society was basically determined by a person's function and status, the Middle Ages also displayed a fundamental division by gender. Even though critics such as Hallissy use the three previously mentioned *estats* to rank Chaucer's female pilgrims, putting the Wife of Bath as one of "Those Who Work" in the sub-category for Tradespeople, and the Prioress and the Second Nun as "Those Who Pray" in the sub-category estat for Religious Orders, most medieval literature grouped women in what was essentially a fourth *estat* (Hallissy 4), determined by marital (meaning sexual) rather than functional status; women were virgins, wives, or widows. Furthermore, a woman's status was first determined by the position of the family she was born into, and later by the position of her husband's family. In general, a married woman had less freedom than a widow but more than an unmarried girl. Most of the time, however, marriage for a woman did not necessarily allow her more societal freedom: usually, it meant that she merely exchanged subordination to her father and brothers for subordination to her husband. Moreover, medieval society also held a paradoxical notion with regard to the Christian value of marriage. Ironically, the same Paul who wrote the standard articulation of spiritual equality for men and women also wrote the following:

Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord; for the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the Church. (Eph. 5:22-23)

These two statements, one establishing that men and women are equal and the other that women are subservient to men, exemplify the medieval paradox regarding women's

equality, a notion that the Church actively perpetuated to keep women subordinated. For instance, on the one hand the Church regarded marriage as a holy state, essential for keeping unbridled sexual activity such as adultery, concubinage, and incest under control. In contrast to the early Germanic practice which allowed polygamy and concubinage, the Church, afraid that a licentious life would seriously endanger men and women's souls, therefore promoted the state of matrimony as an "excellent mystery," encouraged monogamous marriages, and prohibited extramarital affairs. In this regard, matrimony was not unlike courtly love, which also served to tame men's unbridled animal instincts.

On the other hand, however, the Church also viewed marriage as a dangerous obstacle to spiritual perfection and therefore glorified celibacy and virginity as cultural ideals. One reason may have been that the church, in order to maintain its structure, needed a continuous supply of men in the religious hierarchy. Hence, the Church encouraged the practice of maligning women, which shepherded men into monastic communities and thus isolated them from the 'dangerous' women in medieval society. In fact, patristic writers such as St. Jerome perpetuated the view of marriage as a concession to human frailty and, in tradition with the medieval passion for order, as an inferior state incompatible with holy devotion (virginity, of course, being at the pinnacle of excellence) (Wilson and Makowski 56). Paul's words sum up the Church's dilemma regarding marriage:

He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord: But he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife. [. . .] The unmarried woman careth for the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in

spirit: but she that is married careth for the things of the world, how she may please her husband. (1 Cor. 7:32-34)

This passage, often quoted as the standard text of Paul's marital theory, clearly exemplifies Paul's view that the "chaste state is more perfect because the celibate can devote themselves better than the married to the service of the Lord" (Wilson and Makowski 36). This biblical paragraph also reinforced the Church's view of women as sexual beings who were responsible for seducing men; marriage, therefore, was to be denounced since it caused husbands to concern themselves with the pleasures of the flesh rather than with spiritual and religious matters.

Yet if the Church had maneuvered itself into a peculiar corner with its paradoxical views on women and marriage, the aristocracy, the other powerful male group which determined contemporary medieval opinions, regarded marriage as an effective means to build up assets. Although medieval women did not have public rights, they did have private rights in that, unmarried, they were able to own land. For example, during the early Middle Ages, a newly evolved system of equity insured that unmarried women had rights of property that they were previously denied under common law. Unmarried women could obtain lands through inheritance, marriage contracts, and property or annuity transfers. Thus, as landowners, women seemingly held an important political position in medieval society. However, of the land held by 350 women who figure in the Domesday Book as landholders, about half was in the hands of only three women: Harold Godeswin's sister Queen Edith, his mother Gytha, and his concubine, Edith. Clearly, these women did not hold land as 'liberated women,' but instead held it in support of Harold's political ambitions (Leyser 89). Moreover, although a daughter could be the

sole inheritor to a family estate, she could not expect to marry whom she pleased. Instead, marriage had become an important business arrangement in which the parents determined what property was being settled on which prospective spouses and thus allowed women to become objectified in terms of land value. Thus, while marriage dramatically improved men's access to power, it just as dramatically diminished women's access, since upon marriage a wife's property merged with her husband's lands and could not be sold without his approval. The wife, however, did not hold such power over her husband's lands. It was only upon his death that she would gain possession of one third of any land her husband owned. Paradoxically, then, the possession of land, rather than elevating women's legal position, instead caused women to be continually subordinated to their properties.

On the whole, since women did not participate in official government activities, were not allowed to vote or run for office, and almost never became citizens of a town, they had little or no acknowledged power; not being able to participate equally in power structures such as the Church or the military meant that their *estat* simply was not regarded as one which contributed any significant value to the medieval society. However, although medieval women were thus identified as virtually powerless in their society, whether or not they themselves were troubled by the paradoxical role models of Eve and Mary is far from clear. Indeed, although some art forms convey a misogynistic image, other medieval paintings and manuscript illuminations depict women performing a variety of tasks indicating that, in spite of their legal non-existence, women of all *estats* were active and visible participants in the private and public realm. For instance, illuminations in medieval psalters show a balanced division of labor with male and

female peasants equally sharing tasks such as reaping, stone-breaking, and weeding, while medieval paintings portray women working in a joiner's shop, washing ore in the mines, and keeping books (see fig. 4). Even more informative are depictions of women in the marginalia of medieval manuscripts which reveal a fascinating underworld that illustrates how women fought against the "definition of [their] condition" as imposed by the Church and the rules of patriarchal society (Verdier 123). For instance, the marginalia of the *Aspremont Hours* show a woman washing a young girl in exactly the same manner an illumination in the *Douce Hours* shows a midwife washing Christ (see figs. 5 and 5a), while an illumination in the marginalia of a mid-fourteenth century manuscript shows a woman fighting for the right to wear her spouse's pants while he sits on eggs (Verdier 123). Other marginalia even show women on horseback charging knights and Dominican monks (see fig. 6). This often inverted image of the relationships between women and men clearly indicates that women were not totally paralyzed by the roles the clergy and the aristocracy had established for them.

Clearly, although extant records describe the *estats* in terms of men, women were actively involved in all sorts of duties, both inside and outside the household. For instance, although comparatively rich, women of the upper-class certainly were not idle but played an important part in the administration of a household. A medieval noblewoman was usually in charge of supervising rather than performing the various household tasks herself. Especially if a noblewoman's husband was frequently absent, she supervised the people who managed the large group of servants, entertained a variety of guests, controlled the estate's finances, provided for supplies, and organized the



Fig. 4

Quentin Masseys the Elder, *The Banker and his Wife*,
Staatliche Museum zu Berlin, (rpt. in Uitz 31).



Fig. 5

Woman washing a young girl,
from the *Aspremont Hours*,
(rpt. in Verdier 173).



Fig. 5a

Woman washing Christ,
from the *Douce Hours*,
(rpt. in Verdier 172).



Fig. 6

Woman and monk tilting,
from the *Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library*, (rpt. in Verdier 177).

defenses of her home. In fact, women such as Margaret Paston and the Countess of Chester effectively defended their homes against hostile invaders (Leyser 165).

Women of lesser nobility fulfilled these same responsibilities and, when necessary, also took responsibility for the cooking, laundry, and childcare. Other noblewomen worked outside the home, such as Philippa Chaucer who was employed as lady-in-waiting to the Queen. Less affluent women who lived in the city performed a large variety of household tasks and often were also in charge of selling their husband's crafts (see fig. 7): they brokered deals between visiting merchants and local manufacturers; they ran taverns and inns; they belonged to guilds and confraternities; they borrowed and lent money; they delivered babies and they dispensed medicine (Howell 37). However, just how many women were at work in any village or town is hard to assess since businesses were usually registered in the husband's name.

A woman born into the lowest *estat* probably worked the hardest. Her domestic tasks included keeping house, cooking, making and washing cloth and clothes, and raising the children. She also fetched water, kept an herb and vegetable garden, and gathered wood to keep the homes fires burning. Moreover, she usually took care of the hens and pigs, sheared sheep, milked cows, and made cheese and butter. When necessary, she helped her husband in the fields, and in addition to all these chores, she supplemented her husband's income by weaving, spinning, and making and selling ale, usually a profitable business since drinking water was considered unhealthy. Single young women often went into service, which was regarded as an appropriate occupation between adolescence and marriage, or took jobs as wage laborers. Although formal apprenticeship was rare for women, and not all female apprentices would automatically



Goo die frau hie wei kome
 Man suchte sie hin vnd her
 Von se hie nymand mer
 Das flugt stet auf uirthalbar
 Vne dar aber die frau daz

Die gottes hulff so sinuden sey
 D' künig ward der red als seo
 In die frauen viel er da
 Se chust sie an den mund
 Wa rte sie men selde stand

Fig. 7

A female shopkeeper with weighing scales,
 from *Die Geschichten der Könige von Frankreich*, (rpt. in Uitz 30).

be registered, evidence indicates that, especially in the silk trade, female apprenticeships existed; the statutes of the city of London even legislated equally for male and female apprentices (Leyser 156). Clearly, although women were officially excluded from the (male) public world of government, they were indispensable in the (female) private world of production. Therefore, despite the fact that the clergy, aristocracy, and civil authorities viewed women as relatively unimportant in medieval society, women were actually quite influential and contributed to medieval society and culture in many significant ways.

Notwithstanding their important societal contributions, almost the only way for women to attain at least some degree of education and authority was to enter a convent which had its own administration and its own rules governing the nuns' way of life. Yet this opportunity was only open to a relatively small number of women; only wealthy families could afford to 'buy' a place for their daughter. Therefore, England in the middle of the fourteenth century only had some 3,500 nuns on record (Uitz 156).

Moreover, women who were 'called' to a religious life in order to develop their own identity often found that life in a convent did not necessarily provide an escape from male dominance. For instance, most medieval nuns were just as restricted by the image of the Virgin Mary as ordinary medieval women; a nun was to be spiritual, mystical, religious, and, most of all, sexless. Additionally, many convents lacked the protection of the privileged monasteries, and orders for women were limited by their dependence upon men for both secular and spiritual services (Rosenthal 237). Also, clerical fear of women severely limited their social and religious independence. For example, the clergy in Rome and Provence were warned against hearing the confessions of nuns and Beguines out of fear of heresy, while some religious men, such as St. Louis, bishop of Toulouse,

were too afraid to communicate even with the women in their own family (Rosenthal 238). Moreover, in 1300, Pope Boniface VIII published a papal Bull prohibiting nuns from leaving the convent except in emergencies and allowing people to visit nunneries only by special permission. Fortunately, this Bull was never enforced (Power 99).

However, although the intent of nunneries (and monasteries) was to foster a life of spirituality in a secluded atmosphere, some nunneries were quite wealthy and the abbess could become quite an important woman in her own right. For instance, Hildegard von Bingen, a twelfth century Benedictine abbess of the Rhenish foundation of Rupertsberg, was an important administrator who was also quite active in political and social life; she corresponded extensively with Henry II of England, Queen Eleanor, and the Greek Emperor and Empress. Her contemplative religiosity gained her an important reputation within the Church while her comprehensive knowledge of trees, plants, and animals gained her an important reputation as a medieval scientist. Although the spiritual and artistic power of only a few religious women seems to have existed in the medieval world, the increasing popularity of nuns like Hildegard von Bingen indicates that their influence has nevertheless been strong enough to survive into the twentieth century.

The previous analysis suggests that life for women in the Middle Ages was filled with paradoxes. Both the clergy and the aristocracy, the most dominant male groups in medieval society, tried to subordinate medieval women. The clergy tried to dominate women by perpetuating their paralyzing, paradoxical image as Eve, the 'Devil's Gateway,' and Mary, 'Heaven's Queen.' The aristocracy, on the other hand, tried to control women by objectifying them in terms of land and by formulating an inaccessible courtly heroine. Medieval women were therefore depicted as occupying both Hell's pit

and Heaven's pedestal at the same time. At the same time, extant records indicate that 'actual' medieval women were very active in medieval society; they participated both on a public level, providing important economic and cultural services, and on a private, domestic level, providing invaluable support within their households. This complex and conflicting representation of medieval women inspired artists like Chaucer to create his fascinating female characters.

Chapter 2

The Man of Law's Custance:

Medieval Paradox or Mother Goddess?

As the previous chapter indicates, societal beliefs and attitudes in the Middle Ages place medieval women in a paradox: "Eve is set against Mary, the sensuous deceiver against maternal purity, rebelliousness against meekness" (Mann 1). Medieval literature reflects these contradictory prejudices and reinforces the resulting societal constraints which served to keep medieval women in a subordinate position. However, enough evidence also exists to suggest that ordinary women were not completely paralyzed by societal attitudes: many women were actually active participants in all levels of medieval society. Thus, authors such as Geoffrey Chaucer were able to create female characters like Prudence, Cecelia, Griselda, and Custance who, as strong, positive protagonists, were able to break free from societal prejudices. These female characters, who enjoy a central and dominating position in their tales, deal with important topics in medieval society such as the oppression of women in parental and marital relationships. By inscribing these women with heroic characteristics, by depicting them as active subjects on a quest rather than as passive objects, Chaucer provides an alternative representation of medieval women that frees them from their subordinate position. A case in point is provided by Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale in which its protagonist, Custance, breaks free from traditional medieval representations.

Consistent with the prevailing medieval beliefs, the Man of Law's Tale reflects women's complicated and contradictory role in medieval society. According to Carolyn Dinshaw, the Tale is "bewildering, disorienting, and seemingly endless" (88). Sheila

Delany even calls Custance "the least attractive of Chaucer's women, sharing with patient Griselda of the *Clerk's Tale* the somewhat repulsive masochistic qualities of extreme humility and silent endurance" (62 sic). Certainly, Custance is a rather wooden figure who almost too willingly submits to the authority of the men in her life: father, husband, and God. Thus, the Man of Law's Tale is usually categorized as a mixture of hagiography and courtly romance that was written with the intention of enlightening the medieval audience about the making of both a saint and a courtly heroine. Custance seemingly incorporates the patriarchal medieval beliefs that women could and should be subordinated to men: her passivity, her representation as a saint, her commodification, but also her more obscure role as a seductress, seem to limit severely Custance's ability to create her own selfhood.

However, the Man of Law's Tale contains a subtext, another layer of meaning created by Custance's characterization that transcends the limitations of Eve, Mary, saintliness, and courtliness. That subtext presents the story of Custance through several patterns of images suggestive of an ancient, women-centered culture, a culture which undermines the traditional medieval beliefs about women and which is related to the cult of the Mother Goddess. On one level, therefore, Chaucer's Custance reflects women's complicated and contradictory role in medieval society. On another level, however, Custance provides an alternative representation of medieval women that shows her breaking through cultural constraints.

At the surface level of the text, the Man of Law's Tale presents Custance as a saint-in-making, constant and obedient in her faith in spite of a multitude of impossible hardships. Twice, for example, she patiently endures years and days in a storm-tossed

ship. Custance also successfully converts to Christianity people such as the sultan, Hermengyld, the constable, King Alla, and many of his subjects. Moreover, because of Custance's miraculous power, Hermengyld cures a blind man.

"In name of Crist," cride this blinde Bretoun,
Dame Hermengyld, yif me my sighte agayn!"
This lady weex affrayed of the soun,
Lest that hir housbonde, shortly for to sayn,
Wolde hire for Jhesu Cristes love han' slayn,
Til Custance made hire boold, and bade hire wirche
The wyl of Crist, as doghter of his chirche. (II, 561-67)

Although Hermengyld performs the miracle of restoring the blind man's eyesight, Custance is the one who, through Christ, gives Hermengyld healing power. Custance, then, is the real saint. Finally, Custance's high birth and physical beauty are also indicative of hagiographic tales. All these characteristics, as well as the tale's various rhetorical strategies such as *occupatio* or that which is told by pretending to leave it out, *sententia* or moral commentary, *comparatio* or likening to other saints or Biblical figures, and *apostrophe* or direct address to non-present characters, all serve to place the Man of Law's Tale in the popular genre of the *legenda* or saint's life (Paull 186-91). In fact, according to Paull, Chaucer uses rhetorical strategies to manipulate the readers' emotions as these literary devices focus all the action on a single character, Custance, highlighting only those scenes that underscore Custance's saintliness (188).

However, despite her status as a saint-in-making, and even though Custance has no intention to seduce, according to Christian belief, she, as a female, is inherently a

temptation to men. Custance is a seductress merely by being, who, albeit unwillingly and unknowingly, causes the death of many people. For instance, when the Sultan first hears about Custance, he "hath caught so greet plesance / To han hir *figure* in his remembrance" (II, 186-87, emphasis added). Since the Middle English word "figure" denotes both "shape" and "form," the Sultan, in deciding he must possess this "figure," indicates that his desire is aroused even though the text suggests that Custance has been described only in her nobility. The use of the term "figure," then, makes clear that the Sultan is more impressed with Custance's physical characteristics than with her virtuous personality traits. Thus, Custance is cast in the role of seductress, a role that proves to be fatal for the Sultan and his subjects, for once Custance has arrived at the court, the Sultaness is so disturbed by Custance's presence that she slaughters both her son and all his subjects. This sequence of events, desire followed by jealousy and then slaughter, is repeated at the Northumberland court where Custance's presence also causes innocent people to die. For example, when Satan sees "of Custance all hir perfeccioun" (II, 583), he immediately plans to "quite hir" (584). Thus, Satan fills a young knight with "foul affeccioun" (II, 586) for Custance, and when she rejects the knight, Satan kills the innocent, faithful Hermengyld out of spite. Satan is able to slay Hermengyld only because of the medieval paradox for women: even if women are good and do nothing to arouse male attention or desire, women are still bad simply because they exist and therefore men lust after them.

Finally, even the fairy tale marriage between Custance and King Alla is disrupted when Alla is forced to order the death of his own mother who has become insanely jealous of her new daughter-in-law. Obviously, in spite of Custance's exemplary faith in

God, the underlying message is that women, as manifestations of the seductive Eve, have caused and will cause the destruction of humankind. Traditional cultural assumptions about the inherent seductiveness of women burdened even those women who are presented as saintly types.

Other medieval beliefs about women resulted in cultural constraints aimed to keep women marginalized, voiceless, and passive. For example, although the Man of Law's Tale is about Custance's life, Custance herself does not have much of a voice. In spite of the fact that the tale is mostly action with relatively little talking by any of the characters, one might expect that Custance, as the protagonist, directly voices her thoughts, beliefs, and opinions. Instead, Custance has only two speeches two stanzas or longer; most of the time, her voice is mediated through the male narrator. Moreover, not only does the narrator provide the framework of the tale, but the audience is first introduced to Custance through the eyes of the male community: her "excellent renown" (II, 150) is reported to the "chapmen riche" (135) through the "commune voys of every man" (155). Furthermore, the Sultan's subsequent actions rather than Custance's reactions provide the impetus to move the plot ahead. Consequently, the Man of Law's Tale is a woman's story told by men, and Custance, although she is the protagonist of the tale, remains subordinate throughout most of the narrative.

In addition, the Man of Law's Tale also explores the theme of commodification which serves to keep women in an inferior position. For instance, the Sultan, lusting after Custance's "figure," commodifies Custance by plotting to acquire her like a piece of merchandise. According to the patriarchal code, Custance does not have the right to select her own husband. Instead, her marriage is arranged by men who, "by tretys and

embassadrie, / And by the popes mediacioun, / And al the chirche, and al the chivalrie"
(II, 233-35), prepare the agreement:

And he shal han Custance in mariage,
And certein gold, I noot what quantitee;
And heer-to founden sufficient suretee.

This same accord was sworn on eyther syde. (II, 241-44)

Clearly, Custance's marriage is arranged in the terse words of an "acord" or business contract. As a result, she has been effectively reduced to a commodity to be traded like a piece of "chaffare." The extra payment of gold stresses the business nature of the marriage and at the same time reduces Custance's status even more, implying that her "figure" alone is too insignificant to satisfy the Sultan's greed. Thus, Custance's paradoxical representation as a saint and a seductress, as well as her objectification and commodification, clearly reflects ways by which a patriarchal society tried to keep women in a subordinate position.

Although at the surface level of the text the Man of Law's Tale exemplifies medieval women's subordinate status, an analysis of the tale's subtext reveals Custance as a strong, positive protagonist. As an active agent, Custance manages to cope with impossible hardships, fights off evil, and, as Osborn states, "succeeds in orchestrating the joining together of generations at the end of the story" (9). As such, Custance can be viewed as a medieval manifestation of the pre-historic Mother Goddess.

First discovered in visual images more than 20,000 years old, the Mother Goddess provides a strong, powerful role model for women of all ages. She is associated with life-giving powers, simultaneously symbolizing life and death, creation and destruction,

rebirth and transformation. 'Closely connected to the earth, she represents both nature's cycles and women's life cycles.' Powerful and dynamic, the Mother Goddess stands in sharp contrast to the traditional concept of the feminine figure as sedate, subordinate, and inferior. The ancient cultures that worshiped this Goddess were "woman-centered, peaceful, and egalitarian" (Gadon xiii). From the Pyrenees to Lake Baikal in Siberia, from Ice Age tribes to the civilization of Minoan Crete (3000-1500 B.C.E.), life was pervaded by a devoted faith in the Goddess, resulting in peace and harmony with nature (Baring and Cashford 3). However, over time an influx of Indo-European tribes led to a shift in power from matriarchal egalitarianism to patriarchal dominance that caused the Goddess's identity to be fractured into a myriad of other goddesses. Thus, over a period of some 2,500 years, the matriarchal system that accompanied the cult of the Goddess was slowly replaced by a patriarchal civilization that was based on a system of domination as illustrated by the pantheon of Greek skygods. This shift forced the Goddess to be transformed from powerful manifestations such as the Neolithic Mother Goddess of Catal-Huyuk to lesser female deities such as Isis, Queen of Egypt; Kali, Hindu Goddess of Transformation; and Demeter, grain Goddess of the Greek civilization. Although these manifestations still represent the vital life-giving powers of the Mother Goddess, these lesser deities then had to share their divinity with a male god: Isis with her consort and son, Horus; Kali with her consort, Shiva; and Demeter, whose origins pre-date the Olympian takeover, with her brother and consort, Zeus (Gadon).⁴

Eventually, when the Roman Emperor Constantine imposed Christianity as the state religion, male monotheism had almost completely suppressed the cult of the Goddess. The patriarchal Christian Church, which was dualistic, heaven-centered, and

body-denying, denounced the holistic, earth-centered, and body-affirming female deity as unenlightened and inferior. During the third century, for instance, as Christian leaders closely examined Christian writings, patristic fathers excluded those texts that included feminine symbolism and imagery (Berger 49). Nevertheless, especially in agricultural societies, the image of a female deity as a grain protectress was very important to the human imagination; thus, new ways were found to incorporate the Goddess's characteristics in similar forms. For example, representations of the Christian grain protectress can be found in the traditional grain miracles that surround female saints; these miracles often tell of a woman who flees a group of men in fear of rape but whose miraculous powers cause the grain in a newly seeded field to grow so fast that her pursuers are baffled and the woman manages to escape (Berger 89-91). Moreover, at the shrine of Our Lady of the Prairies in North Dakota, the grain protectress is represented in a barefoot Mary who blesses the new harvests, while in Italy, the grain protectress is represented in the Madonna della Spica who carries a sheath of wheat (Gadon 198).

Indeed, the most powerful manifestation of the Goddess in Christianity can be observed in the Virgin Mary, the only female in the Christian pantheon, who, as indicated in Chapter 1, presented a powerful image in the Middle Ages. Although in 1954 the Church finally declared Mary *Maria Regina*, meaning Heaven's Queen (instead of 'Queen of the Earth,' her former title) she was never officially declared a Goddess. Nonetheless, her image embodies the presence of divine power: "free from the stain of original sin, she alone of all humankind [does] not die" but merely falls asleep (Gadon 202). Mary is also linked to the Goddess through her position as Mother of Christ; in ancient matrilineal cultures such as those of Egypt and Minoan Crete, the Goddess gives

birth to a son who becomes her consort, after which both rule the land in unison.

Similarly, in Egyptian hieroglyphics, the Goddess's name is represented as a chair or throne (see-fig. 8), meaning she provides the holy seat of the Pharaoh and, as the throne, makes the king (Gadon 196). The notion of the Goddess ruling with her consort/son is very powerful in the human imagination and has persisted throughout the ages.

Therefore, Mary, symbolizing the throne or chair that gives life to her Son Jesus and that legitimizes His rule, can be viewed as the Christian manifestation of the Mother Goddess.

Aspects of the Goddess are even found in Eve who shares her Hebrew name Hawwah with God or Yawweh in that both names derive from the same Hebrew verb 'to be' (Baring and Cashford 492). The meaning of Eve's name then means 'life' or 'mother of all life' which indicates her former position as Goddess (Baring and Cashford 492). Moreover, the symbols connected with Eve, such as the Tree of Life and the serpent, also have an ancient, divine significance: the Tree of Life is one of the primary images of the Goddess herself, since its roots below and its branches above connect heaven, earth, and the underworld (Baring and Cashford 496). The serpent, too, is of divine origin. It first appears as a benevolent serpent-mother goddess in the Neolithic era and represents the principle of life energy and regeneration in images of the Goddess in every culture, the serpent "standing behind her, eating from her hand, entwined in her tree" (Baring and Cashford 499). In fact, the enmity between Eve and the serpent may be another effort by the Judeo-Christian tradition to change the Goddess's ideology of matriarchy and peace with nature to an ideology of patriarchy and an exploitation of nature.

Yet, despite the successful takeover of the Goddess culture, first by the pantheon of Greek sky gods and later by the absolute, all-powerful Christian God, the worship of



Fig. 8

Isis with golden throne on her head, from the sarcophagus of Amenhotep II,
(rpt. in Baring and Cashford 250).

the Earth Goddess never entirely dies out as is illustrated by her many avatars such as the Egyptian Isis, the Greek Demeter, the Hindu Kali, and the Christian Mary. Over the ages, the Goddess has successfully metamorphosed from all-powerful Mother Goddess to an assemblage of lesser but still important deities who enable her to live on in a new, and in a Christian, context. As a strong, powerful female deity who overcomes incredible obstacles and re-invents herself in many different forms, the Goddess provides a positive role model for women of all ages.

Indeed, manifestations of the Goddess also persist in medieval culture. For example, in medieval literature, the Goddess appears in various forms in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*. Custance, the Sultanness, and Donegild each exhibit some of the Goddess's attributes since all three characters break free from societal prejudices and subvert the Eve-Mary dichotomy that kept medieval women in a subordinate position. Instead, Custance, the Sultanness, and Donegild undermine the image of women as passive victims and provide alternative ways of being for medieval women.

In fact, the Sultanness and Donegild both embody characteristics of destruction that are necessarily associated with the Goddess, for although mostly depicted as the Creator of Life, the Goddess also manifests her Self in images of death as the opposite of life, since without death there can be no regeneration. This particular manifestation of the Goddess is seen in Kali, the formidable Hindu Goddess of Transformation, who is both the "loving mother who gives birth and the devourer of flesh who dances on the corpse in the graveyard" (Gadon 83). Although in medieval (and contemporary) western thought opposites divide, as is exemplified by the Eve-Mary dichotomy, in eastern thought opposites create harmony; thus Kali "creates, preserves, and destroys" as the "Cosmic

Power, the totality of the universe, the harmonization of all the pairs of opposites”
(Campbell 115).

In the *Man of Law's Tale*, the Sultaness and Donegild, more than Custance, are associated with the destructive aspects of the Goddess Kali, particularly when the narrator links the Sultaness to Eve, the ultimate destroyer of Paradise (II, 368). First of all, both the Sultaness and Donegild commit acts of destruction against their own offspring, breaking the sacred role of motherhood; both seek to usurp power, breaking the rules of patriarchy; both try to destroy their son's marriage, going against royal wishes; and both break *hospitalite*, the code of hospitality. These angry acts of resistance do not conform to medieval cultural ideals for women. As a result, the Sultaness and Donegild lose their sexual identity; instead, they are described as “virago” (MLT II, 359), “serpent under femynynyte” (360), “feyned womman” (362), and “mannish”(782) (Delany 68). Although the Sultaness's immediate concern seems to be her son's conversion from Islam to Christianity, at the same time, while working against this, the Sultaness acts to generate a new female identity as a woman with power in a patriarchal society that holds no place for such women.

The Sultaness, then, especially symbolizes the power of the Goddess to destroy cultural constraints obstructing the lives of women in a patriarchal society. In fact, the Sultaness is very effective in destroying the cultural constraints on Custance, who is strictly controlled by the rules of patriarchy. For example, when in Part I of the *Man of Law Tale* Custance submits to her father's wishes to marry the Sultan and leave her familiar home for an unfamiliar and frightening world, she speaks the following words:

“Allas, unto the Barbre nacioun

I moste anoon, syn that it is youre wille; [. . .]

Wommen are born to thraldom and penance,

And to been under mannes governance.” (II, 281-82, 286-87)

In this quote, Custance refers to women’s fate that resulted from Eve’s actions in Paradise: because Eve disobeyed God, ‘women are born to slavery and penance and to be under men’s rule,’ a decree that was actively supported by the dominant patriarchy. Indeed, Custance’s father, as the most important man in her life, determines that she shall marry the Sultan; and thus Custance has no choice but to obey her father’s wishes. Less than one hundred lines later, the Sultanness associates herself with Custance when she uses almost exactly the same words to describe the effect of her new daughter-in-law’s arrival:

“What sholde us tyden of this newe lawe

But thraldom to oure bodies and penance, [. . .]?” (II, 337-38)

However, the law that the Sultanness refers to is not only the “new lawe” of Christianity but the patriarchal law that supports Christianity’s tenet that men should rule over women (Mann 130). The Sultanness’s subsequent rejection of Christianity therefore symbolizes also her rejection of the patriarchal law that limits women’s freedom to live within their own power.⁵ The violent and destructive actions of the Sultanness clearly reflects her struggle against the cultural constraints patriarchy imposes upon women as the Sultanness manifests the power of a Goddess such as Kali.

In order for the Sultanness to create a world in which women are not subordinate to men, she first has to destroy the old world, symbolized by the Sultan, his subjects, and the merchants whose patriarchal attitude is reflected in the way they respond to Custance as a

mere commodity. The Sultanness kills her son and his subjects but, without any motive indicated, lets Custance live. This action can be variously interpreted, especially since the Sultanness sends Custance off in a rudderless boat but at the same time allows her treasure, ample food, and clothes. In not killing Custance and in making it possible for Custance to survive in the boat, the Sultanness represents not just the destructive but also the regenerative aspect of Kali.

In fact, this seemingly unexplainable act of kindness is totally incongruent with the power-hungry character of the Sultanness as depicted by the narrator, who claims the Sultanness wants "hirsself [. . .] al the contree lede" (II, 434). However, the narrator's opinion seems clearly a one-line afterthought which fails to make a convincing argument since, as Queen-Mother, the Sultanness would conceivably have had many earlier opportunities to usurp the throne. Moreover, as a power-hungry politician, the Sultanness would undoubtedly have killed Custance as a potential rival, since, as the widow of the Sultan, Custance might have made a claim to the throne. Instead, by letting Custance live, the Sultanness allows her to escape from a life of subordination in a patriarchal world: thus, in Custance the Sultanness creates the possibility of an alternative way of life for women. Accordingly, in the manifestation of Kali, the Sultanness represents the Goddess's ability to create new life out of destruction. The Sultanness therefore creates an alternative role for medieval women, a role that aggressively breaks through the cultural constraints which limited women to a life of passivity and subordination.

Custance, the protagonist of the Man of Law's Tale, is also closely associated with the Goddess and, as such, actively subverts the medieval Eve-Mary paradox. For instance, both the Goddess and Custance are joined together in images of water. In fact,

many manifestations of the Goddess are born from a “watery abyss [. . .] from which all created forms emerge” (Baring and Cashford 557). For example, the symbol of the Sumerian goddess Nammu is the sea; the Egyptian goddess Isis is “born from the all-wetness;” the Greek goddess Aphrodite is born from the sea; and even the Virgin Mary (whose name comes from the Latin *mare*, meaning sea) is referred to as *Stella Maris* or ‘Star of the Sea’ and ‘Mistress of the Waters’ (Baring and Cashford 557, 568).

Custance, too, has a strong connection with the sea. Three times she undertakes a long sea-journey; twice she is left to die at sea, yet twice she miraculously emerges from the ocean, the archetypal symbol for the womb. Furthermore, sea changes often symbolize a ritual separation from a previous, more profane life, a “crossing over,” or a process of renewal and regeneration (Gadon 154) which is symbolized by the Christian ritual of baptism, but which was earlier and still is associated with the Goddess. Hence, Custance's life-threatening experiences in storm-tossed ships are actually links to the image of the Goddess. As a manifestation of the Goddess who emerges from the sea, and in thereby providing an alternate interpretation of the origin of women, Custance subverts the medieval belief that woman was born from Adam's rib. Thus, Custance helps to free women from their subordinate position, as her miraculous emergence from the sea is linked to the Goddess's capacity for regeneration and rebirth.

However, as a medieval manifestation of the Mother Goddess, Custance is most closely associated with Persephone and Demeter, grain Goddesses of ancient Greece. The myth of Persephone and Demeter tells of a daughter who is abducted, raped, and married against her will, and of a mother who refuses to succumb to male authority. Custance, Persephone, and Demeter are therefore closely linked in the way their stories

reflect patriarchal violence. However, the most important theme in the Persephone myth lies in the reunion of Persephone and her mother, Demeter, a theme repeated at the end of the Man of Law's Tale when Custance reunites several generations. Both stories, therefore, emphasize and validate female values such as interconnectedness and harmony; both the Persephone myth and the Man of Law's Tale celebrate strong, positive, female identities in a patriarchal society and thus subvert the paradox that kept women in a subordinate position.

Persephone and Demeter first appear in Greek mythology as a universal deity called Gaia, Ge, or Da. Gaia is a chthonic Goddess connected not only to the underworld but to the soil and everything else that grows. Creating new life from her body, Gaia takes it back at the time of death; thus, she is life and death, upper world and underworld. However, between 2000 and 1000 B.C.E., the sky god Zeus and the Olympian pantheon, those mythic representations of the social system of patriarchy, usurped the worship of Gaia. Gaia's granddaughter, Demeter, whose name 'Mother of Earth' still reflects her pre-Olympian status, then replaced Gaia in the form of the less important grain Goddess. Demeter is also the mother of Persephone, the Maiden, although for centuries, Persephone was actually viewed as a younger version of Demeter herself because of the similarities in their lives. For instance, both Demeter and Persephone experience patriarchal violence: Demeter is raped by Poseidon, god of the Sea, while Persephone is raped by Hades, god of the underworld. Both Goddesses also share equally in the Eleusian worship rites, a secret ceremony bringing together the personal rite of initiating a young girl into womanhood and the universal rite of commemorating Demeter's gift of agriculture to humanity (Gadon, 150). Thus, Demeter

and Persephone exhibit an “essential unity” that blurs the distinction between the two deities (Hayes 10). A third Goddess, Hecate, the ‘wise crone’ who has many connections to the underworld, completes a trinity. Thus, Persephone, Demeter, and Hecate function as three phases of a woman's life cycle: maiden, mother, and crone rule underworld, earth, and sky. These blended roles effectively embody all aspects of the original Mother Goddess (Hayes 12).

Although the Man of Law's Tale does not directly refer to the Persephone myth, the tale's subtext reveals many connections between the two narratives.⁶ For instance, both tales tell of powerful male figures who emotionally and sexually abuse women and thereby foreground the brutality of the male-female relationships in a patriarchal culture. Indeed, both protagonists are forced into marriage against their will: Persephone to Hades, Custance to the Sultan. Following their marriage, each suffers a figurative death: Persephone when she is forced to move to the underworld, Custance when she is forced to drift “yeres and dayes” (II, 463) in a wave-tossed ship. Eventually, both women emerge empowered from their ‘deaths’: Persephone inspires new life on the upper world, while Custance has gained miraculous healing power which allows her to cure a blind man. Thus, in their miraculous and regenerative powers, both Persephone and Custance are linked to the Goddess.

Indeed, as manifestations of the Goddess, Custance and Persephone subvert the traditional medieval beliefs which viewed women as passive and subordinate figures, for in their journeys, Persephone and Custance are depicted as mythological heroines in a role traditionally reserved for men. In fact, both tales conform to the plot of the hero tale as defined by Campbell, with Persephone's and Custance's journeys in accord with the

three standard stages of the hero's journey: "a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return" (35). In all three stages, Persephone and Custance function as active agents rather than passive objects.

For instance, the first stage of the hero's journey starts with the initial call to adventure, which, according to Campbell, always involves a "mystery of transfiguration," usually a rite of spiritual passage when the familiar life has been outgrown, and old beliefs no longer fit (51). However, such awakenings usually produce separation anxiety (Campbell 52). In both the Persephone myth and in the *Man of Law's Tale*, this rite of passage involves the transformation from childhood to adulthood and causes the protagonists to suffer. For example, Persephone, "the flowerlike girl," is kidnapped by Hades who "snatched her up all unwilling and carried her off" in spite of Persephone's "shrieking and [. . .] crying" ("To Demeter" lines 45, 56). Custance is similarly obliged to leave her childhood and her parental home to marry the Sultan: "'Fader,' she seyde, 'thy wrecched child Custance [. . .] shal to Surre / Ne shal I nevere seen yow moore with ye'" (II, 274-80), words which plainly indicate Custance's reluctance and fear of leaving her home. Yet, although Persephone and Custance are forced to leave behind their familiar worlds of childhood, each manages to voice her discontent: thus, Persephone and Custance acquire a sense of individuality which turns them from passive objects into active subjects.

The next stage of the hero's journey allows Persephone and Custance further to develop their sense of self. This second stage, the initiation process, usually requires a series of trials in order to obtain some kind of "miraculous energy-substance" (Campbell 181). For instance, in the myth, Persephone is forced to become the bride of Hades.

Although this event is often analyzed as Persephone's initiation into the mysteries of sexuality, Persephone's forced stay in the underworld can also be interpreted as an initiation into the mysteries of death in which Persephone acquires knowledge which will eventually allow her to unite the upper and lower worlds in a continuous cycle of regeneration.

In the *Man of Law's Tale*, during the second stage of the hero's journey, Custance is made to experience hardships that lead her to the miraculous and sustaining power of the Virgin Mary. For instance, as a female hero in a male-dominated world, Custance is most in danger of the two lustful knights who, in trying to possess and subordinate her, personify the patriarchal world. When the "false knyght" in King Alla's court accuses Custance of killing Hermengyld, Custance responds,

"merciful mayde,
Marie I meene, dogter to Seint Anne,
Bifore whos child angeles synge Osanne,
If I be gilteles of this felonye,
My socour be, for ellis shal I dye." (II, 640-44)

Custance, unlike the narrator who repeatedly refers to God and the importance of God's intervention in Custance's trials, instead turns in her hour of need to the Virgin Mary, the powerful Christian manifestation of the Goddess. Indeed, Mary seems immediately to come to Custance's rescue: the "false knyght" is uncovered and put to death by a hand which "smoot upon [the knight's] nekke-boon" (II, 669) as a "voys was heard in general audience" (673) declaring Custance "gilteles" (674).

After her second sea-exile, about to be raped by a "lordes steward," Custance once more prays to Mary:

But blisful Marie heelp hire right anon;
For with hir struglyng wel and myghtily
The thief fil over bord al sodeynly,
And in the see he dreynte for vengeance; (II, 920-23)

For a second time, Mary comes to Custance's rescue. This time, she provides Custance with the power of a miraculous energy substance which gives Custance, although undoubtedly weakened from her five-year ordeal "in peyne and wo" (II, 901), the strength to throw her attacker overboard. As an example of a woman who successfully resists rape, this event underscores Custance's significance as a heroic character (Mann 137). Certainly, both Persephone, who has acquired the knowledge of death, and Custance, who has gained strength from the Virgin Mary, emerge empowered from the trials and tribulations of the second stage in the hero's journey.

According to Campbell, the primary function of the hero is to "[unlock] and release again of the flow of life into the body of the world" (40). The final stage of the hero's journey therefore involves a life-enhancing return and a reintegration into society. As a matter of fact, both the Persephone myth and the Man of Law's Tale emphasize the importance of this release of the "flow of life." Indeed, in this final stage, Persephone and Custance provide yet the most powerful examples of strong, positive, female identities in a patriarchal world that constantly aims to subordinate them.

In the Persephone myth, that "life-enhancing return to society" occurs when Persephone returns to the upper world and Demeter no longer withholds her life-giving

power; instead, Demeter “at once sent forth from the fertile land the lifegiving fruit; / All of broad earth was laden with leaves and flowers” (“To Demeter” lines 429-30). As a result of the reunion between Persephone and Demeter, the mother and daughter complement each other with their knowledge of life and death (see fig. 9). Consequently, the barren, fruitless earth is once again a plentiful, life-giving world: clearly, their reunion represents the released ‘flow of life.’ At the same time, the myth commemorates the restoration of the mother-daughter relationship as it substantiates this bond as one of the most essential relationships of humankind. Thus, the myth validates important female values such as interconnectedness as it celebrates the life-giving power of Persephone and Demeter’s reunion.

The restoration of humankind’s fundamental relationships is also an underlying motif in Custance’s life-enhancing return when, at the end of the Man of Law’s Tale, Custance succeeds in joining together three generations. In fact, Custance initiates not one, but three reunions. To bring about the first reunion, Custance deliberately sends her child, Maurice, to the senator’s home, so that King Alla, who “hath the face in remembrance / Of dame Custance” (II, 1032-33), recognizes the child as his son. Thus, Custance becomes the active agent who restores the bond between father and son. Moreover, this first reunion also prompts a second reunion when King Alla realizes that since Maurice looks just like Dame Custance, his mother must be his long-lost wife. Finally, the third reunion involves the restoration of the bond between father and daughter. This reunion is also initiated by Custance when she “preyde [. . .] hir housbonde” (II, 1079) to have her father “vouche sauf som day with hym to dyne” (1083). Indeed, at the very end of the tale, Custance, her father, and King Alla are all



Fig. 9

Demeter and Persephone reunited, from marble bas relief,
(rpt. in Baring and Cashford 376).

reunited and enjoy “pitous joye [. . .] / Bitwixe hem thre” (II, 1114-15). Therefore, Custance’s life-enhancing return is symbolized by the celebration of unity and togetherness. In fact, both the Persephone myth and the Man of Law’s Tale emphasize the importance of the bond between parent and child, as well as the bond between husband and wife, since the restoration of these bonds symbolizes the secret of life itself.

At the same time, both tales celebrate the rare story of how matriarchy wins out over patriarchy. Demeter’s refusal to generate life forces Zeus and Hades to agree to her demands; thus, Persephone is allowed to return to the upper world. Custance’s deliberate effort to reunite her family transforms her from a passive victim who succumbs to patriarchal rule to an active agent who is in charge of her own destiny. Therefore, as manifestations of the Mother Goddess, both Persephone and Custance become dynamic subjects who subvert the medieval ideology that women were subordinate, sedate, and inferior.

In the Man of Law’s Tale, Chaucer explores the archetypal experiences of women in a patriarchal society and their efforts to achieve an independent, authoritative identity. Custance’s fate is a life of subordination that reflects the social realities of many women’s lives in the medieval world. Indeed, on the surface, the Man of Law’s Tale supports the medieval paradox of women’s representation when Custance is depicted as a saint in the constancy of her faith but also as a temptress in her ability to attract the Sultan and King Alla. However, the subtext of the Man of Law’s Tale presents a pattern of literary images that relates the tale to the ancient cult of the

Goddess. Linked to Persephone, the Greek manifestation of the Goddess who symbolizes the creation of life itself, Custance is empowered as a mythological heroine who recreates her subordinate position into one much more powerful. Thus, Custance provides a powerful role model for women of all ages.

Chapter Three

Prudence: An Alternative View of Medieval Society

The previous chapter indicates that in the character of Custance, the protagonist of the Man of Law's Tale, Chaucer subverts the medieval paradox that represents women as both an Eve and a Mary. In fact, Custance is represented in the tradition of the mythological heroine who is instrumental in restoring the life-embracing relationships within her family. In the Tale of Melibee, Chaucer also explores medieval woman's paradoxical position as she personifies an abstract quality or psychological state.⁷ At the same time, however, the Tale of Melibee inverts these traditional and passive depictions of medieval women, since in Prudence, the tale's main character, Chaucer not only advances the innovative idea that women's voices actually matter but also promotes a 'feminine' rather than a 'masculine' interpretation of patriarchal society. Prudence thus transcends the usual paradoxical representations of medieval women and, like Custance, provides instead a powerful role model for women.

Chaucer's "litel thyng in prose" (VII, 937), the Tale of Melibee, is actually a very close rendition of a work by a Dominican friar, Reynaud de Louens, who based his translation on a tract written by Albertanus, a judge at Brescia, in 1246 (Cooper 314). The tale recounts how Sophie, daughter of Melibee and Prudence, is wounded by three of Melibee's enemies. Although Melibee is very anxious to revenge his daughter, Prudence urges him to calm himself. Quoting Ovid, Jesus Syrach, Paul, Tobit, John, Publius Syrus, David, Luke, Petrus Alfonso, Cicero, Matthew, Augustine, and many other biblical, classical, and patriarchal sources Prudence eventually persuades Melibee to forgive his attackers.

The Melibee certainly occupies an unusual position in the *Canterbury Tales* since its narrator is none other than Chaucer in his literary persona of Geoffrey, the pilgrim. Naturally, readers may expect an exceptionally brilliant and insightful narrative that confirms Chaucer's position as "the first finder of the English language" ("Chaucer, Geoffrey"). However, the Melibee consists of much moralistic and didactic prose which is bound to tax many of its readers. Indeed, compared to the brilliant narrative of the Miller's Tale or the complex characterization in the Wife of Bath's Tale, the Melibee leaves much to be desired. However, it is impossible to conceive a poet of Chaucer's magnitude writing the Melibee as it is without intention. We can assume, therefore, that despite the conventional and unimaginative quality of the Melibee, Chaucer chose himself as spokesperson for this tale with a very particular purpose in mind; in fact, in the character of Prudence, a straightforward and self-assured woman who, for *The Canterbury Tales*, holds the unusual position of controlling most of the tale's discourse, Chaucer may conceivably explore a different model of virtuous behavior for medieval women.

Although critics such as Hiltz DeLong usually categorize the Melibee as a didactic treatise with allegorical overtones (Chaucer 923), the tale can also be regarded as a courtesy book and thus combines two popular literary genres of the Middle Ages. Other scholars consider the tale to be Chaucer's way of satirizing medieval literary conventions (Chaucer 924). Indeed, the Melibee's triteness and overabundance of biblical, classical, and proverbial quotations suggest that the Melibee is intended subtly to ridicule the vast body of well-established, conventional literature that existed in the Middle Ages. Even though modern readers may consider these literary genres boring,

tedious, and moralizing, the *Melibee*, as both an allegory and a courtesy book, nevertheless provides a tale that challenges and places in the foreground medieval women's subordinate position. Indeed, as the *Melibee*'s protagonist, Prudence exhibits characteristics that allow her to transcend the stereotypical representations of medieval women that are associated with both literary genres.

As a didactic treatise with heavy allegorical overtones the *Melibee* is, of course, representative of a literary genre that dates back as far as the classical tradition in which allegories are used to personify abstract concepts. In fact, Greek and Roman poets often represent classical virtues as women, a trend that continues in medieval art. Sometimes classical personifications are depicted in female figures simply because the abstract nouns they are identified with are female nouns, such as *Sapientia*, which means knowledge or wisdom, and *Fortuna*, which means fortune (Ferrante 5). At other times, however, the sex of an allegorical representation is determined by the characteristics that are attributed to that particular quality. For instance, as Bornstein explains, Guillaume de Conches, in a comment on Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, relates *Philosophia* to femininity not just for grammatical reasons but also because she "softens the ferocity of the souls, nourishes children with her milk, [and] is accustomed to tending the sick" (10).

However, in medieval allegories, perhaps because of the strong biblical tradition of identifying women with sin and lust, such undesirable qualities as old age and unchastity are often personified as ugly old women. For example, Chaucer, in his *Romaunt de la Rose*, describes various objectionable qualities such as villainy, covetousness, and avarice as poorly dressed, wrinkled, and treacherous women who grimace with rage. In contrast, desirable qualities such as youth and generosity are

frequently personified as beautiful young women. Therefore, since the allegorical tradition personifies those concepts which are essential to a person's moral and religious constitution, the battle for the soul is often seen as a struggle between a vice, personified as an old, repulsive hag, and a virtue, personified as a young, beautiful woman, who try to pull the innocent soul in different directions (Ferrante 2). Accordingly, allegorical representations often depict women from the double perspective of the medieval paradox that perceives women as both a saint and a seductress.

For example, the fifth century's allegory *Psychomachia* by Prudentius, which tells of the battle for the human soul, inspired many medieval poets to develop further a dynamic illustration of the conflicts of the soul. Indeed, Chaucer's Tale of Melibee can also be read as a battle for Melibee's soul; most of the tale's characters are, in fact, thinly veiled allegories. Several times Prudence emphasizes Melibee's allegorical nature: first, she exclaims that Melibee is a man who drinks honey, who has, in fact, drunk "muchel hony of sweete temporeel richness, and delices and honours of this world" (VII, 1410). Her words imply that honey symbolizes the world's temptations, and thus Melibee, as a man who enjoys the worldly pleasures too much, symbolizes fallible human nature. Moreover, Prudence claims that as a result of Melibee's weakness, "thre of [Melibee's] olde foes" (VII, 969), symbolizing the three enemies of the soul, seek to attack Melibee's soul: "for certes, the three enemys of mankynde--that is to seyn, the flesh, the feend, and the world-- / thou hast suffred hem entre in to thyn herte wilfully by the wyndows of thy body" (VII, 1420). Prudence's words suggest that the devil, the pleasures of the flesh, and the pull of the secular world have successfully penetrated Melibee's dwelling and wounded his soul, represented by Melibee's daughter. In accordance with early

didactic literature which recommended controlling the senses in order to resist temptation, Melibee's daughter is wounded in her feet, hands, ears, nose, and mouth. Additionally, unlike the version of Albertanus or Reynaud, where the daughter remains unnamed, in Chaucer's Tale of Melibee the daughter is called Sophie, which is derived from 'sophia,' meaning wisdom. Thus, the wounded and 'senseless' Sophie or soul also represents Melibee's wisdom that has succumbed to all three enemies. Of course, in her role as counselor, Prudence herself personifies the wise, prudent advice Melibee needs to conquer the three worldly pleasures who attacked and mortally wounded his soul and wisdom. Thus, Prudence is the one who wins the battle for Melibee's soul and restores him to his spiritual health.

However, since female allegorical representations were mostly static and confined to act within certain behaviors as prescribed by the moral or spiritual quality they represented, most medieval allegories did not much improve the subordinate position of medieval women but instead reinforced the dichotomy of Eve and Mary: undesirable qualities such as pride and sin are linked to Eve, while desirable qualities such as simplicity and chastity are linked to Mary. Yet, in dispensing careful advice to a figure who is lost in the confusion of the secular world, Prudence moves beyond the allegorical behavior that is usually ascribed to the classical allegorical character of *Prudentia* whose lessons are abstract rather than practical, metaphysical rather than moral (Baker 250). For instance, one would expect that in her representation as counselor to the beleaguered human soul, Prudence would give advice limited on the intricacies of spiritual life. Indeed, Prudence advises that Melibee follow the Christian principles of forgiveness, charity, and peace: "wikkednesse shal be warrished by goodnesse, discord by accord,

werre by pees” (VII, 1289). Moreover, Prudence reminds Melibee that “in alle youre werkes mekely biseken to the heighe God that he wol be youre conseilour” (VII, 1115). Thus, Melibee must be willing to put himself in God’s hands. Prudence also reminds Melibee to drive harmful passions such as “ire, coveitise, and hastifnesse” (VII, 1121) out of his heart since these evil emotions, the “roote of alle harmes” (1129), will undoubtedly lead to the destruction of a man’s soul. Therefore, in this spiritual advice, Prudence faithfully fulfills the advisory role as assigned to her by her allegorical character.

However, although the state of Melibee’s soul as represented by the mortally wounded Sophie suggests that Melibee is in dire need of metaphysical advice, the majority of Prudence’s advice deals with the practicalities of secular life and provides Melibee with a set of moral and judicious guidelines that allow him to cope with political, rather than spiritual struggles. Indeed, Prudence’s advice deals with a variety of topics, many of them not necessarily connected to the state of his soul such as weeping, friendship, rhetoric, hastiness, fortune, law, patience, and reputation. For instance, although Prudence counsels Melibee to place his trust in God, she also gives him the following advice:

“And afterward thanne shul ye taken conseil in youre self, and examyne wel youre thoghtes of swich thyng as yow thynketh that is best for youre profit.” (VII, 1119)

This advice to rely on one’s self rather than on God and to examine one’s thoughts concerning all things that seem best for one’s own profit is in fact much more worldly than spiritual in nature. Prudence also advises Melibee to summon his true friends and

keep away from the advice of fools, flatterers, drunkards, wicked folk, and former enemies with whom Melibee has been reconciled. Prudence then tells Melibee of his mistakes: Melibee invited too many people to the council which he called together to seek advice on how to respond to the attack on Sophie; he called young people whom he did not know well but who flatter him; he brought ire, envy, and rashness in his heart; he let his advisors know his mind; and finally, he failed to separate the advice of true, old friends from that of the others. Such pragmatic advice seems much more appropriate for a man whose worldly affairs require a thorough insight into human nature than for a man whose soul is in mortal danger. Indeed, in providing Melibee with principles of eliciting and evaluating counsel, in offering advice on secular matters, and in influencing Melibee's actions in the world, Prudence moves beyond the symbolic role of merely dispensing spiritual advice to save Melibee's soul: thus, Prudence helps to improve women's subordinate position

However, the allegory of the Melibee presents more than just an internal attack upon the soul. As a matter of fact, the battle for Melibee's soul can also be interpreted as a battle for medieval England. Here, in her role as advisor to Melibee, Prudence manages also to transcend the medieval belief that women should not play a role in government. Several critics, in fact, suggest that Chaucer chose to include in the *Canterbury Tales* a translation of Reynaud's treatise because of foreign and domestic political events. For instance, England had been involved in a long and costly war with France since 1338. In the late 1380's, although the war was successful, more and more people openly questioned the wisdom of continuing these hostilities. Thus, Prudence's determination to

avoid war and instead focus on a peaceful solution can be seen as Chaucer's response to the French-English war (Scattergood 292).

Moreover, in the mid 1380's, a domestic conflict grew between Richard II, his subjects, and his royal advisors when a group of nobles, jealous of the influence on Richard of certain advisors who were outside the royal circle, forced themselves on the king as an advisory council. However, in 1387, influenced by Michael de la Pole, Robert de Vere and others, Richard managed to reclaim his royal privileges, but afterwards an armed uprising was organized by the Duke of Gloucester, the Earl of Arundel, the Earl of Warwick, and others who accused these advisors of treason. Then, in 1388--initiated by Thomas of Gloucester, Henry, Earl of Derby, Richard of Arundel, Thomas of Warwick, and others--the so-called Merciless Parliament convicted and executed a number of Richard's advisors. Therefore, the *Melibee* can also be read as Chaucer's interpretation of important political issues such as "undue influence and [. . .] royal responsibility" (Johnson 145). In fact, Prudence's advice is very much of a political nature: her counsel is concerned with legal questions of revenge and justice versus mercy and forgiveness; moreover, Prudence's counsel is pragmatic in nature and aimed at convincing Melibee that violence is not a viable solution and that war should be avoided at all cost. Eventually, Prudence's arguments lead Melibee to forgive his enemies, which leads their family, symbolizing England, back from the brink of war. Therefore, even though she is confined within the behaviors prescribed by her allegorical quality, Prudence is also presented as a woman who takes on an important role as counselor in public affairs. As such, Prudence breaks free from societal prejudices that denied medieval women a role in government.

Furthermore, Prudence transcends women's representation in another literary genre, for the Tale of Melibee can be seen not only as an allegory but also as a courtesy book, a popular medieval genre that provided behavioral guidelines for medieval women in secular life. Didactic in nature, this genre includes books of etiquette, books of instruction, and books of advice from parents to daughters. Written mostly by fathers, husbands, priests, and scholars, these books provide an interesting insight into the roles medieval women were expected to play and the extent of stereotypical prejudices about women (Bornstein 11). For instance, books of courtly education teach noblewomen about hawking, singing, playing a musical instrument, telling stories, and playing chess (Power 76-77). Other courtesy books provide information on how a wife should treat her husband, how she should attend to household chores, and how she should devote herself to religious duties (Power 80). In fact, many of these courtesy books portray medieval woman as someone who is patient, like the Clerk's Griselda, constant, like the Man of Law's Custance, and religious, like the Second Nun's Cecelia. These, then, are the cultural ideals to which the male-dominated society expected medieval women to aspire.

However, in the Tale of Melibee, Prudence, by appropriating the traditionally male role of advisor, subverts the conventional pattern whereby the good husband advises his wife in the important elements of courtly education: instead, Prudence advises her husband in the important elements of political education. In fact, Prudence proves to be a wise, patient, and faithful counselor who effectively undercuts the misogynistic patriarchal belief that women are unable to provide sensible advice. At the same time, in her role as counselor to Melibee, Prudence transcends the male-inscribed cultural ideals

of constancy, patience, and faith as they are personified in Custance, Griselda, and Cecelia.

Indeed, Prudence is no stoic Custance, no patient Griselda, and no suffering Cecelia. Instead, she is a straightforward, confident, and verbose character who rejects the culturally imposed role of passivity and subordination and offers medieval women a different model of behavior. For example, Prudence, as behooves a noble Christian woman, exhibits an extensive knowledge of the Bible. However, unlike Cecelia in the Second Nun's Tale, who is made to suffer extensively for her unwavering belief in God and the Bible, Prudence uses her faith in the Bible to her advantage by providing biblical support to her wise arguments and sound advice. For instance, in her defense of women's role as counselor, Prudence states the following:

“Heere may ye see that if that wommen were nat goode, and hir counsails goode and profitable, / oure Lord God of hevене wolde nevere han wrought hem, ne called hem help of man, but rather confusion of man.”

(VII, 1104-05)

Indeed, like the Wife of Bath, Prudence uses Christian doctrine to break down the Eve-Mary paradox and the resulting misogynistic belief that women are basically evil.⁸ Moreover, Prudence applies the merciful Christian spirit of the New Testament in her many efforts to persuade Melibee to overcome his vengeful anger and forgive his enemies, thus actively demonstrating and employing her faith.

Furthermore, Prudence exemplifies the medieval cultural ideal that, like Custance in the Man of Law's Tale, women should be constant in their emotions. Indeed, throughout her trials and tribulations, Custance remains unmoved and unshaken in

poverty and prosperity, joy and sorrow, victory and defeat. Prudence, too, exhibits constancy as she remains unshaken in her convictions. For instance, both Melibee and the council are of the opinion that Melibee should seek immediate vengeance upon his three enemies, while Prudence argues against reckless action. Refusing to accept any excuses, Prudence insists that wrong can only be punished by law and not by private vengeance. In spite of their differences of opinion, Prudence does not submit to the various opinions of the council but remains steadfast in her belief that a violent confrontation should be avoided at all cost.

Moreover, in her unwavering beliefs, Prudence blurs traditional gender roles since, in the Melibee, the male and not the female characters seem continually to vacillate; the men, therefore, are more in need of counseling in the merits of constancy than the women. The council members, for instance, repeatedly change their mind: “Yet hadde this Melibeus in his conseil many folk that prively in his eere conseilled hym certeyn thyng, and conseilled hym the contrarie in general audience” (VII, 1048). The council is clearly inconsistent in their opinions, which they seem to tailor according to their audience.

Melibee, like his male counselors, is also most inconstant in his beliefs: first, he refuses to be counseled by a woman, telling Prudence: ““I purpose nat [. . .] to werke by thy conseil [. . .]. I seye that alle wommen been wikke, and noon good of hem alle””(VII, 1054, 56). Melibee clearly shares the misogynistic opinion that women are manifestations of Eve, who misguided Adam and caused the Fall of humankind; therefore, women are unable to provide wise counsel. However, one by one, Prudence refutes all his reasons until Melibee changes his mind, saying, ““And, wyf, by cause of

thy sweete wordes, and eek for I have assayed and preved thy grete sapience and thy grete trouthe, I wol governe me by thy conseil in alle thyng” (VII, 1113). Indeed, then believing Prudence quite capable of dispensing advice, Melibee decides to follow her lead in all matters, especially with regard to his enemies. Yet, when Prudence asks Melibee how he plans to resolve his dispute with his foes, Melibee responds that his enemies do not want peace and that his honor requires war. Clearly, Melibee is not at all ready to follow Prudence’s advice to forgive the three men but instead plans to seize their assets and exile them. However, once Prudence reminds Melibee that he should not be angry and that he suffered punishment because of his own sins, she finally succeeds in convincing Melibee that he should be ruled by mercy. Indeed, for a second time, Melibee’s “herte gan encline to the wil of his wif, considerynge hir trewe entente, / and conformed hym anon and assented fully to werken after hir conseil” (VII, 1870-71).

Clearly, Prudence, strong and unambiguous in her opinions, subverts stereotypical beliefs as she acts in what is traditionally regarded as ‘male’ behavior; thus, she stands in sharp contrast to Melibee and the all-male council, who, in their inconstancy, behave in what is traditionally regarded as ‘female’ or ‘feminine’ demeanor.

Finally, in her dealings with Melibee, Prudence exhibits the cultural ideal of patience. However, in her patience, Prudence even more clearly blurs sex and gender roles. While Melibee is weeping and crying, “lyk a mad man rentynge his clothès” (VII, 973), Prudence patiently reminds Melibee of the words of Ovid:

“He is a fool that destourbeth the mooder to wepen in the deeth of hire child til she have wept hir fille as for a certein tyme, / and thanne shal man

doon his diligence with amyable wordes hire to reconforte, and preyen
hire of hit wepyng for to stynte." (VII, 976-77)

Prudence therefore decides to let Melibee cry and weep "for a certein space" (VII, 978) so that he can regain his composure. However, these words are unusual in that they are not spoken by a calm, understanding father who seeks to soothe a distraught mother, but they are instead conveyed by Prudence, the even-tempered, patient woman, to Melibee, the highly agitated father. Moreover, when Melibee does not seem to become calm, Prudence exclaims, "'Allas, my lord,' [. . .] 'why make ye youreself for to be lyk a fool? / For sothe it aperteneth nat to a wys man to maken swich a sorwe'" (VII, 979-80).

Although Prudence's words seem unusually cool for a mother whose child is seriously wounded, Melibee's actions seem unusually dramatic. As Daileader suggests, Melibee behaves in the impassioned, emotional, and thus irrational manner usually assigned to women while Prudence, on the other hand, behaves in the composed, unemotional, and thus rational manner normally assigned to men (33). Clearly, the gender roles of Prudence and Melibee have been reversed, as Prudence not only displays patience but also incorporates the traditionally masculine characteristic of rationality.

However, the most important manner in which Prudence breaks free from societal prejudices about women occurs in her advice to Melibee and the council, when she lays out the foundations for an ideal medieval civilization. Indeed, in the Tale of Melibee, Prudence explores some of the fundamental hierarchical concepts on which the male-dominated medieval society is built. Rejecting a belief system that favors revenge and justice over peace and mercy, Prudence instead promotes an ideology that is based on unity and interconnectedness (Dillon 57-58).

As a matter of fact, many critics claim that the theme of justice, revenge, honor and nobility provides a thread that connects many of the pilgrims' tales. Indeed, Chaucer explores the concepts of honor and nobility in several of the *Canterbury Tales*. For instance, the Knight's Tale strongly emphasizes the importance of the chivalric rules of conduct. The sense of honor that Arcite and Palamon bring to the tale serves as the defining element of chivalric behavior and is clearly equated with bravery in battle. Indeed, Arcite and Palamon, as the chivalric tradition requires, willingly fight each other for the love of Emelye. Then, in the Miller's Tale, Chaucer parodies Arcite and Palamon's honorable conduct in the less than noble behavior of Nicholas and Absalom who fight each other for the love of Alison, and in the Reeve's Tale Chaucer clearly condemns the chivalric notion of honor and nobility by means of the ill-mannered behavior of John and Alan.

Subsequently, in the Melibee, Prudence provides a much deeper commentary on the traditional notions of honor and nobility as she subverts the patriarchal notion that revenge on one's enemies is honorable behavior. In sharp contrast to Prudence, Melibee explains to the group of counselors the reason for the council:

And by the manere of [Melibee's] speche it semed that in herte he baar a
cruel ire, redy to doon vengeaunce upon his foes, and sodeynly desired
that the werre sholde bigynne; but natheles, yet axed he hire conseil upon
this matiere. (VII, 1008)

Indeed, the council, which consists of "surgiens, phisiciens, olde folk and yonge," as well as "somme of his olde enemys," "somme of his neighebores," ful many subtille flatereres, and wise advocatz lerned in the lawe" (VII, 1004-06), immediately senses

Melibee's desire for vengeance. The young men especially, scorning the wise old folk, immediately jump up to suggest that Melibee should go to war: "whil that iren is hoot men sholden smyte; right so men sholde wreken hir wronges whil that they been fresshe and newe; and with loud voys they criden "Werre! Werre!" (VII, 1035) These young men clearly depict the male concept of honor that requires vengeance but that fails to take into consideration the terrible consequences of war. Indeed, in their recklessness, the young men resemble both the young knights from the Knight's Tale and their satiric counterparts in the Miller-Reeve sequence. Although the wise old men remind Melibee that "er that any werre bigynne, men moste have greet conseil and greet deliberacion" (VII, 1041), providing counsel and deliberation is exactly the role that Prudence then appropriates. However, in her counsel, Prudence rejects the chivalric values personified in the young men. Basing her counsel instead on values of peace, harmony, and social unity, Prudence advises Melibee: "I conseilte yow that ye accorde with youre adversaries and that ye have pees with hem" (VII, 1674). Moreover, rather than passively waiting for this affair to resolve itself, Prudence actively searches out Melibee's enemies, meets with them in a private place, and judiciously arranges the terms of agreement, continually advocating for peace by showing the three men "the grete goodes that comen of pees / and the greet harmes and perils that been in werre" (VII, 1728-29). Indeed, Prudence indicates clearly that peace is of greater importance than vengeance, even if vengeance is justifiable.

Furthermore, Prudence bases her view of society on the importance of kinship ties, both on a private level, meaning within the family, and on a public level, meaning within a society. In this, Prudence is closely associated with Custance who is also aware

of the importance of relationships. Indeed, just as Custance restores the bonds between herself, her father, her husband, and her son, Prudence counsels and successfully negotiates with Melibee to restore the bonds between himself and his enemies and not to destroy their familial ties. For example, Prudence warns Melibee that although Melibee has a very small family consisting of only a daughter, but no “bretheren, ne cosyns germayns, ne noon oother neigh kynrede” (VII, 1367), his enemies have “manie children, brethern, cosyns, and oother ny kynrede” (1371) who, after Melibee has killed his enemies, will undoubtedly continue to seek vengeance. Thus, Prudence warns Melibee against the dangers of a culture that promotes vengeance, since vengeance can cause a vicious cycle of destruction. Instead, Prudence provides Melibee with the following advice:

“Now, sire, thanne shul ye committe the keypyng of youre persone to youre trewe freendes that been approved and yknowe, / and of hem shul ye axen help youre persone for to kepe.” (VII, 1304-05)

Prudence understands that the best defense is a stable relationship between friends and neighbors.

In fact, Prudence herself is instrumental in restoring the relationships within her own family; although she seems remarkably detached for a mother whose child is hurt, Prudence and Sophie are actually very closely connected as, together, they subvert the stereotypical view of medieval women as passive and voiceless. In fact, in their close mother-daughter connection, Prudence and Sophie resemble the Greek grain goddesses, Persephone and Demeter, who also demonstrate a close mother-daughter bond. For instance, just as Demeter and Persephone complement each other as life and death,

Sophie and Prudence complement each other as body and voice. Indeed, the reader only knows Sophie in the description of her body:

Thre of [Melibee's] olde foes [. . .] wounded his doghter with fyve mortal
woundes in fyve sondry places-- / this is to seyn, in hir feet, in hire handes,
in hir erys, in hir nose, and in hire mouth--and leften hire for deed, and
wènten away. (VII; 969-71)

This description of Sophie is especially significant because Sophie's wounds leave her immobile and voiceless and thus unable to accuse her attackers. Indeed, Sophie's mutilated body perfectly illustrates women's subordinate and voiceless position in the male-dominated medieval society. In contrast, Prudence, in her eloquence and verbosity, is more voice than body. Thus, Prudence and Sophie together combine the body and the voice of medieval women and, as one, speak out against a male-dominated society that attempts to keep women voiceless.

Moreover, just as Demeter denounces the rape of Persephone and calls for the reunion of mother and daughter, Prudence denounces the rape of Sophie and calls for the healing of her daughter. Both mothers condemn patriarchal violence and instead emphasize the importance of restoration, of the body as well as familial relationships. Thus, the reunion of Demeter and Persephone restores life on earth, while Prudence and Sophie, who, as Daileader suggests, may in fact be "one entity" (32), an argument that helps explain Sophie's somewhat surprising disappearance from the narrative, restore harmony and order in their world. Indeed, Sophie and Prudence, linked together as body and voice, become one character as they transcend the medieval view of women as voiceless.

Finally, in her advice to Melibee, Prudence provides a view of medieval society that is built on unity, telling him “ye knowen wel that oon of the gretteste and moost sovereyn thyng that is in this world is unytee and pees” (VII, 1677). For instance, Prudence advocates for unity and peace when she arranges to meet with Melibee’s enemies and convinces the three men of the importance of a reconciliation with Melibee. After the three adversaries have listened to her “goodliche wordes (VII, 1732), they state the following:

· Thanne seyden they with *o-voys*, “Worshipful lady, we putten us and oure goodes al fully in youre wil and disposicioun, / and been redy to comen [. . .] for to maken oure obligacioun and boond as strong as it liketh unto youre goodnesse, / that we mowe fulfille the wille of yow and of my lord Melibee.” (VII, 1765-67 emphasis added)

Clearly, Prudence’s words create a sense of unity in Melibee’s enemies as they agree, in one voice, to put themselves at Prudence and Melibee’s disposal.

Prudence also aims to create peace and unity when she arranges to meet with the council. In fact, the council, which is composed of different medieval *estats* and thus exemplifies the diversity of medieval society, holds many different opinions regarding Melibee’s cause, symbolizing social disunity: the young men want war, the old men warn against war, the lawyers want to stall for time, and the doctors want to heal Sophie. However, Prudence’s “greet sapience” and the “greet soth” of her “sweetes wordes” finally convince the council that vengeance is destructive while forgiveness is divine:

And whan Melibee’s freendes hadde taken hire avys and deliberacioun of the forseide mateere [. . .] they yave ful conseil for to have pees and

reste, / and that Melibee sholde receyve with good herte his adversaries to
foryifnesse and mercy. (VII, 1786-89)

Indeed, once the council is ready to accept Prudence's advice and bend to her will, the various *estats* no longer hold different opinions about Melibee's dilemma but fully agree to follow Prudence's guidance. Thus, Prudence's counsel of reconciliation and forgiveness provides the basis for a peaceful and egalitarian society which earns her the title of "noble wyf Prudence" (II, 975); in contrast, Melibee is only referred to as "myghty and riche" (II, 966), never as noble.

Prudence, in contrast to the traditional representation of medieval women which depicts them as passive, timid, and subject to men, is a self-assured woman who knows how to use her wide knowledge of the classics and the Bible to provide her grief-stricken husband, Melibee, with the perfect counsel. Indeed, proving to be more than just a simple allegorical or courtesy book representation, Prudence is a well-versed, outspoken, and intelligent woman who moves beyond the allegorical limits of her character and appropriates a role in government. Moreover, as a character in a courtesy book, Prudence transcends the stereotypical representations of medieval women as passive, patient, and constant. Finally, Prudence provides a feminine conception of medieval society, rejecting the patriarchal notion of honor and nobility as destructive and instead basing her view of society on constructive values such as peace, harmony, and social unity. Indeed, Prudence provides a strong role model for women of all ages.

Conclusion

The previous pages explore the paradoxical identification of women both as a source of evil and a source of redemption as well as the extent to which these contradictory representations helped shape women's subordinate position in medieval society. The clergy and the aristocracy portray medieval women simultaneously as Hell's pit and Heaven's pedestal, a conflicting image that seemingly freezes her into passivity. However, Geoffrey Chaucer, in the *Canterbury Tales*, creates several female characters who actively subvert the traditional image of female subordination. In fact, both the Man of Law's Tale and the Tale of Melibee feature female characters who, in their response to male dominance, transcend stereotypical representations and instead create an image of medieval women as an independent subject whose actions celebrate female values such as harmony and interconnectedness.

Indeed, the almost voiceless Custance and the verbose Dame Prudence, the main characters of these tales, defy prejudicial images of women as passive and subordinate. Instead, Custance appropriates a heroic role as she actively takes control of her life, while Prudence appropriates an assertive role by advising her husband in political matters. In their roles, both Custance and Prudence denounce the idealized patriarchal principles of honor and nobility upon which medieval society is founded and offer instead a very different definition of honor, one which celebrates matriarchal ideals such as peace, harmony, and interconnectedness. Thus, Custance is concerned with bringing peace to her family as she successfully restores the bonds between her herself, her son, her husband, and her father; Prudence, similarly, is concerned with bringing peace to her community as she successfully restores the bond between her family and the community.

Over the last few decades, many feminist critics have slowly become aware of the importance Geoffrey Chaucer places on his female characters. Custance and Prudence, among his strongest women, refuse to be confined and limited by traditional roles for women; moving beyond conventional expectations, they offer for women positive role models that transcend the stereotypes.

Notes

¹ This poem is found in Broude and Garrard (84), who quoted it from Pierre Jonin's *Les personnages feminins dans les romans francais de Tristan au XIIIe siecle* (445 and note).

² In beast fables, animals are often used allegorically to satirize certain ways of thinking and behaving as, for example, in Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Tale, or to satirize certain groups of humans who think or behave in particular ways, but these purposes differ from the intent to degrade an entire sex.

³ Chaucer's Franklin's Tale perfectly illustrates medieval women's courtly dilemma: Arveragus and Dorigen agree to continue courtly love in marriage, Arveragus promising to "take no maistrie / Agayn hir wyl" (II, 747-48), but when Dorigen tells him of her predicament, Arveragus not only orders her to do something clearly against her will but also threatens her with death if she tells anyone about their problem.

⁴ Zeus was married to his sister Hera some time during the Bronze Age. However, as with most of the Greek goddesses Zeus married or fathered, Hera derived most of her identity from her relationship with him. Only Gaia and Demeter were able to keep their divine identity separate from Zeus (Baring and Cashford 315).

⁵ Although the Islamic worldview does not do much to elevate the status of women, the Sultanness, a "mere" woman, is nevertheless able to gather enough support from her council to overthrow her son's rule. Moreover, the council swears and agrees to "live with hire and dye" (II, 345), suggesting that under Islamic law, the Sultanness does not consider herself limited in her freedom to live within her own power.

⁶ However, Chaucer's Merchant's Tale features the characters of Proserpina and Ceres, indicating Chaucer's familiarity with the Roman version of the Persephone myth. In this tale, too, Proserpina refuses to be passive and submissive to Pluto's demands.

⁷ An example of such a character is the maiden in the *Pearl*, a popular medieval allegory.

⁸ The standard medieval position on women's evil is articulated in Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Tale:

Wommennes conseils been ful ofte colde;

Wommanne's conseil broghte us first to wo

And made Adam fro Paradys to go, [. . .]. (VII, 3256-58)

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