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Tiburce's kiss and other extraordinary happenings in Chaucer's Second nun's tale

Kelly M. Waldrop

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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Kelly M. Waldrop entitled "Tiburce's kiss and other extraordinary happenings in Chaucer's Second nun's tale." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

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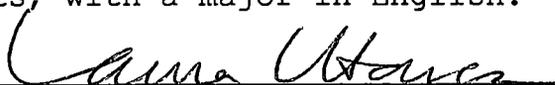
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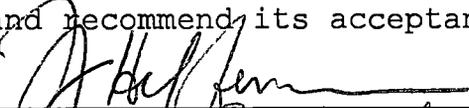
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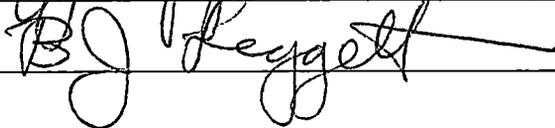
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Laura Howes, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:





Accepted for the Council:



Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of The Graduate School

TIBURCE'S KISS AND OTHER EXTRAORDINARY
HAPPENINGS IN CHAUCER'S *SECOND NUN'S TALE*

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Kelly M. Waldrop
August 1999

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to

Jonathan and Nora Waldrop

who have been my strength and my sanity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

The following is a close reading of Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale*. The goal of this reading is to note the humor and sexuality that can be found in the *Tale*. As I surveyed the critical literature and studied the tradition of hagiography of which the *Second Nun's Tale* is a part, I found an overwhelming tendency among critics to either dismiss the *Tale* as insignificant or to regard it with a stone-faced seriousness. I hope that I have established in the following pages that the *Second Nun's Tale* is an integral part of the *Canterbury Tales* and has within it much of the same humor, sexuality and thematic complexity found in the tales told by the other pilgrims.

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Chapter 1: The *Second Nun's Tale* In Context

What happens when a saint enters a room full of sinners? This is precisely what happens when one turns the pages of the *Canterbury Tales* (CT) and admits Cecilia into the company of the characters therein. Although many of the personae that surround Saint Cecilia in the CT are quite pious and good, their efforts pale in comparison to her heroic deeds. Many critics have claimed, in their dismissal of the *Second Nun's Tale* (SNT) as one of Chaucer's less impressive compositions, that the emphasis on perfection makes Cecilia one-dimensional.¹ Donald Howard claims that the Second Nun's "characters are not real or 'round;' they behave in predictable ways and seem impelled by forces outside themselves ... their motivations do not invite scrutiny" (291). However, when this tale is read while keeping in mind the tradition of hagiography to which it belongs, Cecilia becomes as complex a character as one

¹ Most of these readings stem from Robinson's labeling of the text as "immature" in the notes to his 1957 edition of Chaucer's works. However, more important to this paper, the marking of Cecilia as a one-dimensional character has generally accompanied attacks which accuse Chaucer of misogyny or, at the very least, participation in patriarchal systems that attempt to narrowly circumscribe female gender roles. These critics, cited in note five, defend their readings from those who would claim that Cecilia is a powerful and positive feminine presence by arguing that she is not allowed to express or use her sexuality, is not engendered and thus is one-dimensional.

could wish: a woman embattled against every law and regulation of society. In addition, the context provided by Chaucer gives the reader the opportunity to see Cecilia and her companions as a part of the society of folk created in the *CT* rather than abstractions offered by clergy as a part of a liturgical service. By placing the *SNT* in amongst such a great number of secularly minded stories, Chaucer has offered us a chance to explore both the mysteries of intertextuality and a major concern of the *CT* as a whole: the interaction between the secular and the religious.

Although many would argue that religion is one of the main focuses of the *CT*, it cannot go without notice that only rarely does any pilgrim or character ever deal with the subject directly. Howard Patch draws attention to the fact that "[w]ith the many ecclesiasts on this pilgrimage it is strange that so little is said of religion" (169). The discrepancy between the demographics of the group and the content of the tales they tell serves to highlight the issues raised when the sacred and the mundane meet. We will see later that even in a story with such overt, didactic religious content as the *SNT* there is a tension between the world of the spirit and the world of the flesh that is not as easily resolved as one would expect.

The legend of St. Cecilia told in translation by the Second Nun is quite different from any of the other tales in the collection. Other than obvious differences such as it being a relatively straightforward translation of the version rendered by Jacobus Voragine in the *Legenda Aurea* and a Franciscan abbreviation of the legend,² and it being a saint's life, the *SNT* seems to be the only one of the tales that makes scholars feel obligated to apologize for their interest in it. Yet, interest in the *Tale* remains. The frame narrative format of the *CT* as a whole begs us to compare the tales offered within the frame. Chaucer takes great care to connect each story with others. These connections, both textual and thematic, serve as an invitation to intertextual readings that even the most discriminating scholars cannot refuse. Thus, scholarship has established links between the *SNT* and almost every other tale offered by the pilgrim band.³

Critical Offerings

Most of the critics working in this area seem to have a great interest in finding a way to normalize the

² For more details, see Sherry Reames, "A Recent Discovery Concerning the Sources of Chaucer's 'Second Nun's Tale,'" *MP* 87 (1990): 337-61.

³ For additional treatments, see James Wilson, "The Pardoner and the Second Nun: A Defense of the Bradshaw Order," *NM* 74 (1973): 292-6 and John Hirsch, "The Politics of Spirituality: The Second Nun and the Manciple," *Chaucer Review* 12 (1977): 129-46.

occurrence of the legend of Saint Cecilia in a work with such an overwhelmingly secular tone. Unlike the company one would expect the legend of a saint's life to keep, the *SNT* finds itself surrounded by romances and even fabliaux.

Donald Howard in *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* claims a desire to demonstrate the excellence and appropriateness of the *SNT* (288). In more specific terms, some authors are concerned with ways to make the saintly, pious and virginal Cecilia fit in with the other women in the *Canterbury Tales*.⁴ Connections have been made by several between the *SNT* and its fragmentary counterpart, the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. Joseph Grennen notes similarities between the *SNT* and contemporary alchemical literature, thus connecting it with the story of the following tale. Grennen even goes so far as to write that there is "no question of the fact that the *SNT* is an adaptation of the legend of St. Cecilia created by Chaucer to stand against the 'confusioun' of alchemy brilliantly portrayed in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*" (481). Although I am loathe to agree with anyone who so boldly claims that there can be no questioning Chaucer's motives

⁴ Robert Sturges engages with issues of power and authority in, "The Canterbury tales' Women Narrators," *MLS* 13:2 (1983): 41-51., and Julia Holloway attempts to make sense of two of the women from the perspective of their relationship to the church in, "Convents, Courts and Colleges: the Prioress and the Second Nun," *Equally in God's Image*, eds. Julia Holloway, et al (New York: Peter Lang, 1990) 198-215.

in any situation, I am willing to agree that, along with many other equally strong connections with other tales, Chaucer does seem to have actively attempted to link these two tales together. However, I must take exception to Bruce Rosenberg's claim that the only way for the *SNT* to have any significance and hold any interest for readers is to read it in connection with the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. I hope to show here that the importance of the *SNT* can be illuminated by noting connections with the *CT* as a whole and with the hagiographic tradition familiar to Chaucer's fourteenth century audience.

The multitudinous connections which can be made among the *SNT* and the other tales have led a few brave scholars to agree that the *Tale* is "thematically central" to the *CT* (Cooper 365). Although I noted above my belief that the *CT* is a work of largely secular concerns, there is undoubtedly an underlying interest in things religious. The group is after all on a pilgrimage. The theme of religion and its place in society serves as one of the major ties between the *SNT* and the *CT*. In her book *God's Plenty: Chaucer's Christian Humanism*, Ruth Ames points out that "[t]en of the twenty-nine Canterbury pilgrims are either members of the clergy or minor functionaries in the Church, and another

cleric briefly joins the party en route" (30). Ames, in discussing the Second Nun and her tale, speculates about how Chaucer intends his reader to react to a nun, not satirized like most of the religious characters in the *General Prologue*, who offers a tale of happy martyrdom as a reasonable recommendation for a Christian life model (48,92). The story of Cecilia, in this way, offers for the reader an extreme of religious piety. However, this extreme, regardless of its sincerity and heavy religious message, when read in the company of its comically flawed textual neighbors, highlights the use of comedy common to hagiography (Eggebroten 60).

On an equally serious yet immanently more secular concern, the *SNT* finds Chaucer ruminating on what is generally accepted to be his favorite topic, relations between the sexes. Much ado has been made over how to make the Second Nun and Cecilia fit into Chaucer's preoccupation with the role of women in society. Duly noting the strength of the antifeminist sentiment typical in medieval writing, some authors have found Chaucer equally culpable with his contemporaries for perpetuating stereotypes and for supporting a patriarchal system which was inherently

hostile to women.⁵ Most, however, find in Chaucer both a sympathy for women and a reliance on stereotypical characterizations. Anne Laskaya's *Chaucer's Approach to Gender in the "Canterbury Tales"* is one of the better of these more balanced readings. Laskaya notes the use of stereotypes in the *CT* as the work of male characters who are bent on reinforcing the stereotypes. According to her reading, the women of the *Tales* work just as hard to subvert those stereotypes. She also notes that although many of these women are successful in eluding the misogynistic pigeonholes so carefully prepared for them, more often than not their reward for success is death.⁶ Although I would not condemn Chaucer for it, I think it is quite safe to say that Chaucer does make use of medieval female stereotypes, the most common of these being the

⁵ Works tending in this direction include: Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1992); Hansen's core argument (that attempting to perceive Chaucer as a profeminist is misguided) can be found in her Introduction, pp.1-25. Hope Weissman, "Antifeminism and Chaucer's Characterizations of Women," *Geoffrey Chaucer: A Collection of Original Articles*, ed. George Economou (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975) 93-110. For an even more scathing feminist reading, see Catherine Cox, *Gender and Language in Chaucer* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1997) in particular, Chapter Three, pp.53-75.

⁶ For similar readings, see Stanley Rajiva, "The Eternal Anti-Feminine," *Indian Journal of English Studies* 12 (1971): 1-21; Arlyn Diamond, "Chaucer's Women and Women's Chaucer," *Authority of Experience*, Arlyn Diamond and Lee R. Edwards eds. (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1977) 60-83; and Ann Haskell, "The Portrayal of Women by Chaucer and His Age," *What Manner of Woman*, ed. Marlene Springer (New York: New York UP, 1977) 1-14.

Eva/Ave (Eve/Mary) roles.⁷ Chaucer's use of these stereotypes throughout the *CT* encourages readers to attempt to fit all of the women of the tales into one of the two categories. The attempt to fit Cecilia into these molds is not as simple as one would assume, and the exercise serves to make her seem more real than many of the other of the *CT* characters and more human than any saint should be.

Of course, one must also acknowledge the emphasis placed by Chaucer on marriage. Most discussions of marriage in the *CT* focus on Kittredge's "Marriage Group." However, Marc Glasser, taking account of the centrality of the theme of marriage in all of the *CT*, has noted the likelihood of Chaucer choosing to include the legend of Saint Cecilia because of its emphasis on marriage. He also notes a steady progression in Cecilia's power, agency and voice which directly correlates to her progression from "cautious maiden," to "married woman," and finally to "widow and zealous martyr" (3).

As in any saint's life, iconography plays a fairly important role both in the *SNT* and the criticism written about it. The single largest source of entertainment for

⁷ Robert Hanning, in "From Eva and Ave to Eglentyne and Alisoun: Chaucer's Insight into the Roles Women Play," *Signs* 2 (1977) 580-99, examines two other *CT* characters with this dichotomy in mind.

scholars on this front is the issue of the "corones two." Early writings on the *SNT* have served to establish the origin and meaning of the symbolism. Scholars date the common use of red and roses as symbols for martyrdom and white and lilies as symbols for purity/chastity as early as the fifth century A.D.⁸ V. A. Kolve goes further with his analysis by examining other forms of iconography which have been attached to the Cecilia story, noting specifically the emphasis on eroticism which seems to be more greatly apparent in this legend than in others of similar tradition (143-6).

Above all other ideas, themes, philosophies, etc. covered in the *CT*, there is one constant: humor. Chaucer, although almost always dealing with serious issues, is rarely serious in his discussion of them, and in those rare moments, he can usually be seen as being either ironic or satiric. Unfortunately, the shadow of religious history has cast a gloomy shade over the criticism surrounding the Cecilia Legend. Only two scholars that I have found have

⁸ See John Lowes, "The 'Corones Two' of the Second Nun's tale," *PMLA* 26 (1911): 315, and "The 'Corones Two' of the Second Nun's Tale: A Supplementary Note," *PMLA* 29 (1914): 129, Oliver Emerson's, "Saint Ambrose and Chaucer's Life of St. Cecilia," *PMLA* 41 (1926): 252, Roberta Cornelius "Corones Two," *PMLA* 42 (1927): 1055, and John Tatlock's "St. Cecilia's Garlands and Their Roman Origin," *PMLA* 45 (1930): 169.

managed to retain a sense of humor when dealing with this seemingly weighty story. Graham Landrum, in "The Convent Crowd and the Feminist Nun," views the "convent crowd," the Prioress, the Nun's Priest and the Second Nun, as a sort of ecclesiastical three stooges, playing off of each other and ultimately heightening the humor of the first two and the power of the last. Although Landrum is so amused with these pilgrims as to be almost unconvincing in his mere joviality, he notes many of the comic instances which, if allowed to come through as comic, demonstrate the issues of power and voice so prevalent in this tale. Anne Eggebroten similarly finds humor in this story. She recognizes in the *SNT* the humor quite commonly found in saint's legends of similar vintage. Eggebroten's reading has convinced me that there is humor in the *SNT* and that there is more to the humor than is first perceived. Eggebroten argues that the humor found in Chaucer's version of the tale serves to "convey the theme ... of Cecilia's perfection and fruitfulness through spiritual and physical chastity" (60). This may be true, and yet I am convinced that there is more to it than reinforcing once again the *Tale's* didactic message. Lurking beneath the comic sheen of the tale are

treatments of the themes most common in the CT: religion, sex, marriage, voice and power.

Regardless of the above collection of scholarly works and thematic interpretations, one must make one basic assumption before writing on the *SNT*: that Chaucer actually intended for there to be such a character as the Second Nun. Norman Eliason, in his essay "Chaucer's Second Nun?," questions this basic notion, by citing some discrepancies to be discussed at length later as well as some questionable printer's notes. However, Eliason admits that much of his idea is based on conjecture and fairly inconsistent extra-textual evidence (15-6).⁹ Acknowledging that one cannot simply claim to be entirely sure as to Chaucer's intentions in practically any case, I will work under the assumption that the Second Nun is as real as any of the other pilgrims. However, it does not escape my attention that Eliason's essay, although not convincing, brings up issues of voice which cry out for attention. Chaucer gives the reader very little information about his storyteller in this instance while further complicating the

⁹ Although Eliason's work is noted by most who write on this tale, the idea that Chaucer intended for his Prioress (who is the only real alternative if the Second Nun is to be discounted) to tell the story of Cecilia has not won acceptance in the community of Chaucerian scholars.

voice of the text by having her read or, maybe more accurately, recite a translation. The issue of voice is one which comes up again and again in the *SNT* and in its criticism.

Hagiography and Intertextual Complexity

The *SNT* is, first and foremost, a work of hagiography. True to the sources of his translation, Chaucer follows much of the tradition associated with writing the life of a saint. It will be useful here, therefore, to outline the components found in these stories as well as their context and purpose.

The men and women immortalized in these *vitae sancti* are quite complex. Each walks a very precarious and always fatal line between being a "not quite demigod ... and a moral everyman" (Heffernan 30). For the female saint, this effort is fraught with strife. She struggles against traditional, worldly notions of kinship, aims to gain independence from social and religious requirements of marriage in order to rise to the status of a bride of Christ (*sponsa Christi*), all the while displaying the gift of prophesy evident in those possessing special favor with the divine (185).

These stories share many features with the romance, a fact that we will see was not lost on Chaucer. Many *vitae* have counterparts found in romance literature which can, when compared to the saint's lives, illustrate the way "Providence" replaces individual determinism in the lives of the faithful (Heffernan 142-3). The connection with romantic literature also highlights the fixation of these texts on sexual matters. Eroticism and sexual peril are central to the virgin-martyr tales of this type.¹⁰ Traditionally, the saint must stoically crash through the barriers of human sexuality untainted in order to maintain her special relationship with God. Here, "[f]emale sexuality is never treated as a positive attribute; rather, it is reified, and presented as a liability, a potentiality for sin or a disabling illness" (282). The saint's virginity becomes a challenge to her enemies and to the worldly authorities that she disdains. Typically, the saint is abused and debased physically before being able to, by nature of her ability to resist the temptations of the flesh, join with God (278).

¹⁰ There are many different types of female saints' lives and even many different types of the virgin-martyr tale. One of the most interesting variations in this context is the version in which the virgin is martyred for refusing to marry a pagan.

In regard to context and purpose, saint's lives were quite often "read in lieu of the sermon preached following the Gospel at a Sunday mass" (Heffernan 298). This liturgical association gave them a degree of authority. The purpose these tales and the goal of the medieval hagiographer was threefold: to provide positive role models for pious living, to interpret difficult theological issues and to teach the "truth of faith" to the "community of belief" (19). It is necessary also to note here the importance of the "community of belief" in the actual construction and translation of these *vitae*. The author must render the work as a result of the community's beliefs and acknowledged acceptance of certain norms of piety. It can be said that "the author for sacred biography is the community and consequently the experience presented by the narrative voice is collective" (19-20).

Noting the importance of the community which forms the audience for hagiographic works, any assertions made in this vein will be even more significant if it can be established that Chaucer deliberately and carefully included the *SNT* in the *CT* (thus, in a way establishing the pilgrims therein as the audience for the *vita*). There has been much conjecture over whether or not Chaucer intended

for the *SNT* to be included in the pilgrims' stories. Many have argued that it either was not intended for this purpose or was added late by Chaucer without much thought given to its place in the collection. These arguments have sprung from several bits of evidence, the first of these being the discussion of the translation of the legend of St. Cecilia in the *Legend of Good Women* (written c. 1386). This work having likely been completed before it is presumed Chaucer conceived of the idea of writing the *CT* (c. 1387), it is assumed that the translation which makes up the *SNT* was completed without its inclusion in the *CT* in mind. However, the *SNT* is not the only one of the *Tales* to be written early in Chaucer's career. The *Knight's Tale* was likely written at much the same time as the *SNT* translation is supposed to have been done (c. 1383) (Cooper 61, 358). It seems logical that the acceptance of the *Knight's Tale* and the focus on its importance to the structure of the *CT* should allow us to accept the *SNT* as well.

Two other issues have caused critics to entertain the idea that Chaucer neither revised nor even carefully read over the tale before adding it to the collection. In her prologue, the Second Nun refers to herself as an "unworthy sone of Eve" (62). The masculine reference has caused many

to conclude that the text was written with a male narrator in mind, either the poet himself or one of the male pilgrims. However, these readers have failed to recognize the similarity, noted by Robert Pratt, between this line and a line in the *Salve Regina*, "Ad te clamamus exules filii Evae." The above litany would likely have been sung every day by the Second Nun in her order and would certainly make her notion of herself as a "sone of Eve" much more understandable (Fisher 311, n.62).

One other sticking point that has caused critics to question Chaucer's intention to include the *SNT* is the narrator's request that her audience "reden that I write" (78). This has led most critics to assume that the *vita* was not intended to be included in a group of tales that are set up as oral renditions. Julia Bolton Holloway has noted, however, that *legenda* were "speech acts which were read, usually aloud before an audience" (206). This tends to lend credence to the argument that the Second Nun would have had her translation written down precisely for the purpose of having it ready to read aloud. In addition, Paul Clogan informs us that upon looking up "rede" in the *OED*, one can find listed "interpret" and "study" as well as

"read" among the definitions common during Chaucer's time (214).¹¹

The *Second Nun's Prologue*, of course, is not the only instance in which Chaucer refers to the *CT* as a written work. In the prologue to the *Miller's Tale*, after numerous lines of banter between the drunken Miller and the Host, "Chaucer the narrator" breaks in and apologizes for the upcoming tale and asks that "whoso list it nat ... / Turne over the leef and chese another tale" (3176-7). Although this instance is somewhat different in that it is clear to the reader that it is the narrator acknowledging the textual nature of the work rather than one of the characters, it does serve to illustrate that Chaucer was not overly concerned with hiding from his reader the reality of the *CT* as a written work.

I find the evidence provided above by Holloway and Clogan to be sufficient to put the matter to rest. However, Chaucer's lack of concern for preserving the illusion of the work as an oral one may also serve to provide comfort on this last issue. It seems, therefore, reasonable and

¹¹ The *Middle English Dictionary*, eds. Sherman M. Kuhn, et al (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1952-) gives similar definitions being used during Chaucer's time. However, it does not attempt to assign a specific definition to this particular use.

expedient to dismiss the idea that these minor inconsistencies hamper our reading of the *SNT*'s importance to the *CT*. Instead, I will bear them in mind as possible clues to enhance a new understanding of the excellence of craft with which Chaucer places the *SNT* into that larger body of work.

Several quite powerful connections can be made between the *SNT* and other of the *CT*. The easiest of these connections to make is of course with the two other female narrators. In a company of men, these three women who are asked to join equally in the game of the tales become a unique sub-group. There is in no way any sort of consensus to be found regarding how these three women and the tales they tell relate to each other. Julia Holloway, in the same article quoted above, argues for the three making a trinity of women wherein the Wife of Bath represents the ultimately secular, the Second Nun the ultimately religious, and the Prioress the combination of the two. Robert Sturges argues that the Prioress symbolizes the power of women in arenas of spiritual authority, the Wife of Bath domestic authority, and the Second Nun/Cecilia the combination of those two and the addition of political authority. This last, although not more convincing than the first, is

important in its acknowledgement of the power and authority from which the women narrators and their women characters find a voice.

Likewise noting the importance of voice in Chaucer's works, Donald Howard, in *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*, sees what he calls the "closing tales," the Second Nun's, the Canon's Yeoman's and the Manciple's, as winding up the thematic debates considered throughout the *CT*. The *SNT* he views as concluding the discussion of marriage by offering as a goal a "higher form of marriage" (288). He then connects it to the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* in ways demonstrated admirably, if somewhat overzealously, by Grennen and Rosenberg, and according to Howard it thus provides a final statement on the battle between good and evil (297). The *Manciple's Tale* is regarded as a statement on the tale-game and the writing of the *Canterbury Tales* itself as Howard reads it as a satire on the act of story telling and as exemplifying the theme of "keeping one's mouth shut," an idea he ties back in to the issues of voice surrounding the *SNT* and the lack of a definitive portrait for the Second Nun (303).

Of course, these connections will be quite useful in my attempt to demonstrate that there are issues of power

and voice in the *SNT* and that those issues are both reflections of and reflected upon the other tales in the collection. However, I do not believe that simply establishing thematic connections between the tales is sufficient to display the degree of care with which, I believe, Chaucer included the *SNT* in the *CT*. After all, with enough time, a good scholar could likely find thematic connections between *Mary Poppins* and *Mein Kampf*. There are, however, a few more direct connections that can be made. For instance, James Wilson has noted the continuity of themes of idleness between the *Pardoner's Tale* and the *SNT* and the repeated use of the word "idyl." In addition, both tales are constructed around the number three. Wilson concludes that "it seems reasonable to argue that [Chaucer works] to effect a link between the tales of the Pardoner and the Second Nun" both thematically and structurally (293-6). As mentioned earlier, Grennen and Rosenberg have established numerous connections between the *SNT* and the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* based on the similarities between the symbolism used in the "Chemical Wedding" and the iconography of Saint Cecilia. The most obvious of these connections is the symbolic use in both tales of the colors red and white.

The above evidence goes far toward advancing the idea of the *SNT* as a deliberate addition to the *CT*. However, there is one striking connection which will, I hope, lay to rest any questions regarding to what degree Chaucer intended the *SNT* to be an integral part of the *CT*. Quite by accident, while looking for an article about the *SNT*, I noticed in a table of contents an article entitled "White and Red in the Knight's Tale: Chaucer's Manipulation of a Convention" written by Robert Blanch and Julian Wasserman. I made a mental note to return to this essay at a later date, time permitting, just to see what convention it was that the authors saw as being connected to white and red, those symbolic colors being important to any reading of the *SNT*. While compiling the research I had previously gathered, I found myself reminded of Blanch and Wasserman's essay when reading the "The Tale in Context" section of the entry on the *SNT*, written by Helen Cooper, in the *Oxford Guide*. Cooper notes there that the *SNT* shares with the *Knight's Tale* the use of the garland imagery (364). Upon going back and reading the Blanch/Wasserman article, I was at first a bit discouraged. I found there the idea that red and white symbolism was so prevalent in medieval writing of all sorts that its appearance in the *SNT* could just as

likely connect it with any medieval work (175-7). However, as I kept reading, I found used in the essay as evidence the description of Emily in the garden that so directly and inextricably links her with Cecilia that there is no doubt in my mind that from the time Chaucer chose to use the *Knight's Tale* as the first tale of the *CT*, he intended to include the *SNT* as well.

To a great extent, the one thing Chaucer scholars are interested in, when it comes to reading the *SNT*, is the scene in which Cecilia's guardian angel bestows upon her and Valerian the crowns of roses and lilies. It is also important to note here that Cecilia, as a result of the connection made between her personal worship and the sound of music, is the patron of music and musicians. Those things being kept in mind, the following description of Emily offers a striking similarity: "She gadereth floures, party white and rede, / To make a subtil gerland for hire hede; / And as an aungel hevenysshly she soong" (1053-55). Emily here becomes, for all intents and purposes, a pagan Cecilia. In an act of self-assertion certainly akin to Saint Cecilia, she crowns herself with the garlands of a saint and sings like an angel. When faced with the prospect of marriage, Emily prays much like her Christian sister,

"My maydenhede thou kepe and wel conserve, / And whil I lyve, a mayde I wol thee serve" (2329-30).

These direct statements of oneness between this romantic heroine and Saint Cecilia (which are by no means the only connections to be found between the two) serve two purposes. They show that, just as Chaucer intended for the *Knight's Tale* to begin the *CT*, he intended the *SNT* to follow. They likewise help us to view Cecilia in a way seemingly lost on most critics of the *SNT*. Her connection to Emily does not serve to contrast the two. Rather it encourages the reader to consider them as, in many ways, similar. Thus, we are invited to read Cecilia as a virgin, a saint, a martyr, and as a young beautiful maid who is an object of sexual desire. We will also see, in following these lines of similarity, that the combination of feminine sexuality (hitherto associated much more with Emily than with Cecilia) and the devout piety known as Cecilia's hallmark causes the two men in her life to be united in a holy battle instead of fighting each other for her favor.

Chaucer's invitation for the reader to view Cecilia as a desirable woman, both in accordance with hagiographic tradition and in his connecting her with Emily, gives the identity of the Saint a fullness that is not acknowledged

by most modern readers. Cecilia is as fully a sexual being as is Emily. The one thing that Cecilia has which Emily does not is control; with this control comes power. Cecilia displays an ability to use every aspect of her person, including her sexuality, as a tool toward the end of winning souls to Christ.

These instances of the joining of sexuality and power in the story of Cecilia are a bit of a departure from the hagiographic tradition, which suggests that in order for one to achieve success, one must deny one's sexuality. More in accordance with tradition, these instances are marked by humor and the special knowledge and vision awarded to those in possession of the favor of God. Thus, as we will see, Chaucer has taken a *vita*, which can be seen as closely following the formula of that tradition, and by placing it in the *CT* and connecting the saint with other characters, has altered the way the story may be read. Looking now at the *Second Nun's Prologue and Tale*, we can examine the ways in which Chaucer follows and departs from the hagiographic formula and how the context of the *CT* affects the elements, both traditional and radical.

Chapter 2: Extraordinary Happenings

The Prologue

The *Prologue* of the *Second Nun's Tale* holds for the reader many clues as to Chaucer's intent in relating the *Tale* to the ongoing discussion of the *Canterbury Tales*. Not being a part of the translation, it serves to set up many of the issues dealt with in the *vita*, positions the reader for interpretation and provides the reader with a better understanding of the Second Nun as a character. Although much of the *Prologue* is traditional material, Chaucer combines the material in such a way as to guide us toward an understanding of the *Tale* in conjunction with the *CT*.

The *Prologue* begins by addressing the issue of ydelnesse and noting the connection between idleness and sins of the flesh.¹² Ydelnesse is dealt with very traditionally here as a specific type of sloth. Siefried Wenzel, in his book *The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature*, writes that in Chaucer's time, this

¹² This section is made up of "the only lines in the tale for which there is no known literary source" (Wilson 296). This is not to say that there is no tradition for this type of introduction or homily. However, given the interest in the sources for this tale and the degree to which Chaucer is true to those sources, the introduction of original material is always of note.

particular sin, which rather than laziness indicated putting one's energy into vain practices, was considered a temptation of the flesh as was gluttony and lust (in addition to being considered a temptation of the devil) (80-1). Wenzel also provides a portrait of a person who has given in to *ydelnesse* which is quite striking in comparison to the portrait of Cecilia we will examine in pages to come.

"The slothful person likes to wear soft clothes next to his skin, to take frequent baths, to comb himself often. He loathes to go bare foot, to wear the rough side of clothes on his body to fast and abstain from dainty food and drink, to kneel on the stone floor for prayers to suffer cold on hands or feet and to discipline himself." (85)

It is also explained that among the virtues by which one might combat *ydelnesse* are fortitude, spiritual joy and busyness (89).

The Second Nun acknowledges idleness as the gatekeeper of the garden of desire, "porter of the gate ... of delices" (3). We are told that the devil, "Whan he may man in *ydelnesse* espye, / He kan so lightly cache hym in his trappe, / Til that a man be hent right by the lappe" (10-

12). It is generally accepted that "the hem of a garment" is the intended meaning of "lappe" here, yet I would like to suggest a second meaning as well. The *Middle English Dictionary* lists as an alternate definition for the word "lappe" the precursor for the modern definition, the body from the waist to the knees. Although seeming in conflict with the conventional use of this particular prepositional phrase, when one looks at the body of Chaucerian work, Chaucer's use of "by the lappe" as a pun is not without supporting evidence. According to Benson's *Concordance to the Riverside Chaucer*, Chaucer uses the phrase "by the lappe" only four times (481). One, of course, is here. The other three are found in the second and third books of *Troilus and Criseyde* surrounding the setting up of the impending affair. Two of these instances occur as Pandarus lures first Criseyde and then Troilus into position for the illicit relationship to take place.¹³ In light of the discussion in the *Second Nun's Prologue* of the connection between idleness and sexual pleasure and Chaucer's apparent tendency to use this phrase in scenes portraying sexual anticipation, it is possible to see sexual overtones in the *Second Nun's* admonition. Just as idleness will lead one

¹³ See *Troilus and Criseyde* Book III lines 59 and 742.

into the garden of delight, it will also allow the devil to lead a man by his, shall we say, libido.

The Prologue is fairly specific in gender reference during the homily. The example given, as can be seen by the repeated use of masculine pronouns, hym and he, is of a man being caught in this particular trap. However, it is also made clear that the trap of *ydlenesse* may be a difficulty for women as well considering that the Second Nun offers her translation as a sign of the *bisynesse* in which she has engaged in order to keep the devil at bay. The masculine example given, although it does not go on to provide evidence for a gender related argument, does tend to anticipate the sexual overtones of the following tale and the nature of the characters in the tale, the men being generally the ones who are found to be anticipating participation in physical relationships. This reading also foreshadows the coming argument for living a chaste yet fruitful and busy life, both components, chastity and *bisynesse*, being mutually beneficial. It likewise helps to further position the *Tale* within the context of the *CT* and the pilgrims' interest in the consequences of sexual behavior.

The Second Nun does reveal that it is possible for a woman to be above the dangers of ydlenesse. She does not exclude the possibility of a man doing likewise. However, the sole example we are given is one of female worthiness. She notes of Mary that "Thow nobledest so ferforth oure nature, / That no desdeyn the Makere hadde of kynde / His Sone in blood and flessh to clothe and wynde" (40-42). Mary was, in her own right, noble and worthy to become the mother of Christ. Mary could participate in an act as theologically complex as childbirth without endangering her own sanctity or virginity and without luring a man into a sexual relationship by which his soul could be imperiled.¹⁴

Further on, we find the beginnings of an understanding of what it is that is exceptional about Mary that contributes to her extraordinary abilities.¹⁵ The Second Nun

¹⁴ Issues of childbirth, chastity and sexual activity were very complex in the medieval Catholic church. Chastity was seen as the preferred state. However, sex between a husband and wife for the purposes of procreation was not considered to be implicitly wrong. Illicit sexual relationships and sex for the purpose of physical pleasure were considered to be sinful. See the entries on "childbirth" and "chastity" in Volume 4 of the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, eds., Charles Herbermann et al (New York: Encyclopedia P, 1913).

¹⁵ The character of the Virgin Mary has many different facets. She is at once the human component of the divine miracle that produced the Christ child and the sanctified holy woman who is later assumed into heaven and who serves as what Saint Proclus called "the only bridge of God to men" (*Catholic Encyclopedia* 15: 461). In *The Lady and the Virgin*, Penny Schine Gold informs us that "although she [Mary] has many of the virtues applicable to women - motherhood and virginity as well as humility and obedience - she has them to a much greater degree than other women, and in a combination (motherhood and virginity) impossible for anyone else" (70). Thus, Mary, in the entirety of her character

links Mary to a special type of knowledge.

She says of Mary,

Assembled is in thee magnificence
 With mercy, goodnesse, and with swich pitee
 That thou, that art the sonne of excellence
 Nat oonly helpest hem that preyen thee,
 But often tyme of thy benygnytee
 Ful frely, er that men thyn help biseche,
 Thou goost biforn and art hir lyves leche. (50-56)

Mary gives help, one can only assume in the way of interceding with God, as a result of a special knowledge given to her by nature of her relationship with the divine. Mary's access to this knowledge sets her off against the Second Nun who, lacking a certainty of God, must act solely through faith.¹⁶ She begs of Mary, "though that I, unworthy sone of Eve, / Be synful, yet accepte my bileve" (62-3).

does represent a combination of the human and the superhuman much as Cecilia is shown to do in this representation. However, the Second Nun concentrates her emphasis, as is fitting for one calling on Mary for intercession, on the spiritual component of the Blessed Virgin, the woman who was assumed, body and soul, into heaven and who displays a gift for omniscience in her ability to anticipate the needs of her petitioners. This in itself, regardless of the additional roles Mary may take on in other works, positions Mary here as the more divine of the three women depicted by Chaucer: Mary, Cecilia and the Second Nun.

¹⁶ The complexity of the Virgin is displayed as we are reminded of Mary's willingness, as a young woman, to proceed through the birth of her son with an amazing display of faith in the face of uncertainty. Yet, here we see the powerful spiritual force who knows in advance those who are in need and has the "ear" of God.

Her faith is all she has to offer up to counteract her sinful nature, a nature which is later revealed to be one which the Second Nun associates with physicality and sexuality. To strengthen her faith, she turns to the work of her translation. "And, for that feith is deed withouten werkis, / So for to werken yif me wit and space, / That I be quit fro thennes that most derk is!" (64-6).¹⁷

The extraordinary abilities of Mary are contrasted with the Second Nun's admitted connection between herself and Eve, a character who is fated to live and die powerless in a continuous cycle of temptation. Chaucer thus sets up the stereotypical dichotomy with which his readers have become so comfortable. The invocation of Mary is immediately balanced against the confessed weakness of the very human nun.

The association of the Nun with Eve can be quite unexpected for the modern reader. One anticipates that those who give their lives over to the service of God will be more confident or at least less angst ridden. It is true that she is, as are all, subject to the blight of sin brought on by the fall of man. However, we have already

¹⁷ Benson's note to line sixty-four in the Riverside Chaucer informs us that the Second Nun is quoting from the epistle of St. James, chapter

seen that it was possible for Mary to be worthy of rising out of that state of condemnation. The ability of a devout woman to be capable of such a feat is something with which the Second Nun is greatly concerned. We find in later stanzas that the Second Nun, because of her connection with Eve, is likewise concerned with her ability, as a woman, to tempt men into the damnation of sexual idleness described in the opening homily. She finds herself "troubled ... by the contagioun of [her] body, and also by the wighte / Of erthely lust and fals affeccioun" (72-4).¹⁸ In conjunction with the scene of idle men being tempted into sin by sexual desire, the Second Nun displays the anxiety she feels regarding the part she may play in such a melodrama. We should remember that sexual relationships would only have been considered sinfully dangerous if the participating couple were not married and were not solely interested in procreation. This itself serves to demonstrate the complex

two, verse seventeen. This is one of many references in the *CT* to the epistle of St. James.

¹⁸ When pausing to note that the woman who is professing to be thus troubled is the construction of a fourteenth century man, one must note the historical tendency to connect the female to the body in such a way that intellectual endeavors of women become problematic at best. However, we see here a woman who, although she claims to suffer the same ailments as the stereotypical woman of her time, finds relief in exercising her intellect by performing her translation. For a good discussion of the theories which have surrounded this issue, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), Chapter 1.

situation Chaucer has created for his narrator. The Second Nun, being by nature of her vocation the bride of Christ, can attract no sexual attention from a man that would result in anything but condemnation. We see here not only her concerns for the brand she must wear as a woman and therefore a temptress but also an awareness that the temptation she may cause can never lead to anything but sin.

The reasons for this nun's participation in the pilgrimage are not made explicitly clear to us. According to the ecclesiastic law of Chaucer's time, nuns should not have been outside of their cloister even for such a holy purpose as a pilgrimage.¹⁹ However, Jo Ann McNamara, in *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia*, notes that although there was a tendency toward purity and the enforcement of claustration throughout the thirteenth century, "nuns of all orders participated to some degree in visitations and other legitimate outings" (290). The vita of Saint Cecilia, a Christian woman in a pagan world, being told by a nun who is traveling through a secular world

¹⁹ In 1298, Pope Boniface VII "imposed cloister on all nuns" (*Catholic Encyclopedia* Volume 4, 63). The nuns were neither to leave the cloister nor were they to mingle with any of the laity. This rule remained in place until the Council of Trent (1545-63) during which the sisters were given the right to leave the cloister with the written permission of a bishop.

begins to take up the issues of women and spiritual security.

There was indeed a great concern on the part of the church at the time for the ability of religious women to deal with secular matters without being corrupted by such contact. Heloise (Abbess of The Paraclete, 1101-1164), a woman obviously extraordinary in her calling as well as her strength as a spiritual leader, was herself concerned with this very issue. She is recorded as having "mistrusted the results of propinquity to such an extent that she asserted that she could not eat with pilgrims and guests, as Benedictine abbots were supposed to do....She complained that even female guests could corrupt women with flattery and worldly thoughts" (McNamara 291). Sister Madeleva writes of the Second Nun and the Prioress that "nothing but a very urgent spiritual quest could have induced them to leave their cloister and join so worldly and public an excursion" (27). She also notes that the Prioress' having such a companion as the Second Nun travel with her "is in strict accord with apostolic tradition and is followed closely in most religious communities" (26). Given the Second Nun's position as a subordinate to the Prioress, we can at least speculate that she is acting solely in the

capacity of a companion. The Second Nun's *Prologue* and translation of the Cecilia story seem to connote at the least a sense of unease with her surroundings.

In an attempt to regain a bit of control over her life and to break the cycle of temptation and damnation she so fears may overtake her as a result of the many worldly stories she has heard over the course of her trip, the Second Nun turns to her translation, where we may anticipate, in the light of the role of the saint as bridging the gap between the earthly and the spiritual, Cecilia will serve to unite the disparate possibilities for women by becoming at once both Eve and Mary. In the etymology section regarding Cecilia's name, Cecilia is seen by men not as a sexual temptation but as a woman of great faith and wisdom.

Right so men goostly in this mayden free

Seyen of feith the magnanymytee,

And eek the cleernesse hool of sapience,

And sondry werkes, brighte of excellence. (109-12)

In translating the life of Cecilia, the Second Nun is interested in discovering how a woman can achieve this measure of respect in spite of the traditional pattern of

being an instrument of spiritual peril by virtue of her nature.

Keeping in mind the personal stake the Nun has in her translation, it being the *bisynesse* she hopes will aid her to escape the "contagioun of her body," we must also remember that the work of translating hagiography is an act performed in response to the needs and beliefs of the community of faith within which it is read. If we assume that the Second Nun has performed her *bisynesse* in response to the needs and beliefs of the community of pilgrims, we can then interpret the story in a new way. The Second Nun's translation is not to be performed in the context of a liturgical service (as was mentioned in Chapter 1 as a typical venue for the performance of these *vitae*) in which the radical suggestions regarding appropriate behavior for faithful women would have been tempered by more traditional roles promoted by Christianity. It enters into the ongoing discussion of the appropriate behavior for women bringing with it liturgical authority (drawn from the tradition of such stories being read in lieu of a sermon at mass) few of the other stories can claim and a relatively unchecked boldness. Into this environment, the Second Nun offers a

work that examines the possibility of successfully discovering and using a positive side of female sexuality.

Portrait of a Saint

What I hope to show here is one way in which the *SNT* might be read as less of a departure from Chaucer's style and content than previously believed, indeed not even a departure at all. It is my intent to point out those ways in which, if read with the hagiographic tradition in mind, one can see the *Tale's* appropriateness to the whole of the *CT*. Having seen in the *Prologue* the concerns and, in some ways, the personality of the Second Nun whom Chaucer sets up as not only the narrator but the translator of the *vita*, the following will focus on the tale, as we are invited to do by Chaucer himself, as her creation rather than Chaucer's. This will permit us to fulfill our ultimate goal of seeing the ways in which *SNT* participates in the larger work of the *CT* by allowing the complexities of authorship to dissolve momentarily into the fiction of the story-telling game.

The one thing that most critics agree on is that the *Tale* divides quite nicely into three separate sections. These sections can and have been labeled many different ways. However, given the focus here on the tradition of

translating hagiography, I will look at the sections in that light: the first being the saint's struggles with family; the second, struggles with a suitor or spouse; and the third, a struggle with political forces resulting in death.

As is typical of the genre and true to the analogues, Cecilia is depicted as a woman born into a noble Roman family who is raised as a Christian. She is noted as a girl of particular devotion and love for God, with a strong desire to preserve her chastity. "She never cessed, as I writen fynde, / Of hir preyere, and God to love and drede, / Bisekyng hym to kepe hir maydenhede" (124-6). However, in the version created by the Second Nun, the devout and pious Cecilia puts up no fuss at all when she "sholde unto a man / Ywedded be" (127-8). As a matter of fact, regardless of the tradition of female saints having to first contend with their fathers over this very issue, the Second Nun provides no reasoning at all behind Cecilia's willingness to marry a pagan. Many of the other virgin martyrs (Agatha, Agnes, Katherine, Lucy, etc.) choose death rather than accept such proposals (Glasser 3). It is true that a certain amount of reluctance is portrayed in Cecilia's concern that her "body gye unwemmed" (136).

However, we do not see the explosive defense of her virginity we expect. In contrast to both the tradition of hagiography and other Middle English sources of the legend, no rationale is given for why Cecilia is going to marry Valerian. In the version of the story found in one manuscript of the *Early South-English Legendary*, we are at least told that "Þoru strengþ of hire frendes I-spoused 3e was to a man" (5).²⁰ We find no such background in the Second Nun's translation. It is difficult as well to find a mention of Cecilia's family in any of the extant versions of the tale. Even in the *Legendary* version, there is no sign of that noble family which raised her in the Christian faith. They are either standing idly by while their daughter marries a pagan, or they have left Cecilia alone in the world.

Marc Glasser has also noticed the absence of a familial presence acting in the tale and argues that this serves only to isolate Cecilia and thus emphasize her

²⁰ Marc Glasser adds in note seventeen to his article, "Marriage and the Second Nun's Tale," *Tennessee Studies in Literature* 23 (1978): 2-14, two other manuscripts as follows: "MS. Ashmole 43 has 'Þoru hire frendes strengþ; isposed heo was to a man,' and MS. Cotton Tib. E. VII ... has: 'Hir frendes married hir till a man þat named was Valirian.'" We should also note here that this omission of familial pressure is not original to Chaucer but is likewise absent in the *Legenda Aurea*, which is accepted as the source for this portion of the *SNT*.

progression from a private to public saint (7-8). However, the struggles with family and friends which traditionally accompany such tales are designed specifically for the purpose of emphasizing the saint's isolation even from such close bonds as kinship. These female saints are supposed to renounce their families in order to achieve a closer relationship with the divine. If one considers isolation to be a forced absence from others, the lack of family and friends does not express Cecilia's isolation. She has not been forced to renounce these ties; they simply do not exist for her in this version of the tale.

Here, Cecilia seems to be acting completely autonomously in the decision to marry. She may have relatives or friends engineering the wedding, but they are not brought forward by the Second Nun. The focus remains solely on Cecilia and her relationship with God. Although she does wish to remain a virgin, we do not see her shunning marriage as a distraction of her soul from God. She rather seems to see it as a sort of spiritual mission for which God has specially commissioned her. Cecilia tells her brother-in-law much later on in the story that "the love of Crist ... / Made me thy brotheres wyf" (295-6). Based on the information we are given and the

traditional information we do not receive, Cecilia appears to make the decision to marry based on her understanding of the will of God.

The portrait that we are given of Cecilia on her wedding day provides us with two details that are important for any analysis of her character. Cecilia is dressed on her wedding day in a "robe of gold" (132). As Grennen and Rosenberg have noted, the association of the *SNT* with that of the Cannon's Yeoman makes the use of the color gold take on new meaning. Being the purified and perfected end result of the alchemical experiment detailed in the "Chemical Wedding," gold here likewise comes to symbolize purity and perfection.²¹ This same symbol crops up again less than one-hundred lines later as the vision of, it is assumed, Saint Paul descends before the soon-to-be-baptized Valerian with "a book with lettre of gold in honde" (202). A few lines further on, the *SNT* departs from the text of the *Legenda Aurea* emphasizing the connection between the word of God and gold by the addition of the last line of the following passage.

²¹ Interestingly, while both Grennen and Rosenberg deal with the imagery of the "Chemical Wedding" and the connections between the *SNT* and alchemy, neither mentions the appearance of gold at this point in the Tale. Both seem to contend that the work follows the alchemical model through until Cecilia is "purified" in the bath without noting this symbolic purity assigned to her in her portrait.

"O Lord, o feith, o God, withouten mo,
 O Christendom, and Fader of alle also,
 Aboven alle and over alle everywhere."

Thise wordes al with gold ywriten were. (207-10)²²

Cecilia seems to be not only wrapped in the perfection that gold represents but also in the very stuff of the holy word of God. She is symbolically given a relationship with the word and will of God.

We also see here a relationship being drawn between that special knowledge and salvation. Cecilia, like the image of Mary given to us by the Second Nun in the *Prologue*, seems to come already equipped with whatever it is that is necessary to understand the word and will of God without the assistance of others.²³ Cecilia prays for deliverance from physical corruption, is clothed in gold and is given the ability to escape the fate she fears. The use of gold in the book from which Saint Paul reads in

²² The *Legenda Aurea* here reads "unus Deus, una fides, unum baptisma, unus Deus et pater omnium, qui super omnes et per omnia et in omnibus nobis" and then proceeds directly to the question posed to Valerian "Cumque haec legisset, dixit ei senior: credis ita esse an adhuc dubitas?" (772).

²³ Carolyn P. Collette (in her essay "A Closer Look at Sainte Cecile's Special Vision," *Chaucer Review* 10 (1975) 337-349) takes up this very issue of special knowledge and the way in which the Tale "instructs us in the proper attitude with which to regard this world" (347). She likewise notes many of the instances in which one character seems to know what the others do not.

Valerian's vision associates reading with the special knowledge that is necessary for conversion. The Saint reads from the book, and Valerian is converted. In light of the interest surrounding the verse found in the *Prologue*, which seems to indicate that the Second Nun reads her version of the tale aloud to her companions, the connection between reading and conversion offers an interesting possibility for her reasons for doing so. Her tale tells her that reading holy works aloud can be instrumental in saving souls. At such a late juncture in the collection of the *CT*, it is obvious to most readers that there are members of the group of pilgrims who, although they are not pagans as was Valerian, could stand to have a type of conversion of their own. The thought that Chaucer intentionally left the phrase "rede that I write" in the *SN Prologue* to connect with the theme of redemption through reading to be found here in the *SNT* simply confirms the notion that Chaucer really is the master craftsman he is purported to be.

Reviving once again the themes of the *Prologue* is the next line of the portrait of Cecilia in which we find that under her robe of gold "Hadde next hire flessh yclad hire in an haire" (133). These lines echo the Second Nun's anxieties about the "contagioun of [her] body" and the

"wighte of erthely lust and fals affeccioun" (72-4).

Cecilia wears the hairshirt as would an ascetic or penitent.²⁴ She is attempting to deny herself any degree of physical comfort or pleasure. Cecilia not only has concerns for the treatment of her body by her soon-to-be husband, but like the Second Nun, she is also concerned about the way in which her own bodily desires may interfere with her ability to do God's will: to marry Valerian, convert him, remain chaste and die a virgin martyr. We see here the complexity of this tale; we know that Chaucer composed the *Second Nun's Prologue* to anticipate sentiments related in the *vita* he had translated. However, the effect is one of the *Tale* reflecting the feelings and anxieties of its teller and possibly its audience, the troop of pilgrims.

In the third and final stanza of her portrait, the duality of the divine and the mundane in Cecilia is reinforced as she prays that not only her soul but also her body be saved. "O Lord, my soule and eek my body gye / Unwemmed, lest that I confounded be" (136-7). Cecilia is not just a woman, nor is she simply a perfect and holy agent walking among the sinful. She is the midpoint and the connection between the two. She is both Eve

²⁴ The *Middle English Dictionary* confirms this particular association.

and Mary. Cecilia becomes that link between the worlds of sin and perfection that serves to give hope to a scandalized gender.

The Bride of a Pagan

As mentioned in Chapter 1, very few modern readers have found the humor in the *SNT*, or as Anne Eggebrotten speculates, modern readers tend to snicker under their breath feeling that such laughter is an inappropriate response to a story of some liturgical weight (55-6). However, going back to the original question posed here, what happens when a saint is joined by sinners, we can see that laughter is the only reasonable response. In the three portrait stanzas, Cecilia's perfection is detailed in such a way as to leave no doubts regarding her special status with the divine. As other characters enter and are introduced, their bumbling and completely human misunderstanding of Cecilia is high comedy. We have all seen in such simple and classic humor as the Abbott and Costello "Who's on First" routine that situations in which one character shares with the audience a special knowledge of which the other characters are ignorant has great comedic potential. When Valerian, a decent, upstanding, red-blooded Roman boy enters into relationship with

Cecilia, he has no idea what he is getting himself into. His false assumptions and Cecilia's special knowledge give Cecilia a power over him that is both absolute and amusing.

We first see Valerian on the night of his and Cecilia's wedding. "The nyght cam, and to bedde moste she gon / With hire housbonde, as ofte is the manere" (141-2). Eggebroten notes that "the understatement of the word 'ofte' strikes a humorous note" (56). However, it does much more than that. It shows us truly how far apart in expectation the two newlyweds are. Cecilia has been praying and fasting for days, unbeknownst to Valerian, for the preservation of her virginity. He is proceeding in the bliss of ignorance and in the expectation that his marriage will be consummated according to custom.

Cecilia then sweetly asks for him to listen to and keep her secret.

"O sweete and wel biloved spouse deere,
 Ther is a conseil, and ye wolde it heere,
 Which that right fayn I wolde unto yow seye,
 So that ye swere ye shul it nat biwreye." (144-7)

Valerian's response shows an almost puppy-dog-like enthusiasm to do whatever Cecilia asks of him. "Valerian gan faste unto hire swere / That for no cas ne thyng that

myghte be, / He sholde nevere mo biwreyen here" (149-50). His identity as a young man approaching his wedding bed makes his willingness to please take on strong sexual connotations. It also makes for a surprising response for the reader interested in hagiographic tradition. This is no struggle with the evil pagan force of masculine and sexual corruption. Rather, it is a polite conversation, throughout which Cecilia remains dominant.

Cecilia replies with her secret. "I have an aungel which that loveth me" (152). "Unexpected, ridiculous, and potentially bawdy, these words achieve seriousness only by the end of Cecilia's speech" (Eggebroten 57). Valerian then requests to see the angel and is told that he must be baptized before he might see. Cecilia gives him directions to Saint Urban, and Valerian's eagerness is embodied in the next brief line. "Valerian is to the place ygon" (183).

It is a testament either to Valerian's consideration for Cecilia or to his good sense in wanting to please his new wife that he is willing to perform Cecilia's request rather than simply insisting on rights to her body given him by their wedding. Yet, the rapid-fire manner with which he agrees to Cecilia's terms, questions her truthfulness and speeds off to discover that truth for himself belies an

eager young man with a one-track mind. Cecilia's sexuality and Valerian's desire for her leads him to do things that he would not do on his own. She literally tempts him into Christianity.

The humor and sexual innuendo continues in the greeting Valerian receives. Urban notes that it is the hold that has been given to Cecilia over her own chastity which has brought her first convert into the fold. He introduces Valerian to the "Almyghty Lord" as "The fruyt of thilke seed of chastitee / That thou hast sowe in Cecile" (191,193-4). Valerian is drawn to the true faith by Cecilia's chastity. "When Pope Urban cites Cecile's bisynesse in converting Valerian (190-96), he implies that she has not given in to idleness, that is, to the transitory pleasures of the flesh" (Collette 344). It is Valerian's desire to have sexual relations with Cecilia and her denial of that desire that has saved him. Thus, the "saintly woman's body - her virginity - is a power, not a liability," quite remarkable in a world in which female sexuality could be considered extremely perilous (Laskaya 167). In the traditional female saint's life of this type, the preservation of the saint's virginity is what grants her the special relationship with God. Cecilia is different

in that she seems to have had a special relationship with God from birth and is granted her request for the preservation of her virginity not through a struggle with her family and spouse but as a benefit stemming from her faithfulness. As she negotiates with rather than struggles against her new husband, Cecilia's sexual attractiveness, combined with her ability to guard her virginity, turns into a tool for the salvation of men.

When Valerian returns to Cecilia, he sees the angel and the couple is given the much-discussed "corones two." As mentioned earlier, these garlands serve to remind the reader of Cecilia's status as a desirable maiden by connecting her with Emilye of the *Knight's Tale*. Immediately following, Valerian is granted a "boone" from the angel (234). He requests that his brother be saved as he has been. "I pray yow that my brother may han grace / To knowe the trouthe, as I do in this place" (237-8). The reader, Cecilia, and Valerian are presented with the new bit of inside information that serves to set up the next round of humorous misunderstanding. "The angel seyde, 'God liketh thy requeste, / And bothe with the palm of martirdom / Ye shullen come unto his blisful feste'" (239-241).

According to Valerian's request, Tiburce enters and follows the same path to salvation upon which he himself had recently embarked. Tiburce knows nothing of the recent happenings and is only curious as to where the strong smell of flowers is coming from. "I wondre, this tyme of the year, / Whennes that soote savour cometh so / Of rose and lilies that I smelle heer" (246-8). Cecilia, just as she did with Valerian, works her persuasive powers and finally has Tiburce making the same type of eager responses she had drawn from his brother. Upon the conclusion of her explanation of why idol worship is wrong, Tiburce exclaims "Whoso that troweth nat this, a beest he is" (288).

What follows is one of the most complex situations in the entire tale. Cecilia impulsively "gan kisse his brest, that herde this" (290). Although scholars who write on the *SNT* tend by and large to ignore this occurrence, the interpretations which can be found vary widely. Susan Hagen argues that the kiss represents "her joyful acceptance of him within the Christian community" (46). Russell Peck sees the kiss as a sign of another "spiritual marriage ... suggesting perhaps the realizing of his [Tiburce's] soul as it now is united with the divine community" (31). I will agree with them that these explanations certainly go along

quite well with Cecilia's intentions. However, the question is whether or not Tiburce, the one person involved in the scene who knows very little of what Cecilia's true motives are, would understand these intentions. Hagen rightly argues that this scene displays that Cecilia has redefined "kinship on the basis of the Christian community alone" (46). The confusion is created, however, in the fact that she does not explain her position to others who must go along operating under the social systems they know.

Given all of the sexual overtones of both the *Prologue* and the *Tale* up to this point, it is hard here, and I think possibly even a misreading, not to at least acknowledge the sexual connotations of this act. Marc Glasser comments on this by noting that "Cecilia goes so far as to kiss him [Tiburce] - though she never kisses her husband - and draw him into the circle of Christian fellowship" (9). Kissing someone on the breast in the midst of a theological debate seems quite an extreme response to say the least. However, if we note that Valerian's request of the angel was that his brother should know the truth as he himself does, it begins to make a bit of sense. Valerian's conversion was instigated by his desire for Cecilia. Here again we see her drawing a man into the Christian faith, in part, by means

of her sexual desirability. This is not to say by any means that we are to consider that Cecilia is deliberately seducing her brother-in-law. The combination of her femininity and Tiburce's ignorance of past events creates a situation in which Cecilia's actions of joyful enthusiasm for her newly found ability to convert others is mingled with veiled sexual connotations.

As if the kiss itself were not enough, Tiburce's lack of knowledge of previous events once again leads to muddled meanings and a subtle sexual message. The new nature of the "clean marriage" between Valerian and Cecilia is not explained to Tiburce. The events of the wedding night are not revealed to him, and one must assume that he believes the marriage to have been sexually consummated. Cecilia then in very cryptic language promises Tiburce some sort of new type of relationship with her if he will agree to be baptized. "Lo, right so as the love of Crist ... / Made me thy brotheres wyf, right in that wise / Anon for myn allye heer take I thee" (295-7). Cecilia seems to suggest that she will accept him as a kinsman in the same way she has accepted his brother. We all know that the kinship to which she is referring is a relationship of chastity and clean love. However, this is something that Tiburce does not

know. At the very least, one must assume that he would be confused. As if on cue, Tiburce begins to ask for clarification.

Tiburce is not quite as easily swayed as his brother. Upon finding out that it is Pope Urban, a wanted man, whom they are supposed to go see, Tiburce balks. He is concerned that their visit could lead to their deaths. "Men sholde hym brennen in a fyr so reed / If he were founde, or that men myghte hym spye, / And we also, to bere hym compaignye" (313-315). At this point, the humor turns a bit black since the audience, as well as Cecilia and Valerian, knows that Valerian and Tiburce will die as a result of their visit to Urban. They will be martyred. Tiburce's concern for his life displays his amusing ignorance and foreshadows the end of all of the merriment as each of these characters is bound for the same dire fate. After some reassurances and theological wrangling, the toughest sell Cecilia has had so far, Tiburce goes willingly and with almost as much haste as had his brother. "After this Tiburce in good entente / With Valerian to Pope Urban he wente" (349-350).

Tiburce's conversion marks the end of this second section of the *Tale*. It provides a bridge to the final section and Cecilia's struggle with the law. Cecilia is

able to effect Valerian's conversion with little else than his desire for her. To bring Tiburce into the ranks of the faithful, we see a combination of both overt rhetorical persuasion and a more subtle and likely unintentional sexual persuasion. In the final section, we see her turning exclusively to her oratorical abilities to battle with the prefect Almachius and a final image of the combination of the physical and the spiritual which seems to be Cecilia's particular gift.

Giving Life and Death

The conversion of Tiburce is quickly followed by several deaths. In fewer lines than it took to convince Tiburce to forsake idols and become a Christian, we are told of his death, Valerian's, and that of Cecilia's newest convert Maximus. The rapidity of these scenes one after the other, following so closely on the comical conversions of the two brothers, makes for a situation that is almost comical itself. It is almost as if Cecilia's bent toward martyrdom is so strong that she is unwittingly hurtling her converts into the fiery furnace herself. The contrast which arises between the conversions and the executions is like watching a Woody Allen film followed by "Fargo." As political forces become involved and issues of power and

dominance are raised, the comedy becomes darker and harder edged. The lighthearted sexual tensions are transformed into thinly veiled insinuations of impotence.

We see in the martyrdom of Valerian and Tiburce once again the dichotomy of Cecilia's ability to perform the roles of both Eve and Mary. Eve tempts Adam, he follows her, and death is their reward. In much the same way, Cecilia has tempted Valerian and Tiburce into proceeding along paths that will lead to their deaths. She even goes to them after they have been imprisoned and gives them a pep talk so that they will view their deaths as the passage into glory which she had promised Tiburce during the process of his conversion.

Cecile hem seyde with a ful stedefast cheere,

"Now, Cristes owene knyghtes leeve and deere,

Cast alle away the werkes of derknesse,

And armeth yow in armure of brightnesse." (382-5)

Cecilia is as equally culpable of drawing these men to the life of martyrdom as is Eve in drawing Adam into sin. Of course, the difference here is that Cecilia also functions as Mary. The men will lose their lives in this world, but they will gain life everlasting. As the story progresses, one cannot help but notice Cecilia's proficiency in making

martyrs of men. "Cecile hym [Maximus] took and buried hym anon / By Tiburce and Valerian softely / Withinne hire buriyng place, under the stoon" (407-9). In the context of the larger discussion of the *CT* regarding the ways in which men and women should deal with each other and more specifically the Wife of Bath's apparent interest in finding ways to gain control over men, this becomes a quite an extreme answer.

As soon as Cecilia runs out of men to bury and, it should not be lost on the reader, men to shield her from the attention of the authorities, she is summoned before Almachius herself to perform sacrifices to Jupiter. What we have seen up to this point is Cecilia attempting to work out ways in which she might effect conversions of men. She has thus far benefited from varying combinations of rhetoric and sexual desirability. It is difficult to attempt to continue to look at this section of the story with an interest in finding the ways it deals with how a woman may find positive effects of her sexuality. Cecilia literally makes no effort to convert Almachius in any way. Cecilia abandons any attempt to speak sweetly as she does with Valerian and Tiburce, and she certainly makes no effort to win Almachius over with kisses. She is no longer

attempting to persuade but only to insult. However, there are a few places in the argument between the saint and the judge that speak to the issue of positive sexuality. We can also see a continued use of the lack of knowledge on the part of one character to create an opportunity for Cecilia to make that character laughable.

Throughout the story, there has been a strong connection made between the physical and the spiritual. Cecilia is both the physical Eve and the spiritual Mary. She uses her sexuality, or the means through which she should be able to bring life into the world through procreation, to win souls over to Christ so that they may be "born again" and have eternal life. Cecilia has been noted by many to be quite prolific in this regard.²⁵

Cecilia continually uses imagery of impotence when arguing with Almachius, calling into question both his physical and spiritual power. The judge asks her why she does not seem

to heed his power. Cecilia replies,

"Youre myght," quod she, "ful litel is to dreede,

²⁵ For two such readings, see C. David Benson, *Chaucer's Drama of Style: Poetic Variety and Contrast in the Canterbury Tales* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1986) pp. 142-6 and Trevor Whittock, *A Reading of the Canterbury Tales* (London: Cambridge UP, 1968) pp. 251-61.

For every mortal mannes power nys
 But lyk a bladdre ful of wynd, ywys.
 For with a nedles poynt, whan it is blowe,
 May al the boost of it be leyd ful lowe." (437-41)

It is his mortality that has made him impotent. He is not the penetrating, masculine needle but the helpless bladder. Without a connection to the true God, the Christian God, all of mankind's works are useless, and we are powerless. Cecilia's ability to be somehow more than mortal makes her more powerful and more prolific than the judge.

Further on, the subject is taken up in full when Almachius claims he has the power to "maken folk to dyen or to lyven" (472). It is obvious here that the prefect is simply reminding Cecilia that he can either spare her life or take it. However, Cecilia points out the deeper implications of his statement. She quickly corrects his misperception and offers a subtle sexual insult at the same time.

Thou, that ne mayst but oonly lyf bireve,
 Thou hast noon oother power ne no leve.
 But thou mayst seyn thy princes han thee maked
 Ministre of deeth; for if thou speke of mo,
 Thou lyest, for thy power is ful naked. (482-486)

Cecilia's insistence that Almachius has no other power than taking life is certainly a reference to his inability to win souls to Christ and to give the only sort of meaningful life, life everlasting. His power, unlike hers, is political, conferred on him by princes rather than by the potent spiritual power which gives Cecilia the ability to draw numerous converts into eternal life. However, given the imagery of impotence with which she has previously labeled him, there is quite possibly a second meaning here as well.

The obvious connotation is that he himself is physically incapable of participating in the procreative process. Cecilia does say that if he claims any other power than the ability to cause death he is a liar. Her use of the phrase "thy power is ful naked," while certainly meaning that his power is obvious to her and is both empty and bare, seems also to suggest the second, more physical interpretation of her words. In addition, one can see Cecilia reminding Almachius that he certainly cannot give life without a great deal of help from a woman.

The audience is reminded here not only of Cecilia's prolific nature in contrast to Almachius but also of her ability, for lack of a better word, to bring about death as

well. One of Cecilia's first acts in the *Tale* is to warn Valerian that should he touch her wrongly her angel will kill him. "And if that he may feelen, out of drede, / That ye me touche, or love in vileynye, / He right anon wol sle yow with the dede" (155-7). Cecilia's prayer for the preservation of her virginity has brought about a result quite dangerous for men. Being attracted to her can cause death as easily as can failing to obey the commands of Almachius. We have also seen that every man Cecilia has come in contact with has died the death of a martyr, thus receiving both death and eternal life. In Cecilia's own martyrdom scene, Cecilia even denies Almachius the power to take life which she had previously acknowledged as his. "Indeed when Almachius tries to have Cecile's body burned, he fails, and when he tries to have her decapitated, he fails" (Laskaya 170). Although it is Almachius who boasts of it, it is clearly Cecilia who is in the midst of many such exchanges of life and death. If this is the way in which power is to be measured, Cecilia is the sure winner of the contest.

The scene with Almachius, as well as dealing in this way with issues of sexuality and power, brings up the complex issue of voice. Valerian, who was quite obviously

very willing to please her and seemingly hopeful of a consummation of their marriage, is easily won over with very few words of coaxing on the part of the saint. The conversion of Tiburce requires much more preaching on the part of Cecilia to set it in motion. By the time she reaches Almachius, Cecilia has come to rely quite heavily on her rhetorical skills. She displays rhetorically that she is the more powerful of the two opponents. She argues that she is more prolific and by aggressively attacking and dismantling each of the prefect's arguments displays that she is more effective. Each of Almachius' boasts is deflated by the belligerent saint just as the bladder of wind before the needle she so clearly describes.

It is not so very interesting in this context to display her rebuttal of the judge's arguments as it is to note that she does so verbally, rhetorically, solely with her intellect. Cecilia has come quite a long way from the conversion of Valerian which happens entirely as the result of the reality of her physicality. It is her desire for the protection of her body and Valerian's desire to possess it that instigates Valerian's conversion.

The physical approach seems to have been much more effective in bringing about an obviously positive result.

When the saint relies totally on her rhetorical skills, she may win the argument, but she loses her life. However, we must remind ourselves that we are dealing with a work of hagiography, and our heroine has demonstrated an ability to know and perform the will of God. After having flown in the face of the power of the established government and being brought before that government for reckoning, it is not Cecilia's calling to find a clever way to make everything better. It is her responsibility at this point to remain true to her belief regardless of the outcome. Once again the rebellious female ends up dead. However, Cecilia chooses her death. She goes boldly toward it. She goads Almachius into his condemnation with almost one hundred lines of straight condescension and insults, and she leaves off only when he has ordered her death.

Cecilia's death is an unusual one for a female saint. At this point in the *vita*, it is typical for "physical abuse and the debasement of female sexuality" to take over the story line (Heffernan 276). These women are typically depicted as being stripped naked, sent to bordellos or often mutilated by having their breasts severed (278-81). We see no such graphic depictions in the Cecilia story.

We do, however, see a heightened eroticism and a return to a focus on Cecilia's potent and useful sexuality. Cecilia is not burned just anywhere. She meets her end in a place of erotic association. V. A. Kolve reminds us that upon studying the iconography associated with the bath in Chaucer's day one will find that "public bathhouses were often places of sexual licentiousness throughout the Middle Ages" (146). Kolve likewise admits that Chaucer does nothing to invite such associations which yet exist.

Chaucer properly locates the saint's martyrdom within her own house and without specification of her nakedness. But he simultaneously asks us to imagine - to image in our minds - Saint Cecilia in 'a bath of flambes rede,' and for many, or all, in his first audiences [and I would argue for the other pilgrims listening to the tale],...what would have come to mind is not likely to have been a hypocaust in a Roman villa, which few persons then could have imagined, and which Chaucer does not detail. Instead they are likely to have visualized the baths they knew, whether public or private: the small domestic tubs...or those to be found in public bathhouses - a familiar part of

everyday life in the cities, frequently denounced in episcopal decrees." (144)

Cecilia here is directly confronted with her sexuality as the heat of the bath represents the "symbolic identity of lechery" and the fires of lust (Kolve 148-9). She is literally immersed in it, and regardless of all of the arguments made about the dangers of female sexuality, it does her no harm. Cecilia then receives the three blows to her neck, which would eventually kill her. It is at this point that something miraculous happens.

Although Grennen and Rosenberg seem to have missed the reference to the gold early in the *Tale* and although the similarities with the "Chemical Wedding" break down as the "White Queen" enters the bath of flames alone, it is not hard to see that something extraordinary, and indeed almost alchemical, takes place during this scene. Cecilia's sexuality, as represented by her presence in the bath, and her spirituality begin to meld. The pictorial iconography of Cecilia, with which V. A. Kolve argues Chaucer's audience would have been familiar, depicts her as "pathetic and vulnerable, ...voluptuous and desirable" at the moment of her martyrdom (144). As Kolve examines this iconography, he notes that she is almost always depicted in her martyrdom

as a very beautiful and sensuous woman, fully unclad and waiting for the blows of the sword that were to come (141-144).²⁶ It is from this collectively accepted iconographic image of attractiveness and vulnerability that violence and prolific speech erupts. Cecilia is attacked and begins to preach. "Thre dayes lyved she in this torment, / And nevere cessed hem the feith to teche / That she hadde fostred" (537-9). Cecilia displays her ability to master both the physical and the spiritual. Anne Laskaya argues that "when Almachius attempts to silence her [Cecilia's] words by assaulting her body, her words become even more powerfully subversive of his authority" (169). However, more to the point, when Cecilia is thus confronted with her sexuality and is bodily attacked, she becomes an even more powerful spiritual force. She not only preaches and thus vocally subverts Almachius' authority, she converts many to the true faith in the process. Cecilia, through these trials, has remained Eve the beautiful temptress and Mary the arbiter of the people. She can acknowledge her sexual,

²⁶ It should be noted that this is not one of the more typical treatments of Cecilia's iconography. Although eroticism is quite frequently associated with virgin martyrs, those who study Cecilia's iconography rarely ever mention the fact that she is quite often depicted as both beautiful and naked awaiting her martyrdom. Anna Brownell Jameson's *Sacred and Legendary Art* (1896; New York: AMS P, 1970) provides one example of a more traditional interpretation.

physical nature and retain the ability to have her voice heard. "In fact, Cecelia is both living and dead, a liminal - transgressive figure linking two worlds normally distinct and opposed....Cecelia's living-dead body is the visible site of passage between physical and spiritual levels of reality" (Delany 104). We see here melded in this final scene Cecilia's body and voice, her vulnerability and her power, her control and her willingness to do the will of God. The comedy we have witnessed has led us from the amusing to the macabre and finally to a sort of Dantean conclusion wherein our heroine triumphs over evil with an amazing ease and grace and finds victory in what would otherwise have been seen as defeat.

Chapter 3: Another Look at *The Canterbury Tales*

We have seen how humor is used as a mask for numerous battles. Contending amongst the laughter are issues of the supremacy of man and woman, secular and religious, body and spirit. Chaucer takes a traditional story which he has translated and provides it with a teller whose main concern seems to be these same clashes. The simple image of a nun on pilgrimage with such earthy characters as the Miller and Reeve in itself begins to highlight the universe of contrasts which the *vita* brings to the fore and which is Chaucer's favorite playground.

It has been noted by most readers of the *Canterbury Tales* that Chaucer's characters often come in contrasting pairs. We have the aforementioned Miller and Reeve, the Friar and the Summoner, and, some would argue, the Second Nun and the Cannon's Yeoman. Chaucer, in his original writings and in his choice of assigning the translation of this *vita* to his Second Nun, displays his affinity for polarity. We see in the *SN Prologue* the same polarity at work. Mary cannot be mentioned without the nun invoking the image of Eve as well. Salvation goes hand in hand with sin. The desperation of the faithful yet tempted human is

balanced against the surety of those in special relationship with the divine.

The story continues the emphasis on polarity by such simple things as coupling marriage and celibacy and by telling the story of a Christian martyr with humor. It is possible for us to laugh as Cecilia contends with those who are obviously amateurs in this game of the spirit knowing as she does that she cannot help but win regardless of what opposition she might meet. The futility of the desires of those around her becomes comic in the face of her inability to do wrong. She is the embodiment of divine will coming to fruition. It is the unity made of such polarities with which the *SNT* is concerned. Joseph Grennen notes both the theme of unification and the way in which it serves to further connect the *SNT* to the Cannon's Yeoman's Tale. "On the simplest and most abstract level the two poems play out the theme of 'unity vs. multiplicity'" (473).

By having her tell the story of Saint Cecilia, Chaucer allows his character, the Second Nun, to take up the question of the contest of opposing forces in a way that adds complexity to her character and in some ways makes up

for the absence of a portrait in the *General Prologue*.²⁷ All we do know about her is that she is a nun, and it is in this capacity that she speaks to the pilgrim band. Her prologue, as I have read it here, displays a certain degree of anxiety with her excursion outside of the walls of her order.²⁸ She takes up some of the most important issues of those in her situation. Should female religious be cloistered? Should the laws of claustration be enforced? Can nuns walk among a secular populace without being tainted with sin? Can a woman who is not and does not intend to be a wife be other than a temptation which leads men down a path of condemnation?

The translation of the Cecilia story offers answers to all of the above questions. Cecilia walks among not only a secular but a pagan populace and, by her desire to do God's will, is able to effect positive changes. She encounters increasingly strong resistance and is able to remain

²⁷ Julia Bolton Holloway, in comparing the ecclesiastical narrators, makes an interesting connection regarding the lack of a portrait for the Second Nun. "The Second Nun - the last shall be first - received humbly, a mere line and a half, along with the half-line for the Nun's Priest, in the General Prologue. Similarly had Langland in *Piers Plowman* given Lady Mede a grandiose ten line catalogue and inventory of scarlet and golden ribbons, emerald and ruby jewelry, and then to Holichirche a mere half line of white linen garb" (205).

²⁸ As noted above, traveling outside of the cloister would not have been terribly unusual for these women but would certainly have not been entered into lightly especially by someone as concerned with the seduction of worldly desires (*ydlenesse*) as is the Second Nun.

spotless. Finally, she demonstrates that a woman can control her sexuality and, as a result of that control, know and follow the will of God to the exclusion of sexual desire. This story offers a defense to those who would condemn the Second Nun for her participation in the pilgrimage. It likewise displays the Second Nun's attempts to convince herself of her own ability to combat the temptations she would face while living in the secular world.

It must be noted that the above image of Cecilia is one that is quite distant from the more popular version of a woman as a person of insatiable sexual appetite and a person less capable of finding her way to salvation.²⁹ However, the image is exactly what a medieval audience would expect from the life of a saint. Chaucer's audience likely would have had no trouble reconciling the rebellious and radical saint with the meek and submissive wife who was purported to be the ideal. The female virgin martyrs of these stories are exceptional women and thus not likely to be considered practical role models. The *vita* of a saint, when read literally, tells a medieval woman that she may

²⁹ See Alcuin Blamires ed, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1992).

defy social authority if she sees angels or hears divine voices instructing her to do so. However, as we learn from Valerian's willingness to believe that Cecilia has a lover rather than an angel and his vow to kill them both if he finds that to be true, this path is not one to be taken lightly.

If a woman wishes to have a measure of autonomy and power, she can certainly look at Cecilia as a woman who attained those things. However, that autonomy and power are provided to her by her willingness to submit to the will of God. She is born with a gift for knowing and following a divine plan. That gift allows her to act independently of social systems that would control her. We see in looking at the issue of Cecilia's power a return to the polarity that was obviously of interest to Chaucer. There is a tension here between Cecilia remaining in control of her incarnate life and her giving up control of her spiritual life.

This issue of control and volition is one that complicates any reading of the *SNT*. Cecilia is not the completely autonomous, powerful female presence that most feminist critics would wish her to be. That is simply not her role. However, it is not entirely off the mark. One cannot forget in dealing with Cecilia that she is first and

foremost a saint. As such, she is an exceptional woman who can be the link between the divine and the mundane. She is neither ultimately perfect nor ultimately flawed. Rather, she is just perfect enough to access the divine and just flawed enough to relate to those she would convert. What serves to frustrate the feminist reader is the fact that there are glimmers of the strong independent female character we would all love to discover lurking in the pages of the medieval literary tradition. She is combative. She does act according to her own will and design. She is subversive, and she is vocally present and effective. However, true to her liminality, she is also submissive in the face of her calling. It is virtually impossible to distinguish between her own will and the will of God. Her voice is eventually silenced. To a certain degree, Cecilia can be viewed as the midpoint once again, but rather than being the midpoint of spirituality and physicality, she wades the line between a medieval literary tradition which was fairly heavily laden with misogynist sentiment and the contemporary desire for a redemptive, medieval, female figure.

The true beauty of the *Second Nun's Tale* is simply its fitness to the teller. It is perfectly suited to the

character of a medieval nun who is travelling about with secular companions. When viewed in this very specific light, the issue of power is simplified. It is not a story that is offered to provide a model for the ideal woman. However, it does work quite nicely as a model for the ideal nun. Cecilia makes every effort to deny the world and focus on her relationship with God. When that is no longer possible for her and when she must enter into secular society in order to do the will of God, she does so on her own terms wielding an autonomy and power which can only come from the authority of the divine. Cecilia displays the single-mindedness that is essential for the traveling nun. She offers a model of a woman who has dedicated her life to God, and who must perform his works in a threatening secular world.

These connections allow us to look at the Second Nun as a more definite character. They show us new ways in which this tale affects and is affected by tales told by the other pilgrims. Acknowledging the role of the erotic in this hagiographic work as well as noting the humor which is evident makes it possible to find more numerous and hopefully more meaningful connections between the *SNT* and many of the *CT*. As discussed above, it seems that there is

an intentional relationship established by Chaucer between the portraits of Cecilia and Emily. The similarities between these two characters have been used here to reinforce Cecilia's role as a desirable young woman. However, the implications for Emily's character are equally striking. If Cecilia is to be seen as a beautiful and romantic maiden, we may well be able to begin to view Emily as a virgin martyr of sorts. Cecilia's success in the face of sexual temptation speaks as well to the images of women given in the Miller's, the Reeve's and the Merchant's tales. The sexual duplicity consistently portrayed in these tales takes on a much different light in Cecilia's story. Her lover is not a younger man. Valerian is in a way spiritually cuckolded by the angel. Like January, Valerian cannot see his wife's partner until it is too late. By the time Valerian can see the angel, he has been altered to such a degree that there is no return. We have noted in the previous chapter the ways in which the story speaks to the Wife of Bath's desire to have control over men, and one can almost see a way in which the events of the *SNT* reply to the Nun's Priest who in his tale claims that he "kan noon harm of no womman divyne" (3266). The *SNT*, much as the tale of Chauntecleer and Pertelote, goes on to detail

specifially the perils involved in relationships between men and women, for whoever touches Cecilia in an unclean way will know the harm that can be brought about by a woman.

Over the course of this rather extensive look at the *Second Nun's Tale*, we have taken up several issues. Underlying most of these is the rarely acknowledged hagiographic tradition to which this tale belongs. That tradition itself is what provides us with many of the more Chaucerian elements we find in the tale: humor, eroticism, sexism and, obviously, religion. Noting in addition that, as many have said, Chaucer likely first worked on a translation of the story of Saint Cecilia very early in his career, we might possibly step even further into the realm of speculation than most analyses require and consider the possibility that hagiography may be at the very root of Chaucer's work as an author. The *SNT*, other than the few instances noted above, is assuredly a translation of another's work. However, we find tied together here in a very Chaucerian way all of Chaucer's favorite material. Maybe it would be a more reasonable course, rather than trying to work out ways in which this early work of translation fits into the later original works, to attempt

to see the ways in which Chaucer's original poetry was shaped by his exposure to and seeming affinity for hagiographic works. Rather than seeing the Second Nun's Tale as an aberration, maybe we should begin to see it as a cornerstone. Considering the fact that the dates ascribed to the translation of the Cecilia story and the authorship of the Knight's Tale are so close together, one can hardly resist viewing those two works as the bookends between which Chaucer crafted the whole of *The Canterbury Tales*.

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