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Women, Writing, and Storytelling in Medieval England and *The Canterbury Tales*

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The Second Nun is one of the few characters in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* who is portrayed almost completely unironically. Her tale does not exist solely for entertainment, but rather to provide a moral example. Her account of St. Cecilia is a labor of "holy work," designed to use the art of words and rhetoric to become closer to divine understanding. This philosophy is quite different from that of the Wife of Bath, but both women use their unique educations to preserve their voices in their prologues and stories. The literary impact of real medieval women can be used as a lens with which to better understand these characters and their tales. Religious life enabled education for women, in the name of God. Furthermore, a mystical connection to the divine influenced how these women were perceived by medieval English society. The education, mysticism, and legacy of author Julian of Norwich stands in contrast with that of her contemporary, Margery Kempe. These female mystics made lasting literary contributions to English history, and they are both products and witnesses of their times. Parallels can be drawn between Julian and the Second Nun/Cecilia, and between Margery and the Wife of Bath, when it comes to their views on women's education and storytelling. Understanding the questions surrounding women's writing, especially how it was then perceived by the world, provides context that clarifies the significance of the Second Nun and the Wife of Bath.

There is little to no description of the Second Nun in *The General Prologue*, so her characterization must be drawn from the prologue and text of the tale itself. Her tale comes as a response to the Canon Yeoman's irreverent portrait of priests and alchemists, and depicts instead the life of St. Cecilia as a way to teach the value of virtue over idleness. The Second Nun is clearly an educated storyteller, for she begins the tale's prologue with an explanation that this is a tale she has "doon [her] faithful bisnesse, / after the legende, in translacioun / right of thy glorious lyf and passioun" (Chaucer ll.

24-25). As noted by V. A. Kolve in notes about the tale, the words “legend,” “lyf,” and “passioun” (the third chosen deliberately to evoke a connection to the passion of Christ) are all words used to describe the genre of a Saint’s Life. The only available accounts of St. Cecilia’s life in the 1380s would have been abridgments that were written in Latin, and several centuries old (Kolve in Chaucer 307). Not only does the Second Nun have enough of a grasp of written Latin to understand an account written centuries ago, she has spent enough time with the original texts to understand the language, word connotations, and moral messages well enough to be able to consolidate the accounts without adding or glossing the story. From there, she faithfully converts the tale into English. Therefore, it’s likely that copying Saints’ Lives from Latin manuscripts is one of her duties in the convent where she lives.

Given this context, the Nun has a very conscious approach to her writing. She declares to “yow who reden that I write” that she does “no diligence / this ilke story subtilly to endyte” (78-80). Other learned characters have drawn from literary or Latin sources before, and she is aware of this. Other pilgrims like the Clerk and the Prioress use the elevated Rhyme Royale form, as the Second Nun does, to tell elevated tales (and also to highlight their own perceived intellectual or moral virtue). However, in these other tales the original story is often changed to better fit the teller’s message. In contrast, the Nun’s aim as a storyteller is to give a “faithful” account in all senses of the word. Only she can do this, by virtue of her resources, skill, and education. While there may not be many other pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* who see writing in this way, the Nun’s philosophy of storytelling does parallel another medieval woman who used her education and skill in writing for moral instruction, and in doing so immortalized her literary voice.

Julian of Norwich (1343- unknown, but after 1416) was a mystic and anchoress¹ who experienced visions or “shewings” of Christ, and preserved them in writing. Her book *Revelations of Divine Love* is the first recorded book in the English language written by a woman. It was likely finished around the year 1373, and Julian was one of the most well-known mystics in England by that time, so it is not inconceivable that Chaucer would have been familiar with Julian’s work by the time he wrote *The Canterbury Tales* between 1387 and 1400. There are striking parallels in the historical literary work of Julian of

¹ Julian never took vows to become a nun, but as an anchoress she intentionally withdrew from society to live a life of seclusion, devoted to meditation, prayer, asceticism, much like a women in a consecrated religious community would.

Norwich in comparison to Chaucer's Second Nun, and by extension, St. Cecilia as she appears in the Nun's tale.

Our first clue, as mentioned above, is the attitude of the woman toward her audience. There is a kind of openness to Julian of Norwich's narratorial voice in her *Shewings*²; by this point in her life she had already dedicated herself to a life of seclusion as an anchoress, so there is no secular reason for her to write her story down. In her own words, she is recording her visions because she feels like people can learn about the divine from what she has experienced, much like she learned from it. In Chapters VI-VII of the *Short Text*, Julian writes, "dysregarde... the synful creature to whom it was shewn [herself]... it schulde be to euery ilke manne the same profytte that I desyrede to my selfe & perto was styrryd of God ... for yt comoun & gene" (Julian qtd. in Duran 555 and Windeatt 6). Jane Duran analyzes this passage as an affirmation that "the ultimate Teacher is God, and Julian wants us to know this," but adds that just the fact that she is writing it, and will eventually write more from a theological view later in her life, proves that Julian is also claiming her mission of teaching. She does not seem to trust others to tell her story; she always intended to tell it in her own words, so she could be sure the message was clear. In her later *Long Text*, also known as the *Revelation of Divine Love*, this vocational idea is amended to "but I sey it to you that be simple for ese & comfort, for we arn al one in comfort" (Julian qtd. in Windeatt 6). In the *Long Text*, there is less of a moral distance between Julian and her audience, and she seems to genuinely want to help them (herself included, for she counts herself among the sinful) rather than elevate herself as the witness of these visions. To scholar B. A. Windeatt, the changes in the descriptions and rhetorical devices between the *Texts* reflect Julian's "commitment to the validity of her original experience, as vindicated by subsequent meditation" (Windeatt 17). Windeatt endeavors to show through comparisons of Julian's *Texts* that the *Long Text* was designed deliberately to better connect to the reader rhetorically and spiritually, so Julian's aims in sharing her holy visions (spiritual affirmation, theological discussion, and moral instruction) can be fulfilled.

The Second Nun also seems to have enlightenment on her mind, given that

² Also known as *Showings* or the *Short Text*, this manuscript was the way Julian initially documented her visions as she experienced them. The *Long Text*, commonly studied today as the *Revelation of Divine Love*, was a more theological meditation on her visions, adapted from the *Shewings* but further interpreted after years of spiritual contemplation.

her tale is, on multiple levels, a defense of theological enlightenment and education, especially for women. The Nun's role in society, and her convent, is associated with *scriptoria*, a type of holy work focused especially on reading, copying, and writing. Her translations are a part of her vocation, and she considers it, as Julian does with her writings, to be a sacred labor by virtue of its subject matter. When she addresses the Virgin Mary in the Tale's prologue, the Nun's references to her own sin and the benefit of the audience mirror Julian's aforementioned language in the *Short Text*:

And though that I, unworthy sone of Eve,
Be sinful, yet accepte my bileve.

And for that faith is deed withouten werkes,

So for to werken yif me wit and space,

That I be quit from thennes that most derk is. (62-66)

With her tale, the Second Nun defends her work of writing and translation as holy, because of its intellectual focus on the Lord and its intention to serve as an example of virtue.

Virtue connected to enlightenment is the prevailing theme in this account of St. Cecilia, since Cecilia is an exemplar of holy work, and brilliance in every sense of the word. Before she even begins the Tale, the Nun applies Jacob of Genoa's gloss to Cecilia's name to reflect this (85-112). Among other images of guidance and purity, she is described as a bright white "hevenes lily" for her chastity (in Latin, "celi" + "lilia," 87), and "wanting of blindnesse, for hir grete light" ("cecitate"/ blindness + "carens"/ missing, 100). Throughout her life and martyrdom, Cecilia is a beacon for the people around her, literally and figuratively. Most of the imagery surrounding her and her faith has to do with light. It is often directly linked to intellectual enlightenment by pointing back to the study of scripture as guidance. There are multiple references to "this maydens name *bright*" in the opening gloss, connected with the figure of Leah, who has symbolic connections to light and to work in the Bible, and images of Heaven drawn from Revelation and the Old Testament (102, 112, 118). The Nun even says that Heaven and Cecilia were "brennyng" (burning) with this light (114). In the first line of the tale itself, Cecilia is also called "this maiden bright" (120). She gets her "brightness" from God, who is the source of light and enlightenment in the tale and for the Second Nun, and He is the one in whom she puts her faith. When she confronts Valerian on their wedding night, Cecilia urges him not to

risk the wrath of the angel by touching her lecherously, but says that if he will “in clene love [her] gye, / [God] wol yow loven as me... And shewen yow his joye and his brightnesse.” (159-161).

On the night before their martyrdom, the “light” of her faith gives Cecilia courage, which she then shares with her companions by telling them to “cast alle away the werkes of derknesse,/ And armeth yow in armure of brightnesse” (384-385). In this scene, we see enlightenment and faith acting not just as a way of bringing the individual soul closer to God, but engaged in a soldier-like love for others, even to death. This is the kind of steadfast, active kindness that the Nun supports as indicative of true virtue, for she declares in the prologue that “faith is deed withouten werkes” (64). Cecilia is the least passive figure in the tale, but like other female saints of the time, she gets her strength through a gentle kind of courage, rejecting sin and instead embracing her own faith, purity, and intellect.

The Nun’s secondary aim with this tale, besides offering a moral guide, is to defend holy learning, especially by women. Not only is Cecilia a figure of faith, she is a model of intellectual holiness built on an educated understanding of the scriptures. She is more educated than most of the men in the story, to whom she frequently has to explain miracles and moral teachings. Her defense of her virtue in ll. 425-430 is also an insult to the judge’s gentility and intelligence, retorting that Almachius has asked his questions “folily” and “lewedly.” Folly, in the medieval era, was not only a lack of good moral sense; it was also personified as an antithesis of Virtue and Wisdom in morality plays and allegories, who deliberately lures the protagonist into making mistakes. Even when threatened with death, Cecilia defies Almachius’ strength and pride, reducing it to “nycetee” (foolishness) because of his ignorance in believing that death is the end for her (463). In contrast, most of Almachius’ attacks are against the young woman’s “boldness” in speaking out about her faith (487), and his shows of brute strength are intended to intimidate her (445-8, 458-60, 470-473). Cecilia stands firm, saying in l. 478 that she speaks “by right”— meaning both with sound reason, and with an authority given to her by her identity, virtue, or her relationship with God.

In many instances throughout “The Second Nun’s Tale,” Cecilia’s sexual purity, moral virtue, and intellectual “brightness” are tied very closely together. The references to her as “white” (89, 115) are intended to reflect her spiritual purity and her physical virginity. Cecilia’s virginity does not change

any element of her character, but it does impact the way she can interact with the world. It is only after she convinces Valerian to respect her vow of chastity that he can begin to undertake a journey to conversion with her. In her charitable work, her chastity gives a credence to her holiness, since through her “The world hath wist what it is worth, certeyn, / Devocioun of chastitee to love” (282-3). The Second Nun’s argument regarding chastity is directly related to the virtues of the mind and soul that she emphasizes in her tale: by choosing to keep her body pure and devoted to God, a woman can elevate the mind. In a similar way, through the enlightenment of the mind and a commitment to holy work, the body is in turn sanctified. This is a prevailing idea throughout medieval monasticism, and can be found in the writings of Sts. Benedict of Nursia and Augustine. There is also an element of the denial of the earthly body in Julian of Norwich’s writings: “For we are all in part denied, and we ought to be denied, following our master Jesus until we are fully purged... until we have completely denied our own mortal flesh and all our inward affections which are not good.” (Julian qtd. in Duran 556). But how does this idea stand against traditional feminine stereotypes, which are implicit in any medieval discussion of the sins of the flesh?

There was another female mystic of the late 1300s who took England by storm, with a very different point of view based neither in formal education nor consecrated virginity. Born in 1373 and living until after 1438, Margery Burnham married John Kempe, and shortly after the birth of her first child, she experienced eight months of visions of Christ and Heaven. After these visions, she dedicated herself to a life of travel and preaching, all conducted with very public devotion. She was not literate, but enlisted a scribe to write down her dictation of her life story, which was eventually circulated as *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the first autobiography in English. Although Kempe’s *Book* was published after *The Canterbury Tales* had been written, her view of the world is quite similar to Chaucer’s Wife of Bath, hinting that the ideas they have in common were not entirely unheard of during the late 14th and early 15th centuries. The Wife acknowledges in her prologue that “virginitee is greet perfeccioun / and continence eek with devocioun” but declares that she is not called to that particular brand of perfection. Therefore, she intends to “bistowe the flour of [her] age / in the actes and in fruit of marriage” (105-6, 113-14). The Wife of Bath is not a religious character in the way that the Second Nun is, but her understanding of virtue linked with sexuality is quite similar to Kempe’s. In contrast to the denial of sexuality in order to reach God employed by Julian, the Second Nun, and Cecilia, sex is one of Kempe’s primary subjects. It has been argued

that her discussion of sex and marriage are intentional, much like Julian's rhetorical strategies and the Wife of Bath's arguments for mastery. Drawing from her visions and her knowledge of the world, Kempe consciously crafts a role for herself in her *Book* as "a... spiritual authority that is modeled on the Virgin Mary but incorporates the material of Margery's worldly life" (Williams 529). It has also been noted that this identity as a chaste wife and mother may have aided Kempe by granting her more freedom to travel and preach, as a male religious figure would have naturally been free to do (Hall 65-66).

The freedom to seek and share knowledge is a common thread between Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, and it is seen in Chaucer's works as well. In a convent, women could learn to read and write Latin, the language of academic writing, theology, and medicine. The Second Nun, who spends her days as a copier of Saints' Lives and other religious texts, and who can interpret scholars such as Jacob of Genoa for theological glosses, is clearly educated in Latin and literature. Julian's manuscripts are written and copied in vernacular English, but her theological discussions make it clear that she had some kind of learning in the most important Christian theological texts. A member of a consecrated religious order and a lay anchoress in seclusion would both have had access to educational opportunities not always available to women in the middle and even upper classes of secular society. There is no historical or textual evidence that Margery Kempe ever received a formal education. She draws her wisdom mostly through experience, just like the Wife of Bath whose "experience, though noon auctoritee / were in this world, is right ynough" (1-2). Like the Wife, Kempe learned texts and prayers not by reading them, but by hearing them aloud and possibly memorizing them, and then drawing her own interpretation from what she heard and understood. However, writing about theology in particular was strictly a male discipline in the medieval Church, whether you were a religious or layperson. Preaching was explicitly forbidden for women, under pain of being charged with heresy. Unless, of course, your words came directly from God.

The question of divine authority is present in the texts of Julian of Norwich, the *Book of Margery Kempe*, and "The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale." Because their visions were said to come from Heaven, female religious mystics like Cecilia and Julian possessed an authority which, though it functions within the order of the day, could not be limited by other figures of earthly authority who might have sought to discredit or limit the women. A

divine connection allows Julian, Cecilia, and to a certain extent, the Second Nun (she is preserving the will of God in the sense that she is a literary “witness” to a Saint’s Life), to write honestly and openly about theological matters, which otherwise would have been an academic domain reserved for men.

In fiction and history, the idea of an educated and independent woman speaking from a place of authority can be a threat to the patriarchal hierarchy of the medieval Church and secular society. Because they cannot escape the gendered elements of medieval religious life, each of these women seeks out her own way to a kind of transfiguration. They master the aspects of their lives that might have otherwise been vilified by the male-dominated world they were joining. All of them possess courage, intelligence, and faith in what they believe, though it certainly manifests itself in different ways. Why? Their unique but equally powerful impact has to do with the different roles the various women occupy in society. If women like Julian of Norwich and the Second Nun (and by extension, Cecilia) are going to be taken seriously, they cannot be seen as sexual objects. They deny that element of who they are not because they want to banish their femininity, but so they can focus on a different facet of themselves. Their power comes from a choice of chastity and intellect, which endows them with a courage to speak as God wills them to speak. Margery Kempe and the Wife of Bath, in contrast, live fully in the secular world and all it entails. Kempe would eventually become a mother of fourteen children, and remain a laywoman all her life. For her, spiritual growth is connected to sexuality; she is both a physical and spiritual mother, and sees no need to differentiate the two parts of herself. In the *Book of Margery Kempe*, she uses the role she has in secular society as a way to affirm her connection with God and with the world. This connection in turn helps her to take ownership of her own story, just like the Wife of Bath, and further justifies that story’s preservation in writing. Through a conscious reclaiming of their minds, their bodies, and their right to a connection with God, all of these women were able to partake in literary and theological life just as a male religious figure could. Their work preserved in their writings allowed their voices to be heard, and taken seriously.

Each pilgrim in *The Canterbury Tales* is acutely aware of their place in society. This is reflected in the tales they tell; that is one reason why we the readers are able to infer satirical criticism in a tale based on the pilgrim who tells it. Every pilgrim has been assigned their tale based on who they are, how they interact with the world, and what ideas are most important to them. *The*

Canterbury Tales as a whole operate like this because they are a fictional microcosm of medieval society. The Second Nun's tale works because of who she is. It reflects her own education with its rhyme royale stanza structure and its elevated subject matter, and just like her, the tale prioritizes virtue founded on intellectual understanding and sexual constancy. The Wife of Bath's tale pokes fun at her status among husbands, and champions her quest for sovereignty.

Women like the Second Nun and Julian of Norwich exemplify the education that medieval women could receive in religious life, and this is reflected in the way they construct and write their tales. In contrast, women like the Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe are grounded in an awareness of the world, which perfectly prepares them to tell their stories aloud, so they could be recorded by another. The Second Nun and the Wife of Bath are both independent women with their own ways of claiming a right to their minds and bodies. They do this in relation to their personal values, their environment, and the role they play in society. Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe occupied similar roles in real life, but in different contexts, reflecting the different spheres of medieval life. A different kind of education was needed for each, but the brilliant women of both backgrounds clearly had something worth saying.