Zenobia’s Objects

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Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra, sole female protagonist of the seemingly inexhaustible series of tragedies recounted by Chaucer’s Monk in The Canterbury Tales, was an historical woman born around 240 CE. With her husband Odaenathus, she ruled an influential kingdom from the elegant colonnaded city of Palmyra, built on an oasis in the Syrian desert. As regent to the young heir after her husband’s death in 267, Zenobia pursued a vigorous policy of territorial expansion at the expense of imperial Rome. Defeated by the Emperor Aurelian in 272, she was taken to Rome as a captive, and her despoiled city never regained its former splendor. Ours is a poignant moment for contemplating objects associated with ancient Palmyra: bloody conflict in Syria threatens to destroy what remains of Zenobia’s capital, now a UNESCO World Heritage archaeological site. As I attend in this essay to the symbolic objects possessed by Zenobia in Chaucer’s version of her legend (where she appears as Cenobia), the material objects left by the ancient Palmyrenes attract deeply regrettable attention in the form of destruction of buildings and monuments and the persistent theft of antiquities from the site.

Whatever causes we may assign for the current loss of life and destruction of art on the site of Zenobia’s city, “The Monk’s Tale” holds Fortune’s treachery toward those in high places responsible for the pillaging of Palmyra in antiquity. In the final stanza of Chaucer’s account, Fortune compels this once-victorious warrior queen to an exchange of highly significant objects, a textual moment that draws our attention to the vibrancy of the material world as depicted in late medieval literature. In defeat, Zenobia must exchange her battle helmet for an otherwise unknown headdress called a vitremyte, her scepter for that quintessential object of ancient and medieval women, a distaff. This exchange brings closure to the narrative and thus invites special scrutiny: what we make of it strongly affects our
interpretation of the whole. As we will see, those who comment directly on Zenobia’s new objects have tended to view them in a wholly negative light, as instruments of punishment and gender-based humiliation, in keeping with a negative view of Chaucer’s Monk as a mordant and misogynistic narrator. But like words, objects wield multiple significations, and I will argue that Zenobia’s new objects serve wider and more positive ends than illustrating the punitively misogynistic impulses of the fictional Monk. Indeed, in combination with the affirmative traits featured in her narrative, Zenobia’s gendered (and gendering) objects connect her to a powerful discourse of feminine virtue in Chaucer and in his immediate literary models for this portrait. Rather than punishing her for gender transgression, her exchange of objects demonstrates both what Helen Phillips has called Chaucer’s “pleasure in crossing stereotypical gender images” and his move away from representing human lives, especially women’s lives, as relentless instances of tragedie. As Carolyn Collette has recently reminded us, these tendencies—toward turning gender stereotypes inside out and toward imagining more varied and more often positive outcomes for his characters—are major artistic directions that help to distinguish The Canterbury Tales from the poet’s earlier work. Plentiful as they are, scholarly discussions of Chaucer’s female characters have taken comparatively little notice of Zenobia, yet surely this learned warrior queen in a companionate marriage to a likeminded husband merits more attention than she has yet received.

The exceptional length of Zenobia’s story and the liveliness of its verse testify to Chaucer’s special interest in the Monk’s only female protagonist. Nearly half the Monk’s narratives occupy five or fewer stanzas; Zenobia’s runs to sixteen, longer by five than any other. Undeniably, in the penultimate stanza of her narrative she appears as an object paraded in triumph:

Amonges othere thynges that he wan,
Hir chaar, that was with gold wroght and perree,
This grete Romayn, this Aurelian,
Hath with hym lad, for that men sholde it see.
Biforen his triumphe walketh shee,
With gilte cheynes on hire nekke hangynge.
Coroned was she, as after hir degree,
And ful of perree charged hire clothyng. (VII.2359–66)
In its parallel presentation of chariot and queen, the stanza structurally replicates Aurelian’s reduction of Zenobia to one of the “thynges” (2359) that he won in battle. Her gilded and gem-studded war chariot occupies the first half of the stanza (“with gold wroght and perree”); the conquered queen occupies the second, with “gilte cheynes” and clothing “ful of perree.” Just as the chariot is paraded in triumph “for that men sholde it see,” so “al the peple gaureth” (“stare”) at the conquered queen (2369). In this stanza, both the emperor and the verse form objectify this victorious woman warrior who meets her match only in the supreme power of Rome. Walking before Aurelian’s chariot, she has indeed “yfallen out of heigh degree / Into myserie, and endeth wrecchedly,” in full compliance with the Monk’s rigid generic formula for tragedie (1976–77).

Chaucer has something more to say about Zenobia, however, since he gives her narrative another stanza in which she becomes an agent who wears and bears her objects, though she is forced to relinquish an old set and take up a new:

Allas, Fortune! She that whilom was  
Dredeful to kynges and to emperoures,  
Now gaureth al the peple on hire, allas!  
And she that helmed was in starke stoures  
And wan by force townes stronge and toures,  
Shal on hir heed now were a vitremyte;  
And she that bar the ceptre ful of floures  
Shal bere a distaf, hire cost for to quyte. (2367–74)

As I have noted, Zenobia’s new objects have been interpreted as a punitive response by Chaucer’s fictional Monk to her transgression of normative gender roles, her “brash attempt to arrogate a man’s privileges.” According to this view, by forcing her to trade her battle helmet for a feminine head-dress and her scepter for a distaff, the Monk “humiliates and punishes” her. Thus a recent edition of The Canterbury Tales glosses the probable meaning of Zenobia’s otherwise unknown vitremyte as some type of “humiliating head gear,” and her distaff has been read as the punitive “instrument of Eve’s enforced labor after the Fall.”

A closer look at Zenobia’s newly acquired objects suggests that their significations may be less harsh. Instead of the warrior’s helmet she once
wore (2370) or the crown she wears in Aurelian’s triumph (2365), she “shal on hir heed now were a vitremyte” (2372). Walter W. Skeat called Zenobia’s mysterious vitremyte “perhaps the greatest ‘crux’ in Chaucer.”9 The word has been found nowhere else, and Chaucer’s specification that she wore it “on hir heed” suggests that perhaps even his original readers might have profited from a hint about its meaning. Early Chaucer editor Thomas Tyrwhitt included vitremyte in his list of “Words and Phrases Not Understood”; the Oxford English Dictionary offers only the terse nondefinition, “Of obscure meaning.” The Middle English Dictionary lists the many variant spellings offered in the manuscripts and follows Skeat’s etymological conjecture (in his own words “a mere guess”) that the word derives from Latin vitrea mitra and thus means a “glass and therefore fragile headdress,” as opposed to the sturdy battle helmet implied by the phrase “she that helmed was” (2370).

Karl Young extended Skeat’s speculation about vitrea by citing expressions in which a hood or head of glass indicates not just fragility but vulnerability to deception—in Young’s view Zenobia’s vitremyte signifies that she has been deceived by Fortune.10 Skeat’s derivation of -myte from Old French mite (a variant of mitre, from Latin mitra), “a head-dress,” remains undisputed, but alternate etymologies for vitre- include Old French vite (Latin vitta), well attested in the meaning “a fillet or headband,” or else the place name Vitré, a cloth-exporting town in Brittany.11 Whatever the word’s etymology, the context supports the inference that vitremyte denotes a soft feminine head covering, and further support for this view comes from the passage in Boccaccio’s De casibus virorum illustrium on which Chaucer’s stanza is closely modeled. As Skeat noted, Boccaccio describes the captive Zenobia as Fortune’s victim: formerly helmeted (galeata) she consorted with her soldiers, but now veiled or with her head covered (velata) she listens to the tales of her serving women (mulierculae); formerly she presided in the East with a scepter, and now at Rome she spins with a distaff like other women.12 After citing examples of each element of Chaucer’s apparent compound as applied to ancient and medieval women’s headwear, T. Atkinson Jenkins offered his own conjecture, that Chaucer envisioned Zenobia’s vitremyte as a kind of hood comprised of a light and transparent veil draped over two supports or “horns” (cornes).13 Thus far, no evidence indicates that a vitremyte implies anything more demeaning than the modest head covering then deemed appropriate to ordinary private life in the secondary status accorded to the feminine; we have no reason to associate it with special shame or punishment. The evidence that
connects a *mitra* and distaff to deliberate and punitive humiliation of a heroic figure derives from an intriguing parallel passage identified by Vincent DiMarco. In Boccaccio’s *De mulieribus claris*, as punishment for the death of an enemy, Hercules undergoes a loss of status that, like Zenobia’s, is indicated by a change of headwear and imposition of a distaff. In place of his masculine *pilleus*, in his case the lion’s skin he wore on his head and shoulders, Hercules is made to wear a *meonia mitra*—the same sort of effeminate Eastern headgear that Iarbus, Aeneas’s rival in Virgil’s epic, accuses Paris and Aeneas of wearing on their perfumed locks. DiMarco argues that Chaucer would associate Zenobia’s *vitremyte* with this Eastern, non-Roman, and by implication unmanly *mitra*, “a cloth cap covering the head tied with strings or lappets under the chin” (16). He is surely right to emphasize the gendered implications of a *mitra*, a point further supported by Isidore of Seville’s distinction between the masculine *pilleus* made from animal hide and the feminine *mitra* made from wool.¹⁴

Objects that humiliate a male hero because they are feminine need not afflict a woman so severely, however, not even a former woman warrior; in Chaucer’s society it was not at all unusual for a married or widowed woman to cover her head and spin with a distaff.¹⁵ Thus the Hercules parallel does not require us to conclude that a *vitremyte* is a garment of shame for Zenobia, but the passage does have a striking and perhaps hitherto unnoticed echo in “The Monk’s Prologue.” Boccaccio’s Hercules gives up his weapon for a distaff, not because he is vanquished in battle like Zenobia, but because he has fallen prey to the emasculating powers of a woman. Boccaccio identifies her as Iole, though in classical mythology it is the Lydian queen Omphale who degrades Hercules in this manner. Boccaccio’s account of Hercules thus shares its underlying structure with the moment in “The Monk’s Prologue” in which the Host bewails his treatment by his domineering wife. When displeased by his failure to defend her dignity, Goodelief waves her fist in his face, calls him a milksop and a coward ape, and cries, “I wol have thy knyf, / And thou shalt have my distaf and go spynne!” (VII.1906–7). Goodelief thus plays a comic Iole-Omphale to Harry Bailey’s rueful Hercules, symbolically deprived of his weapon and compelled to spin with a distaff. The meaning of this threatened exchange of objects seems transparent: to take a man’s knife (or his club) is to emasculate him. To replace it with a distaff is to add insult to symbolic bodily injury, substituting for his lost member a quintessentially feminine object in the shape of a pointed stick, sometimes held between the knees of a seated woman, and thus a parodic and effemi-
nate mock-phallus. Unlike Goodelief, Zenobia never threatens to appropriate her husband’s weapons, but rather fights beside him with weapons of her own, and unlike Harry Bailey, she can exchange her scepter for a distaff without the implication that she has lost a gender-defining member.

For Hercules and for Harry Bailey, spinning with a distaff necessarily signifies a humiliating emasculation. But Zenobia’s distaff links her to a discourse of feminine virtue as old as the archetypal “good woman” of Proverbs 31, who does not eat the bread of idleness but works industriously into the night, spinning and weaving textiles with which to clothe her family. In classical antiquity, spinning and weaving as signs of feminine virtue and wifely constancy go back to Penelope in the Odyssey, and legends and visual images of Eve’s sinless opposite, the Virgin Mary, depict her with a distaff.16 Spinning represents virtuous feminine industry in Chaucer’s “Clerk’s Tale”: before her marriage the impoverished Griselda “knew wel labour but noon ydel ese” (IV.217), maintaining herself and her father by “spynnynge” while tending her few sheep (223). But the seminal example in the Latin humanist milieu from which Chaucer drew his portrait of Zenobia is the Roman matron Lucretia, “the verray wif, the verray trewe Lucresse” of Chaucer’s Legend of Good Women. Her spinning signifies “wifly chastite” and virtuous industry in her husband’s absence: “softe wolde oure bok seith that she wroughte / To kepen hire from slouthe and idelnesse” (LGW 1686, 1737, 1721–22). Lucretia’s spinning is one of the images the heinous Tarquin cannot put out of his mind after seeing her: “thus fresh was hyre hewe; / Thus sat, thus spak, thus span” (1761–62). The hetero-normative “good woman” characterized by spinning and self-sacrifice holds considerably less appeal today—modern readers are more often drawn to Chaucer’s combative Wife who leverages her cloth-making into a modicum of independence—but this ideal of feminine virtue ran deeply in Chaucer’s culture and widely through his literary models.

Before taking this expanded contextualization of Zenobia’s objects back to the larger narrative to which it provides closure, it is worth asking how a more positive reading of these objects squares with Chaucer’s characterization of the Monk as narrator. Separating the aims of the Monk, or any fictional pilgrim, from the aims of the larger work is always challenging in The Canterbury Tales, but what is certain is that, like all the figures in the Monk’s lockstep series of de casibus tales, Zenobia must eventually “fall” and thereby serve as a warning to others against trusting in Fortune. It is equally
clear that Chaucer dissociates himself from the Monk’s generically monoto-
nous performance by having both Knight and Host deplore it from their
contrastive social perspectives. The Knight finds these unvaried falls from
high degree too sorrowful while the Host finds them soporific, but both
agree in demanding that they end (2767–99). As has often been noted, the
minimal framing of “The Monk’s Tale” and its repetition of a single genre
and plot structure allow Chaucer to point up by contrast the variety and
surprise achieved by the larger work, the great experiment in narrative fram-
ing and generic variety that is The Canterbury Tales. The Monk’s plots lack
variety, but, just as the earlier hypothesis that Melibee is a deliberate failure
holds little sway now, many scholars have moved away from the idea that the
Monk’s narratives are deliberately and uniformly the failed products of an
incompetent and malicious narrator, seeing them rather as Chaucer’s uneven
experiments in a genre alien to modern sensibilities, but useful to medieval
writers in exploring significant political ideas.17 One of these political ideas,
I will suggest, is the possibility raised by the Zenobia story that women
might possess qualities useful in civic as well as domestic life.

Chaucer explicitly identifies generic monotony as a particular inadequa-
cy of the Monk’s approach to storytelling, but we need not otherwise take
the details of these received narratives, many of them derived quite directly
from Boccaccio and other sources, as indications of the fictional Monk’s
personal traits, including his attitude toward women. The dating of “The
Monk’s Tale” remains highly uncertain, but if, as many have argued, some
version or part of it was drafted in the 1370s,18 prior to Chaucer’s full work-
ing out of his plan for fictional tellers, it would help to explain the tale’s
relative lack of an individualized narrator, apart from his dogged commit-
tment to genre as straightjacket.19 The Monk’s attitude toward women is par-
ticularly difficult to tease apart from the ambivalent play that so frequently
characterizes Chaucer’s treatment of his culture’s gender stereotypes. The
Monk’s narratives certainly include antifeminist chestnuts already standard
in the de casibus tradition, such as the ruin brought upon Samson by Delilah
(2061–94) and upon Hercules by Deianira (2119–28). The Monk dutifully
(or grudgingly) notes that “somme clerkes” excuse Deianira by claiming that
not she but the centaur Nessus provided Hercules with the poisoned shirt
(2127–29); his assurance that he “wol hire noght accusen” anticipates the
playful or mocking tone that the Nun’s Priest takes up in the next tale when
he assures us after a similar rehearsal of antifeminist chestnuts that “I kan
noon harm of no womman divyne” (VII.3266). Such ambivalent “defenses” of women run throughout The Canterbury Tales and thus offer uncertain grounds for singling out the Monk as a dramatized misogynist.

Like all the Monk’s protagonists, Zenobia falls from prosperitee to myserie, but the tale makes an important distinction between figures who deserve their fall—such as Nero, “as vicius / As any feend” (2463–64) or Holofernes, “pompous in heigh presumpcioun” (2555)—and, on the other hand, those who are betrayed by “False Fortune” (2669) even though they deserve better. Ample application of the interjection “allas!” serves as an unsubtle marker for this second, Fortune-blaming, category, which includes Zenobia, as well as Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, venerated as two of the “Nine Worthies,” despite their shortcomings. The story of another hero, the “worthy, myghty Hercules” (2135–42), ends with a full stanza upbraiding Fortune for his fall. Like Alexander, Caesar, and Hercules, Zenobia too is “worthy” (2249); her narrative grants her all the requisite qualities of a warrior-monarch—noblesse, hardynesse, lynage, gentilesse—and it too upbraids the treachery of Fortune:

> But ay Fortune hath in hire hony galle;  
> This myghty queene may no while endure.  
> Fortune out of hir regne made hire falle  
> To wretcchednesse and to mysaventure. (2347–50).

The final stanza of Zenobia’s narrative begins “Allas, Fortune!” and laments her exposure to the bold gaze of the spectators at Aurelian’s triumphal procession (2369). Cruelly betrayed by Fortune, she suffers the wretcchednesse and mysaventure of Aurelian’s triumph. Rather than punishing her for individual transgression of the limitations of her gender, however, Zenobia’s fall represents Fortune’s invariable treatment of those in high places: Fortune “ay” (“always”) “hath in hire hony galle” (2347). Unlike many of the Monk’s protagonists, Zenobia does not bring additional torment on herself by defying Fortune’s reversal when it comes. Donning a vitremyte and bearing a distaff is a mild fate when weighed against the grisly ends met by many of her male counterparts, such as Hercules, to whom Fortune sends as a final material object the poisoned shirt that “made his flessh al from his bones falle” (2126) or Antiochus, whose final object is a chariot, a fall from which “his limes and his skyn totar” and “in this stynek and this horrible peyne, / He starf ful wrecchedly” (2611, 2626–27).
The poetic energy Chaucer invests in the details of Zenobia’s exertions and successes prior to her fall suggests keen interest in, and even admiration for, the transgression of gender boundaries symbolized by her former objects: her golden war chariot, helmet, crown, and scepter. Some of the liveliest verse of the Monk’s entire tale recounts Zenobia’s girlhood freedom with its Amazon-like joy in hunting wild beasts, running in the mountains at night, and sleeping outdoors (2255–65). In these pleasures and in her resistance to marriage and sexual relations with men, she resembles Emelye of “The Knight’s Tale,” the Amazon maiden who also loves “huntynge and venerye” and wants similarly “to walken in the wodes wilde, / And noght to ben a wyf and be with childe” (I.2308–10). The youthful and physically vigorous Zenobia evades the conventional duties or “office of wommen” (2256); instead she takes to the woods to hunt wild beasts with arrows. Rather than engage in sexual relations, her preferred form of contact with men’s bodies is to “Wrestlen . . . / With any yong man, were he never so wight” (2266–67).

Zenobia desires an outdoor life unconstrained by marriage or childbearing, but as with Emelye, when the time comes her wishes are simply overruled by her guardians: “atte laste hir freendes han hire maried” (2271). Both Emelye and Zenobia make the best of marital arrangements they cannot avoid; neither indulges in the self-deception that in “The Knight’s Tale” leads Theseus to imagine that he controls his own and his subjects’ destinies. Zenobia does, however, lay down stringent rules by which she will permit her husband to “doon his fantasye” (2285), depending on the possibility of her pregnancy. To those who regard her new objects as punishments inflicted on her by the Monk for gender transgression, this is one of her major infractions: she “mannishly dictated to her husband the condition of their sexual relations.”

These intimate details of the marriage bed derive quite directly from Boccaccio’s account of Zenobia in De mulieribus claris and may also be influenced by Boccaccio’s description earlier in the same work of the Amazonian practice of strictly regulated relations with men for purposes of procreation. In Chaucer’s version, the narrating voice expresses some sympathy for Zenobia’s husband: “And if she were with childe . . . / Al were this Odenake wilde or tame, / He gat namoore of hire” (2287–92). But earlier, the narrator also promises that the reader or hearer “shul understonde” (presumably later in the narrative) that the man Zenobia marries “hadde swiche fantasies as hadde she” (2274–75). This may be meant to imply that her husband accepts or condones the restrictions placed on his freedom to “doon
his fantasye” in marriage. This at least is Christine de Pizan’s understanding of the passage in which Boccaccio states that Zenobia toughens her body, places great value on virginity, and then marries “a young man toughened by similar pursuits.” In adapting the same passage for *The City of Ladies*, Christine describes Zenobia’s commitment to hard physical training and sexual abstinence and then comments that Fortune was kind to give her a husband “assez courespondant a ses meurs,” that is, “of a similar bent to herself” or “of similar mores.” In emphasizing Zenobia’s good fortune in being married to a man who shares her enthusiasm for exercise and sexual restraint, Christine’s comment has a wry edge, but she does take from her source the impression that Zenobia’s ascetic preferences were in harmony with those of her husband, and Chaucer may have made the same inference.

More so than either Boccaccio or Christine, Chaucer uses language that connects the pagan Zenobia’s marital scruples to standard Christian teachings on sexuality in marriage. In permitting relations with her husband, it was Zenobia’s “pleyn entente / To have a child, the world to multiplye” (2281–82). As the Wife of Bath reminds her critics, God commanded humans to “wexe and multiplye” (III.28), and the phrase “the world to multiplye” recurs in the tale that follows the Monk’s, where, unlike Zenobia, the less scrupulous rooster Chauntecleer seeks sexual relations “Moore for delit than world to multiplye” (VII.3345). Zenobia’s “pleyn entente” to permit marital relations only for procreation puts her in doctrinal harmony with “The Parson’s Tale,” where “entente of engendrure of children” serves as the “cause final of matrimoyne”; another of marriage’s “causes” is “to eschew lecherie and vileynye” (X.938–40). Dialogue is rare in the Monk’s narratives, and only one indirect quotation is attributed to Zenobia herself, the statement that permitting marital relations for purposes other than procreation implicates wives in “lecherie and shame” (2293).

The Christian orthodoxy of Zenobia’s entente to limit marital sexuality to the engendering of children, “the world to multiplye,” and her resolution to avoid the deadly sin of lecherie also connect her to Christian saintly women such as Cecilia in “The Second Nun’s Tale.” Cecilia’s wedding-night demand for a chaste marriage on pain of the groom’s death (VIII.141–58) leaves Zenobia’s scruples moderate by comparison. Chaucer’s adaptation of nearly the full account of Zenobia’s sexual strictures from Boccaccio’s longer narrative in *De mulieribus claris* admittedly creates an odd overemphasis in Chaucer’s otherwise compressed version of her story, but his placement of Zenobia’s chaste entente firmly within a discourse of Christian orthodoxy
indicates that we need not read these stanzas as the Monk’s censure of a culpable transgression of gender boundaries.

Whatever the precise meaning of the statement that Zenobia’s husband “hadde swiche fantasies as hadde she” (2275), it foreshadows the couple’s future compatibility until their separation by his death. Genuinely happy marriages in which both members of a couple share the same “fantasies” from the beginning are a scarce and sought-after goal in *The Canterbury Tales*, and thus it is striking that these two were equally matched and worked successfully together: “So doghty was hir housbonde and eek she, / That they conquered manye regnes grete / . . . and with strong hond held hem ful faste” (2312–16). Although in her youth, “To no man deigned hire for to be bonde” (2270), once married Zenobia “natheless” lives with her husband “in joye and felicitee” (2276–77). Aside from the asymmetrical restraint that Zenobia puts on their sexual relations, their love is mutual, “ech of hem hadde oother lief and deere” (2278). Only after “Odenake” dies does Zenobia alone hold “myghtily / The regnes” until overpowered by Aurelian’s imperial forces (2327–28). A modern scholar affirms the reality of the historical queen’s remarkable military success: “in the course of the years 270 to 271 Zenobia gained control of approximately the eastern third of the Roman Empire.”

Whether Chaucer first composed his account of Zenobia prior to or in the course of his work on *The Canterbury Tales*, her striking narrative raises in small at least two of the major concerns of his last great project: compatibility in marriage, as we have just seen, and the relation of women to learned culture and public life. In her commitment to learning, Zenobia embodies what Carolyn P. Collette has usefully called Chaucer’s “early humanist” values. She raises her two sons “in vertu and in lettrure” (2296) and becomes fluent in “sondry tonges” (2307). Unlike the lovelorn female figures in *The Legend of Good Women* who are undone by their overgenerosity toward men, Zenobia understands the key civic and domestic virtue of mesure: she is wys and large (“generous”), but “large with mesure” (2299). In *De mulieribus claris*, Boccaccio writes that Zenobia read zealously; memorized Greek, Latin, and barbarian histories; and presented them in brief “epitomes,” thereby assigning her a humanist project very much like his own in *De casibus* and *De mulieribus claris*. Following Boccaccio, Christine de Pizan reports that Zenobia “knew Latin as well as Greek, through the aid of which she organized and arranged all historical works in concise and very careful form.” Like her creator, Chaucer’s Zenobia goes beyond the scholarly organizing and epitomizing attributed to her by Boccaccio and Christine:
she seeks to put her knowledge of “sondry tonges” and her avid reading to a further use as moral guidance in living: “for to entende / To lerne bookes was al hire likyng, / How she in vertu myghte hir lyf dispende” (2308–10).

With this view of the civic and domestic virtues recounted in her narrative, we arrive back at the final stanza with Zenobia’s exchange of objects. About the visually appealing “ceptre ful of floures” that she must now give up, Albert C. Baugh made the plausible suggestion that Chaucer had in mind a golden scepter embossed with floral decorations, presumably an instance of fine Middle Eastern metalwork. The apparent beauty of this emblem of Zenobia’s now-ended reign offers another positive image of its combination of martial and humanistic values. Zenobia’s imperial “ceptre ful of floures” completes the stanza’s series of four b-rhymes, a powerful rhyming sequence that reviews her outstanding successes: “kings and emperoures” (conquered by her), “starke stoures” (fierce battles fought by her), “townes stronge and toures” (won by her), and finally the “ceptre ful of floures” that signified her reign. This brings us to the last line, where the poet introduces the distaf with which, for the time that remains to her, Zenobia will spin, “hire cost for to quyte.”

Ancient sources differ in their accounts of the final fate of the historical Palmyrene queen. One tradition reports that she fell ill or starved herself on the way to Rome, with the possible implication that she committed suicide as a way of avoiding Aurelian’s victory celebration. Mary Beard discounts this possibility, on the grounds that it most probably represents assimilation of Zenobia’s story to that of “the most famous of all triumphal refusniks, Cleopatra,” and favors instead the versions in which Zenobia survives Aurelian’s triumph to live out her life as “quite the Roman matrona, we may perhaps imagine—in a comfortable villa near Tibur.” In De mulieribus claris, Boccaccio adopts this same tranquil ending from the Historia Augusta, describing Zenobia as living a retired life, first with her children among respectable Roman women (inter romanas matronas) and then in old age on an estate granted to her by the Roman Senate, located near Hadrian’s villa in Tibur, now Tivoli (C.22.436).

In keeping with the Monk’s commitment to unrelenting tragedie, Chaucer takes his ending from Boccaccio’s De casibus, in which Zenobia loses her warrior-queen’s helmet and scepter and acquires her womanly headdress and distaff. The distaff may link her to Eve’s sin but also, as we have seen, to the feminine virtue displayed by Lucretia and Griselda, as well as the exemplary woman of Proverbs and the Virgin Mary. It links her also to the comic “Malkyn, with a dystaf in hir hand” in the tale that follows, who dashes out
to join in raucous pursuit of Chauntecleer and the fox (VII.3384). There, the Nun's Priest demonstrates that “the latter ende of joye” is not always “wo” (VII.3205). He answers the Monk's unvaried accounts of the falls of illustrious men (and one woman) with his uproarious tale of an illustrious rooster, who manages, however narrowly, to escape tragedie. The Nun's Priest’s high-spirited contradiction of the Monk’s invariant dark vision draws our attention to the trajectory of the larger framing tale in which Chaucer moves away from representing human lives as nearly inevitable instances of tragedie, such as he depicted in Troilus and the Legend of Good Women, and toward the more varied, more often positive outcomes imagined within the mature comic vision of his last work.30

For his portrait of Zenobia, Chaucer drew on accounts found in two different works by Boccaccio, and thus he had a choice of two endings, one relatively tranquil and one more dire. We might describe Chaucer's Zenobia as caught between two narratives: from De mulieribus claris comes the story of her companionable marriage, extraordinary victories, eventual defeat, and afterlife as a comfortably situated Roman matron, and from De casibus, the rhetorical emphasis on her catastrophic fall and resultant involuntary object exchange. Despite her inevitable fall, generically mandated by inclusion in the Monk’s unrelenting sequence of tragedies, Chaucer’s very last words about Zenobia may nevertheless preserve just a little of that quiet retirement among Roman matrons and subsequent retreat to a Senate-sponsored villa in pastoral Tivoli. That Zenobia “shal bere a distaff, hire cost for to quyte” does not compel the reader to the literal (and historically improbable) reading that this foreign queen and military conqueror was forced to spin in order to reimburse Aurelian’s empire for the daily expenses of keeping her captive at Rome. Leaving Zenobia to quyte her cost by spinning with her distaff may be the gentlest ending possible within the generic strictures of tragedie, a way of saying that, with her reign irrevocably lost, Zenobia will not eat the bread of idleness, but live out her days in laudable industry and end on even terms with the world.

Notes


5. All quotations from Chaucer are from Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). Quotations from “The Monk’s Tale” will be noted by line number parenthetically in the body of the text; where useful for clarification, I cite *The Canterbury Tales* by fragment and line number, separated by a period.

6. Vincent DiMarco, “Wearing the Vitremyte: A Note on Chaucer and Boccaccio,” *English Language Notes* 25 (1988): 15–19, at 17. Although I argue for a different view of Zenobia’s objects, I gratefully acknowledge the indebtedness of my piece to the considerable learning compressed into DiMarco’s influential “Note.”


11. The former was suggested by T. Atkinson Jenkins, “Vitremyte: Mot Latin-Français employé par Chaucer” in *Mélanges de linguistique et de littérature offerts à M. Alfred Jeanroy par ses élèves et ses amis* (Paris: Droz, 1928), 141–47; the latter is a previously unpublished suggestion from Robert Pratt cited by the *Riverside Chaucer*, n. to VII.2372.


15. For women’s domestic contribution to cloth-making in this period and the use of the distaff, see David Jenkins, ed., *The Cambridge History of Western Textiles*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), I.179–391. Indeed, a widespread antifeminist proverb cited by Chaucer’s Wife of Bath holds that, along with deceit and weeping, “spynnyng God hath yive / To women kyndely” (that is, “God has given spinning to women by nature,” III.401–2). Observers were so accustomed to seeing women spin that they could think of it as innate to their gender, despite their not being born clutching a distaff. We would not make this essentialist mistake, in part because modern thought thoroughly dichotomizes a conscious human agent and an “inert” object like the distaff. Yet the view reflected in the proverb partially anticipates current theories in cognitive science. According to one theory, a woman who spent many of her waking hours spinning with a distaff would have taken part in “a dynamic coupling between mind and matter” or a “dance of agency” back and forth between the conscious dictates of her brain and the feel and pull of the forming thread. The thread in her hands conditions her brain, helping to create “skill memory,” and thus a life of spinning permeates her biological “nature” more deeply than one might have thought. Lambros Malafouris makes this argument about the interactions among a potter’s brain, his fingers, and the responsive clay that forms the developing pot: “At the Potter’s Wheel: An Argument for Material Agency,” in *Material Agency: Towards a Non-Anthropocentric View*, ed. Carl Knappett and Lambros Malafouris (New York: Springer, 2008), 19–36, at 24, 33–35. The medieval proverb’s failure to draw the requisite bright line between a woman and her distaff reminds us that the current “material turn” is in some ways a “material return,” a return to a less dichotomous view of humanity and the material world.


19. Many of course would disagree with this assessment of the Monk as narrator; see for example Jahan Ramazani, “Chaucer’s Monk: The Poetics of Abbreviation, Aggression, and Tragedy,” *Chaucer Review* 27.3 (1993): 260–76. Ramazani sees in the tale not just an over-insistence on a formulaic view of tragedy but also a portrait of the Monk’s “worldliness and aggression” (272).


26. For the importance of mesure in Chaucer’s works, see *Chaucer Review* 43.4 (2009), a special issue on “Time, Measure, and Value in Chaucer’s Art and Chaucer’s World,” ed. Carolyn P. Collette and Nancy Mason Bradbury.


Works Cited


