Silence, Testimony, and the Case of Susanna

CHAUCER takes the Constance story as an opportunity to imagine a unified Christian "nacioun" which triumphs over the heathen communities that threaten it. In particular, the multiple scenes of false witness in the Man of Law's Tale demonstrate the necessity of witnessing to construct and affirm the cultural and ethical requirements of a community. Like the story of the saintly Constance, the story of saintly Susanna, a Scriptural tale that was enormously popular in England in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, features scenes of false witness to test and affirm the integrity of a Christian community, one that coheres around the doctrinal prescription for female silence, chastity, and obedience. At the center of the story is a tale of false testimony, in which Susanna's steadfast faith directly contrasts with the legal corruption propagated by Church Elders in their own self-interests. It thus offers a lesson similar to the one illustrated in the Man of Law's Tale about the sanctity of divine justice and the corruptibility of earthly legal mechanisms. But unlike the story of Constance, the Susanna story also interrogates how true "witnessing" might be understood as a range of practices, including prayer and prophecy. In doing so, it expands the definition of witnessing to accommodate distinctly female modes of testimony.

The story of Susanna was familiar to medieval readers and congregants from the thirteenth chapter of the Book of Daniel, which describes an incident in which two Church Elders spy Susanna, the beatific wife of Joachim,
as she bathes in a garden. They find themselves overwhelmed with desire: “ravished,” as English versions of the text claim, by her beauty. They decide to approach and sexually proposition her. When she refuses their advances, the Elders take advantage of their juridical and moral authority, telling her that she must either submit or be accused of adultery, a charge she would be unable to deny credibly. After crying out with sorrow and outrage, Susanna silently stands trial for sexual transgressions she did not commit, unable to stand up against the social and legal standing of the Elders who falsely testify against her. Based on the testimony of the Elders, Susanna is convicted of adultery, only to be saved by Daniel, who uses legal inquiry to expose the Elders’ falsehood and condemn them to death. The story was long read as a warning against false witness, an example of divine justice, and an exemplary tale of womanly chastity. Medieval commentators on the Book of Daniel persistently imagined Susanna as a saintly, silent victim in the face of almost certain social and legal condemnation, saved only by the last-minute intervention of divine justice, embodied by the child prophet Daniel. These commentators interpret Susanna’s suffering silence as a sign of her steadfast faith. Like Constance, she is a woman at the mercy of legal officials but always protected by divine justice.

Significantly, however, Susanna’s courtroom silence emerges as a site of protest in late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English versions of the story, which seek to rehabilitate her silence as a kind of testimony itself, outside of Daniel’s prophetic involvement in the case. As Lynn Staley has pointed out, “Susanna occupies a subtly different range of meanings in English texts, possibly because of the challenge to patriarchal control offered by heterodoxy and of the different English attitude toward law itself.”1 In particular, texts such as the Pistel of Swete Susan and the Lollard treatise “Of Prelates,” a polemic against ecclesiastical corruption, carefully depict both how the silence of a condemned woman can be understood as testimony and how that silence might be “translated” into writing for a community of readers. Thus, rather than merely portray a silent woman performing her faith, these texts use Susanna’s silence to expand what might be considered efficacious “witnessing,” including private prayer, public testimony, and even, as this chapter argues, vernacular poetry. Moreover, as these English texts highlight the contrast between the false testimony offered by the communal protectors of the law and Susanna’s silence, they suggest that at stake in this story of false witness is how different kinds of testimony, oral and written, signal their own

peculiar authenticity and shape multiple, even widely differing, Christian communities and authorities.

In fourteenth-century England, the story’s investment in female silence and documentation emerged specifically as an exploration of the complex relationship among sexual transgression, female testimony, and silence. Traditionally, the medieval Church understood female silence as a sign of womanly obedience in marriage: as stated in the first letter to Timothy: “Let the woman learn in silence, with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to use authority over the man: but to be in silence” (I Tim. 2:12–13). Likewise, Tertullian upbraids women for being both verbally and sexually promiscuous, while Jerome warns Eustochium not to “engage in adultery of the tongue.” Such anxieties and warnings were commonplace throughout the Middle Ages, and the long-term worry about female loquacity specifically dovetails with worries about sexual transgressions. Medieval commentators’ strenuous attempts to link Susanna’s chastity to silence—and to muffle the story’s interest in testimony in favor of its assertion of female obedience—are thus based in hefty Scriptural and patristic precedent.

But at the end of the fourteenth century, the English Pistel of Swete Susan recuperates the story’s emphasis on false witness rather than on female obedience, specifically concentrating on how Susanna’s silence might speak to contemporary worries about the role of testimony in cases concerning sexual transgression. In doing so, the Pistel reformulates the patristic tradition it inherits by portraying silence as an efficacious model of female testimony. Such a portrayal poses complicated questions about various ways female testimony might be heard, recorded, and rendered vital to the coherence of Christian community. Indeed, unlike its patristic precursors, the Pistel envisions Susanna’s silence not merely as the sign of an obedient wife but as an opportunity to experiment with the authoritative claims of oral testimony and documentary form. These experiments were, in turn, taken up in the fifteenth century by Lollard writers, who routinely cited the Susanna story in support of their own resistances against ecclesiastical control over written testimony.

By examining the longue durée of the Susanna story and focusing particularly on the late fourteenth-century Pistel of Swete Susan and fifteenth-century Lollard citations of Susanna, this chapter accounts both for the way female testimony emerges in various forms—prayer, legal document, vernacular poetry, even citation—and for the way late medieval English ideas about

witness testimony and legal documentation reframe the stakes of this enduring story of false witness. Susanna’s silence functions as a complex legal, doctrinal, and ideological touchstone for understanding multiple models of bearing witness in the later Middle Ages and for exploring how those models were used to formulate, challenge, and reshape the bonds of Christian community and authority.

Silence, Documents, and Susanna’s Voice in Early Patristic Commentaries

The earliest extant form of the story of Susanna is in Greek (ca. 100 B.C.E.), and the story has been featured in stone carvings in third-century Roman catacombs, in patristic writing from the third and fourth centuries, and in Latin poetry from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In England, the Susanna story was particularly popular in the fifteenth century, appearing in five miscellanies. The earliest English versions, in the Vernon manuscript and British Library Additional 22283, both date from around 1400, while the latest, Cotton Caligula A.ii, dates from around 1500. The *Pistel of Swete Susan* circulated as a stand-alone text in the fifteenth-century manuscript owned by a nun named Matilde Hoyle. In addition, medieval congregants heard the story of Susanna on the Saturday before the third Sunday in Lent, and a short citation of it is included in the Lollard tract *The Lantern of Light*. Beyond the Middle Ages, Susanna was written for the stage in Thomas Garter’s 1578 *Commody of the mooste virtuous and godlye Susanna*, in Lope de Vega’s *Comedia de Santa Susana* (ca. 1600), and in Carlisle Floyd’s 1947 opera, *Susanna*. In all of these versions, Susanna is depicted as a silent victim of false witness, a saintly figure who, like Constance, suffers at the hands of a corrupt legal system, only to be saved by divine intervention. In fact, the only point at which Susanna voices her protest is when the two Elders...
approach her in the garden, when she emits a cry, either aloud to signal to her handmaidens that she needs help or, as some versions have it, muted, to register her innocence only to God.

Indeed, Susanna’s outcry is where various adaptations of and commentaries on the Susanna narrative take the opportunity to “silence” her. Such texts seek to emphasize her as the epitome of the chaste, obedient woman, rather than as a victim of false witness, and her voice is thus the central ideological pivot upon which commentators and translators shape the story to reflect their specific aims. The Vulgate Bible’s Daniel 13 provides a “great voice” for Susanna, heard well beyond the garden walls: “Susanna cried out with a great voice, and the elders cried out against her, and one ran to the door of the orchard and opened it, and when the servants heard the clamor in the orchard they rushed through the back door to see what was going on.”

Here, Susanna’s voice extracts her from the seclusion of the garden, rendering her outrage (and the Elders’ iniquity) public. This great shout comes after she carefully explains to the Elders that she feels stuck (angustiae) between two impossible choices: death or adultery. The Vulgate posits her cry against the cry of the Elders, a sound of truth versus one of treachery.

Likewise, Hippolytus’s third-century commentary on the Book of Daniel juxtaposes Susanna’s voice with that of the Elders, and it offers specific interpretive cues for understanding what her voice signifies. Hippolytus insists that Susanna shouted when the Elders approached her, emphasizing that despite the “large and spacious” size of the garden, her voice was heard and “understood.” Indeed, her shout renders the Elders’ accusations “unbelievable”: “See the proof in Susanna, whose education in God’s Law since childhood and whose pure and prudent life, made the words spoken against her by the Elders seem unbelievable” (I.xxiv). Hippolytus emphasizes that the Elders’ use of language must be read in contradistinction to Susanna’s voice; the words that are specifically “pronounced” against Susanna cannot be believed because her cry signifies truth beyond the claims of their speech. Hippolytus thus understands Susanna’s cry against the Elders’ accusations as being a sound that registers as true because it emerges more directly from her body, unaltered by the machinations of discourse.


Hippolytus’s explanation and elevation of Susanna’s vocal cry, however, is transformed when commentators begin to gloss the story to construct Susanna as an emblem of chastity. In his fifth-century Commentary on Daniel, Jerome silences Susanna’s cry to portray her as an obedient woman who maintains her chastity in the face of an ostensibly insurmountable obstacle.

“Her voice was great,” he writes, “not because of the intense vibrations it sent through the air nor because of outcry that came from her lips, but because of the greatness of the chastity with which she called out to the Lord. And so for this reason Scripture did not attribute a great voice to the outcry of the elders, for the following statement is merely, “The elders also cried out against her.””

Jerome reconstitutes the sound and audience of Susanna’s outburst, translating her cry from a public, legal call for help into a silent prayer to God. In doing so, he reconstructs the Susanna narrative into an exemplary story about female virtue, signaled by womanly silence. Augustine takes up Jerome’s muffling of Susanna’s voice, citing her as a paragon of steadfast chastity and claiming, “Though her prayer was inaudible to human beings, it was heard by God.” He further claims that there are three kinds of life in the Church for a woman: married, widowed, and virginal, exemplified by Mary, Anna, and Susanna, respectively. He takes care to note that each of these women “gives testimony” by living a chaste life. Thus, female testimony, understood as silent prayer and exemplary behavior, functions for these commentators as a way to express the Christian requirements of chastity and obedience.

Jerome and Augustine are the most influential commentators for the Middle Ages’ reception of a silent Susanna, yet what it means for them to “silence” Susanna—and to what extent that is possible—is not always clear. For example, Augustine is careful to note that while Susanna’s explanation and cry were not widely heard, they were documented: “Her words are recorded, which she spoke in the paradise (Dn. 13:7), that is her shrubbery; words no human being heard, apart from the two who were lying in wait to


10. Notably, Constance seems to have internalized this triad. When she goes to trial for murder, she drops to her knees and prays: “‘Immortal god, that savedest Susanne / Fro false blame, and thou, merciful Mayde, / Marie I meene, doghter to Seynte Anne, / Bifore whos child angeles synge Osanne, / If I be giltlees of this felonye, / My socour be, for ellis shal I dye!’” (II.639–44).
ensnare the modesty of another man’s wife, and planning to give false evidence against her if she proved unwilling.” He repeats again that only the two Elders heard that she feels compelled to choose death, lest she commit adultery for God to see. This claim is followed by a full citation of Susanna’s complaint: “They were the only ones who heard what she said: ‘I am trapped on every side. For if I do this thing, it means death for me, but if I do not do it, I shall not escape your hands. But it is better for me not to slip out of your hands than to sin in the sight of God.’”

Although her complaint and her choice to rebuff the Elders, whatever the consequences, are meant only for the Elders’ ears, Augustine ensures to “document” both, and accordingly, Susanna’s words become evidence in support of her innocence. Moreover, in recording her complaint, Augustine assumes the authority to translate her muffled voice into a public document and thus into doctrinal instruction for a wide community of readers. The passive construction—“her words are recorded” (conscripta sunt verba ejus)—suggests that this translation from voice to text occurs organically, without authorial perspective or scribal intervention.

For Augustine, documenting her silent prayer can render it an illustration of female doctrinal obedience. By recording her words, words meant only for the Elders, Augustine extracts her from an isolating and damning silence and makes that silence efficacious for God and, crucially, for a community of Christian readers. Elsewhere, notably, Augustine argues in more general terms what he has enacted in his sermon about Susanna: that silence redresses the ephemerality of sound, making it so that voiced statements can be remembered. “Suppose that we hear a noise emitted by some material body,” he suggests in his Confessions. “The sound begins and we continue to hear it. It goes on until finally it ceases. Then there is silence. The sound has passed and is no longer sound. Before it began it was future and could not be measured, because it did not yet exist. Now that it has ceased it cannot be measured, because it no longer exists.”


12. Confessions 11.27. For a discussion of the relationship between sonority and embodiment in Augustine, see Bruce W. Holsinger, Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 296.
we specify their time spans—how long this is in relation to that—just as if we were speaking them aloud” (11.27). Augustine’s formulations in the Confessions fuse silence and speaking, memory and voice: silence enables memory, and memory functions as if sound were emitted. With these formulations in mind, we can understand how Augustine’s “documentation” of Susanna’s unheard prayer provides him the opportunity to transform her ordeal and anguish into a text, imagining her silence as something that can be understood as if sound were emitted for others to hear. In doing so, he provides her a public voice and ensures that she becomes an enduring exemplar, chaste in the face of almost certain death, rather than merely a silent woman falsely accused.

After translating Susanna’s outcry into a public text, Augustine praises Susanna for speaking her mind to the Elders: “Susanna too gave them something, and didn’t send them away empty-handed, if they had been willing to take her advice about chastity. Not only, you see, did she not consent to them, but she did not, either, keep quiet about why she didn’t consent.” Furthemore, in Augustine’s version of the story, Susanna follows her muffled prayer and private statement to the Elders with a cry which was publicly heard and which inaugurated legal process: “The cry was raised, people came running, proceedings began.” Again, the passive construction here (“the cry was raised”) omits a vocal agent, suggesting that the remaining story of Susanna’s resolute chastity, as well as her participation in legal process, operates communally rather than through her individual complaint. In other words, Augustine focuses on the community responding to a cry and the legal process, rather than Susanna’s personal outrage. Susanna’s individual voice is thus a necessary condition for the possibility of other, legal enunciations on her behalf, which can turn her private prayer and immediate outcry into an opportunity for the community to witness divine intervention into a case of courtroom perjury.

In contrast, for Ambrose Susanna is completely silent, and her prayer is undocumented and left between Susanna and God. Indeed, her silence exemplifies God’s precepts against idle talk. “If we must give an account for every idle word,” he writes in his De officiis,

we need to make sure that we do not find ourselves having to account for idle silence as well. For there is another kind of silence as well, one that is

characterized by activity. The silence of Susanna was an example of it. She achieved more by keeping silent than she would have done if she had spoken. In keeping silence before men, she spoke to God, and she devised no greater proof of her chastity than this silence. Her conscience spoke when her voice was not heard; she sought no judgment at the hands of men, for she had the Lord himself as her witness.\footnote{De officiis, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Ivor J. Davidson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 123. For the Latin see Sancti Ambrosii Mediolanensis, De officiis, ed. Mauritius Testard, CCSL 15 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000): “Deinde si pro verbo otioso reddimus rationem, videamus ne reddamus et pro otioso silentio. Est enim et negotiosum silentium ut erat Susannae quae multis egit tacendo quam si esset locuta. Tacebant enim apud homines, locuta est Deo; nec ullum maius indicium suae castitatis invenit quam silentium. Conscientia loquebatur ubi vox non audiebatur; nec quaerebat pro se hominum iudicium, quae habebat Domini testimonium” (I.III.9.2–9).}

Silence permits Susanna to converse solely with God, who trumps human judges in being able to hear true testimony even when the legal system cannot detect it. In this formulation, her silence offers the only possibility of transcending the probative claims of the two Elders’ testimony in the courtroom, and it marks Susanna’s turn away from courtroom practices to divine justice. Ambrose carefully notes various kinds of silences and testimonial voices: here, though Susanna remains quiet externally, she speaks in her conscience.

Similarly, the late fourth-century De lapsu Susannae (sometimes attributed to Ambrose) omits the words of Susanna’s testimony altogether, instead taking Susanna’s silence as a metaphor for the suffering of those who must witness the sinful actions of the lecherous and promiscuous go unpunished:

Why are you so silent, my soul? Why are you troubled in your thoughts? Why don’t you let your voice break forth and lay bare the ardent desire of your mind so that you might have some relief? This surely, this will be like a remedy for your trouble, if you would open up your mouth and set out to explain what the crime is. Similarly, lancing and draining a boil, however swollen it has been, offers relief from the festering.\footnote{Maureen Tilley, “An Anonymous Letter to a Woman Named Susanna,” in Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice, ed. Richard Valantasis (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 218. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text. For the Latin, see De lapsu Susannae, ed. Ignatius Cazzaniga (Turin: G. B. Paraviae, 1948): “Quid taces, anima? Quid cogitationibus aetiam? Quid non erumpis in vocem et mentis tuae exponis arderem ut aliquod solatium capias? Hoc plane, hoc erit quasi remedium aegritudinis tuae, si aperto ore conceptum digeris scelus. Nam et ulcus quamvis tumidum, cum fuerit apertum, evaporans praestat refrigerium passionis” (I.1).}
The text navigates the various types of silences at the heart of the Susanna story. Here, the voice is imagined simultaneously as something heard and as an internal voice of conscience. Moreover, the speaker addresses his complaints to virgins near and far, imploring everyone to listen to his complaint: “Hear me now, you who are near, you who are far away,” explaining that he wants to speak directly to lapsed virgins and adulterers (I.2, II.5). He thus imagines his objections both to be immediate and to endure beyond the moment of his speaking. Significantly, when he turns to Susanna as an example of chastity in the face of temptation, he takes up Susanna’s voice as direct quotation: “But you say, ‘I did not will this evil; I suffered violence.’ That most brave Susanna, whose name you falsely wear, will answer you, ‘Placed between two elders, there between two judges of the people, set there alone between the trees of the garden, I could not be conquered; because I did not will to be’” (III.12). For the author of De lapsu Susannae, then, the Susanna story is decidedly not about the injustices of evidentiary process or even about false witness. Instead, it functions as an exemplar for lapsed virgins to return to their prescribed chaste behavior. False witness is merely the narrative conceit by which this exemplary aim can be presented. Significantly, this version of the story permits the author to revoice Susanna, insofar as he uses Susanna’s silence as an opportunity to put words in her mouth rather than simply quoting the Book of Daniel. Unlike the Susanna of De officiis, this Susanna speaks, but she addresses an audience far beyond the garden walls with a complaint about the behavior of virgins, not about the false accusation she suffers.

These various depictions of Susanna’s voice illustrate patristic writers’ ongoing struggles to shape the Susanna story to be about female chastity and silent obedience. Indeed, numerous versions of the story in the high Middle Ages obviously strain to explain away Susanna’s magna vox. The Glossa ordinaria, for example, takes great care to muffle Susanna’s voice, transforming her magna vox into “pure testimony,” heard only by God. Nicholas of Lyra makes a similar claim in his commentary on Daniel: “Her voice was great, not because of the beating of the air and cry from the throat, but because of the magnitude of its beauty, through which she called out to God.” He goes on to emphasize that her voice was heard not by men, but by God, because

17. Indeed, the Glossa ordinaria persistently suggests that voices require glosses. Biblia Latina cum Glossa ordinaria, vol. 3 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1992), 351.
of her purity of heart and mind.\textsuperscript{19} Thus, the long hermeneutic history of Susanna’s voice reveals that there are different kinds of silences that can be registered as “testimony,” each with various social and doctrinal functions. Moreover, throughout the Middle Ages, Susanna’s silence is described as a kind of “testimony” that reaches outside the problematic systems of human judgment and evidence to call upon divine justice.

The claim that her silence can be read as testimony is put to the test in the late fourteenth-century English alliterative version of the story, the \textit{Pistel of Swete Susan}, which straddles the line between a vocal and a silent Susanna by describing her response to the Elders’ accusations as a “careful cri.”\textsuperscript{20} The \textit{Pistel’s} depiction of Susanna’s cry challenges the patristic link between female silence and exemplary chastity. Specifically, it foregrounds Susanna’s testimonial silence within the particular context of fourteenth-century changes in English common law that focused on how allegations of rape and sexual transgression could be made, which were required to conform to particular documentary forms of legal complaint. As it explores how Susanna’s testimony might operate under these legal conditions, the \textit{Pistel} suggests that the Elders’ false testimony can be mitigated by Susanna’s testimonial silence because her muffled voice can be witnessed, documented, and disseminated in vernacular poetry.

\section*{Accusation, False Testimony, and the Power of Silence in the \textit{Pistel of Swete Susan}}

The \textit{Pistel} begins, like the Vulgate Book of Daniel, by emphasizing Susanna’s literacy, particularly in “the maundement of Moises.” Yet while the Vulgate merely states that her parents had dutifully instructed her in matters of faith,\textsuperscript{19} “Cordis affectus et mentis pura confessio et bonum conscientiae, vocem eius fecerant clariorem; unde magna erat exclamatio eius Deo, quae ab hominibus non audiebatur.” \textit{Supra Danielem} 947.

\textsuperscript{20} Written after the \textit{Pistel}, Christine de Pizan’s \textit{Book of the City of Ladies} notably restores Susanna’s “magna vox”: “Hearing their threats and knowing that women in such a case were customarily stoned, she said, ‘I am completely overwhelmed with anguish, for if I do not do what these men require of me, I risk the death of my body, and if I do it, I will sin before my Creator. However, it is far better for me, in my innocence, to die than incur the wrath of my God because of my sin.’ So Susanna cried out, and the servants came out of the house.” Christine’s ideal of Susanna imagines her as legally savvy, aware of the violent punishment of adulterers, and it gives her a voice that speaks with a certain kind of exemplary authority, distinct from the exemplary, silent obedience that Jerome, Augustine, and Ambrose attribute to Susanna. See \textit{The Book of the City of Ladies} (New York: Norton, 1988), 156.
the *Pistel* insists that they “lerned hire lettrure of that langage.”

This specific emphasis on her legal literacy sets up the law-focused expectations for the remainder of the text, which is saturated with legal references. These references both offer implicit instructions to read the *Pistel* as an illustration of the triumphant exoneration of a chaste and dutiful woman and remind us that this story can be understood as an exploration of multiple forms of witnessing, from silent prayer to legal documents and even, as the *Pistel* ultimately suggests, vernacular poetry.

As the *Pistel* describes the Elders’ encounter with Susanna in the garden, their lecherous gazes are repeatedly articulated through legal vocabulary: “And whon thei seigh Susan, semelich of hewe, / Thei weor so set uppon hire, might they not sese” (44–45). The Middle English word “sese” (“cease”) signals their inability to tear their eyes away, but it also gestures to two specific legal definitions, one meaning “to arrest and bind over to a session of court,” the other signifying the term for land transfer. The term “sese” thus emphasizes that the Elders’ legal and social standing is at odds with their lustful gazes. In addition, as they watch Susanna play in the garden and devise an elaborate plan to “bewile that worly,” the text describes their plotting as a legal test of her purity: “Every day bi day / In the pomeri thei play. / Whiles thei mihte Susan assay / To worchen hire wo” (62–65). By the middle of the fourteenth century, the verb “assaien” had accumulated a constellation of definitions. The verb often surfaced in romances and meant “to test”: that is, to demonstrate one’s knightly strength in combat. But it could also mean “to investigate” or “to inquire” by means of legal interrogation, as well as to have sexual intercourse. Used here, the verb “assay” emphasizes the overlapping bodily, legal, and moral transgressions of rape, adultery, and false witness the *Pistel* will depict.

The Elders themselves make these overlaps clear when they approach Susanna and present her with the choice of having sex with them or being publicly accused of adultery. “‘Wolt thu, ladi, for love on ure lay lerne, ’” they ask lasciviously, “‘And under this lorere ben ur lemmone?’” (135–36). To “learn their law” clearly means to submit to their advances, and the Elders suggest that she relinquish her body for her “love” of learning the law. Susanna responds with despair:

---

21. *Pistel of Swete Susan*, ed. Russell A. Peck, in *Heroic Women from the Old Testament in Middle English Verse* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 1991), 18. All citations of the *Pistel* will be taken from Peck’s text unless otherwise noted. Hereafter cited parenthetically by line number.
22. “sessen,” *Middle English Dictionary* s.v. 1d.
Then Susan was servful and seide in hire thought:
“I am with serwe biset on everiche syde.
Yif I assent to this sin that this segges have sought,
I be bretenet and brent in baret to byde;
And yif I nikke hem with nai hit helpeth me nought—
Such toret and teone taketh me this tyde!
Are I that worthlich wrec, that al this world wrought,
Betere is wemles weende of this world wyde.” (144–51)

Her internal monologue is followed by noise: she emits a “careful cri,” bringing her servants and valiant men into the garden. Susanna here follows the legal protocol for a complaint of rape, which required that a woman raise the “hue and cry,” a procedure in which a victim of or witness to a crime was to shout in order to gather people from the community to help pursue the criminal. Specifically in cases of rape, an “open cry” must be made to register a claim of unwanted sexual activity.24 Susanna’s legal literacy suggests that she knows these procedures, and here she uses them appropriately.

However, Susanna’s cry is more than a mere enactment of proper legal process. Rather, it illustrates and explores the complicated ways the female voice was deployed in fourteenth-century rape prosecutions. For most of the Middle Ages, rape complaints had to be registered orally with a cry. Only late in the fourteenth century did rape law catch up with the documentary procedures (including writs of complaint, petitions, and bills) already well in place for other legal accusations.25 Specifically, in 1382 a new statute on rape and ravishment required that charges of sexual transgression be tried specifically “by inquisition of the country”; the statute did not offer the option to try the charge by battle, unlike in other kinds of criminal allegations.26 Before


25. Formal legal complaints, documented in writs or petitions, were used to pursue personal and communal accusations, and “plaints” were an important form of expressing grievances. For a discussion of the commonplace use of documentary complaints in the fourteenth century, see Sheila Lindenbaum, “London Texts and Literate Practice,” CHMEL 284–309; and Wendy Scase, Literature and Complaint in England, 1272–1553 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

then, rape cases required material evidence to support, and sometimes even substitute for, the claim of the victim. In the twelfth century, for example, Glanvill claimed that a woman pursuing a plea of rape case should, “soon after the deed is done” (*mox dum recens fuerit maleficium*), go to the nearest vill to “show to trustworthy men the injury done to her, and any effusion of blood there may be and any tearing of her clothes.” She must then complain publicly to generate the *publica fama* necessary to begin legal proceedings. For Glanvill, physical evidence and vocal complaint work in conjunction in the difficult process of proving a rape took place.

But by the fourteenth century, the requirement to provide immediate material evidence had dropped away: women were no longer required to expose a bloodied body or torn clothes to their community leaders. In addition, a woman could take up to 40 days to register a complaint of rape, and rape claims were to conform strictly to the documentary formulae of the writ. The expectation of documentary iterability was paramount, insofar as the language used and details given in the original (oral) complaint to a family member, community authority, or sheriff had to match exactly with the claims made in the writ of complaint; any deviation, even of the most minor detail, could result in rendering the complaint legally null. Thus, the relationship between sexual transgression, vocal complaint, and documentary form was tightly controlled, such that legal procedure required a linear trajectory from bodily violation to vocal cry to oral testimony to legal text. Sexual violation must be “translated” into an “open cry” that would draw members of the community as judges and witnesses, and it should then be “translated” into a formal accusation and finally into a formulaic document in which the details of the event could be ossified and repeated. Adultery was even more difficult to track and prosecute than rape, since it was a transgression usually done in secret, without witnesses, and thus it could be difficult to generate the necessary *publica fama* to start proceedings. Nonetheless, it was subject to “multiple networks of informing, gossip, rumor, talebearing, and, on occasion, lies about neighbors’ sex lives among community inhabitants, which brought such cases to the attention of officials and courts.”

---

28. For a discussion of inquisition and *publica fama*, see the introduction.
29. For a discussion of the documentary formulae and the requirement that details of the rape be repeated in all documents, see Barbara A. Hanawalt, “Whose Story Was This? Rape Narratives in Medieval English Courts,” in Of Good and Ill Repute: Gender and Social Control in Medieval England (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 124–41.
documentary formulae to move from gossip to formal complaint. For late medieval English writers, the systems designed to register allegations of rape and adultery were sufficiently new to the documentary practices of petitionary complaint that they offered them an opportunity to experiment with the relative probative efficacy of material evidence, oral testimony, and documentary form. The Pistel, as discussed below, conceptualizes the Susanna story as such an experiment. Specifically, Susanna’s “careful cri” in the face of sexual and social transgression navigates the Pistel’s understanding of the relationship between body, voice, and document, particularly in terms of a woman’s ability to announce her own chastity and pursue false charges of sexual transgression.

The Pistel’s interest in whether and how the written word can recuperate the testimonial voice of a silenced woman emerges early in the poem. Unlike either the Vulgate or the various commentaries on the Book of Daniel, the Pistel spends some time setting up the Elders’ approach of Susanna. Predictably, when the two Elders are “ravished” by Susanna’s beauty, they at first try to hide their lust from God and from one another:

Heore wittes wel waiwordes thei wrethen awai
And turned fro His teching that teeld is in trone;
For siht of here soverayn, sothli to say,
Heore hor hevedes fro hevene thei hid apon one.
Thei caught for heor covetyse the cursyng of Kai,
For rightwys jugement recordet thei none,
They two. (55–61)

The description of their lust is commonplace in its depiction of “wayward wits” and self-oblivion, familiar from romance narratives in which a beautiful love-object transfixes the lover. But their desire to conceal their lust, formulated here as a refusal to “record” it, suggests that we ought to understand the Elders’ ravishment in documentary terms. They seek to suppress, even erase, their lust by controlling whether it gets “written.” For the Elders, recording their ravishment would potentially transform their inner feelings into external and visible testimony. By the time we hear Susanna’s careful cry, then, we are primed to read it as a crystallization of the Pistel’s exploration of how a voice can be represented in text. Her careful cry stages the possibilities and limitations of oral and documentary testimony in terms of their ability to legibly register either female chastity or sexual transgression.

When Susanna’s “careful cri” brings her servants to the garden, the Elders make good on their threat to accuse Susanna of adultery. In disbelief but
unable to contradict the Elders’ claims, the townspeople shackle Susanna and put her into a dungeon to await trial, while Joachim, “with al his affinité,” rushes to the court.\(^{31}\) To present their “playnt” to the judges, the Elders seal their accusation with an oath:

Be this cause that we say,
Heo wyled hir wenches away;
This word we witnesse for ay,
With tonge and with toth. (218–21)

The Elders’ oath locates their authority and their truth-claims specifically in the mouth (“tonge and toth”), and in doing so, places special emphasis on their collective voice as public, legal, and evidentiary. Specifically, the Elders’ oath sets up the terms by which we must read the \textit{Pistel’s} description of Susanna’s condemnation and eventual salvation: that is, as an investigation of the community-forming power of testimony within and beyond the courtroom, rather than a celebration of her innocence. Significantly, as the \textit{Pistel} turns to Susanna’s trial and Daniel’s prophetic intervention, it repeatedly focuses on the mouths of both the Elders and Susanna, from which different kinds of testimony emerge to address different communities.

In a scene reminiscent of Constance’s public trial, the crowd gathered to witness Susanna’s trial reluctantly believes the Elders, given their social standing and solemn oath. As the Vulgate makes clear, “The multitude believed them as elders and judges of the people; and they condemned her to death.”\(^{32}\) The \textit{Pistel} explains it slightly less overtly than the Vulgate: “Nou heo is dampned on deis; with deol thaugh hir deve, / And hir domesmen unduwe do hir be withdrawen” (235–36).\(^{33}\) Notably, in one of the manuscripts of the \textit{Pistel}, the multitude is particularly aural: in the version found in Cotton Caligula A.ii, the line reads, “with dyn they hyr deiuie” (“they deafened her with din”). But in other versions of the \textit{Pistel}, we are to understand that Susanna is deafened with grief (“deol”), rather than with the voice of the crowd. Alice Miskimin has tried to account for this discrepancy by suggesting that the \textit{Pistel}-poet may have confused the Vulgate’s \textit{creditit} (“believed”) with \textit{crepi-}

\(^{31}\) Staley argues that the gesture to Joachim’s “affinité” suggests the \textit{Pistel’s} specific engagement with English models of justice. “Susanna and English Communities,” 50.

\(^{32}\) “Creditit eis multitudo quasi senibus populi et iudicibus; et condemnaverunt eam ad mortem” (Dan. 13:41).

\(^{33}\) As both Miskimin and Peck note, these lines are particularly difficult to interpret. I follow Peck’s translation: “Now she is damned on a dais; they deafened her with grief / And the unjust judges order her to be withdrawn.”
But whether the translation is deliberate or accidental, the shift from the condemnatory rumble of the crowd to its grief (or, perhaps, Susanna’s grief) suggests a link between the crowd’s testimony and its emotional response to Susanna, rather than necessarily signaling their judgment of Susanna in the face of ostensibly incontrovertible legal evidence. Here, the crowd’s noise signals both their inability to deny the Elders’ testimony and their deep surprise and sadness that Susanna could be capable of such transgressions. Thus, unlike the “prees” that silently witnesses the “merveille” of the divine hand of justice in the *Man of Law’s Tale*, this crowd functions as a legal and social entity that outwardly expresses its dismay at the legal trap in which Susanna finds herself. Yet significantly, the crowd cannot read her silence as testimony of her innocence; it can only hear the perjured testimony offered by the Elders.

Whereas the public din of the throng signals either its judgment of Susanna or, perhaps, its dismay at the condemnation of a woman it hopes is innocent, Susanna’s voice of protest only comes when she withdraws from the crowd to await her fate alone in the dungeon. There,

> Heo asked merci with mouth in this mischeve;
> “I am sakeles of syn,” heo seide in hir sawen,
> “Grete God of His grace yor gultus forgive
> That doth me derfliche be ded and don out of dawen
> With dere.” (239–43)

Again, the *Pistel* emphasizes the mouth, suggesting that we are to read Susanna’s prayer here against the false oath and testimony that had issued from the Elders’ mouths. Certainly, the distinction between the Elders’ mouths and Susanna’s emphasizes the Elders’ iniquity against Susanna’s steadfast innocence, at least for readers of the *Pistel*, if not for the diegetic crowd. It also juxtaposes the Elders’ public, authoritative (and false) testimony, offered in the courtroom, with the private (and true) testimony of a condemned woman. Thus, when Joachim visits Susanna in jail, she falls to the floor and kisses his hand, explaining, “For I am dampned, I ne dar disparage thi mouth” (253). She seeks to keep the perception of defilement away from Joachim, and to “disparage his mouth” would be to damage the power of his (male and public) word.

34. Miskimin 157. The manuscripts that contain the line “with deol they hyr deiue” are the Vernon manuscript, Huntington Library HM 114, and BM MS Additional 22283.
Given Susanna’s courtroom silence, it might seem as though the *Pistel* corroborates a long-standing interpretation of the Susanna story that understands Susanna’s testimony to be private, directed only toward God, while the Elders’ voices are directed to the court and community. But there may be a different way to understand how the *Pistel* conceptualizes the different kinds of testimonies that emerge from Susanna and from the Elders, particularly if we read the *Pistel’s* repeated use of mouth imagery alongside another tale centrally about a silenced woman and the production of a public, evidentiary text: the story of Philomela.  

Like Susanna, Philomela is ubiquitous throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages, taken up by Ovid, the *Ovide moralisé* author, Gower, Chaucer, and Christine de Pizan, to name just a few. The story describes Tereus’s violent mutilation of Philomela, in which he rapes her and then, to keep her from accusing him of the crime, cuts out her tongue. Unable to speak, Philomela instead weaves her story into a textile for her sister, Procne. Chaucer’s particular version of the Philomela story (roughly contemporaneous with the *Pistel*) strikingly suggests that the central issue is the role of a male author in a tale that details the textual expression of silenced women. When Tereus cuts out Philomela’s tongue, Chaucer writes, “O sely Philomene, wo is thyn herte! / God wreke thee, and send the thy bone! / Now is it tyme I make an ende sone.”  

Leaving out the gruesome ending of the story in which Procne and Philomela kill Tereus’s son and feed the child to him, Chaucer instead foregrounds his own sense of guilt for retelling a story that portrays the violent rape and silencing of an innocent woman. Indeed, he begins the tale with a self-conscious assertion of his own response to Philomela: “And, as to me, so grisely was his deed / That whan that I his foule storye rede, / Myne eyen wexe foule and sore also” (2238–40). Chaucer seems especially anxious to distance himself from the violence performed against Philomela, positioning himself as a sorrowful witness to the events. The ending reframes the story to ensure that Philomela be understood as a wholly innocent victim. More generally, the story depicts the possibility that silenced women can find alternative modes of public testimony, whether in a textile or in the vernacular poetry penned by a male author.

Like Chaucer’s *Legend of Philomela*, the *Pistel* recognizes itself as a document that works to emphasize the legal and moral innocence of its protagonist. But rather than merely express sympathy as Chaucer does, the author classifies the *Pistel* as a kind of testifying document and the final word on

---

35. In addition, as Staley notes, the fact that the Elders’ transgression occurs specifically under a laurel tree—a unique feature of the *Pistel’s* version of the story—contextualizes the *Pistel* with Daphne. “Susanna and English Communities,” 47.

the case of Susanna: “This ferlys bifel / In the days of Danyel, / the pistol wit-
nesseth wel / Of that profete” (361–64). The particular form Susanna’s text
takes here is an epistle, which typically refers to a written letter, specifically
one that takes its content from the apostolic letters of the New Testament,
often read as part of the Mass. Indeed, the story of Susanna was read aloud
during Lent, so the “pistol” here likely gestures toward its use in sermons
and other doctrinal texts. But in the fourteenth century, “pistol” could also
refer to an oral complaint or message, as when the old woman in Chaucer’s
*Wife of Bath’s Tale* whispers a “pistol” in the ear of the knight, telling him
what women really want.\(^\text{37}\) Similarly, Hoccleve’s *Jonathas* features a meet-
ing between Jonathas and an anonymous prostitute on the street, in which
“Shee thidir cam / and bothe foorth they wente, / And he a pistle rowned in
hire ere: / Nat woot y what / for y ne cam nat there.”\(^\text{38}\) Both the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* and *Jonathas* understand a “pistol” to be a whispered comment or com-
plaint, specifically when female chastity is at stake. In these cases, the “pistol”
remains unarticulated for the reader, heard only by the immediate recipient.

Given this range of meanings, its appearance at the end of the *Pistel of
Swete Susan* signals the poem’s interest in multiple testimonial forms and
their gendered modes of authority and access. On one hand, the *Pistel*
establishes itself as a documentary witness that can be accessed by readers who
want to hear about the triumph of chastity and womanly obedience. On the
other hand, however, this epistle could signify an oral witness that cannot
immediately be heard, one that could potentially offer instruction in female
sexual expression. As noted above, though official complaint petitions were
open to women, forms of complaint about sexual transgression remained vexed even into the late fourteenth century, particularly in terms of encod-
ing a woman’s oral accusation into the iterable, written formulae acceptable
in court. The *Pistel’s* final claim that such a “pistol” can “witnesseth wel”
implicitly points out the complicated relationship between oral and written
complaints made by and on behalf of women. By using the term “pistol,” the
poem asks whether “witnessing” is an oral activity or a documentary one,
foregrounding the limitations and payoffs of voiced testimony and written
witnesses. Oral testimony, it seems, can control its audience and determine
who will hear it, while written testimony can claim iterability and legal force.

Of course, the relationship between speech and writing, and particularly
their comparative claims to authenticity and truth, were debated long before
the *Pistel*, and the poem’s particular interest in oral and written testimony


\(^{38}\) *Hoccleve’s Works I: The Minor Poems*, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, EETS e.s. 61 (London
1892), lines 166–68.
engages unexpectedly in this enduring philosophical discussion. Plato’s *Phaedrus*, to take one foundational example, argues that writing encourages laziness and forgetfulness, while Isidore of Seville recognizes writing as a supplement to speech, in which letters are symbols of words that speak on behalf of the absent. Honing Isidore’s formulation, John of Salisbury famously argued, “Fundamentally letters are shapes that indicate voices. Hence they represent things which they bring to mind through the windows of the eyes. Frequently they speak voicelessly the utterances of the absent.” In these formulations, writing is inextricably linked to voice, the originary site of cognition and articulation. More crucially, writing is a way for the silent (the “voiceless” or “absent”) to speak, mimicking utterance.

Like Isidore, Hugh of St. Victor also imagines speech and writing to be intimate partners. For Hugh, the link between voice and writing enables the kind of authoritative commentary that muffles Susanna’s voice:

The word “gloss” is Greek, and it means tongue (*lingua*), because, in a way, it bespeaks (*loquitur*) the meaning of the word under it. Philosophers call this an *ad-verbum* (upon the word) because, with one single word, it explains that word concerning the meaning of which there is question, as, for example, when *consticescere* (to become silent) is explained by the word *tacere* (to be still).

Hugh here follows William of Conches’s commentary on the *Timaeus*, in which William asserts that a gloss must be as clear as if it were “the tongue of a doctor speaking.” Such emphasis on the clarity of commentators’ glossing “tongues” surfaces in the *Pistel’s* recurring interest in men’s mouths, particularly the “tonge and toth” that describes the Elders’ false testimony against Susanna. The tongue is where theologians such as Hugh and William situate commentators’ authority to gloss Scriptural texts, and the *Pistel’s* investment in male mouths reprises the link between doctors’ tongues and Scriptural hermeneutics. But of course, the Elders’ mouths are the site of false testimony, spoken under the auspices of ecclesiastical authority. The *Pistel* thus revises the link between authoritative glossing and tongues, experimenting with the metaphors that authorize male patristic authority—that is, the authority of


41. For William’s commentary on the *Timaeus*, see *PL* 172: 250.
those who tell and retell Susanna’s story—by disengaging the tongue from the page. Indeed, Hugh’s description of silence to exemplify what he means by glossing uncannily anticipates the Pistel’s focus on Susanna’s silence in the face of false accusations. For Hugh, silence can be rendered articulate by authoritative lingua, but the Elders take immoral, self-interested advantage of their ability to gloss Susanna’s silence in the courtroom. However, although the Elders attempt to speak for Susanna, translating her silence into a story that transforms her into an adulteress and maintains their legal, doctrinal, and social status, their ultimate failure to testify convincingly via “tonge and toth” suggests the Pistel’s rejection of the authoritative-gloss-as-patristic-tongue metaphor.

Furthermore, the idea that silence is an enabling condition of writing—and voice a distraction from it—surfaces repeatedly in a wide range of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century vernacular poetry, when bureaucratic documentary production became increasingly central to the literary projects of several writers. To take one prominent example, Thomas Hoccleve elevates the bureaucratic work of a Privy Seal clerk to poetic production in the prologue to his early fifteenth-century Regiment of Princes. For Hoccleve, writing is linked to the ailing body but not to the voice: “A wryter moot thre thynges to him knytte, / And in tho may be no disseverance: / Mynde, ye, and hand—noon may from othir flitte, / But in hem moot be joynyt continuance.”

Claiming that writing tires the stomach, eyes, and back, Hoccleve goes on to argue that Privy Seal clerks must execute their jobs in silence, lest they be distracted by the talking and singing going on around them. Indeed, the need for silence distinguishes writers from manual workers, whom he calls “artificers”:

Thise artificers, see I day by day,
In the hoofteste of al hir bysynesse,
Talken and syngge and make game and play,
And foorth hir labour passith with gladnessse;
But we laboure in travaülous stilnesse;
We stowpe and stare upon the sheepes skyn,
And keepe moot our song and wordes yn. (1009–15)

Sarah Tolmie points out that Hoccleve actually fails to distinguish between the intellectual work of a writer and the physical work of a laborer, interested

42. The Regiment of Princes, ed. Charles R. Blyth (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 1999), lines 995–98.
as he is here and throughout the *Regiment* in his own bodily afflictions. \(^43\) Moreover, Tolmie reminds us that the job of Privy Seal clerks was mimetic rather than inventive, and that they spent their time “directing their discrete wills to follow or co-produce the royal will embodied in the warrants issued by their office” (287). Thus, Hoccleve’s call for silence might be read not so much as a writer’s need for silence to concentrate but as a gesture to the radical absence of the author-scribe at the heart of the kind of bureaucratic production in which he was involved. Transcribing the utterances of others, Hoccleve-the-bureaucrat reconceptualizes Isidore’s intimate relationship between voice and letter to imagine writing as representative of the authorial absence that renders bureaucratic production almost monastic in its focus and in its intense devotion to the state. \(^44\)

Hoccleve exemplifies what might be seen as an increasing disengagement between voice and document in the later Middle Ages, a disengagement at the heart of the *Pistel*’s revision of the long-established philosophical and patristic link between tongue and text in the face of new kinds of legal and bureaucratic textual productions. For Hoccleve, silence can be deadening, a morose vision of John of Salisbury’s voice-as-text under the tedious conditions of scribal labor. But if we examine another fifteenth-century Chaucerian, Robert Henryson, we might see yet another version of the relationship between voice and documentation, as he considers silence central to documentary production. Like the author of the *Pistel*, Henryson specifically explores the relationship between bureaucratic silence and female voice in his *Testament of Cresseid*, which revisits Cresseid after her affair with Diomedes is over. She is condemned to a diseased life in a leper colony and given over to a parliament of gods to be judged. The *Testament* ends with a complaint and Cresseid’s last will, which leaves most of her worldly possessions to her fellow lepers and cautions the “ladyis fair of Troy and Grece” to beware the vagaries of Fortune. \(^45\) Significantly, what Cresseid laments most is the loss of her voice: “‘My cleir voice and courtlie carroling, / Quhair I was wont with ladyis for to sing, / Is rawk as ruik, full hiddeous, hoir and hace” (443–45). Nonetheless, she seems to imagine her writing as a way to ensure her testimony will endure, since, after concluding her complaint she begins


her last will and testament: “with paper scho sat doun / And on this maneir maid hir testament” (575–76).

The emphasis here on both the material paper and the “making” of her testament illustrates Cresseid’s sense that for her testimony to be effective, it must be documentary, rather than oral; this written testament clearly substitutes for her absent raw voice. In her document, Cresseid implores her readers to take heed of her experiences: “Exempill mak of me in your memour,” she writes. “‘Quhilk of sic thingis wofull witnes beiris’” (465–66). Cresseid defines witnessing here as the documented accounts of her life, both the complaint she pens as well as Henryson’s Testament. Thus, for Cresseid, “bearing witness” is fundamentally documentary, and as such, fundamentally iterable, accessible to a community of readers rather than listeners. Moreover, Cresseid conceptualizes her testament as a supplement to her deteriorating body and the loss of her “cleir voice,” a way to mitigate the silence brought upon by her death.

But Henryson takes a more ambivalent stance with respect to the possibility that a written document produced by a male author can offer the kind of authentic testimony Cresseid might provide with her own voice and body. Indeed, like Chaucer, he seems to worry about taking over Cresseid’s testimony once her voice is gone:

Now, worthie wemen, in this ballet schort,  
Maid for your worship and instructioun,  
Of cheritie, I monische and exhort,  
Ming not your lufe with fals deceptioun:  
Beir in your mynd this schort conclusioun  
Of fair Cresseid, as I have said befoir.  
Sen scho is deid I speik of hir no moir. (610–16)

The effect of Cresseid’s death, he suggests, is to silence the author, though he carefully puts this silence in oral terms: “I speik of hir no moir.” His overt refusal to “speak” on behalf of the dead Cresseid is supplanted by his textual production that claims to document Cresseid’s voice. For both Cresseid and Henryson, then, the voice must be destroyed in order for the text to be efficacious; the absence of oral testimony provides the conditions by which a documentary witness can be written and, by extension, the conditions by

46. For a discussion about how literary complaints were invigorated and structured by legal forms of complaint (that is, a written bill that formalized a grievance for which legal remedy was sought), see Scase, Literature and Complaint.
which that document can imagine a community of present and future readers taking heed of its exemplary testimony.

Henryson’s Testament, like Chaucer’s Legend of Philomela, sets up a gendered system of witnessing: the loss of the female voice is the male author’s opportunity to write (albeit with some anxiety). The end of the Pistol seems to participate in a similar system, since this witnessing “pistel” testifies on behalf of Daniel the prophet, not Susanna. To make a broad claim from these observations, we might suggest that testifying documents in the later Middle Ages tend to signal male authorship, or at least masculine authority. If this is the case, the Elders’ legal downfall would not celebrate Susanna so much as it would elevate Daniel, and the Pistol of Swete Susan would attest to the transfer of religious authority from the perjurious Elders to a young prophet. But the use of the term “pistel,” rather than “compleinte,” suggests perhaps that the Pistol wants to posit an alternative. Even if we are to recognize that this poem documents the divinely sanctioned, authoritative power of Daniel’s prophetic voice, we must also consider the possibility that there is an oral testimony, a “pistel” whispered so that it cannot be immediately accessed by readers. Perhaps this “pistel” is Susanna’s testimony, a female voice that subtends the documentation of Daniel’s judgment.

Citation, Notaries, and Documentary Presence in the Case of Susanna

Thus far, this chapter has tracked various patristic interventions into the Susanna story, demonstrating that Susanna’s silenced voice was key to the influential and enduring transformation of the story from a warning against false witness into an exemplary tale of female obedience. The previous section argued that the late fourteenth-century Pistol of Swete Susan rehabilitated the story’s interest in false witness, restaging the evidentiary possibilities in female silence and written documents, particularly when examined both through fourteenth-century complaint procedures regarding sexual transgressions and through other fourteenth- and fifteenth-century vernacular texts that explore the complicated relationship between female silence, official document, and male-authored vernacular poetry. This section turns to late medieval citations of the Susanna story (rather than adaptations of or commentaries on it) to examine how fourteenth- and fifteenth-century writers used the story’s complex negotiations between vocal and documentary witnessing to reconsider the communal unity promised by the exemplary
Susanna. For some vernacular writers at the turn of the fifteenth century, Susanna’s stoic silence offered a model of resistance against corrupt ecclesiastical or legal hierarchies, rather than a tale of false witness that could reaffirm orthodox doctrine. These texts envisioned the Susanna story as a way to challenge the authority of the Church to assert an alternative heterodox Christian community.

Significantly, many of the texts that cite the story of Susanna understand it in legal terms, emphasizing its investment in how legal testimony might be registered. For example, when Chaucer’s Parson cites Susanna, he insists the Susanna story is of particular importance for jurors and notaries: “Ware yow, questemongeres and notaries! Certes, for fals witnessyng was Susanna in ful gret sorwe and peyne, and many another mo” (X.796). Notaries, discussed more fully in chapter 4, were the legal scribes charged with documenting the oral testimonies of courtroom witnesses, and they represented a fairly new scribal occupation in the fourteenth century, one that was already flourishing in Italy but only beginning to emerge on the English legal scene. Notaries were not required to write down testimony word for word, but rather to construct testimony as a coherent narrative. Because they were afforded a significant amount of inventional leeway but also considered arbiters of legal truths, they were often the subject of suspicion and satire in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The Parson not only understands the Susanna story as fundamentally about false witness rather than about female obedience and chastity, he imagines bureaucratic scribes as the pertinent audience for it, rather than wives or virgins. Accordingly, he inserts the Susanna narrative into a contemporary legal context, worrying particularly that what the narrative exposes—that is, the potential fallibility inherent in transcribing oral testimony into a legal document, particularly when that testimony is silent—might happen under the relatively new conditions of notarial practice.

Similarly, the Wycliffite treatise “Of Prelates” views the Susanna story as a warning for notaries to watch out for false witnesses and as a caution for them to pay attention to how they document testimony. The treatise particularly worries about the negotiation between voice, silence, and document. It claims that when corrupt ecclesiastical officials want to condemn an innocent man, they

47. Here, I draw on another meaning of “witness”: that is, “to cite.” “witnessen,” Middle English Dictionary s.v. 5 a–d.
brynge many false witnesses & notaries in his absence, & in presence speke
no word, & þei feyuen þis false lawe, ȝif þre or four false witnesses hirid bi
money seye sich a þing æsten a trewe man, þan he schal not be herd, þouȝ
he wolde proue þe contrarie bi two hundrid or þre; & þes false men seye in
here doynge þat crist was lafully don to þe deþ, & susanne also, for bi dich
witnessis þei weren dampnyd, but cristene men bileue techiþ þe contrarie.48

The treatise’s vocabulary takes up the dense connotations of “witness”: that
is, to provide oral testimony to an event, as the Elders (falsely) do, and to
document that testimony, as notaries were supposed to do. “Of Prelates” is
particularly anxious about the work legal documentation is designed to per-
form, insofar as it worries that while prelates might be silent in the face of the
“trewe man,” a false accusation might nonetheless enter into the legal record.
In such a scenario, notarial writing might supplement silence in order to sup-
port and ossify the claims of a false witness, particularly since, as the Susanna
story shows, silence offers corrupt Church authorities the opportunity to
falsify the legal record. Moreover, the treatise presents such documentary
manipulation as an exploitation of the principles of presence and absence:
the testimonial silence that occurs in the presence of the “trewe man” results
in lies and slander written in his absence.

Indeed, Wycliffite texts repeatedly worry about false witnesses’ exploita-
tion of official modes of documenting testimony, citing Susanna as an exam-
ple of ecclesiastical authority gone wrong. For example, William Thorpe uses
Susanna as a way to authorize his refusal to submit to Archbishop Arundel’s
demand that he abjure his Lollard practice of preaching without Church
permission:

And I heerynge þese wordis þouȝte in myn herte þat þis was an vnlee-
ful askynge, and I demed mysilf cursid of God if I consented herto; and
I þouȝte how Susanne seide “Angwysschis ben to me on evry side,” and
forþi þat I stoode stille musynge and spak not.49

Throughout his Testimony, as discussed in chapter 5, Thorpe maintains
his silence to the frustration of Arundel and his henchmen. That he draws
upon Susanna as a foundational text in support of this strategy suggests
that he understands the Susanna story to be about managing the relation-

48. The English Works of John Wyclif, ed. F. D. Matthew, EETS 74 (London: Kegan Paul,
Trench and Trubner, 1880; repr. 1902), 74–55.
49. The Examination of William Thorpe, in Two Wycliffite Texts, ed. Anne Hudson, EETS 301
ship between testimonial silence and textual production, particularly when the legal and doctrinal record is at stake.\textsuperscript{50} The layers of citation here are multiple and complicated: Thorpe documents—but does not utter—something Susanna purportedly said, either to the Elders, to herself, to God, or to her readers. Thus, rather than merely use Susanna as a model for faithful silence—that is, silence that, as prayer, can result in divine intervention—Thorpe puts pressure on the story’s complex negotiations between voice and document and, by extension, between presence and absence. Thorpe’s silence frustrates Arundel’s attempts to turn his testimony into a self-accusing document, but Thorpe can also imagine his own silence turning into text that will reach beyond Arundel to a sympathetic audience. By using Susanna to negotiate his own silence with various kinds of documentation (the legal transcript Arundel seeks to produce as well as the extralegal autobiography Thorpe wants to provide a Lollard audience), Thorpe transforms the Susanna story into an iterable text that supports his resistance against ecclesiastical and legal corruption.\textsuperscript{51}

The Wycliffite championing of Susanna centers on larger questions about divine mediation and presence, discussed more fully in chapter 5. In the case of “Of Prelates,” the treatise worries in particular about the work of a notary, who operates as a kind of intermediary between the defendant and the court and, as Thorpe points out, between oral testimony and documented transcript. In “Of Prelates,” Susanna represents an exemplar of truth unadulterated by corrupt clergy or legal officials.\textsuperscript{52} Likewise, Thorpe sees Susanna as a way to argue on behalf of his own righteousness without the interference of the legal officials who want to shape him into a legal and moral heretic. We might fruitfully understand these complex citations of Susanna in terms of Derrida’s discussion of spectrality, which operates according to the same

\textsuperscript{50} Another Lollard tract, the fifteenth-century \textit{Lanterne of Liȝt}, also cites Susanna as a warning against false witness, but it emphasizes God’s intervention into a seemingly intractable situation. \textit{Lanterne of Liȝt}, ed. Lilian M. Swinburn, EETS 151 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1917), XII.10–19.


\textsuperscript{52} Debates about clerical mediation between individual and God are, of course, an enormous and complex issue for Wycliffism and Lollardy. Although I discuss these debates more in chapter 5, I cannot pursue their details fully in this book. For a more in-depth discussion of mediation and presence in Wycliffite studies, see J. Patrick Hornbeck II, \textit{What Is a Lollard?: Dissent and Belief in Late Medieval England} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), and Anne Hudson, \textit{The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) as well as studies by Hudson, Fiona Somerset, and Andrew Cole cited in chapter 5.
logic as iterability: the spectral word, like the iterable word, can be detached from its immediate context, bubbling up in unexpected places and with unintended results.\textsuperscript{53} Derrida defines spectrality as the inevitable return, what he calls the “frequenting,” of a dead or absent authority, such that even the excoriation or rejection of that authority retains its residual presence. Spectrality thus operates via citational logic, which works according to a principle of reflection, “reproducing in a mirror the logic of the adversary at the moment of the retort, piling it on there where one accuses the other of abusing language” (157). In other words, spectrality denotes not merely a ghostly haunting in which something dead or absent unexpectedly returns, but a persistent, dialectical reproduction, in which the rhetorical techniques of an adversary are learned and mimicked so as to destroy the adversary.\textsuperscript{54} Thorpe’s citation of Susanna reflects and assumes Archbishop Arundel’s ecclesiastical power to quote Scripture, and in doing so, Thorpe asserts the power to produce his own legal document, beyond the ecclesiastical arm of the Archbishop. That he does so with a citation of Susanna suggests that he envisions her silence as a particularly powerful model of spectrality, from which he can counter Arundel’s efforts to indict him as a heretic.

Moreover, when Derrida explains that spectrality connotes repetition and frequency, insofar as the specter returns to haunt the present, he uncannily returns us to the \textit{Pistel}. As Derrida explains, the specter haunts repeatedly:

Visit upon visit, since it returns to see us and since \textit{visitate}, the frequentative of \textit{visere} (to see, examine, contemplate) translates well the recurrence or returning, the frequency of a visitation. The latter does not always mark the moment of a generous apparition or a friendly vision; it can signify strict inspection or violent search, consequent persecution, implacable \textit{concatenation}. The social mode of haunting, its original style could also be called, taking into account this repetition, \textit{frequentation}. (126)

Strikingly, when the \textit{Pistel} describes the Elders lurking around the garden walls, gazing upon Susanna, it describes them as specters:

\begin{quote}
Iwis, ther haunted til her hous, hende, ye may here,
Two domes of that lawe that dredde were that day,
\end{quote}


Preostes and presidens preised als peere;
Of whom ur soverein Lord sawes gan say,
And tolde
How heor wikkednes comes
Of the wrongwys domes
That thei have gyve to gomes,
This juges of olde. (31–39)

The *Pistel* follows the Wycliffite Bible’s use of the Middle English verb “hauntiden” as a translation of the Vulgate’s *frequentabunt*.55 Though the Elders do not repeatedly visit the garden, they “haunt” the text insofar as they signal the return to a moment of transgression, to the violation of Susanna. In other words, when the Elders “haunt” the garden, they do not merely lurk and gaze upon Susanna; they perform the historical and textual work of the specter, loitering in the space between presence and absence, between the transitory quality of the utterance and the iterability of the written word. Read with Derridean spectrality in mind, the *Pistel*’s use of the word “hauntiden” here indicates that the Elders’ moral transgression can be understood as something that returns again and again, first as their proposition to Susanna and then as false witness. In other words, their lascivious gazes and their perjury mirror one another, violating Susanna in the eyes of her husband, the community, and the court.

In explaining the frequenting quality of the specter, Derrida also recognizes the intimate relationship between seeing and spectrality. This “visor effect,” as he calls it, describes the feeling of being seen without being able to gaze back, of being haunted without knowing from where or by whom. How, he asks, do we respond to something we cannot see but somehow know is there? For Derrida, the only way to respond is to hear the specter: “Since we do not see the one who sees us,” he writes, “we must fall back on its voice” (7). Notably, the *Pistel* specifically depicts the Elders’ lecherous gazes—gazes the unwitting Susanna cannot return—as an aural moment for the reader, injecting “hende, ye may here” to direct the reader to *listen* to this moment in the story. This narratorial intrusion is unique to the *Pistel*’s version of the Susanna story. Reading it through Derrida, we might conceptualize this directive as a suggestion that the readers of the *Pistel* pay attention to the multiple ways voice can surface in a text. Accordingly, Susanna’s “careful cri” exists between utterance and documentation, a silence that can be “heard” by readers despite the Elders’ attempts to muffle it.

By considering spectrality as a framework for thinking about how the *Pistol* understands Susanna’s cry in the garden and, more broadly, about how late medieval texts take up the Susanna story as a call to resist ecclesiastical manipulation of the written record, we can recognize that fourteenth- and fifteenth-century adaptations and citations of the Susanna story foreground the complexities of textual iterability and authority, particularly when it comes to female testimony. Moreover, the long history of the Susanna story illustrates the way vocal and written testimony can be used to construct the requirements of Christian obedience, particularly for women. However, whereas early commentators translate Susanna’s silence into a model for women to bear witness to their steadfast faith in Christian doctrine and divine justice, later English versions reconceptualize female silence as a model of resistance. By extension, these English versions of the story use Susanna’s silence to imagine communities of Christian believers that could bear witness to the iniquities of some Church authorities and assert obedience to “true” Church doctrine that operated outside ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Thus, like the *Man of Law’s Tale*, the story of Susanna provides opportunities to imagine a unified Christian community; the threat of false testimony is the impetus to articulate and shore up the Scriptural requirement to bear witness to one’s faith, even in the face of legal manipulation. But whereas the *Man of Law’s Tale* depicts a “nacioun” that emerges unified and triumphant out of false witnesses’ threats against Alla’s Christian authority, the Susanna story depicts the authorities themselves as the threats to Christian community. Moreover, as late medieval adaptations of the Susanna story reveal, the tensions at the heart of this story of false witness occur between the multiple forms of witnessing. The various kinds of testimony featured in this story—from private prayer to public testimony, from whispered epistles to vernacular poetry—lay claim to different models of legal and moral authority. The portrayal of different witnessing forms is most fulfilled in the *Pistol of Swete Susan*, and later citations of the Susanna story take up the *Pistol’s* exploration of different kinds of witnessing to critique ecclesiastical authority and to imagine alternative Christian communities.

These explorations of various forms of witnessing demonstrate the complex ways witnessing can produce different, even competing, devotional communities, in which Church authorities might be the target of critique. Indeed, even though the Susanna story functioned for patristic writers as a foundational example of female obedience and chastity, it comes to operate as a challenge to orthodox forms of community-unification and -discipline. The next chapter shows how witnessing was fundamental to a particularly important and vexed discourse of community-formation in the later Middle
Ages: neighborliness. The witness and the neighbor were unexpected but crucial reflections of one another in a wide range of late medieval discourses about community, from pastoral treatises to legal statutes to outlaw poetry. Those texts, like the *Pistel*, depict witnessing as a fundamental but flexible mode of constructing a community and show that determining who is one’s neighbor is a more complicated task than it first seems. In addition, as we shall see in the final two chapters of this book, the competing authoritative claims that could be made by oral and documentary testimony were crucial to late medieval writers who sought to stretch the boundaries of Christian community to include those marginalized by ecclesiastical restrictions and discipline. The medium of witnessing—whether the body, the voice, or the document—was an important consideration for writers exploring how testimony is defined and how the requirement to bear witness could be used to reconfigure Christian obedience, community, and authority.