God precedes and transcends us, but first and above all in the fact that he loves us infinitely better than we love, and than we love him. God surpasses us as the best lover.

—Jean-Luc Marion, The Erotic Phenomenon

The New Testament proclaims, “Deus caritas est et qui manet in caritate in Deo manet et Deus in eo” (I John 4:16; “God is charity: and he that abideth in charity, abideth in God, and God in him”), but defining, contemplating, and making God’s caritas accessible through the written word exposes the impossibility of contemplating the Divine without subverting his perfection. Augustine pithily summarizes this conundrum of pondering divinity and urges his readers to strive for transcendence despite the limitations of human perception: “If you are not able now to comprehend what God is, comprehend at least what God is not; you will have made much progress, if you think of God as being not something other than He is.”

In his analysis of medieval allegory and sexuality, Noah Guynn assesses this hermeneutic conundrum of discussing the Divine for classical and medieval rhetoricians, including Cicero, Donatus, Augustine, Isidore of Seville, and Hugh of St. Victor: “Yet there is almost always some degree of awareness, whether latent or fully articulated, that discursive, tropological meaning is internally and irremediably split, that signifiers are always ‘other’ with respect to an

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essential, unvarying, and ineffable signified.” The “essential, unvarying, and ineffable signified” that is the Divine creates these rhetorical traps, in that discussing his perfection through the imperfect medium of language inevitably corrupts the incorruptible. Humans can only approach the Divine through metaphor, allegory, and other such symbolic play with language that figures God within the limited terms of human comprehension, and due to these factors, amatory affectation and eroticism—as understood, as they must be, through human experience—provide apt metaphors for considering the raptures of divine love.

Frequently in the Middle Ages, spiritual and metaphysical treatments of God assume a decidedly erotic cast, limning the Divine through a very human understanding of the body and sexual pleasure. For even if one embraces Augustine’s suggestion to imagine God through what he is not, how is this possible except through the human terms that then constitute what the Divine is not? For example, Paul elliptically refers to the physicality of Divinity when he discusses the necessity of the Church approximating the Godhead:

et ipse dedit quosdam quidem apostolos quosdam autem prophetas alios vero evangelistas alios autem pastores et doctores, ad consummationem sanctorum in opus ministerii, in aedificationem corporis Christi, donec occurramus omnes in unitatem fidei et agnitionis Filii Dei, in virum perfectum in mensuram aetatis plenitudinis Christi. (Ephesians 4:11–13)

And he gave some apostles, and some prophets, and other some evangelists, and other some pastors and doctors. For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Until we all meet into the unity of faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the age of the fullness of Christ.

Paul’s enigmatic image of the “virum perfectum in mensuram aetatis plenitudinis Christi” asks his followers to contemplate the Divine image, but it is unclear what they should then see as represented through his words. In his explications of Pauline thought, Augustine struggles with the issue of God’s corporeality and its attendant physical form, such as when, in response to Paul’s consideration of the “virum perfectum in mensuram

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aetatis plenitudinis Christi,” Augustine euphemistically interprets Paul’s metaphoric construction of the Body of Christ to necessitate “the union of head and body, which consists of all the members, and they will be completed in due time.”

The euphemistic phrase referring to “all the members” tangentially adumbrates God’s erotic nature in the inclusion of his humanly recognizable genitals. In his “Tome of Leo,” Pope Leo the Great likewise addresses the issue of God’s genitalia: “Thus there was born true God in the entire and perfect nature of true man, complete in his own properties, complete in ours.” The body of God, as a complete and perfect rendering of man’s, tangentially raises a host of questions concerning God’s erotic drives. Leo’s precepts were adopted by the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E., which concludes:

> Therefore, following the holy fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin.

This question of God’s physical incarnation—whether he is equipped with a penis or not—is only one of numerous issues concerning God’s erotic nature in the Middle Ages, including visual depictions of his circumcision and at times erect penis, exegetical interpretations of vexing scriptural passages (such as Bernard of Clairvaux’s detailed explications of the Song of Songs), and mystical accounts of divine


6. Ibid., 72.

7. As Leo Steinberg’s provocative analysis of medieval and Renaissance art demonstrates, the issue of Jesus’s penis and its symbolic representation of his humanity was a matter of prominent concern to numerous artists (*The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* [London: Faber & Faber, 1983]).

8. Studies of Bernard of Clairvaux that illuminate the sexual play in his allegorical reinterpretation of the Song of Songs include Ann Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); and E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990). Astell cites Pseudo-Richard of Victor’s explication of erotic love and its spiritual import as depicted in the Song: “We learn from the words of this love; by the power of this love we burn in the love of Divinity. We must consider this repeatedly,
rapture. Lara Farina notes that medieval religious writers employed language in the manner that they experienced it, despite its limitations: “the language with which [medieval religious writers] go about producing desire must not depart entirely from the desirable as it is already known, even if that means relying on imagery and rhetoric that are seemingly incongruous with Christian religious endeavor or its more ascetic doctrines.” While the issue of God’s eroticism appears unthinkable within certain medieval discourses, Augustine’s and Leo’s careful euphemisms reveal that many medieval Christians could not refrain from pondering the eroticism of their Father, and other religious traditions, particularly those of mystics, thought of Divinity in insistently and graphically amorous terms.

When Chaucer includes depictions of God and God’s love in his fictions, he too must confront the inherent paradox of describing divine perfection through the imperfect mediums of human language and thought. The impossibility of characterizing the ineffable, and particularly the impossibility of delineating the contours of spiritual love with terms of human physicality, coincides with overtly sensualized visions of the Divine in Chaucer’s corpus. As Mark Miller suggests of Chaucer’s play with sexuality in his fictions, “erotic energies trouble and cross presumptive borders between the normal and the perverse, even as in many ways they depend on the constitution of such borders,” and such is the

however, lest when we hear the words of outward love, we remain with the superficial understanding” (28).

9. As Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff demonstrates, bodies and gender are inextricably connected to visionary writing: “Bodies—the visionary’s own body and the body of Christ—are very important in women’s visionary writings. . . . [I]n using the language of the body the medieval writer may be able to say unsayable or unthinkable things” (Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994], 204). In a similar vein, Amy Hollywood notes: “many women were forced to seek access to the divine and to public voice by inscribing their bodies and souls with suffering, with wounds marking the presence of God and the limits of imagination” (The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995], 206). For an excellent study of the eroticism of mystical texts, including the Ancrene Wisse and the Wooing Group, see Lara Farina, Erotic Discourse and Early English Religious Writing (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), esp. 35–86; Farina also addresses Bernard of Clairvaux and the Song of Songs (6–12). For the mystical eroticism of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, see Liz Herbert McAvoy, Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe (Cambridge: Brewer, 2004), esp. 152–53, 167–69 for Julian and 126–30 for Margery.


case with Chaucer's divine eroticism, in which heavenly aspirations lead humans to contemplate the potential physicality of erotic union with the Divine, as well as hinting that the Divine responds to such spiritual carnality in a strikingly physical manner. Chaucer's conceptions of an erotic and eroticizing Christian God recall and parallel those of his forebears and contemporaries who similarly confront the sexual implications inherent in loving God, while the unique rhetorical situations of his narratives simultaneously position his vision of divine love as his own.

In theorizing the narrative effect of Chaucer's divine eroticisms, it should be noted that Chaucer's relationship to Christianity can only be hazily surmised through his fictions. Ruth Ames hypothesizes that Chaucer's theological perspective was that of "an enlightened fourteenth-century gentleman who held dogma without being dogmatic, of a moral artist whose milieu was ironic humor, of a Catholic who did not find the justification of faith easy, but who believed that God so loved the world that he gave his only son for its redemption."12 Such interpretations, however, can only be built from the evidence of his polyphonic texts that ironically and humorously undercut one another. Certainly, Chaucer's knowledge of the Christian Bible was extensive, as evident from his many scriptural allusions.13 In this chapter I do not explore Chaucer's religious beliefs or his relationship with Christianity but rather the narrative effects of his depictions of God's potential carnality, those that queer the meaning of divine love by positing it in insistently human terms that reimagine the teleological presumptions of Christian unity with the divine. Within Chaucer's fictions, these depictions of an erotic God trouble the border between the anagogical and the allegorical because, in many instances, the call to contemplate God's love becomes entangled with his narratives' various other themes and plotlines that veer away from issues of spirituality while simultaneously hypothesizing the possibility of God's sexual desire for the humans he has created. In Legend of Good Women and the Parson's Tale, two texts rarely analyzed in tandem, Chaucer hypothesizes the potential of a God unbound by his eroticism and sensuality. These texts are divergent in theme and structure—a dream vision qua apologia for antifeminism in Legend of Good Women, a moral treatise on penitence in the Parson's Tale—yet they unite in their reflections on the nature of

God and his sensuality. In the fabliau humor of Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale* and *Wife of Bath’s Prologue*, the possibility of an erotic God enhances the sexual play of the narratives, positing the Divine as equally invested in sexuality (and sexual farce) as the narratives’ earthly protagonists. In the *Second Nun’s Tale*, readers witness Chaucer’s allegorical yet frank depiction of human consummation with an erotic God, as the Transcendent physically ravishes Cecilia during her martyrdom for love. To conceive of one’s love for God, whether in the Middle Ages or today, one must do so in human terms, for human terms are the only terms we have. Chaucer both exploits and obfuscates the queer narrative possibilities of loving a loving God, alternately reveling in and resisting the often graphic amorousness at play in pondering God and his bounteous eroticism.

**LOVING GOD, LOVING TRANSGRESSION**

As language can never fully illuminate the Divine, so too must any attempt at an experiential epistemology of the Divine falter due to the limits of human perception, and Chaucer addresses faith’s inherent uncertainties in the opening lines of the *Legend of Good Women*. Pondering the foretold pleasures of heaven and pains of hell while introducing his surreal dream vision, Chaucer as narrator affirms religious belief while simultaneously contemplating the lack of empirical evidence to support its claims:

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A thousand tymes have I herd men telle
That ther ys joy in hevene and peyne in helle,
And I acorde wel that it ys so;
But, natheles, yet wot I wel also
That ther nis noon dwellyng in this contree
That eyther hath in hevene or helle ybe,
Ne may of hit noon other weyes witen
But as he hath herd seyd or founde it writen;
For by assay ther may no man it preve.
But God forbede but men shulde leve
Wel more thing then men han seen with ye!
Menshal not wenen every thing a lye
But yt himself yt seeth or elles dooth;
For, God wot, thing is never the lasse sooth,
Thogh every wight ne may it nat ysee.
Bernard the monk ne saugh nat all, pardee! (LGW F.1–16)
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These lines sketch the epistemological crisis inherent in faith, in that empirical evidence is lacking and so believers must rely on the authority of Scripture and the exegetical tradition to answer questions that are otherwise unanswerable. It is generally agreed that Chaucer’s source for these lines is Jean Froissart’s *Le Joli Buisson de jonece*, but whereas Froissart’s lyric speaker ponders the unlikelihood of discovering the Fountain of Youth and then contrasts this chimerical vision with the truth of his Christian faith, Chaucer’s narrator considers the impossibility of confirming religious doctrine. As the tension between earnest and game defines Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (and as this tension disrupts interpretive efforts regarding the dynamics of the tale-telling contest), a similar tension between faith and experience invigorates Chaucer’s attempts to depict the Divine in the *Legend of Good Women*, in that the narrator upholds the tenets of faith (“I acorde wel”) while acknowledging the voices who demand experiential evidence. Chaucer begins four of these sixteen lines with the conjunction *but*, and this syndetic style signals opposing positions in the narrator’s internal monologue in which he ponders the possibility of faith without evidence. Indeed, Chaucer’s narrators raise similar points concerning the necessity of a divine epistemology in a variety of other narrative circumstances, such as when Antigone in *Troilus and Criseyde* muses, “Men moste axe at seyntes if it is / Aught fair in hevene (Why? For they kan telle), / And axen fendet is it foul i n helle” (2.894–96). Sounding a similar note, the fiend in the *Friar’s Tale* endorses the necessity of experiencing damnation in the afterlife to comprehend its mysteries:

“Come there thee nedeth nat of me to leere,
For thou shalt, by thyn owene experience,
Konne in a chayer rede of this sentence
Bet than Virgile, while he was on lyve,
Or Dant also.” (3.1516–20)

14. The relevant lines from *Le Joli buisson de jonece* read: “Jai oy aparler souvent / De le fontainne de jouvent / Ossi de pieres invisibles / Mes ce sont coses impossibles / Car onques je ne vi cheli / Foy que doi a saint marcheli / Qui desist jai droit la este” (“Often I have heard men speak / Of the Fountain of Youth, / Also of invisible stones, / But these are impossibilities, / For never have I met anyone, / By the faith I owe Saint Marcellin, / Who said: ‘I was actually there’” (Jean Froissart, *An Anthology of Narrative and Lyric Poetry*, ed. and trans. Kristen Figg, with R. Barton Palmer [New York: Routledge, 2001], 296–97, lines 786–91). After dismissing the wondrous but unconfirmed fantasy of a Fountain of Youth, Froissart’s narrator “thanks God with folded hands” for imparting spiritual truths.
This is not to state that Chaucer suffers from a crisis of faith—it is the texts, not the author, who are under examination here—but that his narratives reveal the fault lines of faith and experience, in which texts teach of but cannot wholly portray the Divine.

This passage from *Legend of Good Women*, as well as the similar passages from *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Friar’s Tale*, suggests that to be human is to experience doubt, that the mysteries of the Divine must always remain mysteries, and such is the case with Chaucer’s hazy depictions of God’s erotic nature. Along with the impossibility of an experientially religious epistemology, Chaucer also highlights the ways in which religious tenets solicit their own erotic transgressions. When the Parson argues in his *Tale* that God rules over human sensuality, he exposes God’s failure to govern human eroticism effectively. The Parson outlines a hierarchical relationship of lordship, in which God wields authority over humanity by placing his deputies of reason and sensuality in control of the unruly human body: “For it is sooth that God, and resoun, and sensualitee, and the body of man been so ordeyned that everich of thise foure thynges sholde have lordshipe over that oother, / as thus: God sholde have lordshipe over resoun, and resoun over sensualitee, and sensualitee over the body of man” (10.261–62). The Parson proceeds to observe that sensuality is the weak link in this chain of dominion. Although the Middle English word *sensualitee* refers primarily to the human senses and their ability to decode external stimuli, the word’s secondary meanings as lust and passion bleed into its primary meaning, and the Parson argues that the rebellious nature of *sensualitee* disrupts God’s hierarchical dominion over the human body: “For sensualitee rebelleth thanne agayns resoun, and by that way leseth resoun the lordshipe over sensualitee and over the body” (10.265). The Parson then blames reason’s failures to discipline sensuality for causing humanity’s fall: “For right as resoun is rebel to God, right so is bothe sensualitee rebel to resoun and the body also” (10.266). Perpetually engaged in rebellion, sensuality subverts humanity’s relationship to God, leading sinners to bodily pleasures rather than to spiritual truths.

At the same time, one might well wonder, why is reason derelict in its divinely ordained responsibilities? Reason’s failure to discipline sensuality tacitly suggests God’s failure to discipline reason, and in this man-

15. The *Middle English Dictionary* defines *sensualitee* as “(a) The natural capacity for receiving physical sensation understood as an inferior power of the soul concerned with the body; (b) physical desire or appetite, lust; a sinful, passionate emotion; also, lustful, sinful nature; (c) the body.”
ner religion makes possible its subversion in that spiritual transgressions are called forth by the very religious prohibitions that forbid them. The logical, if unintended, extension of the Parson’s argument is that God desires humanity to succumb to erotic transgressions from which he fails to protect them. For while the Parson’s reasoning mirrors that of medieval theologians, it distorts such teachings by obscurely, if not incorrectly, reflecting their precepts. With words akin to the Parson’s, Thomas Aquinas believes that “man’s reason is right, in so far as it is ruled by the Divine Will, the first and supreme rule. Wherefore that which a man does by God’s will and in obedience to this command, is not contrary to right reason, though it may seem contrary to the general order of reason.”

However, in his discourse inspired by Aquinas yet derivative in its theology, the Parson allows the possibility, through its devaluation of divine authority into statements expressed in the subjunctive mood, that God loses control of reason and sensuality. If even God cannot control reason and sensuality, how can a Christian avoid sins of the flesh and other transgressions? Judith Butler argues that sin and guilt are preconditions of religious identity and experience: “This readiness to accept guilt to gain a purchase on identity is linked to a highly religious scenario of a nominating call that comes from God and that constitutes the subject by appealing to a need for the law, an original guilt that the law promises to assuage through the conferral of identity.” Slavoj Žižek sees in this dynamic the “perverse core of Christianity” and explains its function in his reading of Paul’s first epistle to the Corinthians: “Paul basically says: ‘obey the laws as if you are not obeying them,’ [and] this means precisely that we should suspend the obscene libidinal investment in the Law, the investment on account of which the Law generates/solicits its own transgression.” From Butler’s and Žižek’s readings of spiritual desire, transgression is the precondition to religious belief, the necessary intervention of the Law into the believer’s sense of identity that creates the religious subject through and of this necessary repudiation of that which is to be believed, and, indeed, loved.


For one to obtain a stake in religious identity, the law demands libidinal (and often blatantly eroticized) investments in its power, and the Parson’s interpretation of sensuality constructs God as the Law generating concomitant transgressions, for any erotic transgression within this system must be queer, in that it subverts the very order that calls it forth from the precondition of sin. As Žižek further notes, “Pauline love is not the cancellation or destructive negation of the Law, but its accomplishment in the sense of ‘sublation,’ where the Law is retained through its very suspension, as a subordinate (potential) moment of a higher actual unity.” This dialectic double-crossing of desire—in which eroticism impels transgressions, yet transgressions facilitate the reconstruction and further maintenance of the Law—implicates God within an erotic system that can only function through a queer desire for transgression. Žižek’s analysis responds to the following exhortation of Paul:

unusquisque in quo vocatus est frater in hoc maneat apud Deum. . . .
hoc itaque dico frater, tempus breve est, reliquum est ut qui habent
uxores tamquam non habentes sint. Et qui flent tamquam non flentes,
et qui gaudent tamquam non gaudentes, et qui emunt tamquam non possi-
dentes. Et qui utuntur hoc mundo tamquam non utantur, praeterit enim
figura huius mundi. (I Corinthians 7:24, 29–31)

Brethren, let every man, where he was called, therein abide with God. . . .
This therefore I say, brethren; the time is short; it remaineth that they
also who have wives, be as if they had none; And they that weep, as
though they wept not, and they that rejoice, as if they rejoiced not; and
they that buy, as though they possessed not. And they that use this world,
as if they used it not: for the fashion of this world passeth away.

As Dale Martin argues of this passage, “Paul does not speak of sexuality but of sexual actions and desires. And whenever the subject arises, Paul treats sex as potentially dangerous. If it cannot be completely avoided, it must be carefully controlled and regulated so as to avoid pollution and cosmic invasion.” In Paul’s demand for those who have wives to live as though they had none, as well as in his subsequent calls for self-abnegation, he rejects conjugal coupling as a diversion from the Divine, as a tran-

19. Ibid., 112.
sient and earthly distraction from eternal bliss, yet this eroticism that must be sacrificed marks the very possibility of the potential sacrifice: one must have what must be lost. The Law calls for these investments of desires sexual and otherwise, engagements of the self through and of the body, yet by obtaining such purchase over the human sinner, religious belief encourages the transgressions that preclude its attainment. Furthermore, the latent eroticization inherent in virtually any hierarchy—in which the ruler and the ruled rally for power, all the while enjoying the power play as much as any pleasure to be derived—leaks out into the open when the top of the hierarchy transgresses its own dictates. While such an interpretation of the Parson’s sermon may necessitate reading against the grain—surely the Parson, if one hypothesized his ability to do so, would disagree with Žižek’s analysis of the law and its regulatory effects—other moments in the Chaucerian canon visualize not merely the pleasures of human sensuality but the Divine partaking in them.

From this perspective, it is not surprising to see that God does not rule over his own sensuality in Chaucer’s fictions but instead seeks bodily transgressions with mortal lovers. Subsequent to the narrator’s discussion of faith’s epistemological crises at the beginning of the *Legend of Good Women*, God is presented as a potential lover to humanize in explicitly amorous terms the unknowable mysteries of the Divine. The description of God’s libidinal reaction to Dido stresses the physicality animating divine amatory desires:

This freshe lady, of the cite queene,  
Stod in the temple in hire estat real,  
So rychely and ek so fayr withal,  
So yong, so lusty, with hire eyen glade,  
That, if that God, that hevene and erthe made,  
Wolde han a love, for beaute and goodnesse,  
And womanhod, and trouthe, and semelynesse,  
Whom shulde he loven but this lady swete?  
Ther nys no woman to hym half so mete. (LGW 1035–43)

The unabashed eroticism of this scene demands that readers reimagine the Christian God as one actively seeking human lovers. One could posit that Chaucer’s use of the word God in this passage refers to Jupiter, or to the God of Love who figures so prominently in the *Legend of Good Women*’s frame narrative, or to another classical deity; F. N. Robinson argues, however, that “the audacity of the comparison is not to be explained away on
the ground that Jupiter was in Chaucer’s mind or that Virgil compares Dido to Diana. Medieval taste differed from modern in speaking of sacred persons and things.”21 It should be noted as well that Chaucer phrases this passage in the subjunctive mood, describing not God’s actual desires but his hypothetical yearning for Dido should he choose a human female as his divine consort. Speaking imaginatively of God’s eroticism, Chaucer protects himself with the freedoms of the hypothetical, yet within this envisioning of God’s erotic desires, Dido represents his ideal mate primarily due to her physical allure. Human sensuality, which the Parson believes to be under the authority of reason and God, here rules God himself, with the passages focusing so intently on the visual pleasures afforded by Dido’s beauty. Divine desire and libidinal transgression conflict yet cannot overrule each other: if the Divine sexually transgresses in this moment of attraction, it is his desires that stage the transgression and the law that creates the transgression. Dido’s beauty fractures the law and its prohibitions, for she reveals the erotic core of the Divine that regulates human eroticism, but only to fall to similar temptation. The narrator’s description of Dido—“That fayrer was than is the bryghte sonne” (1006)—is initially linked to the passion she incites in human lovers—“Of kynges and of lords so desyred / That al the world hire beaute hadde yfyred, / She stod so wel in every wightes grace” (1012–14)—but human kings, the reader soon learns, are merely earthly symbols of the King of all who would succumb just as easily under the sway of her beauty.

Indeed, within the fictions of the Legend of Good Women, Chaucer reimagines the very meaning of hagiography, as the subtitle of his dream vision—The Seintes Legende of Cupide—links saintly suffering with women’s amorous disappointments. The blending of classical mythology with Christianity is also apparent in the God of Love’s description of his mother as “Seynt Venus” (F 388), in which the licentious passion of Venus is resignified as a Christian exemplar of divine eroticism. Many of the eponymous exemplary women, including Cleopatra, Thisbe, Dido, Hypsipyle, Medea, and Lucretia, are referred to as martyrs in the incipits of their legends,22 and so the generic resignification of classical legend into amatory hagiography tacitly relocates at least some of these non-Christian women into the eternal pleasures of heaven, for where else do martyrs go upon their death, except to their perpetual reward for suffering such


22. Ariadne, Philomela, Phyllis, and Hypermnestra are not labeled as martyrs; instead, Chaucer refers to the legendary aspect of their narratives.
cruel torments? Whereas Ariadne is stellified into the astrological “signe of Taurus” (2223), suggesting that she remains in a pagan universe in her afterlife, Lucretia, although a pre-Christian woman, becomes a “seynt” with an accompanying feast day (1871). If God’s response to Dido is any indication of his sexual interest in other human females, the beauty of these and other legendary women should be sufficient to catch his eyes (as his erotic attentions to Cecilia in the Second Nun’s Tale likewise illustrate, as I address in the final section of this chapter).

In terms of their literary and aesthetic effect, in many instances Chaucer’s project of highlighting God’s eroticism drives his fictions to the teleological pleasure of a failed union with God, for any human effort to limn the Divine must end in failure to capture his fully resplendent glory. As Žižek argues, the mimetic failure that is constitutive of art and literature illuminates how desire creates unresolved aporias, which create a signifying chain predicated on failure that paradoxically leads one to the Divine:

It is through this very failure to show its “true reference in reality” directly that a poem sublates its “pathological” idiosyncrasy, and generates its properly universal artistic impact. This shift, this sudden recognition of how the very obstacle preventing us from reaching the Thing Itself enables us to identify directly with it (with the deadlock at its heart), defines the properly Christian form of identification: it is ultimately identification with a failure—and, consequently, since the object of identification is God, God Himself must be shown to fail.23

For Žižek, literature’s failure to achieve mimetic perfection, to create “real life” on the page, generates its artistic meaning, but this aestheticism is built upon absence and failure. As medieval exegetes realized the impossibility of discussing the Divine without tropological damage done to the idea of the ineffable, so too must any attempt to depict God end in failure. Thus, to identify with the failure of literature is to confront the failure of God but nonetheless to be brought to God: by contemplating the impossibility of knowing the Divine, readers are granted access to the Divine through the circuitous and queer pleasures of textual failures. And, indeed, most critics agree that the Legend of Good Women ends in failure, with the “Legend of Hypermnestra” concluding with the promise of a moral that never comes: “This tale is seyd for this conclusioun” (2723), the narrator proclaims, as the text then lapses into silence. As

no moral is offered to Chaucer’s stories of wronged women, their meaning can only be conjectured, which undoes the moral certitude expected in these hagiographies on the border between the secularly and spiritually erotic. Similarly, too, as Chaucer’s depiction of God’s desire for Dido calls forth the transgressions of desire that lead to God, Chaucer’s narrator establishes himself as the font of earthly transgressions that would lead one to him as an earthly participant in erotic play. In his flirtatious close to the “Legend of Phyllis,” he volunteers to solace women who have suffered betrayal: “Syn yit this day men may ensaumple se; / And trusteth, as in love, no man but me” (2560–61). As God’s attraction to Dido models the eroticism inherent in Christian love, Chaucer establishes himself as an exemplar of its more earthly enactments, promising to provide sexual solace that could perhaps lay the foundation for a spiritual journey: once the body and sensuality transgress against reason and God, the return of reason and of God himself cannot be far behind.

**CHAUCER’S FABLIAU HUMOR AND DIVINE EROTICS: GOD’S PRYVETEE AND PIMPING**

All of Chaucer’s fabliaux feature religious characters, themes, or subtexts. The *Miller’s Tale* depicts dueling clerks who employ their knowledge of the Bible to advance their sexual agendas, and the *Reeve’s Tale* satirizes the erotic transgressions of the priesthood in the parentage of Symkyn’s wife. The * Summoner’s Tale* and *Shipman’s Tale* respectively feature a friar and a monk as their erotic antagonists, and the sexual rivalry at the heart of the *Merchant’s Tale* reaches its narrative climax in a garden scene parodying the Fall of Adam and Eve. Chaucer’s consistency in coupling religious themes with fabliau humor unites the sacred and profane, and in so doing, these tales humorously rail against the hypocrisies of the Church through their depictions of lascivious clerks and clergy. But as the clergy are God’s representatives on earth, so too does God himself become a target of Chaucer’s raunchy humor, as he questions the meaning of God’s eroticism in the *Miller’s Tale* and in some suggestive passages of the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue*.

In its treatment of God’s eroticism, the *Miller’s Tale* embellishes the vulgar humor of Nicholas’s earthly passion for Alison with crude spiritual import by repeatedly addressing the issue of God’s pryvete. In its surface significations, pryvete refers simply to one’s secrets and private affairs, but Chaucer frequently uses the word to refer to buttocks and genitalia. In
the *Summoner’s Tale*, Thomas whets the unctuous friar’s pecuniary appetite by urging him to “grop wel bihynde / Byneth my buttok” so that he may find a “thyng . . . hyd in pryvetee” (3.2143), and in the *Monk’s Tale*, Julius Caesar modestly covers his genitals while dying: “His mantel over his hypes caste he, / For no man sholde seen his privetee” (7.2714–15). In his *Prologue*, the Miller similarly refers to *pryvetee*, but he obfuscates its referent by connecting it to the Divine:

An housbonde shal nat been inquisityf
Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf.
So he may fynde Goddes foyson there,
Of the remenant nedeth nat enquere. (1.3163–66)

Where, readers may wonder, precisely is the “there” that hides “Goddes foyson,” his plenty? The male auditors to whom the Miller directs his words must discover the appropriate “there” to achieve their reward of God’s bounty, yet they must simultaneously embrace ignorance regarding the meaning and the very possibility of knowledge necessary to bring them to rapture. Readers may reasonably conclude within the context of Chaucerian fabliaux that the Miller’s “there” directs the male listener to pursue his pleasures in a woman’s vagina, and this locus of pleasure surely stands as a site of “God’s foyson” within the heteroerotic framework of the tale; nonetheless, the coupling of God’s and women’s *pryvetees* posits God’s genitals as a site of mystery and pleasure as well, and it is likewise plausible within the crude humor of fabliau that one would find God’s plenty through his divine yet unimaginable genitalia. God’s genitals are linked to ignorance in these lines, limning the divinely erotic as a site beyond human knowledge yet instrumental for obtaining earthly pleasure.

This double entendre of *pryvetee* as a matter of secrecy and as a code word for genitalia continues throughout the *Miller’s Tale*, as John the carpenter proclaims, in his paean to ignorance, “Men sholde nat knowe of Goddes pryvetee. / Ye, blessed be alwey a lewed man” (1.3454–55). Moreover, Nicholas, when admonishing John to prepare for the purported flood, also refers to God’s *pryvetee*: “Axe nat why, for though thou aske me, / I wol nat tellen Goddes pryvetee” (1.3557–58). Much like the pun on *queynte* that signals Nicholas’s groping lasciviousness for Allison, as

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24. In referring to the Miller’s male auditors, I acknowledge the fact that, except for the Wife of Bath, Prioress, and Second Nun, the Canterbury pilgrims are men. The erotics of the *Miller’s Tale* are conceived within a paradigm of masculine pursuit and female conquest, even as this paradigm is subverted in the tale’s resolution.
reduced to her vagina (1.3275–76), Chaucer’s play on pryvetee illuminates and obscures his depiction of the Divine. Language fails in the gap between earthly and divine discourses because the word pryvetee cannot be cleansed of its erotic meanings. The inconceivable image of God’s genitals thus circulates throughout the text, an invisible signifier of divine eroticism that remains virtually unimaginable yet that is explicitly linked both to Nicholas’s quest for Alison’s queynte and to questions concerning the proper purview of human knowledge. John and Nicholas agree that matters of pryvetee should be preserved from prying eyes—John in his professed and self-satisfied ignorance, and Nicholas in his manipulation of theological pryvetee for his sexual advantage. Despite the vast differences between the two men, their relationships to divine mysteries share a sense of their unplumbed depths, with Nicholas exploiting the mysteries of which John is proudly ignorant.

Several scholars, including Frederick Biggs, Laura Howes, Louise Bishop, and Karma Lochrie, address Chaucer’s references to God’s pryvetee and the intersection of the erotic and the Divine in the Miller’s Tale. Biggs and Howes read pryvetee as “the limits to human knowledge, primarily of God but also of other humans,” such that the term’s confused references “both to human genitalia and to divine secrets” parodically allude to God’s encounter with Moses on Mount Sinai, in which the thunder that greets Moses (Exodus 19:16) finds its Chaucerian echo in the flatulent “thonder-dent” (1.3807) that greets Absolon’s nose. Bishop examines the intersection of Alison’s and God’s pryvetees, positing that the “Miller’s Tale gives its readers the mystery and power of unknowable woman: the mystery of her orifices, utterly confused even to the ostensibly initiated, and the mystery of her power, situated, unlike (or like) the divine’s, in a triumphant ‘Tehee.’” Focusing on the ways in which the tale’s erotic escapades merge with its concern over divine secrecy, Lochrie concludes that “both the Miller and Chaucer want to create the secret in order to reveal it and allay masculine fears that surround the feminized secret in medieval culture generally.” These perceptive readings of divine erotics in the Miller’s Tale highlight the epistemological crises inherent in contemplating the Divine due to the many mysteries of faith,

especially given the thematic treatment of this issue in a fabliau ostensibly far removed from theological concerns. Because the Divine can only be perceived through that which he reveals, and because the Law instantiates itself through the required transgression that enables it, the Miller’s Tale cannot reveal the Divine without tackling the mysteries of faith, even as it evinces little interest in pursuing them other than for their humorous potential within the realm of sexual farce. A fabliau requires some sort of transgression against cultural norms to build its humor, and, as Butler and Žižek outline, religious belief must likewise encode transgression into its foundations. From these twin perspectives, God’s pryvetee in the Miller’s Tale is virtually a prerequisite to the sexual farce unfolding, for it establishes the necessity of erotic transgression against a Law that, as the Parson makes clear, is itself always already transgressed.

As the Miller’s Tale unfolds, God’s eroticism, his pryvetee, becomes intimately connected with both human eroticism and human spirituality, as well as their confused interplay. Nicholas’s and Absolon’s pursuit of intercourse with Alison anagogically symbolizes what they should pursue in their vocation as clerks: transcendent union with the Divine. In pursuing the mysteries of women—a mystery that is inversely and graphically exposed to Nicholas when he “caughte [Alison] by the queynte” (1.3276)—Nicholas reveals his focus on sexual pleasures rather than spiritual mysteries. But it is surely telling that his knowledge of the Divine assists in his pursuit of Alison’s genitalia, whether he distorts biblical authority (as in his rewriting of the story of Noah’s Flood) or recites it accurately (as in his quotation of Ecclesiasticus). Indeed, in his admonitions to John in preparation for the supposed flood, he regulates his landlord’s sexual activity with Alison by usurping God’s erotic authority over the sex lives of husband and wife:

“Be wel avysed on that ilke nyght
That we ben entred into shippes bord,
That noon of us ne speke nat a word,
Ne clepe, ne crie, but be in his preyere;
For it is Goddes owene heeste deere.

28. Nicholas cites Ecclesiasticus to convince John to obey his commands, declaring, “Werk al by conseil, and thou shalt nat rewe” (1.3530), which echoes the biblical injunction “sine consilio nihil facias et post factum non paeniteberis” (32:24; “do thou nothing without counsel, and thou shalt not repent when thou hast done”). Note that Nicholas attributes these words from Ecclesiasticus to Solomon, but this mistake was a rather learned one in the Middle Ages. For analysis of this biblical passage throughout Chaucer’s corpus, see Curt Bühler, “Wirk alle thyng by conseil,” Speculum 24 (1949): 410–12.
Thy wyf and thou moote hange fer atwynne;  
For that bitwixe yow shal be no synne,  
Namoore in lookyng than ther shal in deede.  
This ordinance is seyd. Go, God thee speede!” (1.3584–92)

Nicholas refers in these lines to the traditional anti-erotic view that intercourse did not occur on Noah’s ark, as expressed by such ministers as John Mirk: “And whan alle were browthe in, as God bad Noe, and hys thre sonnus gon into the schyppe be hemselfe, and Noes wyf and hys sones wyues be hemselfe, for encheson that in tyme of aflyxion men schuldon abstyne hem fro cowpul of wommen—so, whan thei were alle in, God closyd the dore aftur hem wythouteforth.” By alluding to this anti-erotic tradition, Nicholas prepares John to deny himself the pleasure of “God’s plenty,” employing biblical traditions and interpretations to coerce John into ceding sexual authority over his wife. Nicholas also encourages John to accept him within the parameters of his marriage when he declares, “And thanne shul we be lordes al oure lyf / Of al the world, as Noe and his wyf” (1.3581–82). Following the logic of these words, John must reconceptualize the parameters of traditional marriage to incorporate his rival within its postdeluvian bonds, granting Nicholas shared lordship with him and shared sexual pleasure with his wife. Citing God’s prohibitions against sexual activity as a means to access sexual activity, Nicholas exploits the potential of religious doctrine to solicit its own transgressions. As Žižek argues, “the properly Christian Redemption is not simply the undoing of the Fall, but stricto sensu its repetition. . . . Adam’s Fall (and the subsequent instauration of the Law) was a simple contingency—that is to say, that, if Adam had chosen obedience to God, there would have been no sin and no Law: there would also have been no love.” For Nicholas, the reenactment of transgression guarantees the erotic pleasures he seeks, rendering and degrading the love created from Divinity into its most carnal and crude expression.

In contrast to Nicholas, who manipulates the Bible for erotic gain, John misunderstands the transgressive role of the Divine and thus cannot exploit biblical knowledge for sexual pleasure, as evident in his misreadings of biblical and biblically inspired texts. John’s pronounced ignorance of religious teachings, such that he cannot discern the falsehood in Nicholas’s prophecy of a flood (which contradicts God’s promise in Genesis

cases, contrasts with his assumed air of wisdom through ignorance when he declares to Nicholas, “Ye, blessed be alwey a lewed man / That noght but oonly his bileve kan!” (1.3455–56). John must fail to preserve his wife’s fidelity for the fabliau’s humor to climax—that is, the narrative climax depends on his failure to climax with his wife—and his ignorance of the Divine contributes to his ensuing sexual punishment, despite that he models the very ignorance of God’s pryvete that the Miller thematically endorses. The Miller’s Tale extols ignorance as the precondition to enjoying God’s plenty, yet the character who epitomizes such ignorance fails to protect his erotic interests. In accord with Žižek’s theorization of the ways in which the Law solicits its own transgressions, in the Miller’s Tale Nicholas succeeds in bedding Alison while John loses sexual access to her inversely in accord with their propensity to transgress the Law. Within the carnivalesque world of Chaucerian fabliau, such an inversion is to be expected, but what is nonetheless surprising is that the Law functions so congruently with fabliau humor: the Law provides the foundation against which the carnivalesque humor of fabliau reacts, yet, once again, the Law depends on such transgressions not merely to reassert its authority but to reassert the transgressions that encode its power further.

As a parish clerk, Absolon should follow his vocational interest in the Bible, yet Chaucer stresses that this clerk, as part of his seductive repertoire, pursues avocational pastimes that merge his religious and erotic pursuits. The many gifts he sends to Alison—“pyment, meeth, and spiced ale, / And wafres, pipying hoot out of the gleede” (1.3378–39)—allude to the wine and communion wafers of the Eucharist, thus substituting earthly pleasures for spiritual union with the Divine. Also, Absolon perceives his dramatic skills in mystery plays not as a means of sharing divine revelation with his audience but as a tactic for seducing John’s wife:

Somtyme, to shewe his lightnesse and maistrye,
He pleyeth Herodes upon a scaffold hye.
But what availeth hym as in this cas?
She loveth so this hende Nicholas. (1.3383–86)

Absolon’s dramatic skills fail to win him Alison’s sexual interest, and his assumption of the role of Herod aligns him as the comic villain of the unfolding fabliau, one representing a petty, diminished avatar of one of Christianity’s great antagonists. Stephen Knight suggests that many aspects of Absolon’s characterization, including the erotic tone of the phrase “sensyne the wyves” (1.3341) in his initial portrait, reveal his tendency to
exploit spirituality for sexual advantage. In a similar vein, Absolon’s plea to Alison at her window evokes imagery from the Song of Songs, which once again highlights his eagerness to exploit his faith for erotic pleasure:

“What do ye, honey-comb, sweete Alisoun
My faire bryd, my sweete cynamome?
Awaketh, lemmyn, and speketh to me!
Wel litel thynken ye upon my wo,
That for youre love I swete ther I go.
No wonder is thogh that I swelte and swete;
I moorne as dooth a lamb after the tete.
Ywis, lemmyn, I have swich love-longynge
That lik a turtel trewe is my moornynge.
I may nat ete na moore than a mayde.” (1.3698–707)

Scholars including Nicolette Zeeman, R. E. Kaske, and Jesse Gellrich explore the allusions to the Song of Songs in this passage, particularly in its erotic lexicon of honeycombs, cinnamon, birds, and lambs. The devolution of the sacred into the profane, while not surprising within the vulgar parameters of a Chaucerian fabliau, highlights the slipperiness of biblical erotics: because biblical erotics focus on bodily desire as they metaphorically stimulate spiritual desire, the body can never be dismissed from this allegorical consideration of physicality and instead depends upon the potential intermingling of bodies both heavenly and divine. This is not to hypothesize a crude one-to-one correspondence between Absolon and God through this fabliau reconfiguration of the Song of Songs, but because this biblical text and its allegorical interpretations focus so intensely on the physical, the devolution of this spiritual ideal to Chaucer’s fabliau is not a particularly long journey: the fabliau is simply more candid about human sexuality than most exegetical attempts to tame the insistent eroticism of the Song of Songs.33

33. Taming the carnality of the Song of Songs challenged medieval exegetes because it exploits earthly eroticism to enlighten spiritual pursuits, and, from this perspective, even
In this fabliau anti-quest, in which the pryvetees of both God and a man’s wife have been declared taboo knowledge, Nicholas succeeds in fornicating with Alison, yet he is simultaneously punished for his sexual transgressions. The Miller’s Tale lacks thematic consistency in its ending, for its opening admonition not to inquire of God’s pryvetee declares that, through ignorance of God’s eroticism, one will find sexual pleasure. Following the logic of these lines, it appears that John’s ignorance should protect him from the erotic onslaught of the two young clerks, yet the tale concludes with a commonplace religious exhortation—“God save al the rowte!” (1.3854)—that humorously posits the availability of spiritual salvation to both sinners and those sinned against. Indeed, numerous characters appeal for God’s mercy and salvation as the tale reaches its climax: Absolon proclaims, “so God me save” (1.3795); Nicholas cries, “Help, for Goddes herte!” (1.3815); and Nicholas and Alison accuse John of insanity, blaming him for the debacle that has befallen him and declaring that “he preyed hem, for Goddes love, / To sitten in the roof” (1.3838–39). These various exclamations carry little religious import, yet they retain God’s presence in the tale’s conclusion, most obviously to highlight the contrast between religious principles and fabliau humor but also to recall the matter of God’s pryvetee and its interrelationship with human sexual pursuits. The Law not only establishes the preconditions that necessitate its transgressions, but these transgressions emerge in tandem with an impossible vision both of God’s genitalia and of his plans for human salvation that neither knowledge nor ignorance can discover.

In regard to Nicholas’s, Absolon’s, and John’s quests for sexual transcendence with Alison, the concluding humor of the Miller’s Tale ironically arises from what God refuses to save this fraternal company: the three men are respectively punished for their erotic transgressions, with John cuckolded, Nicholas anally branded, and Absolon flatulently humiliated.34 The possibility remains for God to save these men in a transcen-

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34. Despite Alison’s characterization of John as “so ful of jalousie” that she fears he will murder her if her affair is exposed (1.3294–96), her husband never displays any violent tendencies, even when Absolon courts her at their window (1.3364–70). John resists the
dent sense, but the tale’s conclusion also highlights the arbitrariness of divine justice, as Alison eludes punishment for her sexual escapades. At the same time, the Miller’s Tale foretold that Alison, through her own pursuit of spiritual enlightenment, would escape retribution due to her narrative alignment with Christ: “Thanne fil it thus, that to the paryssh chirche, / Cristes owene werkes for to wirche, / This goode wyf went on an haliday” (1.3307–9). Within the poem’s carnivalesque erotics, Alison has indeed performed “Christ’s own work,” for the pryvetee of her vagina, which was allegorized as the equivalent of God’s pryvetee, has united the men in pursuit of spiritual and sexual mysteries beyond their ken. The poem’s closing appeal to God’s mercy tacitly proposes that all sinners are worthy of salvation, as it also points to the mysteries of salvation, which must remain as much a matter of divine pryvetee as the perplexing issue of God’s genitalia, an image that can only be imagined in human terms and that surfaces repeatedly in the tale to contrast divine knowledge with the very earthly desire of many men to experience erotic pleasure through a woman’s genitals.

Similar to the Miller’s Tale as it repeatedly intersects God’s pryvetee with Nicholas’s and Absolon’s insistent desires to fornicate with Alison, the Wife of Bath’s Prologue exploits the amorous potential in divine eroticism. Alison of Bath encourages readers to laugh as she profanely reimagines the meanings of sacred texts, and the bulk of her argument reinterprets the Christian Bible to suit her sexual worldview, including her professed confusion over the moral of Jesus’s conversation with the Samaritan woman (3.14–25), her delight in the bigamy recounted in the biblical stories of Solomon, Lamech, Abraham, and Jacob (3.35–58), and her passionate rebuttal of Paul’s anti-erotic polemics (3.61–90). Alison mostly refrains from considering the issue of divine eroticism itself, but in perhaps her most blasphemous passage, she envisions Jesus as facilitating earthly intercourse:

I nyl envye no virginitee.
Lat hem be breed of pured whete-seed,
And lat us wyves hoten barly-breed;
And yet with barly-breed, Mark telle kan,
Oure Lord Jhesu refresshed many a man. (3.142–46)

temptations of violence and sin, but in marrying a young woman, he casts himself as the senex amans who, in the world of fabliau, is punished for his inherent foolishness in marrying a young bride.
By portraying Jesus as virtually a pimp, one who oversees the “refreshment” of men, Alison resignifies the miracle of the loaves from its original denotation as physical hunger into the unbridled eroticism of sexually unsatisfied wives. The gospel accounts of this miracle depict the famished crowd’s bodily need to symbolize their spiritual need: the loaves sate their desire for earthly sustenance, but this experience then catalyzes a deeper spiritual longing for God. Kevin Madigan records of the allegorical symbolism of the Miraculous Feeding of the 5,000 that “No later than Hilary of Poitiers, the pericope [of this miracle] was interpreted as an allegory of the multiplication of the letter of the Law (the five loaves being equated with the five books of the Pentateuch) into the heavenly food of the spiritual senses.”

In Alison’s recasting of this miracle as sexual through her pun on refreshed—a word whose sexual connotations she exploits earlier in her celebration of Solomon’s active sex life (4.35–38)—she corporealizes the human body into bread and expands her bawdy wordplay further. The bread that may become the Bread of Life through transubstantiation is the female body in its unchecked eroticism, but it is an eroticism that Jesus himself unleashes through the polysemous play of allusion and allegory when he proclaims, “ego sum panis vitae, qui veniet ad me non esuriet, et qui credit in me non sitiet umquam” (John 6:35; “I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall not hunger: and he that believeth in me shall never thirst”). As Alison demonstrates, the symbolism of bread can be readily resignified into the sordid erotics of prostitution and pimping, and, due to Jesus’s metaphoric construction of himself as bread, Jesus himself symbolizes both the pimp and the female prostitute in Alison’s refashioning of the gospels. In her call for sexual pleasure that is simultaneously earthly and divine, Alison dismantles the categories of body and spirit, uniting both in a shared transgression of the Law that the Law itself enables. Within this polyvalent sexual play, God’s eroticism is implicated with Christian salvation, such that human copulation and eternal redemption are virtually interchangeable.

Chaucer’s fabliau sensibility encourages readers to enjoy the humorous potential of God’s pryvetee and Christ’s pimping, yet the humor of these moments cannot be sterilized of their theological ramifications. Imagining divine pryvetee and pimping, as the Miller and Wife of Bath demand of their audiences, punctures the immaculate image of the Divine while

limning the power of transgression to bring readers to a new relationship with the Divine. Readers may dismiss such fabliau antics as crude illustrations of divine love, rendering grotesquely physical the image of Divine perfection, yet by inviting readers to confront the inherent transgression in conceiving any image of God within human terms, these transgressions spark reflection and contemplation that can reignite one’s sense of communion with the Transcendent. As Augustine argues, one can only contemplate the Divine through that which he is not, and Chaucer’s fabliau humor extends the logic of such claims to their most ridiculous, yet nonetheless illuminating, extreme. These fabliau portrayals of God’s pryvetee imagine the earthly repercussions of unchecked eroticism, as does Chaucer’s Second Nun’s Tale in its depiction of Cecilia’s earthly spiritual marriage to Valerian, which is symbolically yet graphically consummated only when God replaces her husband as her lover.

**LOVING GOD IN THE SECOND NUN’S TALE**

As Dido piques God’s amatory interest in Legend of Good Women, Cecilia likewise stimulates God’s erotic desires in the Second Nun’s Tale, Chaucer’s most extended depiction of divine courtship and sexual consummation. In the Prologue to her tale, the Second Nun tells the Canterbury pilgrims that she will faithfully retell St. Cecilia’s legend from a translation, and on its surface, the Second Nun’s Tale appears decidedly anti-erotic, most notably due to Cecilia’s commitment to chastity. By sharing the story of a virgin martyr, the Second Nun aspires to lead her fellow pilgrims away from sin and to the Divine:

> And for to putte us fro swich ydelnesse,  
> That cause is of so greet confusioun,  
> I have heer doon my feithful bisynesse  
> After the legende in translacioun  
> Right of thy glorious lif and passioun,  
> Thou with thy gerland wroght with rose and lilie—  
> Thee meene I, mayde and martyr, Seint Cecilie. (8.22–28)

A virgin and a martyr, Cecilia is remembered for her diligent proselytizing of the Gospels and her conversion of countless Romans to Christianity. Both the rose and the lily are iconic representations of the Virgin
Mary, and as such they symbolize purity and chastity;\textsuperscript{36} in this vein, the text’s surface level of signification stresses the absence of sexuality within the narrative (notwithstanding the paradox of stressing an absence). The ensuing invocation to Mary (8.29–84) further grounds the Second Nun’s symbolism in its Marian referents. St. Cecilia thus personifies maidenly chastity, despite the fact that the narrative’s depiction of her as a virgin conflicts with its simultaneous portrayal of her as an object of much sexual desire—both human and divine.

Before the Second Nun addresses the erotic desires circulating around Cecilia, she considers the conflict and contrast between earthly and heavenly felicities. Her hagiography of Cecilia, which focuses on this virgin’s renunciation of sexual congress in marriage, faces an internal contradiction in that its creation of narrative pleasure for its readers is predicated upon its dismissal of all earthly pleasures. This conflict emerges in the Second Nun’s Prologue when she establishes her theme regarding the dangers of idleness, warning her audience that Satan deploys idleness as a tactic in his seductions: “Wel oughten we to doon al oure entente, / Lest that the feend thurgh ydelnesse us hente” (8.6–7). As Satan’s potential prey, Christians must avoid idleness lest they succumb to illicit and predatory desires; rather, they must position themselves as objects of eternal salvation through a life actively devoted to their faith. In declaiming on this theme, the Second Nun introduces, by contrast and antithesis, a subtheme of pleasure into her text when she argues that “Ydelenesse” is the “porter of the gate . . . of delices” (8.2–3). As Gregory Sadlek explores in his Idleness Working: The Discourse of Love’s Labor from Ovid through Chaucer and Gower, Idleness is often coupled with amatory pursuits in Ovidian verse and its medieval descendants, such as in Chaucer’s Romaunt of the Rose, when Ydelenesse opens the gate for the dreamer: “In at the wiket went I tho, / That Ydelenesse hadde opened me, / Into that gardyn fair to see” (642–44, cf. Knight’s Tale 1.1940).\textsuperscript{37} Through his allusion to idleness, Chaucer both points

\textsuperscript{36} For an overview of the symbolism of roses and lilies, see Lucia Impelluso, Nature and Its Symbols, trans. Stephen Sartarelli (Los Angeles: Getty Museum, 2003), 85–89 and 118–27. As much as the lily and rose are complementary images in the Second Nun’s depiction of Cecilia, these flowers and their colors symbolize a wide range of additional concepts. The lily is also associated with Juno, female fertility, and beauty, and the rose connotes death and Jesus’s passion. The Second Nun also links the red of the rose and the white of the lily to Jesus when she refers to his blood and (presumably white) flesh: “That no desdeyn the Makere hadde of kynde / His Sone in blood and flessh to clothe and wynde” (8.41–42).

\textsuperscript{37} Sadlek also focuses on depictions of love as labor; see, in particular, Sadlek’s “Love’s Byzynesse in Chaucer’s Amatory Fiction,” in Idleness Working: The Discourse of Love’s Labor
to the sexual nature hidden behind Ydelnesse’s gate and underscores the Second Nun’s interest in the sexual matters of which she attempts to cleanse her narrative. From her perspective, Idleness’s door to pleasure, in her ensuing tale and likely in the *Romaunt of the Rose* as well, should remain shut, and the Second Nun posits that, by avoiding idleness, one consequently avoids untoward pleasures that would lead one away from God. At the very least, however, the Second Nun’s allusion to the *Romaunt of the Rose* underscores that her reading habits do not accord with her spiritual exhortations to others, for the *Romaunt of the Rose* falls outside the hagiographical genre with which she chooses to instruct her audience in Christian morality. Hagiography is nonetheless a genre predicated upon pleasure, albeit a painful pleasure denied until the narrative reaches its conclusion and the saint unites with God. As Robert Mills outlines, the masochistic pleasures inherent in self-sacrifice and martyrdom illuminate the teleological drive of many hagiographies: “Martyrdom iconography . . . embodies this masochistic structure of suspense—it is, above all, an art of stillness and deferral, representing actions about to be fulfilled as much as things already carried out.” In sum, hagiography celebrates the “aestheticization of pain . . . in the service of pleasure.”

The dual edge of pleasure—as the sinful path to damnation and as the eternal joy of divine union—upsets the Second Nun’s binary construction of idleness as sinful and activity as holy, for pleasure is revealed to be their shared and guiding telos, particularly when the tale climaxes with God’s erotic union with Cecilia.

Somewhat surprisingly, given her conjoined themes of the sins of idleness and the dangers of pleasure, the Second Nun embodies the sin that she castigates, eschewing the diligence necessary to tell her tale expeditiously: “Yet preye I yow that reden that I write, / Foryeve me that I do no diligence / This ilke storie subtilly to endite” (8.78–80). Positioning her imperfect narration as a counterexample to Cecilia’s active life, as she also requests forgiveness for her rhetorical failures, the Second Nun encodes the failure of her story as constitutive of its meaning. Her tale cannot succeed in capturing Cecilia’s exemplary saintliness, as all attempts to capture the Divine through human speech must likewise fail (in congruence with Žižek’s theorization of poetry’s failure). In her prayer that her auditors “wole my werk amende” (8.84), the Second Nun thematizes failure into

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from *Ovid through Chaucer and Gower* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 208–58.

the narrative, but this promise of failure is thus the precondition of her tale.

In this account of Cecilia’s martyrdom, God’s passion for women illuminates his quest for consummation with Cecilia, but it is therefore impossible for the Second Nun to tell the chaste story of a virgin martyr. The human body is stained with original sin—a sin of sexuality, in many exegetical interpretations—and in her invocation to Mary, the Second Nun seeks divine assistance for purging herself of her sinfulness:

And of thy light my soule in prison lighte,
That troubled is by the contagioun
Of my body, and also by the wighte
Of erthely lust and fals affeccioun. (8.71–74)

The Second Nun’s attention to her body, with its tendency toward earthly lust and false affection, puts the sinful human body thematically at the heart of the narrative. To diagnose her spiritual condition in the terms of Chaucer’s Parson, her reason insufficiently governs her sensualitee, and thus her body contaminates her soul. By telling the exemplary story of St. Cecilia, the Second Nun attempts to cleanse her body and spirit of lust, but divine eroticism, evident in God’s amorous interest in Cecilia, models the purging pleasures of sexual union with the Divine. The Second Nun desires what she cannot yet have—transcendent oneness with God—but the “contagioun” of her body foreshadows the eternal joys awaiting her, for this transgression is the precondition that the Law establishes for her eventual pleasure in heaven.

Following the Second Nun’s anti-erotic efforts to erase traces of pleasure and sexuality from her Prologue, her tale initially focuses on the rejection of earthly sexual desire. Cecilia dedicates herself to God and promises her commitment to earthly chastity—“O Lord, my soule and eek my body gye / Unwemmed, lest that I confounded be” (8.136–37)—

39. The theological complexities of original sin are beyond the scope of this study, but it is worthwhile to note that many medieval exegetes derived their conceptions of it from Paul’s declaration “sicut enim per inoboedientiam unius hominis peccatores constituti sunt multi, ita et per unius oboeditionem iusti constitueuter multi” (Romans 5:19; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:22; “For as by the disobedience of one man, many were made sinners; so also by the obedience of one, many shall be made just”). In this typological interpretation, Adam introduces sin into the world, for which Jesus’s sacrifice atones. For an overview of original sin, see Pierre Payer, The Bridling of Desire: Views of Sex in the Later Middle Ages (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 42–60; and Linwood Urban, A Short History of Christian Thought, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 125–55.
with these words foreshadowing her refusal to consummate her marriage to Valerian. As Dyan Elliot explains of spiritual and sexless marriages of the Middle Ages, the legend of St. Cecilia “possesses three irreducible elements that are common to most hagiographical depictions of virginal marriage: reluctance to marry, conversion of the spouse on the wedding night, and a secret resolve to preserve virginity.” Before God unites with Cecilia through her death, his amatory rival—Cecilia’s husband Valerian—must be dismissed from the narrative, and in the triangulated desires among Cecilia, Valerian, and God, God’s desires trump Valerian’s, proving both the transience of human passion and the intransigence, as well as the ultimate physicality, of divine eroticism. Cecilia admonishes Valerian to quench his erotic desire for her:

“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,
And in youre yowthe thus ye shullen dye;
And if that ye in clene love me gye,
He wol yow loven as me, for youre clennesse,
And shewen yow his joye and his brightnesse.” (8.155–161)

Cecilia’s threat appears to strengthen the narrative’s thematic treatment of anti-eroticism. If Valerian loves Cecilia “in vileynye”—a telling yet muddled reference to his spousal right to consummate their marriage—God’s angel will intercede and enforce his prohibition against sexual activity by slaying Valerian. On the story’s surface level, Cecilia’s words are proved true as the narrative proceeds: no human copulates with her, and her virginity is thereby protected from earthly onslaughts.

When Cecilia threatens Valerian with his imminent demise should they consummate their marriage, the rejected groom sees himself as unwittingly ensnared in an erotic triangle, suspecting that his bride has taken a human lover and cuckolded him. Valerian, however, must learn that he himself is an object of divine desire as much as his wife. As Eve Sedgwick famously observes of triangulated desires and their latent homoeroticism, “there is a special relationship between male homoso-

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41. It should be noted that Cecilia refers in these lines not to God but to “an aungel . . . that loveth me” (8.152). The angel, as God’s proxy, preserves Cecilia from Valerian’s eroticism, yet only then to deliver Cecilia in service to God’s spiritual and erotic drives.
cial . . . desire and structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power. . . . For historical reasons, this special relationship may take the form of ideological homophobia, ideological homosexuality, or some highly conflicted but intensively structured combination of the two.”

With the Divine as one vertex in this erotic triangle, the homosociality inherent in the struggle between God and Valerian over Cecilia—brief as it is—transcends gender while remaining trapped within it. God’s desires are genderless, so it seems, in that all Christians receive the bounties of his love, but God is insistently gendered male, and so the impossible act of contemplating the Divine’s erotic drives requires one to contemplate a heavenly masculinity both unmoored from yet primarily conceivable within human terms of masculine sexuality, as understood within patriarchal paradigms of medieval thought. The Second Nun herself models such a conflicted gendered space when she refers to herself as an “unworthy sone of Eve” (8.62), and Valerian must correspondingly learn to resignify the meanings of husbandly masculinity that no longer function when God disrupts his expectations of marital sexuality.

Within the homosocial competition between God and Valerian, Valerian exposes the latent violence of erotic triangles when women refuse to conform to their husband’s desires. His attempts to monitor his bride’s erotic life include his promise to murder her, should she prove untrue:

Valerian, corrected as God wolde,
Answerde again, “If I shal trusten thee,
Lat me that auangel se and hym bitholde;
And if that it a verray angel bee,
Thanne wol I doon as thou hast prayed me;
And if thou love another man, for soothe
Right with this swerd thanne wol I sle yow bothe.” (8.162–68)

Still suspecting that Cecilia has taken a human lover, Valerian must realize that his earthly vision of a consummated marriage with Cecilia merely serves as a conduit to his as yet unconsummated relationship with God. John Hill points out that Cecilia is blessed with “a vision of luminous

43. As much scholarship has shown, medieval figurations of the Divine as male have their counterparts in maternal depictions of Jesus. Caroline Walker Bynum’s Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) remains a definitive text in this field.
Truth,” one that “awaits the chaste believer converted by [her] wisdom,” and this vision of Truth “wins over her new husband, Valerian, who threatens wedding night violence” if he discovers that she is cuckolding him. But divine Truth is also foreshadowed in Valerian’s threat to penetrate Cecilia, either with his penis if he were to consummate their marriage or with a sword if he were to punish her suspected infidelity. This physical violence is postponed until the night of her gruesome martyrdom when the threat of the sword, in its crude phallic symbolism betokening hymenal penetration, is metaphorically realized, but also when God, metaphorically as well, penetrates her as his lover. Pope Urban’s imagery of Jesus sowing seeds of chastity prefigures the narrative’s conclusion, for at the same time that the Second Nun presents Cecilia as having escaped sexual penetration on her wedding night, the words of Pope Urban explain how Jesus has symbolically impregnated her:

“Almyghty Lord, O Jhesu Crist,” quod he,  
“Sower of chaast conseil, hierde of us alle,  
The fruyt of thilke seed of chastitie  
That thou has sowe in Cecile, taak to thee!  
Lo, lyk a bisy bee, withouten gile,  
Thee serveth ay thyn owene thral Cecile.” (8.191–96)

Incarnating this paradoxical image of a spiritual sower of chastity, Jesus metaphorically consummates his relationship with Cecilia to procreate not newborn babies but newborn children of the faith, no matter their age. Perhaps surprisingly, given the contemporary equation of “the birds and the bees” as a euphemism for sexual knowledge, bees often connoted chastity in classical and medieval symbolism; as Lucia Impelluso documents, “based on the once-common belief that the insects [i.e., bees] reproduced by parthenogenesis, or the development of an unfertilized female gamete, bees were also used to connote chastity.” In contrast to Valerian, who was forbidden to sow the seed of a human child in his wife’s womb, Jesus consummates his love for Cecilia through metaphorical intercourse that results in countless children of the faith, all of whom are presumed to be avatars of chastity themselves.

Because Valerian eroticized Cecilia as an object of human desire, he denied her the Christological relevance due to her as a proselytizing agent,

yet through his erotic confusion Valerian succeeds in finding God. As Jacqueline Rose observes of woman’s role in signifying to and for men, “As negative to the man, woman becomes the total object of fantasy (or an object of total fantasy), elevated to the place of the Other and made to stand for its truth. Since the place of the Other is also the place of God, this is the ultimate form of mystification.” Valerian’s mystification and objectification of his wife leads him to the Divine, and the Second Nun recounts the executions of Valerian and his brother Tiburce that bring the men to their heavenly reward: “With humble herte and sad devocioun, / And losten bothe hir hevedes in the place. / Hir soule s wenten to the Kyng of grace” (8.397–99). By ceding his erotic claims to his wife’s body, Valerian finds the salvation denied him when he focused on sexual pleasure in marriage. As the homosocial conflict between God and man is obscured in this encounter, so too is the eroticism at its heart, in which Valerian’s purgation of sexual desire allows him to fulfill spiritual desires unrecognized until his wife refused to consummate their marriage; thus, he is able to be born into the faith as one of Jesus’s “seeds of chastity” that has been impregnated in Cecilia.

Of particular consequence in the story of Cecilia’s marriage to Valerian, and in line with the tale’s anti-erotic façade, are Cecilia’s attempts to preserve her virginity: she is defined morally by her intact hymen and its symbolic register within her community, primarily because her virginal status symbolizes the Church’s purity as well. As Kathleen Kelly argues of early Christianity’s investment in its martyrs, “Hagiography, in telling the story of the menaced virgin martyr, is really telling the story of a Church that reserved to itself the right to recognize, sanction, and reward virginity.” The wedding night violence with which Valerian threatens Cecilia, however, is merely delayed, not denied, and when Almachius orders Cecilia’s execution, he stages her death to his desire, with his minions following his every command:

...“In hire hous,” quod he,
“Brenne hire right in a bath of flambes rede.”
And as he bad, right so was doon the dede;
For in a bath they gone hire faste shetten,
And nyght and day greet fyr they under betten. (8.514–18)

Unflinching passivity as inspired through her eroticized attachment to God motivates Cecilia’s every action throughout her arduous execution. V. A. Kolve sees erotic tension in the traditional iconography of this scene, with the virgin’s placement in a bath titillatingly suggesting her naked body surrounded by flames symbolizing sexual lust: “She is most commonly shown naked in a cauldron bath, with a fire blazing below and an executioner ready to strike at her neck with a sword. . . . This last image is heroic in both style and substance, but in respect to Cecilia’s nakedness it is erotic too.”48 It should be noted that Chaucer does not specify Cecilia’s nudity in his retelling of her story, and other visual depictions of Cecilia’s martyrdom portray her fully clothed.49 Nonetheless, the contrast between the burning flames and Cecilia’s cool response to them—“She sat al cool and feelde no wo. / It make hire nat a drope for to sweete” (8.521–22)—points to the erotic energy of forbearance in her stance, one awaiting fulfillment in death. As she resisted Valerian’s desire for her on their wedding night, she now proves herself impervious to all human desires to act upon her—whether such desire is to be enacted through sexual intercourse, decapitation, or immolation. The scene also inverts the famous Pauline admonition—“it is better to marry than to be burnt” (1 Corinthians 7:9)—and proves that burning for the faith in righteous chastity aligns one with the divine will. This scene also foreshadows the tale’s recoding of the very meaning of marriage as Cecilia prepares herself for her role as God’s bride.

A hint of human mercy appears in Chaucer’s depiction of Cecilia’s gruesome death scene when Almachius’s servant, after cutting her throat with three strokes, refuses to strike her again due to a custom prohibiting excessive cruelty in punishments:

He myghte noght smyte al her nekke atwo;
And for ther was that tyme an ordinaunce
That no man sholde doon man swich penaunce
The ferthe strook to smyten, softe or soore. (8.528–31)

49. For an image of Cecilia in which she is executed while fully clothed (taken from Huntington Library MS H. M. 3027, fol. 161), see Robert Miller, ed., Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 114.
This legal injunction prohibits Cecilia’s neck from being struck a fourth time, and the three strokes numerologically align her with the Trinity in a scene laden with erotic imagery. The cuts on her neck crudely register that the hacking of the phallic sword has successfully penetrated her body, and Cecilia’s blood thus adumbrates not merely a physical wound but a spiritual deflowering. The rupturing of her hymen, a liminal event delayed from her wedding night, now metaphorically transpires as she ascends to her rightful place as God’s eternal lover. Certainly, Cecilia’s blood dominates the iconography of this scene:

But half deed, with hir nekke ycorven there,
He lefte hir lye, and on his wey he went.
The Cristen folk, which that aboute hire were,
With sheetes han the blood ful faire yhent. (8.533–36)

Death offers not merely the possibility of salvation but the consummation of divine intercourse, with the bloody sheets signifying the bleeding of Cecilia’s hymen on her wedding night. True, readers see a bath instead of a bed in this erotic scene shared by God and Cecilia, but the focus on Cecilia’s bloody sheets argues strongly for a metaphoric reconstruction of the bath as a scene of hymenal penetration.50 Chaucer adapts these bloody sheets from his source “In festo Sancte Cecilie virginis et martyris” (Paris, Bibl. Nationale, ms. Latin 3278), but departs from its rather mundane depiction of the events—“cuius sanguinem omnes Christiani qui per eam crediderant bibleis linteaminibus extergebant” (“All the Christians she had converted came and wiped up her blood with cotton or linen cloths”)—to paint a more lurid picture of Cecilia’s bloody shifts, as she lies in a reclined position.51

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50. On a lexical level, it does not appear likely that Chaucer’s use of sheets to describe the cloths used to mop up Cecilia’s blood refers merely to towels or cleaning fabrics. In every other instance Chaucer employs the word sheets he refers to bedsheets, such as in the scene when Troilus and Criseyde consummate their affections: “With that here heed down in the bed she leyde, / And with the sheete it wreigh, and sighte soore” (3.1055–56). Chaucer’s other references to sheets include Reeve’s Tale (1.4140), Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale (879), Parson’s Tale (10.195–200), Troilus and Criseyde (3.1570), and “The Former Age” (45).

51. For the “In festo Sancte Cecilie virginis et martyris,” see Robert Correale and Mary Hamel, eds., Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales (Cambridge: Brewer, 2002), 1.516–27. Chaucer’s other primary source for the Second Nun’s Tale is Jacobus de Voragine’s Legenda Aurea, which is available in Correale and Hamel, 1.505–17. The depiction of Cecilia’s beheading in the Legenda Aurea does not depict bloody sheets or cloths, referring instead to the “cruentus carnifex” (“bloody executioner”).
As Paul Strohm succinctly observes, “Bloody beds are rife in late medieval literature,” and he cites the appearance of these overdetermined tropes of intercourse in the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue*, Julian of Norwich’s *Showings*, Beroul’s *Tristan*, and Chrétien de Troyes’ *Lancelot, ou le Chevalier de la charrette* to outline the persistence of this sexual symbolism in various highly charged erotic scenes.\(^{52}\) In his reading of Chrétien’s *Lancelot*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen suggests that bloody beds disrupt gender to the point of incomprehensibility. When Lancelot fornicates with Guinevere after cutting his finger, the ensuing bloodstains reverse their genders such that masculinity and femininity no longer signify coherently:

> These bloody sheets are the wedding night topos, the display that announces consummation through feminine loss (the virgin’s hymen), but here the male body has stained the sheets, and itself. Or, rather, the masculine body has become feminine. Or else masculine and feminine (along with lover/beloved, master/servant, vassal/lord, public/private) have temporarily lost their relational signifying power, each bifurcation blurring to the point at which it is no longer possible to contain them.\(^{53}\)

Lancelot’s blood in Guinevere’s bed disrupts gender categories to the point of incomprehensibility, and, correspondingly, God’s symbolic penetration of Cecilia’s body disrupts the border between the spiritual and the physical, the heavenly and the earthly, and the very meaning of human eroticism when God pursues heavenly love in an earthly manner. At the same time, Cecilia proleptically demonstrates her understanding of such medieval thinkers as Alan de Lille, who encourages women to view themselves as forsaking earthly eroticism for the joys of an eternal bridegroom: “Si vis nubere terrestri marito propter divitias, considera quod terrena divitiae fallacibus sunt et transitoriae, quia aut in praesenti vita transeunt, aut saltem in morte recedunt. Nube ergo illi, apud quem thesauri sunt incomparabiles, et divitiae immutabiles; quas nec fur furatur, nec tinea demolitur” (“If you want to marry an earthly husband for riches, consider that earthly riches are deceptive and transitory, for they pass away either in the present life or at least in death. Therefore marry him whose treasures are incomparable, whose riches are immutable, where thief does not


steal, nor moth corrupt"). If one is to marry the Divine, the Second Nun suggests, one should be prepared for the heavenly erotic possibilities that an earthly anti-eroticism enables.

In its ostensible genre of hagiography, the Second Nun’s Tale tells the predictable story of a virgin martyr who preserves her chastity as a sign of her purity and wins eternal joys in heaven for her forbearance; in its veiled yet insistent allusions to God’s carnality, this hagiography troubles its genre by depicting God as a lover capable of and patiently pursuing physical consummation with his beloved. Cecilia’s final acts are to bequeath her house to Pope Urban, thus establishing her maternal role within the early Church. With God as their spiritual father, Jesus as the impregnator of seeds of chastity, and Cecilia as their human mother, the children of the Church receive an earthly inheritance from their mother that foreshadows their heavenly reward. The generative erotics latent in the Second Nun’s Tale reconfigure the human family as a spiritual hybrid of the earthly and the heavenly, but one that relies on the attenuated image of their heavenly father physically consummating his spiritual marriage to their mother, enacting the sexuality forbidden to earthly husbands and wives but readily available to sate the erotic yearnings of the Almighty.

Given the vast array of medieval conceptions of an erotic God in various allegorical, exegetical, and mystical texts and artworks, it would be remarkable if no vision of an erotic God entered Chaucer’s expansive corpus. These queer hints and allusions to an erotic God, one unwilling to discipline himself to the same sexual standards established for his faithful, follow no set pattern, and indeed, in most instances one can refuse to see any visions of God’s pryvetee because they are so occluded from view. Whether in a logical lapse in the Parson’s Tale or in the sexual play of Chaucer’s fabliaux, whether in response to a momentary vision of female beauty in Legend of Good Women or in a prolonged amatory rivalry in Second Nun’s Tale, God loves in Chaucer’s corpus, thereby upsetting the boundaries between the human and the Divine in provocative ways. As these themes mostly simmer beneath the surface of their narratives and do not cohere into a unified vision of divine love, one can see artistic failure in Chaucer’s treatment of the Divine; if, however, Žižek is correct that poetry’s failures lead to God, then perhaps Chaucer succeeds where he has failed, in a queer vision of the Divine who transgresses the anti-erotic regulations that his love demands.

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