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A glorious feast for the eyes : the roles of iconography and sight in Chaucer's The prioress's tale and The second nun's tale

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Title:	A Glorious Feast for the Eyes: The Roles of Iconography and Sight in Chaucer's The Prioress's Tale and The Second Nun's Tale
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This thesis investigates Chaucer's use of iconography and sight in The Prioress's Tale and The Second Nun's Tale and how these elements symbiotically support and enhance the text so that the tales themselves become iconic. An overview of medieval religious practices and doctrines is followed by a discussion of The Prioress's Tale, in which Chaucer's direct reference to a Virgin icon is explored. Further, the analysis focuses on the way in which visual cues supplement the meaning of the written word. A discussion of The Second Nun's Tale follows, exploring the relationship between sight and faith. The importance of sight as a unifying device is discussed as is the idea that sight and faith together work to engender finite, divine truth for the reader/listener. The conclusion forwards the notion that the tales are iconic because they draw the reader/listener toward the divine via an emphasis on icons and religious visual imagery.

I certify that I have read this thesis and find that, in scope and quality, it satisfies the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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A GLORIOUS FEAST FOR THE EYES: THE ROLES OF ICONOGRAPHY AND SIGHT IN CHAUCER'S THE PRIORESS'S TALE AND THE SECOND NUN'S TALE

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"Words become pictures, pictures give birth to words. In the Middle Ages to be audience to an 'image' (whether verbal or visual) implied activity, not passivity. It called one to thought, to feeling, to meditation," (30). As V.A. Kolve recognizes here, in the beginning of his study, Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative, the relationship between the written word and the visual image in medieval literature is extremely close, one could even say symbiotic. Words beget "pictures" in the mind's eye, just as pictures beget a flow of words, thought or spoken, from the viewer. Such cross-fertilization is, I would argue, a natural process of the human mind, the result of the primacy of sight in the hierarchy of the senses. Though empiricism has taught us to distrust any "knowledge" gained through our senses, what I hope to show in this paper is that the presence of a powerful iconographic dimension in Chaucer's religious poetry requires that we re-evaluate our interpretations of his work with an understanding of the role that sensory perception--sight, in particular--played in creating meaning in the medieval world. That mere words can be allied with visual images to engender a finite meaning some would say is naive, archaic, or simply impossible.[1] But what Chaucer's religious poetry demonstrates is that the compression of the written word and the religious visual image and the understanding created therein is not only possible, it is indisputable.

To further complicate matters, the study of the influence of visual images on the imagination and intellect has long been the exclusive domain of the art historian. Pre-eminent scholars such as Andre Grabar and Erwin Panofsky have focused on the history

[1] See Jacques Derrida's Of Grammatology, his essays, "Differance" and "Form and Meaning: A Note on the Phenomenology of Language," and Paul de Man's "Process and Poetry."

and importance of iconography[2], but only in fits and starts, it seems, have scholars of medieval literature embraced the notion that the interaction of words and visual images is crucial to a complete understanding of the texts of the Middle Ages.[3] V.A. Kolve, in the book previously mentioned, has provided an excellent foundation for such inter-disciplinary work, for he analyzes Chaucer's first five Canterbury Tales from a perspective of the "narrative imagery" they evoke. My own discussion, then, will build upon Kolve's work and will explore how, in two of Chaucer's religious tales--those of the Prioress and the Second Nun--Chaucer skillfully weaves vivid imagery into the fabric of his poetry so that these tales themselves become iconic.

By making this assertion, however, I do not mean to suggest that Chaucer, perched at his desk, carefully injected religious imagery into his tales with the express purpose of exploiting his audience's familiarity with sacred images and their meanings. My point, in fact, is that the medieval mind, steeped in Christian symbolism, would have accepted and understood the commingling of the verbal and the visual quite naturally. In a society where few could read, reliance upon visual representations of ideas, religious and secular, was standard, unconscious, and pervasive.[4] Chaucer, a poet of considerable deftness and sensitivity, clearly makes use of his audience's knowledge of religious visual images, yet he does so unobtrusively. If this premise is valid, as I believe it is, then the ways in which

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[2] See Grabar's Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins and Panofsky's Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance and Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers on and in Art History.

[3] Although I advocate an inter-disciplinary approach to medieval textual analysis, I also recognize the inherent difficulty in such a position. To be a medievalist already requires an expertise in languages, theology, history, and philosophy, yet what I hope to show in my discussion is that knowledge of art--iconography, specifically--adds a layer of understanding to medieval literature that cannot and should not be ignored.

[4] See Biblia Pauperum (Poor Man's Bible), a collection of pictorial Biblical narrative scenes targeted at the illiterate; also see the commentary on and examples of Books of Hours in John Harthan's The Book of Hours.

modern critics interpret Chaucer's work, and indeed much of medieval literature, must incorporate an understanding of the central role of the visual in order to be complete.

Rather than ignoring, or, indeed, undermining, the power of the word-image nexus, we must instead accept that Chaucer's religious poetry requires being interpreted in light of the fact that the symbiotic relationship between word and image created accessible meaning for his audience. As students of literature, we should not shy away from investigating the power of iconography in medieval texts, and, in fact, I would argue that without an acute awareness of the ways in which iconography supplements the words on the page, The Prioress's Tale and The Second Nun's Tale, while remaining edifying, lose some of their complexity and depth and beauty--it is like viewing a rainbow with the indigo and violet filtered out. Ultimately, it is through the investigation of the iconographic dimensions of Chaucer's work that we can rediscover the original power of his poetry and attain a true and integrated understanding of his achievement.

Before proceeding to the tales themselves, it is worthwhile, I think, to first give a brief overview of those issues which are inextricably bound up in the development of medieval culture, namely the doctrines and religious practices that defined early Christianity. To do so is important because doctrinal conflicts, the rise of relics and icons, and the popularity of pilgrimages all affected and influenced Chaucer's work. And, too, what should not be ignored is the theological volatility of the early Christian and medieval periods; though the dogma of modern Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy are largely stable, this was certainly not always the case. In the beginning of the 4th century, as a relatively young revealed religion, Christianity suffered the upheavals of "growing pains." The conversion of the emperor Constantine and subsequent promulgation of Christianity did much, of course, to cement the political and cultural authority of the Church, but the explosive growth also brought with it a host of problems. Perhaps

foremost among these troubles was doctrinal controversy. Orthodoxy, even though it was meant to represent an unbroken tradition of apostolic faith, was challenged by numerous heresies, such as Arianism[5], so that ecumenical councils had to be convened in order to officially define Christian doctrine and staunch the bleeding caused by heretical ruptures.[6] The first of these councils, that of Nicea in 325, tackled the most problematic of all issues--the mystery of the Trinity. Orthodox Trinitarian doctrine is a complex and crucial subject to which I will return later in this discussion as it arises in the Tales.

As if heresies did not pose enough of a problem for the Church in its infancy, there was also the matter of entrenched Roman paganism with which to contend. Destroying the physical remnants of polytheism--the idols and temples--was relatively easy in comparison with eradicating its influence on the mentality of ancient man. Historically, this influence has been used to explain the rise of the Christian cult of saints and, by extension, icons, as though these two developments were mere re-directions of idolatrous compulsions. Peter Brown, in his The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity, countermands this interpretation, writing

> ...the two-tiered model [of Christianity] encourages the historian to assume that a change in the piety of late-antique men, of the kind associated with the rise of the cult of saints, must have been the result of the capitulation by the enlightened elites of the Christian church to modes of thought previously current only among the 'vulgar.' The result has been a tendency to explain much of the cultural and religious history of late antiquity in terms of drastic 'landslips' in the relation between the elites and the masses. (17)

In other words, the rise of the cult of the saints has been peremptorily written off as no more than a pragmatic decision by religious authorities to appease an ignorant and superstitious populace that was still tainted by paganism. Brown goes on to argue,

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[5] By the 8th century, St. John of Damascus was able to list 103 distinct heretical sects in his On Heresies, which was taken, in part, from a previous catalog compiled by St. Epiphanius.

[6] See Jaroslav Pelikan's discussion of ecumenical councils in The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700), pp. 22-30.

however, that such an explanation is a misinterpretation of the facts. He explodes the notion that the origin of saint veneration was a vestige of paganism, tolerated as a way of controlling the lower classes. He states:

> ...what is clearly documented is the tension caused by the way in which the demands of a new elite of well-to-do Christian laywomen and laymen were met by the determination of an equally new elite of bishops, who often came from the same class, that they and they alone should be the patroni of the publicly established Christian communities. Instead of a dialogue on 'superstition' conducted between the disapproving 'few' and the 'common herd,' we must begin with a conflict more plausible to late-Roman men—a conflict between rival systems of patronage. (32-33)

Viewed in this light, the popularity and veneration of saints' tombs and relics were direct results of a power struggle between wealthy Roman families--who wished to continue their private patronage of holy funeral sites--and the Church authorities--who wished to consolidate their ecclesiastical power by bringing such patronage to the people, though always under strict Church control.

Brown's assertions, while they do not explain away the religious elitism that was indeed a component of early and medieval Christianity, do underscore the fact that the origins of saint and icon veneration cannot be simplistically ascribed to the superstitious longings of an uneducated mob. These more popular practices within Christianity were, in fact, widely accepted and supported by Church authorities. St. John Chrysostom, Pope Gregory the Great, and St. John of Damascus all wrote and preached extensively during the early Christian era on the miraculous workings of the saints and their relics and holy images.[7] Even though I stress that many deeply respected leaders of orthodox Christianity lent their support to the cult of the saints and icons, I in no way mean to ignore or deny the existence of religious elitism in the societies of both the East and the West, nor do I wish to

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[7] See the eighth of St. John Chrysostom's Homilies on the Statues to the People of Antioch, the second book of the Dialogues of Gregory the Great (De vita et miraculis venerabilis Benedicti), and St. John of Damascus's The Orthodox Faith, Book Four, On Images.

gloss over the very obvious disparity between the educated and uneducated faithful--in fact, I will discuss this disparity at some length during my analysis of The Prioress's Tale. My point, however, is that attributing popular forms of Christian worship **exclusively** to the "vulgar" only undermines the importance and gravity of these practices.

Throughout the centuries leading up to and during the Middle Ages, Christians of all classes, the wealthy and the learned included, became devotees of relics and icons and participants in pilgrimages.[8] When, in 1095, Pope Urban passionately called the aristocratic faithful to service in the First Crusade, he did so by appealing to their desire to rescue Jerusalem--with all of her holy sites and relics--from the clutches of the "infidels." And pilgrimages of all kinds, not just those to the Holy Land, enthralled medieval society and provide the backdrop for Chaucer's most famous and eclectic work. In our age, such journeys are no longer popular (except, perhaps, among members of the Cult of Elvis), but their prevalence during the Middle Ages should not be underestimated. The motivations for pilgrimages were, of course, as varied as the travellers themselves; scholars have long identified a host of inspirations, ranging from sincere piety to cures for illnesses to the desire for the adventure and novelty of travel.[9] In Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, the poet

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[8] For instance, Helena, the mother of the emperor Constantine, devoted much of her energies to locating the pieces of the True Cross. When she did so, in 326, she had built the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem on the site. Hundreds of other churches sprang up in the Byzantine Empire and in Europe, housing saints' bones and other corporeal remnants, and became enormous pilgrimage centers, such as those at Santiago (St. James de Compostela), Jerusalem, and Canterbury. With the rapid spread of shrines and churches, it is no wonder that the peddling of saints' relics became a lucrative business--one that Chaucer lampoons in his description of the Pardoner in the General Prologue.

[9] In addition, Jonathan Sumption, in Pilgrimage: An Image of Mediaeval Religion, identifies at least four different "categories" of pilgrims: those who travelled to the Holy Land in the hope of imitating Christ's journey on earth, those who used pilgrimages as a means of withdrawing from an incurably corrupt world, those who went on pilgrimages to expiate their sins, and those on whom pilgrimages were imposed by church courts. Victor and Edith Turner (Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives), put forth the view that pilgrimages represented "liminoid phenomena," a typically human practice of ritualized transition or movement away from a familiar location toward a periphery that offered salvation. Finally, Christian Zacher, in Curiosity and Pilgrimage: The Literature of Discovery in Fourteenth-Century England, writes of the pilgrimage as a manifestation of curiositas, the desire to see and know the world.

uses the journey to one of England's most prominent pilgrimage sites as a framing device[10] for his work and presents a disparate assemblage of travellers whose motivations reflect this spectrum. The tales themselves cover a wide range of subjects and styles, from the obscene to the devotional, and it is this latter group upon which I will focus. Though Chaucer's use of "narrative imagery" runs through his secular tales as well (as Kolve has demonstrated), I believe that his religious tales illustrate the commingling of the visual and the written arts most strikingly and provide ample proof of the vitality of this fusion.

The Prioress's Tale begins with the invocation of God and Mary for assistance in telling the tale well and to the greater glory of both. Almost from the very beginning, in the prologue, Chaucer incorporates vivid imagery into his verse and uses it to smooth the Prioress's change in focus from God to Mary. In the first stanza, the Prioress explains that God's praises are already sung far and wide by learned men but that also "...by the mouth of children thy bountee / Parfouned is, for **on the brest soukynge** / Somtyme shewen they thyn heriynge " (ll. 457-459, emphasis mine[11]). She then follows this image of motherhood, which began as an invocation of God, with a direct appeal to Mary. She continues:

> Wherfore in laude, as I best kan or may,
> Of thee and of the **white lylye flour**
> Which that the bar, and is a **mayde alway**,
> To telle a storie I wol do my **labour**;
> Nat that I may encressen hir honour,
> For she hirself is honour and the roote
> Of bountee, next hir Sone, and soules boote.
>
> O mooder Mayde, O mayde Mooder free!
> O bussh unbrent, brennynge in Moyses sighte,
> That ravyshedest doun fro the Deitee,
> Thurgh thyn humblesse, the Goost that in th'alighte,
> Of whos vertu, whan he thyn herte lighte,

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[10]It is interesting to note that this common literary term relies to a certain degree on our understanding of the visual arts and how they logically apply to literature, which is, in a sense, the heart of my present discussion.

[11]From this point onward, all emphasis added is my own.

Conceyved was the Fadres sapience,
Help me to telle it in thy reverence!
(ll. 460-473)

In effect, the prioress's introduction of the suckling child in line 458 initiates the movement from God toward Mary as the main inspiration for the tale. The words and images she uses in line 461 ("the white lylye flour"), line 462 ("mayde alway"), and line 463 ("I wol do my labour") form a path of connected references to motherhood and Mary that would have prepared the audience for the direct address of "mooder Mayde," (Mary). These lines help to fulfill the promise introduced with that first vivid image (the child at the breast), and I would argue, the listener's understanding that the Prioress refers to the Virgin and infant Jesus would have been easily and quickly completed.

To facilitate such a connection through visual imagery is important, I believe, because of the unique position Mary held in medieval spiritual life. The Cult of the Virgin, an import from the East, was extremely popular during the High Middle Ages, when Mary became a powerful intercessor on behalf of the sinful.[12] The Prioress, as a woman invested herself with religious authority--rare enough in medieval society--would have wished to stress the Virgin's role as the Mother of God because by reminding her audience of Mary, the Theotokos ("God Bearer"), she would also have been subtly reinforcing her own position as a female religious. That she accomplishes this goal with an appeal to a concrete image reflects the primary way in which the Cult itself was popularized in society: through icons, relics, and churches dedicated to the Virgin, all "seen" manifestations of devotion. Several recent critics have noted this elevation of Mary's (and, by extension,

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[12] See Pelikan's discussion of "Mary as Mediatrix" in The Growth of Medieval Theology (600-1300), pp. 160-174, and Marina Warner's chapter entitled "Intercessor" in Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary.

female saints' and mystics') status in medieval texts but none, to my knowledge, have fully probed the implications of the technique used, that of reliance on visual representations.[13]

The closest any have come may be found in the work of Elizabeth Robertson, whose study of devotional prose focuses on the way in which accounts of female spirituality are nearly always linked to the workings of the flesh. In Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience, Robertson asserts that "as daughters of Eve, all women inherit Eve's dependence on the senses, her inability to think abstractly, her fundamental willfulness, and, most importantly, her sexual guilt" (8-9). This misogynistic attitude, rooted in the patristic tradition, is, she continues, ". . .mitigated to some extent by the redeeming figure of Mary. . . .a woman can never rise above her body as did Mary... but she can at least imitate Mary's silence and obedience. She can follow Mary in humility, obedience, silence, modesty, prudence, and mortification as well as in compassion and endurance of suffering" (39). There is no indication in the literature or theology of the Middle Ages that "ordinary" women believed they could achieve Mary's unique standing, but the rise in Mary's status, as evidenced by the spread of her cult[14] and the development of marian doctrine[15], highlights the redemptive qualities of motherhood.

The Prioress's emphasis on the image of the suckling child is a perfect example of this: woman is destined to endure the hardships of birth and child rearing, but, as Mary exemplifies, she is also the lifegiver, the bearer of spirit. Although our modern sensibilities rightly take offense at the notion that a woman's worth resides solely in her maternal capabilities, we must understand that to the medieval mind, motherhood was an undeniably

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[13] Roger Ellis's Patterns of Religious Narrative in the Canterbury Tales touches briefly upon the use of religious art in the tale, but his primary argument revolves around the imperfections of the work as a religious exemplum.

[14] See Michael P. Carroll's The Cult of the Virgin Mary: Psychological Origins, pp. 10-13, for a list of marian pilgrimage sites in Europe.

[15] Bernard of Clairvaux, one of the most influential of all theologians during the Middle Ages, was a strong supporter of Mary's elevated status and wrote extensively on mariology. See his Four Homilies in Praise of the Virgin Mary.

central and positive female role. Robertson, while her interpretations of female spirituality are insightful, to be sure, does not go far enough in expanding her investigation to include the study of how iconography figures into the equation. The proliferation of icons of the Virgin point to a raised consciousness of her part in the creation of Christianity itself; the Council of Ephesus in 431 had officially declared Mary the Theotokos, and universally acknowledged by the orthodox from the 5th century onward was the understanding that without Mary and the virgin birth, there could have been no incarnation, no redemption for mankind.[16]

It was her role in the salvation of humanity that "allowed" womankind to achieve the kind of validation through the flesh on which Robertson focuses. During the 11th and 12th centuries, Mary was viewed as

> . . .the Second Eve. . . .As it had been through a woman that the earth had come under the curse of sin and death, so it would be through a woman that blessing would be restored to the earth. The curse of Eve had been a consequence of pride and disobedience, the blessing of Mary a consequence of humility and obedience.
> (Pelikan, The Growth of Medieval Theology, 600-1300, 167)

Most interesting, and perhaps most neglected, in this development of doctrine and the ensuing rise of the Cult of the Virgin is the idea that Mary's power transcends written language. She carried Christ, the Logos, in her womb. The Word of God was surrounded and nurtured by her flesh, an honor due her not because of her erudition but because she was humble and obedient. Consequently, icons of the Virgin that are made to be seen (and in some cases, touched) are appropriate and logical manifestations of her power. Icons do not rely upon the written word for their efficacy; they are not slaves to literacy. Instead, emotional response--like Mary's sensory experience of carrying Christ and giving birth--defines their ability to communicate, a subject I will discuss at greater length shortly.

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[16] See Pelikan's The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700), pp. 49-61.

Returning to the Prologue, its use of strong visual imagery is characteristic of Chaucer's technique throughout the body of the tale that follows it. Chaucer, in the Prologue, clearly establishes the importance of seeing, of visualization, to religion and to his art, and yet he does so without heavy-handedness. The example of the child suckling at the breast is particularly vivid and resonates on many levels, but there are others as well. In the third stanza, for instance, as I have already cited, the Prioress describes the Virgin in terms of a rather unconventional image, the burning bush. Customarily, the burning bush applies to God's appearance to Moses, but here, Chaucer has the Prioress equate it with Mary, and, in addition, stresses that the bush was "...brennynge in Moyses **sighte**" (l. 468), as though it was the act of seeing, rather than hearing, that validated the experience. Such validation through sight is common in the Bible, and I am thinking here specifically of Thomas' need to see and touch the resurrected Christ in order to believe. Though Christ's response--in effect, that happier are those who have faith without physical proof--undercuts his disciple's need, there seems to be something profoundly human about verification through sight. It is as though Christ Himself acknowledges and condones the human reliance on sight, and in a sense, this episode anticipates the development of Christian iconography. And yet, far from detracting from religious experience, wedding spirituality to visual symbolism actually enhances it by helping to create meaning through a vocabulary of accessible signs. Chaucer's emphasis on sight at this early stage in the tale seems to me to point to his recognition of the necessity of this sense, working in concert with faith, to nurture and validate religious experience.

Further, the importance of recognizing the power of the visual in connection with the written becomes clear in the beginning of The Prioress's Tale proper, which opens with an immediate and straightforward reference to an actual piece of religious art--an icon of the Virgin. We are told of the young Christian boy who is the hero of the story "that day by day to scole was his wone, / And eek also, where **as he saugh th'ymage / Of**

Christes mooder, hadde he in usage, / As hym was taught, to knele adoun an seye / His Ave Maria, as he goth by the weye" (ll. 504-508).[17] The boy passes the icon every day and venerates it, and it is this action that sets in motion all of the events of the tale. Significant, too, is his tender age, the fact that his vision is as yet unclouded by the filth and corruption of the world. In his innocence, the image of the Virgin elicits the boy's pious response and

> as he sat in the scole at his prymer,
> He Alma redemptoris herde synge,
> As children lerned hire antiphoner;
> And as he dorste, he drough hym ner and ner,
> And herkned ay the wordes and the noote,
> Til he the firste vers koude al by rote.
> (ll. 517-522)

The icon, then, can justly be thought of as the instigator of all that happens to the hero in the course of the story. Without the visual cue, would the boy's devotion have been so strong? Perhaps, but for Chaucer to feature the icon so prominently at the beginning is an indication of the power of such an object and of his confidence in his audience's familiarity with and acceptance of this power.

The success of the tale as a religious exemplum, then, hinges on the audience's knowledge of icon veneration and particularly of the kind of communication that icons establish between viewer and subject.[18] By Chaucer's time, the Iconclast controversies that had raged in the East in the 8th and 9th centuries had ended, but it is worthwhile to discuss the debate because the triumphant orthodox position encapsulates my belief that the

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[17] The eastern setting of The Prioress's Tale is meant to heighten the drama of the boy's action here because he was a Christian living in a hostile Asian city. Even though Chaucer makes it clear that Christians had some status in the city, he also makes it clear later in the tale that the Jewish citizens persecuted adherents of Christianity. This anti-semitism, a disturbing component of the work, is unfortunately all too common in medieval literature in general. Historically, the relationship between Jews and Christians was rife with hatred and persecution (which were, for the most part, condoned and forwarded by religious leaders), and it was not until this century, in fact, that the Papacy and Jewish leaders met to heal the breach that had existed between the two religions for centuries.

[18] See Pelikan's The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700), pp. 117-133 and Robert Nelson's "The Discourse of Icons, Then and Now."

visual can supplement--and in some cases, must replace--the written. In effect, the argument embraced by the Iconodules postulated the theory that a work of religious art could draw the pious viewer into the realm of the divine. The icon creates and sustains a direct line of communication between the earth-bound viewer and the heaven-dwelling subject. Immediate, visceral sensation--that of seeing the icon--establishes this communication, tears down the barriers thrown up by Latin, the privileged language of the Church of the West. According to Jaroslav Pelikan, ". . .beginning with the fourth and fifth centuries, there grew among Christians the belief that in relics and images there was available some special form of divine presence and help" (The Spirit of Eastern Christendom, 600-1700, 104). Partisans of icons supported their widespread use precisely because of this ability to draw the faithful into a relationship with the subject. Visual representations of divinity had the power to include, to captivate, to enthrall, and to inspire whereas, for the most part, and especially for women and young children, learned Latin excluded, distanced, and even ostracized the uneducated. It is precisely these special abilities accorded to icons that should not go unrecognized, particularly in studies that focus on the female audience, such as Robertson's.

In the case of The Prioress's Tale, Chaucer emphasizes that the boy has "litel book lernynge" (l. 516) but that this represents no obstacle to the expression of his devotion. The image of the Virgin is enough to inspire his worship, and so the boy immediately sets upon the task of learning the hymn of praise, the Alma Redemptoris. Chaucer at this point, it seems to me, goes to great lengths to point out that formal understanding of the words of the hymn is unimportant. The little boy begs one of his schoolmates "t'expounden hym this song in his langage" (l. 526)--that is, to translate the song from Latin into the language he understands--but the older boy can only respond:

> 'This song, I have herd seye,
> Was maked of our blisful Lady free,
> Hire to salue, and eek hire for to preye

> To been oure help and socour whan we deye.
> I kan namoore expounde in the matere.
> I lerne song; I kan but smal grammeere.' (ll. 531-536)

So neither understands the meaning of the individual words, and yet that does not matter! The boy need only be reassured that the hymn praises Mary and he immediately devotes himself to its memorization. Soon enough, he has mastered the task, and "twies a day it passed thurgh his throte, / To scoleward and homward whan he wente" (ll. 548-549). And does not the timing of his song coincide with his twice daily pass by the icon, as though the icon itself is the wellspring of his knowledge and understanding?

Perhaps most curious about this episode is the degree to which learning and language are devalued. As I have already mentioned, one of the advantages of icons was the relationship they fostered with the pious viewer outside of the bounds of written language, but Chaucer, after all, was learned, and as a poet, language was his ally, his weapon of choice. Why, then, does he seem to undercut that which is his lifeblood? The answer may be, of course, that his attitude is a result of his proclivity for irony and satire. As a master of poetic language, he may have been confident--and mischievous--enough to poke fun at himself. But I believe that another plausible explanation revolves around the notion that for Chaucer and his contemporaries, "language" meant much more than just the meaning of individual words. As I have been attempting to show, The Prioress's Tale relies upon visualization for its impetus; the physical presence of the Virgin icon more than anything else inspires the boy and eventually leads to his martyrdom. Understanding the meaning of each word of the hymn is unimportant because seeing the icon facilitates its own understanding, its own language, in a sense. To be sure, this "language" of the icon is supplemented and supported by verbal expression, and vice versa, but it seems to me that what is at the heart of piety and devotion is the raw sensory experience of seeing. The faithful did not need to comprehend patristic exegeses in order to comprehend divinity. Visual cues, icons, do this work for the illiterate, and for the literate, like Chaucer, the

power of the visual afforded him the opportunity to enhance his art, to imbue his words with the spirit and emotion of immediate, visceral reaction.

Crucial to make clear at this point is the fact that while I contend that the success of The Prioress's Tale is contigent upon its incorporation of visual cues, I do not mean to do so at the expense of the words on the page. Chaucer wrote poetry (and prose); he did not paint pictures. His gift, however, is his ability to fuse the written word with the religious visual image effortlessly. The icon in this particular tale acts as a kind of touchstone for the audience, a familiar and purposeful addition that creates another layer of easily accessible meaning, meaning that relies only on emotional response. Throughout the rest of the tale, as the boy's martyrdom unfolds, the Virgin remains a strong presence. The widowed mother calls upon Mary for help in finding her son, and when she does so, miraculously, though his throat is cut, he still sings the hymn of praise. The boy explains that Mary appeared to him "...and bad me for to synge / This anthem verraily in my deyynge, / As ye han herd, and whan that I hadde songe, / Me thoughte she leyde a greyne upon my tonge" (ll. 659-662). I emphasize this appearance of the Virgin because it reinforces the importance of the icon--the visual cue--and the connection between the veneration of the icon and the help provided toward the end. Crowds gather at the site of the mortally wounded boy who still sings, and the evidence of the divine blessing he has received from the Virgin is enough to reaffirm the power of the Christians over the persecutors of the boy. The tale ends with the witnesses of the miracle prostrating themselves in worship of Mary, as though the icon were present, and they place the boy in a marble tomb, as though his body will become an object of worship, too, continuing the cycle of veneration initiated with the appearance of the Virgin icon at the beginning of the story. This seems a fitting conclusion, one that encapsulates the symbiosis of the word-image relationship, for just as the image of the Virgin leads to the boy's repetition of the words of the hymn, so does the boy's repetition of the words of the hymn lead to his martyrdom and eventual

transformation into a sight/site, for undoubtedly, the "tombe of marbul stones cleere" (l. 681), as the resting place of a martyr, would have special prominence for the characters in the tale, and more importantly, would have carried special significance for the pilgrims listening to the tale as they journeyed to their own martyr's tomb in Canterbury.

In The Second Nun's Tale, which appears after that of the Prioress, Chaucer again emphasizes the importance of the visual, but he does so without a direct appeal to a piece of religious art. Instead, the tale tells the life of St. Cecilia, whose martyrdom focuses on the role that sight plays in promoting faith. The relationship between seeing and believing in medieval times was a complicated matter; working against the human reliance on sight was the Fall of Man, wherein Eve's eyes led her to sin. The Biblical account relates that

> . . .the serpent said to the woman: No, you shall not die the death.
> For God doth know that in what day soever you shall eat thereof, **your eyes shall be opened**: and you shall be as Gods, knowing good and evil.
> And the woman **saw** that the tree was good to eat, and **fair to the eyes**, and **delightful to behold**; and she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave to her husband who did eat.
> **And the eyes of them both were opened.**
> (Genesis: 4-7)

And because their eyes were opened, because they disobeyed God's one restriction, they were banished from Paradise, Humanity with them: a compelling warning against the potential dangers of sight but also one that links seeing with obedience. After all, Eve's sin was not that she had eyes and looked upon the Tree of Knowledge but that she allowed her desire to overwhelm her discretion and God's admonition. As I will discuss shortly, The Second Nun's Tale centers on the role that sight plays in fostering faith, and what is more, it makes clear the fact that sight can be a positive and redemptive spiritual force only when yoked to true belief.

As is typical of the genre of saints' lives, Cecilia's story begins with a description of her nobility, her purity, and her unswerving devotion to Christianity. She is the

> . . .mayden bright Cecilie [who]
> Was comen of Romayns and of noble kynde,
> And from hir cradel up fostred in the feith
> Of Crist, and bar his gospel in hir mynde.
> She nevere cessed, as I writen fynde,
> Of hir preyere and God to love and drede,
> Bisekynge hym to kepe hir maydenhede.
> (ll. 120-126)

Intensifying the extraordinary nature of these attributes is the time period in which Cecilia lived: the age of Roman paganism, when Christians were forced to hide their faith or face the probablility of persecution and martyrdom.[19] Cecilia, as a woman who follows a higher authority than the Roman Emperor, remains strong in her commitment to Christ, and when she is married off to Valerian, her first thought is of protecting her virginity by converting her husband. Bold in her rejection of his advances, Cecilia tells Valerian that an angel watches over her, safeguarding her purity,

> '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** you his joye and his brightnesse.'
> (ll. 155-161).

Here is the first time in the tale that the connection between faith and sight is made clear. Cecilia asserts that only if Valerian respects her chastity will he be able to see the majesty of the angel and be saved.

Much critical attention has focused on these words that Cecilia uses to defend her chastity and, by extension, on the language of female saints and mystics in general. Robertson's study, to which I have already referred, is one such example, and another that deserves mention is Robert Boenig's Chaucer and the Mystics: The Canterbury Tales and

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[19] Although Cecilia's exact dates are unknown, Omer Englebert, writing The Lives of the Saints in the beginning of this century, observes that she may have been "a victim of the persecution of Diocletian or that of Julian the Apostate" (444). Diocletian ruled from 284-305, before the imperial acceptance of Christianity, and embarked on a campaign to wipe out Christianity in the Empire. Julian the Apostate (361-363) attempted to return the Empire to paganism during his brief reign but failed.

the Genre of Devotional Prose. His reading of The Second Nun's Tale concentrates on Cecilia's "fragmentation--" ". . .a fragmented marriage [and] a fragmented life ended through a curiously fragmented execution" (123). Of Cecilia's words to her husband, Boenig asserts: "If the main argument to submit to a celibate marriage and convert to Christianity is to avoid being cut down in his youth, then Valerian gets sorely duped: he is cut down in his youth regardless—because he has led a celibate marriage and converted to Christianity" (124). But Boenig here, in his zeal to underscore Cecilia's linguistic shortcomings, misses the point. Undeniably, Valerian is "cut down," but his death is triumphant because his place in Heaven, as a martyr, is secure. Cecilia's exhortation is meant to safeguard her own virginity and to ensure that Valerian is not cut down in his youth AS A PAGAN, for in that state, there is no hope for salvation. The saint's words, then, do not either reflect or cause a "fragmented marriage"; rather, they lead to union, the union of Valerian's soul with God.

Perhaps a more troubling aspect of Boenig's reading is the fact that he, like most critics, ignores the importance of the visual in this tale as a unifying force, one that affects faith as well as art.[20] In Valerian's case, Cecilia's initial words leave him unconvinced; like the apostle Thomas, he needs proof, he needs to see the angel in order to believe: "'If I shall trusten thee, / **Lat me that aungel se and hym biholde**; / And if that it a verray angel bee, / Thanne wol I doon as thou hast prayed me" (ll. 163-166). To see the protecting angel is necessary for Valerian so that he may overcome his sexual jealousy, which binds him to the world of the flesh. Matters of trust aside, the emphasis on sight

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[20] Boenig does mention Chaucer's use of narrative imagery, but he does so only in the context of engaging Kolve's work on The Man of Law's Tale. Boenig does not apply Kolve's techniques to any other tale that he discusses, and, in fact, even his reference to Kolve's interpretations implies that he views words and images as existing in **constant** competition with one another. Of The Man of Law's Tale, Boenig writes: "The Constable's despairing words before sending the innocent Custance once more out to sea are, I suggest, as central to the tale's meaning as the image of the rudderless boat explicated so forcefully by Kolve" (112). Boenig does not seem to recognize that words and images need not compete for primacy at all times but can instead support and enhance one another.

here is important because it signals that for religion, as for art, visualization and understanding are intertwined. One feeds the other, and vice versa, creating a symbiotic relationship: seeing means believing just as believing means seeing. Regarding Chaucer's poetry, the same principle applies, as the words conjure up pictures in the imagination that create understanding in the intellect, and this understanding leads, in turn, to further visualization. A Mobius strip of meaning, images and words constantly feed and feed off of one another so that the resulting nexus is imbued with power and vitality and divine presence.

This symbiotic relationship helps to unify the tale, and nowhere is this relationship more forcefully illustrated than in the description of Valerian's actual conversion. The passage detailing the event is crucial and worth quoting at some length:

> And **with that word anon ther gan appeere**
> An oold man, clad in white clothes cleere,
> That hadde a book with lettre of gold in honde,
> And gan bifore Valerian to stonde.
>
> Valerian as deed fil doun for drede
> **Whan he hym saugh**, and he up hente hym tho,
> And on his book right thus he gan to rede:
> 'O Lord, o feith, o God, withouten mo,
> O Cristendom, and Fader of alle also,
> Aboven alle and over alle everywhere.'
> **Thise wordes al with gold ywriten were.**
>
> Whan this was rad, thanne seyde this olde man,
> 'Leevestow this thyng or no? Sey ye or nay.'
> **'I leeve al this thyng,'** quod Valerian,
> 'For sother thyng than this, I dar wel say,
> Under the hevene no wight thynke may.'
> Tho vanysshed this olde man, he nyste where,
> And Pope Urban hym cristned right there. (ll. 200-217)

The words Urban uses to praise Cecilia's devotion in sending Valerian to the catacombs conjure up the old man, in effect, causing him to appear. No sooner has he appeared with the sacred book in hand when Valerian prostrates himself. The old man has read no word yet, but Valerian falls down nonetheless when he sees him. Then the old man reads the

words, and once he is finished, he asks Valerian if he believes. Valerian readily assents and only then does the old man vanish, leaving Urban to baptize his convert.

So the sequence runs: WORD-VISUALIZATION-PROSTRATION-WORD-BELIEF. The one gives life to the other, and the result is faith. Also important to recognize in this sequence is the fact that Valerian's prostration (his first step toward belief) occurs without benefit of the written or spoken word. The initial motivation is **seeing** the old man appear, as though--like the young boy in The Prioress's Tale--devotion need not be born of language alone but can be inspired, too, by the sensory experience of seeing. Of course, it is the old man's recitation of the words, working together with his presence, that crystallizes Valerian's faith. This fusion is a perfect and compelling example of how the compression of word and image creates meaning and unity within the tale. The "meaning" in this case is the beauty and truth of faith, which unites Valerian with God. Faith heals the breech between husband and wife, transcending their "marital fragmentation," and it is the act of or attempt at conversion repeated throughout that provides the tale with its structure.

Left out of a reading like Boenig's is any mention of this power of words and images to create meaning and unity within the tale. Boenig does not discuss Valerian's conversion and the role that sight plays in it in any depth, nor does his treatment of Tiburce move beyond a few brief references. Because he practically ignores two of the most important events in the tale, he also ignores the simple formula through which Chaucer reinforces the importance of the visual in the conversion experience: those who have faith can see the divine truth, while those who cling to false belief are, metaphorically, blind.[21]

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[21] This formula has a long history of use in both secular and religious literature, so much so that it is archetypal. Sophocles' Oedipus Rex is one of the earliest and most famous examples, and the Bible itself contains numerous references to faith overcoming blindness. One such instance occurs in the Gospel According to St. Mark, when Jesus encounters a blind man in Jericho: "And Jesus answering, said to him: What wilt thou that I should do to thee? And the blind man said to him: Rabboni, that I may see. And Jesus saith to him: Go thy way, thy faith hath made thee whole. And immediately he saw, and followed him in the way" (10: 51-52).

When Tiburce arrives in his brother and sister-in-law's bed chamber, he can only smell their coronals; he cannot yet see them because he is still a pagan. Valerian explains that "'Two corones han we, / Snow white and rose reed, that shynen cleere, / Whiche that thyne eyen han no myght to see; / And as thou smellest hem thurgh my preyere, / So shaltow seen hem, leeve brother deere, / If it so be thou wolt, withouten slouthe, / Bileve aright and knowen verray trouthe'" (ll. 253-259). Tiburce, in a somewhat contrived and naive manner, soon declares his belief, saying, "'Whoso that troweth nat this, a beest he is. . .if that I shal nat lye" (ll. 288-289). Tiburce's initial conversion experience is marked by the speech of his brother and Cecilia as they attempt to convince him of the truth of Christianity. Though he says that he believes, he reveals his imperfect faith when he questions the proposed meeting with Urban. That he does not fully believe upon **hearing** the first speeches of his brethren is indicative, I think, of the idea that faith is tied to both word and sight. Unlike Valerian, Tiburce does not see the old man and his book, and so it seems that his young faith will take more time and persuasion to coalesce than did his brother's. In fact, it takes Cecilia's explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity to fully convince Tiburce; he finally is baptized by Urban, and it is only at this point that he, too, can see the angel.

If the followers of Christ in this tale are the "see-ers," then the pagans are anathema, the blind. Villainous Almachius is foremost in this category, as he refuses to be swayed by Cecilia's arguments when she is brought before him towards the end of the tale. Regarding the conflict between these two, Boenig makes several provocative and insightful assertions, particularly when he warms to the subject of Cecilia's verbal skill. He states:

> Now [during the debate with Almachius] Cecilia's language is no longer secret, given to others, or directing others to secret places; it is public...and aggressive, wrenching Almachius's words from what he thinks are their fixed referents and, through Pseudo-Dionysian doubling, investing them with [a] different. . .meaning, one that signifies on a spiritual rather than earthly level. (127)

Finally, Boenig is ready to credit Cecilia with power, but what he omits in his interpretation of this final scene is any reference to the importance of sight, literal and metaphorical. Cecilia, unfazed by the evil prefect's threats of violence, scorns Almachius's adherence to paganism, asserting that:

> 'Ther lakketh no thyng to thyne outter yen
> That thou n'art blynd; for thyng that we seen alle
> That it is stoon—that men may wel espyen—
> That ilke stoon a god thow wolt it calle.
> I rede thee, lat thyn hand upon it falle
> And taste it wel, and stoon thou shalt it fynde,
> Syn that thou seest nat with thyne eyen blynde. (ll. 498-504)

Though Almachius has the literal power of sight, Cecilia devalues it because he is figuratively blind to the one true faith. Without belief in the Christian God, Almachius is destined to deceive himself; he is destined to live his life paying homage to a cold and lifeless piece of rock. His spiritual blindness, which Cecilia points out, as Boenig says, aggressively and by wrenching words away from the prefect, underscores the idea that sight must be harnessed to faith in order for it to reveal truth. In order to create meaning, both vision and word must be bound up with genuine belief, and Cecilia's final request before she is martyred at the end of the tale is a fitting embodiment of this combination of true vision and holy words. With her last breath (holy words), she asks that a church be built on the site of her home, so that a physical manifestation (true vision) may endure beyond her own lifetime. The Second Nun's Tale, then, functions as a blueprint for the way in which words can act on vision, and vision on words, to facilitate faith. Cecilia's vision is clear and her words are powerful because she believes in God. The distance between sign and signifier shrinks precisely because her sight is yoked to faith. Taken in its entirety, the tale redeems vision and demonstrates that this sense, for character and audience alike, need not perpetually lead to expulsion from Paradise as long as it operates in concert with a faithful and loving heart.

One of the ideas on which this paper is predicated is that Chaucer's two religious tales, when interpreted in light of their strong iconographic content, themselves become iconic. To identify them as such is not, however, to push them into the realm of privileged discourse, isolated and impenetrable, as the New Critics suggest in their characterization of poetry as verbal icon.[22] On the contrary, what I posit is that religious poetry as icon opens up poetic language by grafting the visual onto the verbal. Chaucer's tales are iconic because they, like conventional, painted icons, render accessible and immediate the presence of the divine. The inclusion of the Virgin icon as a familiar touchstone for the listening audience of The Prioress's Tale, for instance, coupled with Chaucer's seemingly gleeful disparagement of learned Latin acts to establish a relationship between the poem and the audience that is not based exclusively on formal education. Understanding the tales, in fact, exists outside of the limitations imposed by learning and scholarship because the religious visual imagery--the child sucking at the breast or the old man with his golden book, for example--enhance words and create their own vocabulary of images. Robert S. Nelson, an art historian, has said this of icons: "In essence the image, the icon, is a mediator, a way for the believer to comprehend God and his teachings and a medium through which God and the believer interact" (149). Though this statement appears in an article that describes Byzantine mosaics and illuminated manuscripts, does it not also apply to Chaucer's religious poetry? At the end of The Prioress's Tale and The Second Nun's Tale, would not the detailed and gory descriptions of martyrdom have helped the audience listening intently comprehend God's power and majesty? Would not this same audience have felt a certain spiritual intimacy and interaction with the Virgin because the type of icon featured so prominently in the tale is similar to one they might venerate every Sunday in church or keep enshrined in their own homes?

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[22] See W.K. Wimsatt's The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry.

My answer, of course, is that the tales I have been discussing undoubtedly function in these ways, creating meaning and conjuring divine presence in the minds of listeners through verbal AND religious visual imagery. It is difficult, I think, for our 20th-century minds to grasp, or embrace, the idea that words, religious poetry, specifically, can have immanence. Deconstructive theories of meaning deferred and language instability have, at least to some degree, imposed limitations on what we will accept as the ability of "texts" to achieve finality. And, too, there is the modern bastardization of what an icon can be. Elvis and Madonna are considered American icons these days, a sign, I suppose, of the takeover of secularism and the rise of commercialism in our culture. Chaucer and his contemporaries would, no doubt, have been appalled at the notion that non-religious figures--common entertainers, no less!--could have gained so much fame, could have become so thoroughly a part of the cultural landscape. I imagine Chaucer wandering through Graceland with his eyes bulging and his mouth agape, praying fervently for his journey in Hell to end quickly. But Chaucer, too, in his way, helped to explode the orthodox understanding of "icon." His religious tales were devotional; those who heard them were meant to be inspired and educated. Chaucer did with words what artists accomplished with brush strokes: he elicited a pious response and fostered understanding and communication between the faithful and the divine.

Recognizing Chaucer's work as iconic also helps to underscore the fact that human culture, whether medieval or modern, is profoundly visual. Today, we are quick to label the Middle Ages as hideously archaic, a time of darkness, terror, and writing copied painstakingly by hand! Even the later invention of the printing press seems provincial by our standards, when the click of one button can send information speeding across miles of fiber optic cables like Tomahawk missiles. Mary Carruthers, writing in 1990, states: "It is my contention that medieval culture was fundamentally memorial, to the same profound degree that modern culture in the West is documentary" (8). The first part of her assertion

is undoubtedly accurate; in the Middle Ages, the preservation of knowledge depended upon its faithful storage in one's memory, a process made possible, I would argue, by the strong visual images at work in medieval literature. And, certainly, for several centuries, documentation has been the hallmark of the West. Our literature, our history, our cultural identity all fill millions of pages. But rather than indulge in pointing out the obvious differences between medieval and modern societies, what if we approach the issue from the other side? What if we ponder the **similarities**, similarities that mark the continuous development of an essentially visual human culture?

Chaucer's religious poetry, as I have argued, features a strong iconographic dimension that underscores the importance of the visual in medieval society. So entrenched was religious art that Chaucer's use of it in his tales seems natural, effortless, the result of a sensitive writer incorporating those elements into his work that best reflect and enhance the knowledge and interests of his audience. In the Middle Ages, religion dominated the culture, and Chaucer's poetry perfectly reflects this. In our times, secularism has supplanted religion, yet the importance of the visual remains the same, and in fact, some might argue that the visual is even more dominant now. Our culture is a kaleidescope of television sit-coms, 200 million dollar movies, music videos, and CNN satellite uplinks. We hear, ad nauseum, of the havoc that technology wreaks upon our society, of the insidious influences of automation and the Internet, but these are the easy targets. What I suggest is that our current state of affairs is no more than a natural and inevitable extension of what has always been present in human society: the power of the visual.

It seems to me that we must embrace the connection between the visual and written arts, that we must not compartmentalize the two in our studies, parsing our thinking into separate regions where there is no overlapping influence. Too, what we must do is reintegrate an understanding of the ability of writing, working together with concrete images, to produce Truth. The import and subsequent dissemination of the theories of

Derrida have, lamentably, driven finite meaning and faith to the brink of extinction in contemporary criticism. These concepts are only very recently coming back into use widely, though I suspect that this is so only because of a faddish and reactionary desire to break with deconstruction and declare oneself as different, Other. One way their re-emergence may be preserved, however, is by avoiding treating the written and visual arts as two wholly distinct entities, because to do so goes against the evidence present in Chaucer's work and present in our own culture. We should pay more attention to the ways in which art and writing influence one another, particularly in medieval literature, because it is through this enterprise that we approach an understanding of the continuum of human cultural development and keep the wolves of nihilism and despair at bay.

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