

RELIGIOUS OATHS IN THE CHAUCERIAN FABLIAUX

Luke William Mills

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Approved by:

Charlotte Gross

Shayne Legassie

Theodore Leinbaugh

Patrick O'Neill

Joseph S. Wittig

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## ABSTRACT

Luke William Mills: Religious Oaths in the Chaucerian Fabliaux  
(Under the direction of Joseph S. Wittig)

My dissertation examines religious oaths and asseverations in the fabliaux of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. To contextualize Chaucer's fabliaux, I look at some of his possible sources and analogues—*Dame Sirith*, the first extant English fabliau, the Old French fabliaux, and Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Using religious oaths to underscore the contrast between idealized values and earthly, temporal values, Chaucer prods readers to locate themselves both within their social *and* their spiritual communities. Asking believers to consider what it means to make a powerful faith-based promise, especially when the circumstances surrounding that guarantor have been ironically charged, Chaucer actively troubles the creation of self, the establishment of community and the place of the swearer within that community, noting the degree to which all three fail to achieve the spiritual ideal of the oath-state. My dissertation explores that dissonance writ large within and across the *Tales*.

For Gina, Evelyn, and Heidi

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“For men use, if they have an evil turne, to write it in marble, and whoso doth us a good tourne, we write it in duste, . . .”

—Sir Thomas More, *The History of King Richard III*

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## INTRODUCTION

This project was born of an essay I wrote in my Early Middle English seminar in the Spring of 2008. In that essay, which became the basis for Chapter 1, I noted the large number of religious oaths in *Dame Sirith*, the first extant Middle English fabliau, and considered their significance. In the end, I concluded that the author of *Dame Sirith* included so many religious oaths intentionally, to provide an ironic contrast between religious ideals and the profane context in which they appear. So, for example, I mentioned the cleric Wilekin, who in his quest to seduce Margery, another man's wife, swears religious oaths profusely, even swearing at one point "bi the holi roed [cross]" that he will be complicit with Dame Sirith, the procuress he has hired, in her nefarious scheme to trick Margery. Wilekin's behavior is, without a doubt, outrageously opposed to Christian ideals and his vocation, and his frequent religious references by means of oaths constantly reminds the reader of this fact; these dissonant notes are struck too frequently to be accidental. I concluded, then, that the Dame Sirith Poet wanted his audience to note this contrast, not for "moral instruction," but rather, to embrace the ironic aspects of human nature.

In providing some kind of context for my reading of *Dame Sirith*, I examined for the first time some English translations of the Old French fabliaux, a genre popular especially in 13<sup>th</sup>-century northern France, and, to a lesser extent, Anglo-Norman England, too. I noticed in reading these tales a similar, if less stark and biting, contrast between sacred ideals and profane reality. To confess, I also found the fabliaux pleasurable reading, even if crude from time to time. More often, they were funny and charming, even moving: there is, for instance, an account in one fabliau of a beggar who, alone and unobserved, dies and is so apparently unimportant that neither devil nor angel bothers to fetch his soul (his soul eventually makes its way into heaven!). The pleasure I took in reading these fabliaux, including *Dame Sirith*, was similar, I realized, to my experience reading Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. In particular, I felt a similar kind of *frisson* in the *Tale's* ironic contrast of sacred and profane—in the frame, where the often sordid

behavior of pilgrims grates against the purpose of their pilgrimage, and in the tales, too, where one can often see a similarly blatant and provocative disregard for religious ideals. Most of all, I perceived the similarity between *Dame Sirith* and the *Tales*, for in the one tale, religious oaths, because they are used so frequently by all characters, seem to satirize not just the clergy (or whatever else) but everyone; it is a satire of human nature. Likewise, in *The Canterbury Tales*, pilgrimage, already a well-worn motif symbolizing the human condition, only confirms Chaucer's intent for broad commentary, suggested already by the pilgrims, coming as they do from every estate. Thus, the pell-mell of the actual pilgrimage, in contrast to the ideal one, satirizes human nature. Both *Dame Sirith* and *The Canterbury Tales* present the reader with these jangling discourses to send up, albeit humorously, the failings of humanity.

This apparent link between *Dame Sirith*, and by extension, the Old French fabliaux, and *The Canterbury Tales* was the initial impetus for writing this dissertation. I wanted to know, first, if I was right about the fabliaux (both the Old French and Chaucerian). Were they really as marked by this dissonance as I thought? And second, if so, did they in any way inspire Chaucer's construction of the *Tales*? Were *The Canterbury Tales* something like the apotheosis of the fabliau?

This dissertation is a venture in answering these questions. I begin by looking more closely at religious oaths and asseverations (emphatic confirmation of a statement ["as God is my witness,..."]) in *Dame Sirith*. I extend the work in my original essay by considering *Dame Sirith* in the context of its manuscript, MS Digby 86, which includes a fabliau, *Les Quatre Sohais saint Martin* (*The Four Wishes of Saint Martin*) and a comic beast tale, *The Fox and the Wolf*, as well as some other comic strands. I widen that context a bit by looking, too, at MS Harley 2253, composed in nearly the same time and place, and featuring four Anglo-Norman fabliaux—*Les trois dames qui troverent un vit* (*The Three Ladies Who Found a Dick*), *Le Chevalier a la Corbeille* (*The Knight of the Basket*), *La Gageure* (*The Bet*), and *La Chevalier Qui Fist les Cons Parler* (*The Knight Who Made Cunts Talk*). And so I deliberate on what these other fabliaux may tell us about *Dame Sirith*. Further, I also consider the analogues to *Dame Sirith*,

in Petrus Alfonsi's *Disciplina Clericalis*, in the exempla of Jacques de Vitry, and in the *Gesta Romanorum*, and what bearing their interpretation of the tale may have on *Dame Sirith*.

In Chapter 2, I continue the investigation, looking at religious oaths in the Old French fabliaux, this time in the original language. I devote some space at the beginning of the chapter to the critical work that has been done on oaths in the fabliaux, but because there is so little of it, much of the chapter attempts to blaze a trail by doing close readings of the religious oaths in the fabliaux of MS Digby 86, MS Harley 2253, and two analogues to Chaucer's fabliaux, *Le Meunier et les deus clers* (*The Miller and the Two Clerks*) and *Le Vescie a Prestre* (*The Priest's Bequest*). In this chapter, I am able to try out a tentative answer to the question above concerning religious oaths in Old French fabliaux compared to *Dame Sirith*: oaths do *not* seem to function in quite the same way in the Old French, though they do sometimes have considerable satirical power and add to the texture of the fabliaux.

Because Boccaccio's *Decameron* is a likely influence on Chaucer's *Tales*, in Chapter 3, I look at religious oaths in those fabliau-derived tales from Boccaccio's *Decameron* that are analogues and possible sources for Chaucer's fabliaux. Because there has been little to no critical work done on these oaths in English and because I am not a fluent reader of Italian, where perhaps more in this line has been written, much of Chapter 3 is, like the preceding chapter, devoted to close reading. In my conclusion, I note that religious oaths in Boccaccio's *novelle* do little to nothing. Boccaccio, a renaissance writer engaging with a more permissive sexual ethic in favor of rigid moralism, is not interested in juxtapositions of the sacred and profane.

In Chapter 4, I examine religious oaths in Chaucer's fabliaux—*The Miller's Tale*, *The Reeve's Tale*, *The Summoner's Tale*, *The Merchant's Tale*, and *The Shipman's Tale*. In this case, critics have paid some attention to oaths, and so I include their work in this chapter. No critic has, however, considered oaths as they function in all of Chaucer's fabliaux and what impact this may have on the *Tales*. Neither has any critic compared the way oaths work in Chaucer's sources and how he uses them himself. In the end, I come to some conclusions. First, Chaucer uses religious oaths in his fabliaux in ways similar to the Old French: for wry commentary and for texture. But like *Dame Sirith*, he also uses frequent religious

oaths in one of his fabliaux, *The Shipman's Tale*, to evoke a sacred world against which the world of the tale is compared. Moreover, the religious oaths in Chaucer's fabliaux have a resonance beyond the tales themselves. Alison's oath by "Seint Thomas of Kent," the saint toward whose shrine the pilgrims of the frame are headed, though fairly benign in *The Miller's Tale* itself, becomes much more meaningful when considered in the context of the frame. And in answer to the second question above, concerning the "apotheosis" of the fabliau, I conclude that though the *Tales* are probably not a simple amplification of the fabliau, their potential for universal significance through religious oaths uttered by a fairly even-handedly portrayed collection of all the medieval estates may have allowed Chaucer the possibility of seeing that a comic work comprising no small amount of rabble could nevertheless be meaningful.

This final conclusion is somewhat at odds with Charles Muscatine's claim in *The Old French Fabliaux* that the fabliaux constitute their own ethos, which he terms "hedonistic materialism." Muscatine argues that the fabliaux are not in a commensal relationship with Christianity or courtly culture. That is, the fabliaux cannot be understood as being essentially about flouting conventional morality or parodying the romance. Instead, they promote a confident, coherent view of the world that values the concrete—food, money, drink, etc.—over the ideal. Of particular importance to my dissertation is the corollary of this argument, that the appearance of most religious elements in the fabliaux is insignificant, that they are there because they have to be. It makes sense: in an officially Christian culture, it is impossible not to include religion in some fashion. But, Muscatine continues, the fabliau's hedonistic materialism is compartmentalistic, and most often, the *fableor* and his audience do not notice any kind of ironic contrasts with religious ideals. In some cases, this may be true, but in the chapters that follow, I shall push back against this argument, suggesting finally that there is some significance in the fact that Chaucer himself was, in writing his fabliaux, alert to these contrasts. His particular way of reading the fabliaux should be, I claim, taken more seriously than it currently is.

## CHAPTER1: RELIGIOUS OATHS AND ASSEVERATIONS IN DAME SIRITH

*Dame Sirith*,<sup>1</sup> the earliest extant English fabliau, appears uniquely in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Digby 86, a late 13<sup>th</sup>-/early 14<sup>th</sup>-century miscellany owned originally by a family in South Worcestershire.<sup>2</sup> Though typical of a fabliau in being relatively short (450 lines), written in verse, and funny,<sup>3</sup> *Dame Sirith* is remarkable (as readers have long observed) for being obviously intended for some kind of dramatic performance and not just mere recitation. The dramatic function of the poem is evidenced by the preponderance of dialogue over narration (398 lines out of 450), marginal letters in the manuscript indicating speakers, and a conspicuous break between lines 278 and 279 that would require some kind of dramatic gesture to make sense.<sup>4</sup> *Dame Sirith* has been widely anthologized and is often read in courses of Middle English literature, especially in connection with the fabliaux in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. But for all its exposure, little critical work has been devoted to the poem. In the past twenty years, in fact, only two critics have given it much notice: John Hines<sup>5</sup> in a chapter of *The Fabliau in English*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All *Dame Sirith* citations are from the edition in J. A. W. Bennett and G. V. Smithers, eds., *Early Middle English Verse and Prose*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. revised (Oxford: OUP, 1968), 77-95.

<sup>2</sup> *Facsimile of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 86*, introd. Judith Tschann and M. B. Parkes, EETS, ss 16 (Oxford: OUP, 1996). Tschann and Parkes indicate the Grimhill family as the original owners, though Marilyn Corrie points out (in personal correspondence) that this is a tentative claim at best, that the manuscript could have also been owned by someone associated with the Grimhill family.

<sup>3</sup> For convenience, I'm here considering the fabliaux according to Joseph Bédier's definition of them as "contes à rire en vers." See Joseph Bédier, *Les Fabliaux*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Paris: Champion, 1925), 30.

<sup>4</sup> In line 278, *Dame Sirith*, the go-between for a clerk and his beloved, agrees to make an arrangement between the two by means of a "iupert" ("exploit") and "ferli maistri" ("marvelous deed"). In line 279, she is addressing a dog and feeding it pepper. Obviously, there are things here transpiring off the page.

<sup>5</sup> John Hines, *The Fabliau in English*, (London: Longman, 1993), 43-65.

and Michael Swanton over several pages in *English Poetry before Chaucer*.<sup>6</sup> In his chapter on *Dame Sirith*, Hines emphasizes the poem's artistry and sophistication by closely analyzing several of its passages. His insights are often revealing: he offers for consideration the supposedly virtuous wife's claim to her would-be seducer that she will not fornicate on either "bed or floor" (100-02), which seems, as he points out, like a slip on the wife's part and evidence of an uneasily suppressed coarseness. Hines thus cultivates an appreciation for the characters' speech and shows how their language can, if considered carefully enough, reveal previously unseen personal qualities. Swanton's reading of *Dame Sirith* is somewhat more cursory but helpful nonetheless. In particular, Swanton picks up on something in the dialogue that does not seem to interest Hines much—the frequency of religious oaths. The poem's characters, he says, "invoke religious oaths from first to last, emphasizing the gap between empty words and deeds."<sup>7</sup> Swanton provides only a few examples of religious oaths in *Dame Sirith*, however, and his discussion of the "gap" between words and deeds is tantalizingly brief.<sup>8</sup> In the first part of this essay, I would like to build on Swanton's insights by looking more closely at the poem's religious oaths and asseverations<sup>9</sup> and describing more precisely the meaning they bear. In the second, I consider some other factors regarding the religious sensibility of *Dame Sirith*—that is,

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Swanton, *English Poetry Before Chaucer*, (Exeter: U of Exeter P, 2002). Previously *English Literature Before Chaucer*, (London: Longman, 1987). Swanton's treatment of *Dame Sirith* remains substantially the same.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>8</sup> This is not to fault Swanton. As he says in his preface to the first edition, his readings are meant as "starting-points from which it is assumed the reader will wish to advance" (xii). My essay will make it clear that I think he has given us a good starting-point, indeed.

<sup>9</sup> By "oath" I mean "a solemn or formal declaration invoking God (or a god, or other object of reverence) as witness to the truth of a statement, or to the binding nature of a promise or undertaking." By "asseveration" I mean "solemn affirmation, emphatic assertion, positive declaration, avouchment," *OED Online*. March 2012. OUP. Swanton mentions only oaths, but I feel this distinction is helpful for a closer analysis. Also, for brevity's sake, I will often mention just the religious "oaths" in *Dame Sirith* and other fabliaux in subsequent chapters; please understand asseverations to be included under this heading unless I indicate otherwise.

the analogues to the “weeping bitch” story, a couple of other comic stories in MS Digby 86, and some clues about the personality of the Digby scribe-owner himself.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, my claim is that an examination of the evidence will not only deepen understanding of the poem but also motivate a reevaluation of religious elements, especially sacred oaths, in other medieval comic literature.

Understanding how religious oaths in the fabliaux (or any medieval literature, for that matter) function is tricky business, of course. In the Old French fabliaux, oaths of all sorts appear, and they often seem to be used merely as convenient for meter or rhyme. So why should *Dame Sirith* be treated any differently? The answer lies, first, in the sheer number of religious oaths in *Dame Sirith* and second, in their conspicuous placement in the text. This becomes clearer when one compares the English poem to the Old French fabliaux. There are over 120 extant Old French fabliaux, and although a comparison between *Dame Sirith* and all of them might be in some ways illuminating, a more telling and useful comparison could be made between *Dame Sirith* and the Anglo-Norman fabliaux in MS Digby 86 and London, British Library MS Harley 2253.<sup>11</sup> Like MS Digby 86, MS Harley 2253 is a wide-ranging miscellany that contains texts in Middle English, Anglo-Norman, and Latin; both manuscripts were copied in the West Midlands and though not at the same time, still within about sixty years of each other.<sup>12</sup> These similarities suggest at least that the two manuscripts were produced in a similar milieu.

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<sup>10</sup> This is, according to Tschann and Parkes (*MS Digby 86*, xlii), “Scribe A,” who was responsible for copying the majority of the manuscript. The other scribe, “Scribe B,” was responsible for two quires only.

<sup>11</sup> *Facsimile of B.M. MS. Harley 2253*, introd. N. R. Ker, EETS, (Oxford: OUP, 1965).

<sup>12</sup> Tschann and Parkes date MS Digby 86 to “the last quarter of the thirteenth and, perhaps, the earliest years of the fourteenth century,” (*MS Digby 86*, xxxviii). N. R. Ker puts the date of MS Harley 2253 some time in the 1340s, although he notes that the last few leaves of the manuscript may be later (*MS Harley 2253*, xxi-xxii).

Besides *Dame Sirith*, MS Digby 86 contains only one other fabliau, *Les Quatre Sohais saint Martin* (*The Four Wishes of Saint Martin*). MS Harley 2253 has four: *Les trois dames qui troverent un vit* (*The Three Ladies Who Found a Dick*), *Le Chevalier a la Corbeille* (*The Knight of the Basket*), *La Gageure* (*The Bet*), and *La Chevalier Qui Fist les Cons Parler* (*The Knight Who Made Cunts Talk*). The difference in number of oaths and asseverations between *Dame Sirith* and these other fabliaux is remarkable. While *Les Quatre Sohais saint Martin* has five oaths and asseverations,<sup>13</sup> *Les trois dames qui troverent un vit*, four, *Le Chevalier a la Corbeille*, seven, *La Gageure*, four, and *La Chevalier Qui Fist les Cons Parler*, three,<sup>14</sup> *Dame Sirith* contains thirty four. Of course, a relatively high number of oaths might not by itself mean anything. But looking closely at the placement of these oaths confirms their significance.

Before providing this close reading, however, I ought to provide a short summary of *Dame Sirith*. The tale begins with a clerk named Wilekin approaching a local merchant's wife to propose to her a "secret and quiet" love affair while her husband is away on business. Margery, the wife, rejects energetically Wilekin's advances while insisting upon her own faithfulness—she is "a woman both good and true." Wilekin leaves forlorn, but on the advice of a friend, visits a certain "Dame Sirith," who has apparently earned a reputation as a procuress. When Wilekin puts his case to Sirith, she initially dissembles by rebuking him and whimpering that she is only a poor, innocent, old woman scraping by on Christian charity. Wilekin knows this game and is not interested in playing it. "Leave off, old woman!" he barks, and then makes an offer of generous payment for her services, to which she promptly agrees. Sirith manages to bend Margery by means of a fairly lame trick: she feeds her dog some mustard and pepper, and when the dog's

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<sup>13</sup> This count has been made from the transcription of the MS Digby 86 version in Willem Noomen and Nico Van Den Boogaard, eds., *Nouveau Recueil Complet Des Fabliaux (NRCF)*, vol. 4 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1988).

<sup>14</sup> These counts have been made from the Old French transcriptions (and translations) in Carter Revard, "Four Fabliaux from London, British Library MS Harley 2253, Translated into English Verse," *The Chaucer Review* 40 (2005): 111-40.

eyes begin to run, she leads her to Margery with the outrageous story that the dog is her daughter weeping at the misfortune of being transformed by a clerk whose love she had spurned. Margery notices a resemblance between this story and her own and frantically begs Sirith to bring Wilekin to her so that she can avoid a similar fate. Sirith fetches Wilekin and the tale ends with her crudely exhorting him to consummate his lust for Margery and then turning to the audience with an advertisement of her services.

On the surface, then, *Dame Sirith* is just another run-of-the-mill fabliau. It certainly seems to contain a fabliau's requisite parts: a lecherous religious figure, an adulterous wife, and a little trickery. But the shape and impact of the tale change when one looks more closely at its religious language. The first words of the dialogue, though not an oath in the proper sense, are religious in nature and set the tone for what follows: "God almiȝtten be herinne" Wilekin says as he enters Margery's house. This greeting is first of all one of the many signs that Wilekin is some kind of religious figure.<sup>15</sup> One may be reminded, for instance, of Friar John's "Deus hic" (III. 1770) when entering the house of Thomas in the *Summoner's Tale*.<sup>16</sup> No matter what exactly Wilekin's position in the church, there is irony in the difference between his official duties and his mission to seduce Margery. For the same reason, his greeting too becomes ironic: God, or his influence perhaps, seems conspicuously absent in this initial scene and one senses very clearly that God is the last thing on Wilekin's mind. Certainly, considered from Wilekin's

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<sup>15</sup> Margery herself mentions later that Wilekin is a "clarc"[cleric, scholar, man in holy orders] (366). What exactly this means is unclear. Since he is pursuing a small town merchant's wife, Wilekin is very unlikely to be any high-ranking church official, for as Per Nykrog has pointed out, "the noble lover limits his activity practically to his own milieu: lovers from the bourgeoisie and the peasantry are below his dignity" (*Les Fabliaux: Etude d'histoire littéraire et de stylistique médiévale* [Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgard, 1957], 118). In fabliau settings such as *Dame Sirith*'s, the lover is usually a priest, so it seems reasonable to assign this or some similar religious role to Wilekin. *Dame Sirith* also tells Margery that her own daughter was cursed by a "clarc wiȝ croune" [cleric with tonsure] (348), a detail obviously meant to mirror Margery's own situation. Still, Wilekin's exact religious role isn't certain.

<sup>16</sup> All Chaucer quotations taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, Ed. Larry D. Benson, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boston: Houghton, 1987). According to the explanatory notes in the *Riverside*, the "prescribed Franciscan greeting when entering a home was *pax huic domui* (peace to this house)." Whether Wilekin is a friar himself is not stated in the text, but it is not unlikely.

perspective the greeting is not intentionally ironic; it may be useful as a way of ingratiating himself with his hostess, or it may be mere verbal habit. In any case, there is an uneasy disconnect between the man, his purposes, and his language.

Margery shows a similar disconnect herself. After Wilekin's greeting she swears enthusiastically

'Bi houre Louerd, heuene-king,  
If I mai don aniþing  
þat þe is lef,  
þou miȝtt finden me ful fre.' (31-34)

["By our Lord, King of heaven, if I can do anything that is pleasing to you, you will find me very generous."]

To which Wilekin replies "Dame, God þe forȝelde!" [Lady, God reward you!] (37)—a particularly remarkable oath in light of what Wilekin *really* wants for Margery and what, indeed, she ends up with as a reward. But, more significantly, once Wilekin has proposed a "dernelike and stille" affair (86), an apparently scandalized Margery cries immediately "þat wold I don for non þing, / Bi houre Louerd, heuene-king / þat us is boue!" [I would not do that for anything, by our Lord, King of heaven, who is above us!] (88-90). The contrast with her earlier, identical oath "bi houre Louerd, heuene-king" (31) is telling. In the first instance, she uses the oath to promise Wilekin *anything* that he would like; in the second, she uses the same oath to swear that she would do the thing he would like for *nothing*. The parallels between these two passages are too striking to be simply accidental, and the contrast between them obviously highlights Margery's simplicity and naiveté (or her disingenuousness). But the presence of the religious oath reveals, too, her carelessness and vacuity. In both instances, the oath has no bearing on her actions. Her language about God is empty and an apt symbol of her own cipher-like quality.

As soon as Margery has concluded her protest, Wilekin begins his plea for "merci" with a religious oath:

‘Dame, dame, torn þi mod!  
þi curteisi wes euer god,  
And zet shal be:  
For þe Louerd þat ous haueþ wrout,  
Amend þi mod, and torn þi þout,  
And rew on me!’ (109-14)

[“Lady, Lady, change your mind! Your graciousness has always been good and will yet ever be: for the sake of the Lord who has created us, better your attitude, and turn your thought, and have pity on me!”]

And he ends with one as well:

‘And þilke Louerd þat al welde mai  
Leue þat þi þout so tourne  
Pat Ich for þe no leng ne mourne.’ (146-48)

[“And the same Lord who controls all allow it that you so change your thinking that I don’t continue longing or mourning for you.”]

Besides the continued irony of religious oaths being used in an attempt to effect sinful purposes, one also notices that this kind of language comes naturally to Wilekin. A comparison to *The Summoner’s Tale* is once again helpful.<sup>17</sup> Friar John shows a similar fluency with language of this sort and a willingness to use it for his own purposes. Thus, as he concludes his sermon to Thomas, he pleads “Now help, Thomas, for hym that harwed helle!” (2107) and “Now Thomas, help, for seinte charitee!” (2119). Friar John and Wilekin’s language characterizes them all the more as professional religious. One notices the difference in the language of secular folk—Margery’s, for instance. Sometimes indeed she resorts to religious oaths and asseverations but when, for example, she is putting Wilekin off, she does so by making declarations concerning

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<sup>17</sup> This comparison is meant to suggest, not that *Dame Sirith* is a source for *The Summoner’s Tale*, but rather that both texts display the same sort of ironic sensibility.

“Yule” and “food and drink.”<sup>18</sup> Wilekin’s oaths and affirmations, in contrast, are almost exclusively religious.<sup>19</sup>

Wilekin’s language is basically the same in his first exchange with Dame Sirith. Upon entering her dwelling,<sup>20</sup> he greets her “faire” with “words milde and eke sleie” [mild and sly words] (159-60): “God þe iblessi, Dame Siriz!,” [God bless you, Dame Sirith!] (161) he cries. Sirith puts on pious appearances as well in her immediate response to Wilekin’s request:

‘Benedicite be herinne!  
Her hauest þou, sone, mikel senne.  
Louerd, for his suete nome,  
Lete þe þefore hauen no shome!’ (193-96)

[“God bless us! You have here, son, much sin. Lord, for his sweet name, prevent you therefore from having any shame!”]

She maintains similarly fulsome religious language throughout this first speech, disavowing any knowledge of “wicchecraftt,” and cursing Wilekin’s friend who sent him to her: “His life and his soule worþe ishend” [May his life and soul be destroyed] (214). But she continues to use religious oaths even after Wilekin has promised her payment for her services and she is ready to do his will (229-36). To make sure that Wilekin is not trying to entrap her, she asks again for reassurance that he truly loves Margery (231) and then feigns pity by wishing for God to remedy his situation: “Wat God, Wilekin, me rewep þi scape— / Houre Louerd sende þe help raþe!” [God knows, Wilekin, I pity your suffering—may Our Lord send you help quickly!] (235-36). The audience sees clearly, however, that what moves Sirith is not religious pity but a desire for

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<sup>18</sup> “So Ich euer mote biden 3ol, / þou art ounwis!” [As I may I ever await Christmas, you are unwise!] (116-117) and “So bide Ich euere mete oþer drinke, / Her þou lested al þi swinke.” [As I may I ever await food or drink, you lose here all of your work] (133-34).

<sup>19</sup> The only exceptions are when he swears “bi mi mi3tte” [by my might] (253) to keep his contract with Dame Sirith hidden and “bi þe somer blome” [by the summer bloom] (294) that he will await her until she has played her trick on Margery.

<sup>20</sup> For the fact that Wilekin is inside Sirith’s dwelling see 193 (“herinne”) and especially 406-07.

the money, fur, and shoes offered by Wilekin (224-25). The religious oaths are, as always, a sheen awkwardly applied to reality.<sup>21</sup>

Sirith's verbal behavior here is another instance of the divide in this tale between religious ideals and profane reality. It is also a nice example of the difference between the verbal patterns in *Dame Sirith* and the typical Old French fabliau. In a discussion of fabliau obscenity—a subject closely related to religious oaths—Roy J. Percy points out that in most fabliaux, the *fableors* transition from euphemistic terms to obscenities in order to unmask the pretensions of a particular character.<sup>22</sup> Charles Muscatine provides a good example of this from the *Le Pescheor de Pont Sur Seine (The Fisherman from Bridge-upon-Seine)*,<sup>23</sup> wherein a wife who has consistently uttered contempt for her husband's "thing" (*riens*), "business" (*afère*), and "instrument" (*ostil*), uses the obscene "dick" (*vit*) to celebrate once it is "recovered": "Mesire a son vit recouvré, / Nostres Sires i a ouvré" [My lord has recovered his dick—Our Lord has done it!] (199-200).<sup>24</sup> Her obscenity, then, gives the lie to her previously prudish and disdainful attitude; it sets her hypocrisy in bold relief. *Dame Sirith* does no such thing, however. Instead, the author allows Sirith to keep her dignity (at least insofar as she perceives it) intact. He does this to further emphasize the great distance between words and deeds, the implications of which I shall consider later.

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<sup>21</sup> Sirith's verbal habits may also be explained by her role in the analogues to *Dame Sirith*, which I shall discuss in the second part of this essay.

<sup>22</sup> Roy J. Percy, "Modes of Signification and the Humor of Obscene Diction in the Fabliaux," in *The Humor of the Fabliaux*, eds. Thomas D. Cooke and Benjamin L. Honeycutt (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1974), 163-96.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Muscatine, *The Old French Fabliaux* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986), 116.

<sup>24</sup> Text from Willem Noomen and Nico van den Boogaard, eds. *NRCF*, vol. 4 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1988), 109-29. These lines are found in two of the three extant manuscripts: Paris, Bibl. Nat., fr. 837 and Genève, Bibl. publ. et univ., fr. 179<sup>bis</sup>.

In this same scene, Wilekin uses the tale's most strikingly dissonant oath. The oath occurs when Sirith wants to confirm that Wilekin will keep the details of their agreement mum.

He answers her with alacrity:

'Iwis, nelde, ne wold I nout  
þat þou heuedest vilani  
    Ne shame for mi goed.  
Her I þe mi trouþe pliztte:  
Ich shal helen bi mi miztte,  
    Bi the holi roed!' (249-54)

[“Indeed, old woman I would not wish that you had any dishonor or shame on account of my good. Here I pledge my faith. I shall keep it hidden with all my might, by the holy cross!”]

This is the poem's only instance of swearing by “the holy cross.” The cross was, of course, a potent and central symbol in the Middle Ages. The sign of the cross was, and still is, used in the administration of the sacraments and was supposed to possess the power to drive away the Devil. The cross itself was venerated in the Good Friday service, during which “the clergy and the people genuflected or prostrated themselves” before it.<sup>25</sup> Oaths by the cross were probably common enough in everyday speech, but the particulars of this scene add to its weight. This episode is itself very near the center of the poem and works as the narrative's fulcrum. From this point on, the weight of success falls towards Wilekin and his designs for Margery. There is obvious irony here in an oath of loyalty between two figures like Wilekin and Dame Sirith, and the irony of the oath is heightened by the fact that it is religious, and, what is more, by the realization that Wilekin is, as a priest or other religious figure, not just verbally swearing by the cross but most likely making the sign of the cross, too, in a blasphemous parody of the priest's

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<sup>25</sup> R. E. Reynolds, “veneration of the cross” *The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages*. Ed Robert E. Bjork. OUP, 2010.

blessing at mass.<sup>26</sup> Sirith’s response underlines the finality, the irrevocability of his decision; it is also sounds eerily like a deal with the Devil: “Welcome, Wilekin, hiderward! / Her hauest imaked a foreward / þat þe mai ful wel like” [Welcome, Wilekin, to this place! You have made here an agreement that may fully well please you] (255-57). This scene is probably the most important in the whole poem. In it, one sees the clearest expression of the theme of *Dame Sirith*—which is, in short, humanity’s laughable hypocrisy and easy corruptibility.

Wilekin continues in his blasphemous role when he gives Sirith a parting blessing as she prepares to do her work: “Al so haui Godes griþ, / Wel hauest þou said, dame Sirip, / And goderhele shal ben þin!” [So have God’s peace. You have spoken well, Dame Sirith, and good fortune shall be yours!] (267-69). Sirith herself continues to make use of religious oaths and sentiments as she bemoans her fate outside Margery’s door: “Louerd,” she wails, “wo is holde wiues, / þat in pouerte ledeþ ay liues!” [Lord, it is sorrow for old women who always live in poverty!] (303-04), and at the end of her lament, she asks why God will not let her die: “Wi nul Goed mi soule fecche?” [Why won’t God fetch my soul?] (314). Margery responds in kind, asking God to “hounbinde” [unbind] (315) Sirith and telling her that she will feed her “For loue of Goed” [for the love of God] (317). Sirith ratchets it up even more in her reply:

‘Goed almiztten do þe mede  
 And þe Louerd þat wes on rode idon,  
 And faste fourti daiis to non,  
 And heuen and erþe haueþ to welde—  
 As þilke Louerd þe forþelde!’ (322-26)

[“May God Almighty reward you, and the Lord who was crucified and fasted forty days until the ninth hour and has heaven and earth to control. The same Lord repay you!”]

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<sup>26</sup> Keeping in mind that *Dame Sirith* was performed, it seems natural that Wilekin the professional religious accompany his oath by the cross with this gesture.

The humor in this exchange reiterates the same sardonic theme. One feels the jarring contrast between Sirith's feigned exuberant piety and her inner cunning. There is grim irony, too, in the "mede" that "God almiȝtten" and the crucified Christ give Margery as a result of her charitable act. One also notices that while Margery does not get the reward she is looking for, her own request that God reward Sirith for her "swinke" [work] (330) is answered just as Sirith would like. The moral realm has become topsy-turvy, or as the psalmist puts it, "sinners, . . . prospering in the world, obtain riches."<sup>27</sup>

There then occurs a rare authorial interjection in a narrative link between Margery's gift of "fles and eke bred" and Sirith's incredible story of the weeping bitch: "þan spac þat holde wif / (Crist awarie hire lif!)" [Then that old woman spoke / (May Christ curse her life!)] (331-32). The poet swears in his own voice a bit later, when Margery finally sends Sirith to fetch Wilekin, and he relates the outcome: "Hoe [Sirith] wente hire to hire inne: / þer hoe founde Wilekinne, / Bi houre Driȝtte!" [She herself went to her house: / there she found Wilekin, / By Our Lord!] (406-08). Arch, mocking irony and feigned propriety of this sort one recognizes also in Chaucer's narrative persona in the *Canterbury Tales*. This ironic authorial self-construction, whenever it is used, is always intended to be to some extent playful, and often, coy. In the same way, the author of *Dame Sirith* uses mock-horror and feigned simplicity to play with his audience and lead them into the same impish frame of mind.

Sirith makes another religious declaration as she relates the tale of her daughter's transformation, and it is in line with the rest of her usage: "Al the sunne Ich wolde forgiue / þe mon þat smite of min heued— / Ich wolde mi lif me were bireued!" [I would forgive all of the sin of the one who would strike off my head—I wish my life were taken from me!] (334-36). Once Sirith has finished her story, a troubled Margery cries "A! Louerd Crist, wat mai I þenne

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<sup>27</sup> Vulgate, Psalm 72.12.

do!” [Oh, Lord Christ, what may I then do!] (365) and then describes her experience with Wilekin. Immediately, Sirith replies “God almiȝtenn be þin help / þat þou ne be nouþer bicche ne welp!” [May Almighty God be your help so that you become neither a bitch nor a puppy!] (371-72) and advises Margery to accept the advances of “any” clerk who makes love to her. Margery swears twice more in her response to Sirith’s advice: “Louerd Crist,” she says, “þat me is wo, / þat þe clarc me hede fro / Ar he me heuede biwonne!” [Lord Christ, it is woe to me that the cleric went away from me before he had won me over!] (379-81). She then begs Sirith to fetch Wilekin for her with the following words:

‘Euermore, nelde, Ich wille be þin,  
Wiþ þat þou feche me Willekin,  
    þe clarc of wam I telle.  
Giftes will I geue þe  
þat þou maiȝt euer þe betere be,  
    Bi Godes houne belle!’ (385-90)

[“Old woman, from now on I will be yours provided that you fetch Wilekin, the cleric of whom I tell. I will give you gifts so that you might always be better off, by God’s own bell!”]

The “bell” that Margery mentions is probably the sacring-bell rung at the elevation of the Host.<sup>28</sup>

The oath, as striking as it may be, probably does not have significance in the immediate context.<sup>29</sup> Its significance, and that of the other oaths in this exchange, is more general: it continues to highlight the contrast between the religious world that it brings to mind and the profane context in which it is expressed.

When Dame Sirith returns to Wilekin and tells him the good news about Margery, he once again resorts to a religious asseveration: “God þe forȝelde, leue nelde, / þat heuene and erþe

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<sup>28</sup> So argue Bennett and Smithers in their note on this line in *Early Middle English Verse and Prose*, 311.

<sup>29</sup> Perhaps one could argue that such an oath calls to mind the contrast between the sacred body of Christ and the body of Margery, soon to be defiled by a foolish regard for her own self-preservation. But this seems like a bit of a stretch.

haueþ to welde!” [May the God who has control of heaven and earth reward you, dear old woman!] (415-16). Sirith then takes Wilekin to Margery “and swor bi Godes ouene belle / Hoe heuede him founde” [and swore by God’s own bell she had found him] (421-22). It is interesting not only that the oath by the sacring-bell is once again being used but also that the author thinks it worth including in the narrative itself. This underscores the importance that the poet attaches to religious language and again,<sup>30</sup> it may also call to mind the odd contrast between the sacred flesh of Christ and the fleshly sin of Wilekin and Margery. Wilekin’s final asseveration and oath are more clearly significant, however, in the way that they once again emphasize his religious position in the midst of an adulterous liaison. First, he asserts his eagerness to do Margery’s will by saying, “Dame, so Ich euere bide noen, / And Ich am redi and iboen / To don al þat þou saie” [Lady, as I hope to live to see the ninth hour! And I am ready and prepared to do all that you say] (433-35). This asseveration, as Bennett and Smithers suggest, could be both an example of Wilekin “speaking in character” and further, an indication of the poet’s own monastic background.<sup>31</sup> Both, I think, make it much more likely that the religious presence in this tale is an uneasy one.<sup>32</sup> Second, Wilekin demands “par ma fai!” [by my faith!] (436) that Sirith must “gange awai, / Wile Ich and hoe shulen plaie” [go away while I and she [Margery] will play] (437-38). Swanton is exactly right when he says that Wilekin’s oath here “underlines the true nature of his avowed religion.”<sup>33</sup> This final oath by his “faith” is highly appropriate; it is the culmination of all of his preceding deeds and, from a certain perspective, the seal of his perdition.

The dialogue closes with Dame Sirith’s reply to Wilekin:

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<sup>30</sup> See footnote 28.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 312.

<sup>32</sup> I discuss this at more length below.

<sup>33</sup> Swanton, *English Poetry*, 246.

‘Goddot, so I wille;  
And loke þat þou hire tille  
    And strek out hire þes.  
God ʒeue þe muchel kare  
ʒeif þat þou hire spare,  
    Þe wile þou mid hire bes.’ (439-44)

[“God knows, so I will [leave you alone]. And see to it that you till her and stretch out her thighs. May God give you much grief if you spare her in the time that you are with her.”]

What began as a “gap between words and deeds” has become a complete inversion of values.

Sirith, something of a Devil-figure, urges a man in holy orders to fornicate with verve or else be cursed by God. Just as Wilekin’s final words seem an appropriate signifier of his moral condition, so does this concluding scene bring an apt end to the poem. The sacred and the profane, up to this point existing in an uneasy parallel, are finally twisted together and inverted.

So far, my evidence for a tension in *Dame Sirith* between religious ideals and profane reality has been based mostly on a close reading of the text. In what follows, I would like to briefly consider how two external factors—the nature of MS Digby 86 and the analogues for the “weeping bitch” episode—may deepen understanding of *Dame Sirith*’s religious sensibility. Regarding MS Digby 86, I am particularly concerned with the contents of the manuscript and with the scribal commentary and marginalia also found there, which make sense of the inclusion of *Dame Sirith*, whose humor is consonant with the rest of the manuscript. I consider the analogues important because they were almost certainly read (or heard) by the *Dame Sirith* poet,<sup>34</sup> and their religious associations justify a close reading of *Dame Sirith* that sees an intentionally ironic contrast between the sacred and the profane.

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<sup>34</sup> Though the “weeping bitch” story existed in oral form, *Dame Sirith* is, as Bennett and Smithers suggest, “substantially of literary origin” (*Early Middle English*, 80).

First, MS Digby 86, like any miscellany, is made to meet various needs and accordingly contains religious works, “historical” documents, practical advice, romance, saints’ lives, and various other genres. Though compiled by the scribe-owner to meet various and widely different needs, the manuscript’s comic texts are similar enough in their humor to suggest some interesting and significant comparisons. I would like to consider two of them here.<sup>35</sup> One of these works, the fabliau *Les Quatre Sohais saint Martin* (*The Four Wishes of Saint Martin*), has already been mentioned. The MS Digby 86 version of the tale begins as a peasant has rushed home after being granted four wishes by Saint Martin.<sup>36</sup> The peasant is eventually persuaded by his wife to let her have the first wish, whereupon she wishes that he, her husband, be completely covered with penises. The husband retaliates by wishing for his wife to be covered in vaginas. Realizing that they have gotten themselves into a fix, the husband wishes that they be rid of their penises and vaginas, leaving both of them with no genitalia. The husband must then use the fourth and final wish to restore his penis and her vagina. The peasant and his wife thus find themselves in the same condition as before.

The other comic text of interest is the Middle English beast fable *The Fox and the Wolf*.<sup>37</sup> In this very fabliau-like tale,<sup>38</sup> a fox in search of water ends up stuck at the bottom of a monastery’s well. While he is lamenting the fate that his “lust and wille” have brought him to, his “gossip” the wolf hears him and asks what is the matter. The fox, hoping to get himself out

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<sup>35</sup> The following pieces, in addition to *Dame Sirith*, are not the manuscript’s only comic works. A full discussion of all of these would be, however, beyond the scope of this chapter.

<sup>36</sup> The version in MS Digby 86 starts about 40 lines in from the other two complete versions. In these versions, the reader is introduced to the peasant, a devotee of Saint Martin, whom Saint Martin honors with four wishes. The peasant runs home excitedly but before he can tell his wife their good fortune, she scolds him for coming home early from work. For all of these versions, see Noomen and van den Boogaard, eds., *NRCF*, vol. 4, 191-216.

<sup>37</sup> Bennett and Smithers, *Early Middle English*, 65-76.

<sup>38</sup> Some earlier critics in fact classified it as a fabliau. See, for example, the introduction to Melissa Furrow, “Middle English Fabliaux and Modern Myth,” *English Literary History* 56 (1989): 1-18.

of the well, tells the wolf that he is in paradise, where there is food and drink and “blisse wipouten swinke” [bliss without labor] (144). The wolf, hungry himself and tired of life, is convinced to jump into the bucket hanging above the “pit” so that he might descend to paradise. As he descends, the fox, sitting in the bucket at the other end of the rope, ascends to the top and makes his escape. The wolf is eventually hauled to the top himself by a thirsty monk who yelps that “þe deuel is in þe putte!” [the Devil is in the pit!] (282) when he sees him. The rest of the monks join their brother, bringing pikes, staves, stones, and hounds with them, and beat the wolf.

The humor in both of the tales reveals a taste for an irreverence similar to that in *Dame Sirith*. In *Les Quatre Souhais saint Martin*, there is obvious flippancy in turning Saint Martin into a kind of fairy godmother, and, as in *Dame Sirith*, all of the human players are objects for ridicule. The wife is put up for more criticism, true, but the husband is made to look foolish, too. In *The Fox and the Wolf*, the fox’s lament at the bottom of the well recalls Jonah’s psalm of woe in the belly of the fish,<sup>39</sup> except that the fox transitions without a thought from woe to willful deceit.<sup>40</sup> The “good,” or the religious, in this poem are the fools. The wolf’s desire for the life hereafter and his agonized confession bring about his ruin. The moment, too, in which the monk pulls up the wolf and thinks him the Devil emerging from hell gently pokes fun at a simple and credulous piety. The poet sides rather with the fox, showing an “uninhibited relish for the scandalous triumphs of a brazen reprobate.”<sup>41</sup>

The wry, irreverent humor of *Dame Sirith* not only harmonizes with the other two fabliau-like tales in MS Digby 86. It is also in tune with the Digby scribe’s sense of humor. The manuscript reveals a scribe-owner with his own playful nature, as Marilyn Corrie suggests, in the

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<sup>39</sup> Jonah 2.2-10.

<sup>40</sup> Jonah doesn’t exactly learn his lesson, either, but, in contrast to the fox, he *does* try.

<sup>41</sup> Bennett and Smithers, *Early Middle English*, 67.

way that it is sometimes illustrated with characters from various stories and has “drawn hands pointing to the more suggestive passages of other texts.”<sup>42</sup> Corrie likewise offers some interesting speculation on the last line to *L’Estrif de .ii. Dames (The Strife between Two Ladies)*, apparently added by the scribe himself. In this final line, the scribe says that the poem, featuring an argument about morals between a chaste, virtuous woman and a promiscuous, vicious one was made “De Aubreie de Basincbourne e Ide de Beauchaup.” This addendum may very well refer to two local women known by the scribe and be intended as an arch observation on their interaction and conduct. Taking the “dedication” this way seems consonant, says Corrie, with the “mischievousness” in the rest of the scribe’s work. A similar mischievousness is often at play in *Dame Sirith*, though the humor, as I will argue in my conclusion, is much darker.

The analogues to *Dame Sirith* are also revealing. The “weeping bitch” episode in *Dame Sirith*, which is of Indian origin, first appears in Western literature during the twelfth century in Petrus Alfonsi’s *Disciplina Clericalis*.<sup>43</sup> Thomas D. Cooke points out that it is this version of the story that *Dame Sirith* most closely resembles.<sup>44</sup> Still, there are some differences. The story begins by introducing a nobleman who leaves his wife for a time to study oratory in Rome. His wife chastely and obediently remains at home until one day she must step out briefly to visit a neighbor. While out, she is seen by a young man who falls violently in love with her and begins unsuccessfully pleading for her love. His failure to win her makes him lovesick. An old woman dressed as a nun (*anus religionis habitu decorate*) notices the young man’s despondency and

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<sup>42</sup> Marilyn Corrie, “Further Information on the Origins of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 86,” *Notes and Queries* 46 (1999): 430-33.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas D. Cooke, “Dame Sirith,” *Manual of Writings in Middle English*, vol. 9 (New Haven: CT Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1993), 3158-3159; Petrus Alfonsi, *Disciplina Clericalis*, (Berlin: T. C. F. Enslin, 1827), Tale XIV.

<sup>44</sup> Cooke, *Manual*, 3159.

after hearing his story, resolves to help him. She compels her bitch puppy to fast two days and then on the third feeds her bread prepared with mustard, the bitterness of which causes the puppy's eyes to run. The old woman presents the puppy to the wife and tells her that it is her daughter, who has been turned into a dog for rejecting a young man in love with her. The rest of the story then plays out similarly to *Dame Sirith*: the wife is frightened for herself and has the old woman bring the young man to her so that he might achieve his desire. But the *Disciplina* is framed as an exchange between a master and a pupil who offer commentary on the stories. At the end of this tale, the pupil tells the reader what he should have learned: "I hope that if any man will be wise enough to always fear that he is able to be deceived by the guile of a woman, perhaps he will also be able to protect himself from her trickery."<sup>45</sup>

In addition to the *Disciplina Clericalis*, Bennett and Smithers mention Jacques de Vitry's version of the tale from his *Exempla*<sup>46</sup> (tales used as sermon illustrations) and how both versions provide much of plot essentials of *Dame Sirith*.<sup>47</sup> In this version of the story, the absent husband is not mentioned but there is the additional detail that the spurned lover himself changes the object of his affection into a bitch "by some magic" (*quibusdam sortilegiis*). It also concludes with a moral: "Behold, how subtle and crafty are [malicious old women] to do evil so that they might think up inventions in sin."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> "Spero quod si quis homo tam sapiens erit ut semper timeat se posse decipi arte mulieris, forsitan se ab illius ingenio custodire valebit."

<sup>46</sup> Jacques de Vitry, *The Exempla or Illustrative Stories from the Sermones Vulgares of Jacques de Vitry*, ed. Thomas Frederick Crane, (New York: Lenox Hill, 1890), 105-06 (tale CCV).

<sup>47</sup> Bennett and Smithers, *Early Middle English*, 79.

<sup>48</sup> "Ecce qualiter subtiles sunt et sapientes ut faciant mala ut cogitent adinventiones in peccatis." In the context of this tale, it's unclear who, in fact, the "subtiles" and "sapientes" are. The next tale, however, features "again" (iterum) an adulterous wife and a deceitful old woman. The tale ends with the following moral: "Huiusmodi autem vetule leve sunt inimice Christi et ministri diaboli atque hostes castitatis..." [Now facile old women of this kind are enemies of Christ and ministers of the devil and foes of chastity]. My assumption, therefore, is that Jacques is

Also relevant is the version of the tale in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century *Gesta Romanorum*.<sup>49</sup> Here, the husband is a soldier who must go on a long journey. The wife remains at home until a neighbor entreats her to come with her to a festival. At the festival, a young man sees her, falls in love, and begs for her love in return. She rejects him; he becomes ill. On his way to church, he is accosted by an old woman “with a reputation for holiness” (*in proposito sanctam reputatam*) who asks what disturbs him. He relates his troubles, and she replies that she will find a cure for him. As in the other versions, she feeds her bitch bread and mustard, but the story she tells the wife is slightly different in that the fictitious spurned lover dies and then her daughter is transformed by God as punishment. The “moral” of the story is an allegorical interpretation of it. The soldier-husband represents Christ; the “chaste and seemly” wife, the soul with the gift of free will and the Holy Spirit; the festival, fleshly desire; the young man, the world’s vanity; the old woman, the Devil; and the bitch puppy, hope of a long life and presuming too much of God’s mercy. This version also features more dialogue than the other two, with a much more fully developed conversation between the old woman and the wife.

There is no simple way of understanding why the “weeping bitch” story was moralized and allegorized and what effect the various versions had on their audiences. Sometimes, no doubt, the story was told in earnest for the edification of the faithful; at others, the morals must have existed merely to give sanction to an amusing yarn. What is interesting about *Dame Sirith* is that it tells the story without any explicit tag-line moral at all.<sup>50</sup> Bennett and Smithers, on the

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referring to “malicious old women” in the preceding tale, but of course he could be thinking, more generally, of “the wicked.”

<sup>49</sup> Hermann Oesterley, ed., *Gesta Romanorum*, (Berlin: Wiedmann, 1872), 325-27 (Tale 28). Obviously, this version of the tale might not be properly termed an analogue since it was written around the same time as *Dame Sirith*. What is of particular interest in this version, however, is its allegorical interpretation, which is proof of another, undoubtedly popular, way of reading *Dame Sirith*.

<sup>50</sup> This is all the more remarkable because many of the Old French fabliaux end with morals of this kind.

one hand acknowledging the edifying history of the story, consider it on the other, “a kind of justice” that the story ends up being used as mere “literature of entertainment.”<sup>51</sup> There certainly is some poetic justice in the fact that the “weeping bitch” story ends up being turned back into a fabliau. But Bennett and Smithers seem to ignore the personality of the *Dame Sirith* poet himself and his own motivations for writing the tale. It is particularly important to remember that the author was almost certainly connected to the church in some way, whether as a *clericus vagans* unable to complete his university education or as something more official, perhaps a monk. It is hard to believe that a literate man of this era could have turned this story into a fabliau without any awareness of its traditional moralizing baggage. Indeed, I think that its baggage was the point in turning it into a fabliau. The *Dame Sirith* poet had read and heard the “weeping bitch” story and many in his audience probably had heard it, too, either in sermons at the parish church or from the mouths of the Franciscans and the Dominicans.<sup>52</sup> So, the mere presentation of *Dame Sirith* as a comic story puts the expectations the audience would have had for literary entertainment (expecting to hear “something funny”) up against those for an edifying illustration in a sermon (some “sentence”). Yet, presumably, the audience was amused by this combination. The source of this amusement comes from the strangeness of the contrast both in a broad sense, in the combination of exemplum and fabliau, and more particularly, in the odd presence of religious oaths. The poet and many of his audience were not at all discomfited by this contrast; they found the irreverence of it rather titillating.

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<sup>51</sup> Bennett and Smithers, *Early Middle English*, 77.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Frederick Crane, introduction to *The Exempla of Jacques de Vitry*, xix-xx. Crane mentions here that public preaching was at first “jealously guarded and granted to comparatively few.” The foundation of the Dominican and Franciscan orders, however, “gave an enormous impulse to preaching and entirely changed its character.” Because the Dominicans and Franciscans were preaching to audiences with a “popular character,” they incorporated tales into their sermons to meet the tastes of their listeners.

The analogues to *Dame Sirith* also shed some light on my close reading of the tale. The fact that Sirith is some kind of holy woman in two of the analogues, for instance, explains her frequent and continued use of religious language in the tale. And if she is indeed a religious figure in *Dame Sirith*, the poem's contrast between religious ideals and reality becomes even starker. Those who should be God's agents in the world for the salvation of humanity are in fact the very opposite. In the case of Sirith, the allegorical way of reading the tale also reinforces the notion that she may be a Devil-figure. For good reason, then, does Wilekin's compact with her seem like a deal with the Devil.<sup>53</sup>

### Conclusion

The point of my argument is that *Dame Sirith* cannot be understood without a close consideration of its contrast between sacred ideals and profane reality. The point of *Dame Sirith* is not found in the little bit of humor generated by a ruse featuring a dog with runny eyes. Instead, the real meaning of the story is contained in the stark dissonance between a religious, idealistic way of seeing the world and a more cynical, concrete viewpoint. The poet's meaning is that humanity itself is habitually glib, hypocritical, and self-seeking. Pious clerks are really lechers; poor, defenseless old women are, in fact, grasping schemers; and pretty young wives are self-interested fools. One notes an interesting difference here between the moralizing of *Dame Sirith* and the exempla and Old French fabliaux. Whereas in the latter, particular groups are singled out for censure—women or uxorious husbands, say—in *Dame Sirith*, the blame is

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<sup>53</sup> I would also add, tentatively, that the poem's allegorical reading may even open up the nomenclature of *Dame Sirith*. For instance, it may be telling that the wife in *Dame Sirith*—in the allegorical interpretation, the figure associated with the human soul—is given the name *Margery*. This name is derived from the Latin *margarita*, or “pearl,” and in Middle English, “margery” or “Margery stone” is often used for “pearl;” or is used in conjunction with it, as in Higden's description of the *margarita candida* of Ireland, which John of Trevisa translates as “white margery perlis.” The pearl, of course, is used by Christ to denote something exceedingly precious, from the kingdom of heaven (Mat. 13) to the “holy” (Mat. 7.6). These associations of a heightened preciousness and purity were carried into the Middle Ages and manifested in the literature. *Pearl* is the obvious example. Of course, Margery was a common name and may mean nothing in *Dame Sirith*. But then again, it could be another indication of the profound disparity between pious exterior and ugly reality.

universalized. All members of society are subjects for criticism. But the *Dame Sirith* poet is not particularly moved by these observations. This is no call for the reform of 13<sup>th</sup>-century English society. On the contrary, he finds a perverse pleasure in this jarring contrast between the sacred and the profane, working it for all the laughs that he can and even participating in it himself.

This reading of *Dame Sirith* also deepens appreciation of oaths as they appear in other Middle English comic literature. Chaucer's *Summoner's Tale* provides a good example, particularly the scene in which Friar John reacts to Thomas's "gift" at the conclusion of that insufferable (and delightful) sermon touching especially on "ire." In a moment of catharsis (for Thomas and the reader), Thomas farts into Friar John's hand. The friar's response is telling:

The frere up stirte as dooth a wood leoun—

‘A, false cherl,’ quod he, ‘for Goddes bones!

This hastow for despit doon for the nones.

Thou shalt abyge this fart, if that I may!’ (2152-55)

Here, our sense of the friar's hypocrisy lies not only in the tenor of his response but also in the marked difference in verbal style: his foregoing sermon is hilariously long-winded and his language is nice and delicate throughout. His terseness here in comparison to his preceding talkativeness is noticeable, as is the difference in his religious language. Prior to this scene, the Friar's religious oaths are mild, infrequent and often self-serving. "Yet saugh I nat this day so fair a wyf / In al the chirche, *God so save me!*," (1808-09, my emphasis) he "chirketh" in his greeting to Thomas's wife. His other oaths and invocations are similarly bland: "By God!" (1850), "so God me wisse!" (1858), "For Goddes love" (2053). His allusions to the Godhead further maintain a pious exterior: God is often "hye God," and Jesus, in addition to the normal title of "Crist," becomes "oure Lord Jhesu" (1904) and "oure sweete Lord Jhesus" (1921). The contrast between this language and Friar John's abrupt, reflexive oath by "Goddes bones" is

immediately apparent. Chaucer (or the Summoner) is not using this oath merely for rhyme or meter but rather as another deft touch on his portrait of the Friar, whose silliness and hypocrisy become even more vivid.

Of course, religious oaths vary in significance according to the comic tale in which they appear. At times, they may mean little to nothing. At others, as in *The Summoner's Tale*, they add subtle strokes to a figure's portrait. At other times, however, as in *Dame Sirith*, they carry a great deal of meaning. Neglecting to think about the religious language in *Dame Sirith* means missing an important element of the fabliau's humor. But besides providing a deeper appreciation of one particular poem, I also hope that my argument is motivation to look more closely at religious oaths as they appear in the Old French fabliaux, the Chaucerian fabliaux, and other medieval comic literature. They are often doing interesting and remarkable work.

## CHAPTER 2: RELIGIOUS OATHS AND ASSEVERATIONS IN SOME OLD FRENCH FABLIAUX

In the last chapter, I compared the number of oaths and asseverations in *Dame Sirith* with those in the Anglo-Norman fabliaux of Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Digby 86 and London, British Library MS Harley 2253. Though *Dame Sirith* is nearly the same length as these fabliaux, it contains around seven times more oaths and asseverations. As I said before, the high number of oaths in *Dame Sirith* may be significant of their importance in the tale but their sheer number does not entail anything. Conversely, the lower number of oaths in the Anglo-Norman fabliaux does not entail their insignificance. In this chapter, then, part of what I would like to do is look more closely at the oaths in the Anglo-Norman fabliaux of MS Digby 86 and MS Harley 2253. *Dame Sirith* has been inspected in regards to some Anglo-Norman fabliaux produced around the same time and in a similar milieu, and now it is time to consider these fabliaux in regards to *Dame Sirith*—but not only to *Dame Sirith*, of course. The fabliaux in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* are also relevant, and indeed, the culmination of this project. Accordingly, I shall add to the mix two other Old French fabliaux that Chaucer may have used as sources: *Le Meunier et les deus clers* (*The Miller and the Two Clerks*) and *Le Vescie a Prestre* (*The Priest's Bequest*).<sup>1</sup> So not only will the work in this chapter describe oaths as they appear in the Old

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<sup>1</sup> For these fabliaux, I will be using the critical texts found in Willem Noomen and Nico Van Den Boogaard, eds., *Nouveau Recueil Complet Des Fabliaux (NRCF)*, vols. 7 and 10 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1983-1998). All translations from the Old French are my own.

French fabliaux, but it will also bring some clarity to the way they are used in the Middle English fabliaux.

As with *Dame Sirith*, critics have paid little attention to oaths in the Old French fabliaux, though the topic has been at least broached. In a short essay, Ewa Dorota Żółkiewska provides a general overview of the way invocations of God and the saints are used in the Old French fabliaux and Anne Cobby takes a closer look at these invocations elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Both Żółkiewska and Cobby make helpful and intriguing points, and before looking at their arguments more closely, I should stress that in a large part, I find myself in agreement with them and shall often use these shared insights over the course of my own argument. There are, certainly, some points I see differently, but these differences have been instructive in forcing me to come to terms with what exactly I think and to articulate it clearly.

In her essay, Żółkiewska categorizes the several ways oaths are used in the fabliaux. Most of them, she says, are used merely to reflect common speech since the fabliaux are written in “the low style,” which regularly makes use of this kind of language. The rest of her categorizations deal therefore with the minority of other uses. Some oaths are used to exaggerate a particular emotion, as in *D’Estormi*,<sup>3</sup> wherein Estormi utters a fierce oath after he finds himself pinned beneath and then injured by the very corpse he has just tried to dispose of: “Vois, por le cul sainte Marie!, / Fet Estormis, je sui matez!” [“Look, by Saint Mary’s ass!,” said<sup>4</sup> Estormi, “I

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<sup>2</sup> Ewa Dorota Żółkiewska, “Le Bon Dieu et Tous Les Saints—dans Les Fabliaux,” in <<*Contez Me Tout*>>: *Mélanges de langue et de littérature médiévales offerts à Herman Braet*, La République des Lettres 28 (Louvain: Peeters, 2006), 355-362; Anne Cobby, “‘Saint Amadour et sainte Afflise’: Calling upon the Saints in the Fabliaux,” in *Grant risee? The Medieval Comic Presence = La Présence comique médiévale: Essays in Memory of Brian J. Levy*, eds. Adrian P. Tudor and Alan Hindley, Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe 11 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 173-89.

<sup>3</sup> *NRCF*, vol.1, 13-28.

<sup>4</sup> Here and throughout, I will often translate the historical present as past tense.

am defeated!"] (489-90). Others can be used to give an aura of sincerity. For example, there is a speech by the old procuress Auberee in the fabliau named after her.<sup>5</sup> In her speech, she is berating a husband for kicking his wife out of the house for her suspected infidelity. In fact, the wife has been faithful until the night she is evicted, at which time, ironically enough, she is joined to her lover for the first time. Auberee has secretly arranged all of this—the wife’s eviction, the bed for the lovers, and the final trick on the husband. To convince the husband that his wife is in fact chaste, she goes to him the morning after he has banished his wife and berates him, telling him that his wife has spent the night in the church praying prostrate before the altar, as she observed herself early that morning. She then scolds him:

De cel tendron qui ier fu nee,  
 Qui deüst la grant matinee  
 Dormir ceanz souz la cortines!  
 Et vos l’envoiez a matines!  
 A matines! Lasse, coupable!  
 De Damle Deu l’espiritabile  
 Soie je, dist ele, saignie  
 Et ennoree et beneüe!  
 Veus en tu fere papelarde? (508-16)

[“This tender young thing born but yesterday ought to be sleeping under her bedcovers this early in the morning! And you have sent her to Matins! To Matins! Wretched, damnable! May I be blessed, honored, and favored by the Lord God of heaven!,” she said. “Do you want to make her a hypocrite?”]

According to Żółkiewska, this oath by “the Lord God of heaven” lends force to Auberee’s words, stunning the husband and driving away any suspicion.

Further, Żółkiewska points out that the saints are sometimes invoked in humorous accompaniment to the deeds of the fabliaux. The author of *Le Chevalier a la Robe vermeille*<sup>6</sup> winks at the audience, for instance, when the wife, having succeeded in cuckolding her husband

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 296-312.

<sup>6</sup> *NRCF*, vol. 2, 300-08.

and then turning his suspicions into doubts about his own sanity, encourages him to seek out Saint Arnould, “well-known patron of cuckolds”:

Et devez bien en cele terre  
Monseignor saint Hernoul requerre:  
Vos deussiez des l'autre esté  
Avoir a son mostier esté  
O chandele de vostre lonc! (294-98)

[You ought to seek out my lord Saint Arnould in that country. Since last summer, you ought to have gone to his church with a candle of your own length!]

The irony here is delightful: what the husband takes for well-meant advice is in fact a mocking revelation of the lady's affair.

Żółkiewska mentions also that oaths sometimes help to localize a fabliau's characters or setting. In *Les deus Anglois et l'Anel* (Two Englishman and a Ring),<sup>7</sup> one of the main characters is easily identified as English when he swears by “seint Almon,” or Edmond, king of East Anglia and martyr. In one of the versions of *Les trois Dames qui troverent l'Anel* (*The Three Ladies Who Found a Ring*),<sup>8</sup> the author, Haiseau, coming from Normandy, has one of the ladies swear by a “Saint Huideveret of Gournai, patron of Gourney-en-Bray,” a town nine miles from Rouen. Thus the oath gives the audience an idea of where the action of the fabliau is taking place.

Finally, oaths can be a shorthand way of appreciating a character's psychology. Though Żółkiewska does not mention it, Estormi is a good example. While he certainly swears by “le cul sainte Marie” as a result of great frustration, this oath is not far out of line with the rest of his speech. Elsewhere, he swears by “le cul Dieu” [God's ass] (317, 329, 524), “saint Pol” [Saint Paul] (340), by “les sainz d'Engleterre, / ceus de France et ceus de Bretagne” [the saints of England, France, and Brittany] (408-409), “le poistron” [ass] (460), “le cuer Dieu” [God's heart]

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<sup>7</sup> *NRCF*, vol. 8, 178-81.

<sup>8</sup> *NRCF*, vol. 2, 229-40.

(469), and “le cors saint Richier” [Saint Richier’s body] (508). Neither are all of these oaths used in moments of great emotional distress.<sup>9</sup> Rather, their use rounds out the character of Estormi, who is first mentioned in the context of whorehouses, taverns, and gambling.

Anne Cobby is less interested in oaths in the generic sense than in how they specifically contribute to the artistry and comedy of the fabliaux. She looks at oaths by Saints Martin and Simon (who are, by Żółkiewska’s count, the most frequently invoked saints<sup>10</sup>) and oaths as they work in individual texts. For my purposes, it will do to look at her discussion of oaths by Saint Simon as they appear throughout the fabliaux and then, oaths in the fabliau *Le Prestre et Alison* (*The Priest and Alison*).<sup>11</sup> By reviewing just these two examples, Cobby’s methodology will become clear enough to set up my own discussion of oaths. Cobby considers first, then, oaths by Saint Simon, which are used six times in the fabliaux. In two of those instances, his name is mentioned “in contexts of systematic deceit or impersonation,”<sup>12</sup> as in the confession that a husband, in the guise of a priest, elicits from his wife in *Le Chevalier qui fist sa Fame confesse* (*The Knight Who Made His Wife Confess*). When the wife, who has confessed that she is an adulteress, perceives what her husband has done, she pretends to have been wise to his game and purposely leading him on:

Mes m’en estoie aperceüe,  
Quant je vous en enquis sordoïs  
En ce que dis par mon gaboïs.  
Mout me poise, par saint Symon,  
Que ne vous pris au chaperon

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<sup>9</sup> For instance, the first two times Estormi uses the oath by “le cul Dieu,” it is in casual conversation with John and Yfame (Estormi’s uncle and aunt, who are responsible for the priests’ deaths), before he has even learned of the job they have for him.

<sup>10</sup> Żółkiewska, “Le Bon Dieu et Tous Les Saints,” 360.

<sup>11</sup> *NRCF*, vol. 8, 195-206.

<sup>12</sup> Cobby, “Calling upon the Saints,” 179.

Et que ne vous deschirai tout! (268-73)<sup>13</sup>

[But I perceived it when I told you the worst of it in what I said by my mockery. It weighs on me much, by Saint Simon, that I didn't grab you by the cowl and tear you to pieces!]

In one of the versions of *Le Damoiselle qui ne pooit oïr parler de foutre* (*The Maiden Who Couldn't Abide Talk about Sex*),<sup>14</sup> the servant uses an oath by Saint Simon as he and the maiden seduce each other by means of an elaborate metaphor: "Puis li mist sa mein sor le con / Qu'est ce fait il por seint Simon" [Then he put his hand on her cunt: what, by Saint Simon, is this?] (156). In two other fabliaux featuring oaths by Saint Simon, both involve "the sale or barter of women's bodies."<sup>15</sup> In *Le Meunier d'Arleux*,<sup>16</sup> a young man tries to trade a pig for a night with a pretty girl staying in the house of the miller:

'Sire, dist il, por Saint Simon,  
Car faites un markiet a mi.  
Certes j'ai un porchiel nourri,  
Il a passé cinc mois entiers;  
Celui avrés molt volentiers,  
Foi ke doi Diu, sainte Marie,  
Se jesir puis o le meschine.' (194-200)

["Sir," he said, "by Saint Simon, now make a deal with me. I have certainly a well-fed little pig, fully five months old. This you can have very willingly, by the faith that I owe to God and holy Mary, if thereby I am able to lie with that girl."]

And then, in *Le Prestre et Alison*, when the mother who is feigning to prostitute her daughter, Marion, to the priest asks if he has brought his payment, he answers:

"Dame, ne sui pas ci por guile!  
J'ai les garnemenz apotez:  
Veez les ci! Or esgardez,  
Quar il sont et bel et plaisant!

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<sup>13</sup> *NRCF*, vol. 4, 236-43.

<sup>14</sup> Manuscript *D* (Paris, Bibl. Nat., fr. 19152, fol. 55b-56a), *NRCF*, vol.4, 65-79.

<sup>15</sup> Cobby, "Calling upon the Saints, 179.

<sup>16</sup> *NRCF*, vol. 9, 226-36.

Vos me tenroiz a voir disant,  
Ainz que parte de vo maison.  
Foi que ge doi a seint Simon,  
Ge n'amai onques a trichier.”  
Lors rue sor un eschequier  
Quinze livres d'esterlins blans. (266-75)

[Lady, I am not here for trickery! I have brought the clothes. See them here! Now look, for they are lovely and pleasing. You will hold me as one speaking truly before I leave your house. By the faith that I owe to Saint Simon, I have never loved trickery. Then he threw fifteen shiny esterlins on the chessboard.]

Cobby says that in *Le Sacristain II*,<sup>17</sup> the oath by Saint Simon is “a line-filler and rhyme-provider” but that the fabliau does begin “with an attempt to buy a woman’s body.”<sup>18</sup> The final instance of the oath is in *Trubert*,<sup>19</sup> “a tale whose very theme is impersonation.” Cobby declines to discuss the particulars of this oath, however, because *Trubert* needs more attention than she can give it in her essay. She also mentions all of the deceitful Simons who appear in the fabliaux, from the monk-seducer Simon in *Frere Denise (Brother Denis)*<sup>20</sup> to the Benedictine Simon in *Le Vescie a Prestre (The Priest’s Bequest)*,<sup>21</sup> who, along with one of his fellows, tries to wheedle a gift out of a priest on his deathbed. According to Cobby, all of these examples suggest that when the name Simon is used, as for example, in the passage from *Le Chevalier qui fist sa Fame confesse*, it may be in reference not to Simon the Zealot, brother of Jude (as the *NRCF* editors suggest<sup>22</sup>), but Simon Magus, who in Acts 8 tries to purchase the power of the

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<sup>17</sup> *NRCF*, vol. 7, 153-73.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>19</sup> *NRCF*, vol. 10, 188-262.

<sup>20</sup> *NRCF*, vol. 6, 15-23.

<sup>21</sup> *NRCF*, vol. 10, 295-303.

<sup>22</sup> *NRCF*, vol. 4, 445.

Holy Spirit from the apostles. “Simon” in the fabliaux, therefore, emphasizes a character’s deceit or unlawful dealing.

Cobby then continues a discussion of oaths in *Le Prestre et Alison*, which, for a fabliau, has a remarkable number of invocations of saints.<sup>23</sup> At the beginning of this fabliau, the narrator swears by “le cors saint Huitace”—Saint Eustace, that is, who was boiled alive “in a bull-shaped brass cauldron.”<sup>24</sup> And then Mahaut, the mother of Marion, swears vengeance on the priest in Eustace’s name as she prepares a bath for Alison, the whore who will surreptitiously take her daughter’s place in bed:

Damedieus en prist a jurer  
Et enprés les cors S. Huitasse,  
Le prestre pranra a la nasse  
Ausin com l’en prant le poisson. (136-39)

[She began to swear by the Lord God and then by the body of Saint Eustace that she would take the priest in the net the way one does a fish.]

Several of the oaths appear not to be significant: Mahaut refuses the priest’s offer of payment for her daughter by swearing on Saints Gervase and Protase (110), and she swears to Alison by Saint Denis that she has found a husband for her (149); Hercelot swears by Saint George in welcoming the priest to the house (322) and by Saint Peter as she falsely reassures the priest that he will sleep with Marion (214). But Cobby thinks that the priest makes a significant oath by St.

Lawrence as he hands some money to Hercelote after she has delivered the girl he thinks is Marion:

Tien, Hercelot, ceste ausmoniere,  
Fait li prestres, ‘ci a dedenz  
Vint sous ou plus, par seint Loranz!

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<sup>23</sup> According to Cobby, six saints are mentioned by name, and two indirectly (Mahaut swears “par les sainz c’on quiert a Gisor” [the saints that one finds at Gisor], who are Gervase and Protase) (“Calling upon the Saints,” 110).

<sup>24</sup> Brian J. Levy, *The Comic Text: Patterns and Images in the Old French Fabliaux* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 155.

S'achate un bon pliçon d'aigneaus.  
Et g'irai faire mes aviaus  
A celi qu'ai tant desiree. (344-49)

[“Take this purse, Hercelot,” said the Priest. “It has within twenty sous or more, by Saint Lawrence! Buy thus a good coat of lambskin, and I will do my pleasure with the one whom I have so much desired.”]

Saint Lawrence is significant here, says Cobby, because he was roasted on a gridiron and the priest is about to be disgraced by fire.<sup>25</sup> Cobby then concludes her discussion of *Le Prestre et Alison* by pointing out that this text shows that the saints can be used for artistic effect in mainly two ways: “Simon, Lawrence, and Eustace are chosen for their identity, whereas others serve to underline the guiding passions of the speakers and the themes of the fabliau. At the same time, here as everywhere, they are useful for rhyme.”<sup>26</sup>

Clearly, neither Żółkiewska’s nor Cobby’s essay accounts for a fabliau like *Dame Sirith*, where the presence of oaths conveys the tale’s real meaning. Rather, they both see oaths as supplements to the artistry or humor of the fabliaux. And to Żółkiewska’s thinking, most oaths have little to no significance, serving merely as reinforcements of common speech. Maybe this is right. Maybe most oaths in the Old French fabliaux are of slight significance, being at most something like subtle, suggestive strokes on a nearly complete portrait—much like the Friar’s oath in Chaucer’s *Summoner’s Tale*. Cobby, on the other hand, though certainly agreeing with Żółkiewska that most oaths in the fabliaux are there for the purposes of mimesis or rhyme and meter, pushes things a bit further. Though her comments on the invocations of saints are thought-provoking and helpful, some of these claims may go a bit too far. For instance, her examples regarding “Simon” all add up to show that there may have been a negative association

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<sup>25</sup> Hercelote raises a false fire alarm and draws all the neighbors to the house, and eventually, the priest’s room, where he and Alison are caught in bed together.

<sup>26</sup> Cobby, “Calling upon the Saints,” 182.

with the name but none of the examples in itself is conclusive. In berating her husband in *Le Chevalier qui fist sa Fame confesse*, the wife does use an oath by Saint Simon, but in the same speech she also uses oaths by *la merci Dé* (two times, 262 and 265) and asseverates twice: “Se Dame Dieus mon cors garisse” [As the Lord God may save my body] (276), and “se Dieus me gart” [As God may save me] (279). True, she is not invoking saints in these cases, but why are these oaths ignored? Perhaps she views oaths referring to God here as mostly insignificant, but she would need to explain why.

A similar problem besets the reader when he refers to Manuscript *D* of *Le Damoisele qui ne pooit oïr parler de foutre*, for in the same speech that the servant swears by “seint simon” (156) he also swears by “seint germain” (144) and “por amor dé” (170). In fact, this is a recurring problem that Cobby does not address. As Cobby herself points out, what may be a significant oath by Saint Martin in *Le Chapelain* is closely situated near oaths by Saints Peter and Fatué. Cobby may very well not include a discussion of Peter and Fatué because they seem to merely provide rhymes (or not exist, as in the case of Fatué<sup>27</sup>), but why would the same not apply to Martin? Cobby’s reasoning is that Saint Martin is known for having given half of his cloak away and this fabliau deals with clothes, but such a connection seems tenuous, especially in consideration of the fact that Martin has other associations. Indeed, the saints’ often numerous associations create a real problem for such an argument. When Saint Anthony is invoked<sup>28</sup> by a man who digs up a corpse instead of the ham he was expecting, it is not wholly convincing that Anthony is used because he is “the patron both of gravediggers and of pork butchers”<sup>29</sup> because

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>28</sup> God is invoked, too (“Aïe, Dius et saint Antoine!” [412]), but not discussed. This oath appears in *Le Sacristain I* (*NRCF*, vol. 7, 140-52).

<sup>29</sup> Cobby, “Calling upon the Saints”, 183.

he is also associated with the healing of men and animals, gardening, mat-making, and more.<sup>30</sup> Obviously, these numerous associations make it all too easy for a critic to establish a link between the use of a saint's name and the details of a narrative. For the link to be convincing, the evidence for it must be weighted proportionally to the saint's several associations. But even supposing that Saint Anthony is used on purpose, what effect is achieved? It is hard to see how it might be humorous. Perhaps one could suggest, however, that in making this link, the poet adds some substance and texture to the tale, which ceases to be a mere extended joke with an isolated existence and is rather contextualized within a vibrant Christian tradition. But again, the poet could just be using it for rhyme.

There is a question of fitness, too. Though the name of Simon may have negative associations, how are those applicable when it is *Saint Simon* being put up for consideration, as in the wife's speech to her husband in *Le Chevalier qui fist sa Fame confesse*?<sup>31</sup> Simon Magus was never himself canonized, so to suggest that the poet includes an oath by the actual saint with the other Simon really in mind seems doubtful. Likewise, the priest's oath by Saint Lawrence in *Le Prestre et Alison*,<sup>32</sup> which, because Lawrence was roasted on a grid, is supposed to be significant of the priest's calamity by fire, seems an awkward fit. For the priest does not "meet his ruin through fire," or at least exclusively through it. Herculot's false alarm helps only to bring about his real ruin—exposure, contempt, and a sound beating at the hands of the neighbors.

It is what Żółkiewska and Cobby leave undone or (at times) perhaps miss that drives my own argument. For one, their relative disregard for anything besides oaths to the saints compels me to more closely consider oaths referring to God (and other religious elements). Żółkiewska

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<sup>30</sup> See "Martin of Tours" in David Hugh Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* 5<sup>th</sup> ed. rev. (Oxford: OUP, 2011).

<sup>31</sup> p. 28.

<sup>32</sup> pp. 31-32.

and Cobby certainly have good reason to avoid such oaths; they are quite frequent not only in the fabliaux but in all medieval literature, which perhaps renders them nearly meaningless.

Nevertheless, they deserve more sustained investigation. The minor flaws in Cobby's argument also intrigue me in what they entail. For one, they make it clear that quite a bit of weighty evidence must be marshaled in favor of the significance of an oath by any particular saint. Second, they seem to imply that such oaths are usually not significant, for the evidence that Cobby offers is probably the best available. Thus, in the close readings that follow, it is my purpose to not only show what oaths (invocations to God and the saints, asseverations) are doing in the fabliaux, but also not to overstate the case.

For my close readings, I shall look first at *Les Quatre Sohais saint Martin* from MS Digby 86, the fabliaux from MS Harley 2253, and finally, *Les Meunier et les deus Clers* and *Le Vescie a Prestre*.

#### *Les Quatre Sohais saint Martin*

The version of *Les Quatre Sohais saint Martin* found in MS Digby 86 is remarkable for lacking the fabliau's opening scene,<sup>33</sup> in which Saint Martin appears to the peasant and gives him four wishes, and for adding 56 verses of complaints against women at the end.<sup>34</sup> The language of this version (MS Z) is also quite different from the other two complete versions<sup>35</sup> and is described by

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<sup>33</sup> Apparently, the leaf containing the first part of the story is missing. See Carter Revard, "From French 'Fabliau Manuscripts' and MS Harley 2253 to the *Decameron* and the *Canterbury Tales*," *Medium Aevum* 69 (2000): 261-78 (footnote 10).

<sup>34</sup> In "The Compilation of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 86," *Medium Aevum* 66 (1997): 236-49, Marilyn Corrie points out that this addition is composed from scraps of *Le Blasme des Femmes* (see edition in Thomas Wright and J. O. Halliwell, *Reliquiae Antiquae*, vol. 2 [London: J. R. Smith, 1845], 218-23.) <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001023787> and *Le Chastie-musart* (Paul Meyer, ed., "Le Chastie-musart d'après le ms. Harlién 4333," *Romania* 15 [1886]: 603-10).

<sup>35</sup> Versions A (Paris, Bibl. Nat., fr. 837, fol. 189a-190a) and B (Berne, Bibl. De la Bourgeoisie, 354, fol. 167c-69a), according to Noomen and van den Boogard's identification in the *NRCF*, vol. 4.

Jean Rychner as a “degraded oral version, transcribed later from memory.”<sup>36</sup> The fabliau has very few oaths, seven in all, and on a first reading, they do not appear to play a significant role.

The first appears after the husband has told his wife that Saint Martin has granted him four wishes. The wife replies,

Sire fest ele si deu m’ayst  
Je vous say ben cunsiler  
Vous me devez ben amer  
Ore vous prie ieo s’i vous plest  
Que me dounez vn suhet (16-20)

[“Sir,” she said, “may God help me, I know how to counsel you well, and so you should love me well. Now I beg you, please, to give me one wish.”]

The second oath is again uttered by the wife as she continues to beg her husband for a wish after he initially refuses:

Sire fest ele pur deu merci  
Ja estes vous moun douz amy  
Jeo vous eim taunt cum ma vye  
Ne me deuez faillir mie  
Jeo vous demaund s’i vous plest  
Que me donez vn suhet  
Voutre soient li autre troy (33-39)

[“Sir,” she said, “by the mercy of God, you are ever my sweet love! I love you more than my life, and so you shouldn’t at all fail me. I ask you, please, to give me one wish! The other three will be yours.”]

The husband acquiesces and adds an oath of his own:

Sere fest il e vous l’eiez  
Mes pur deu tele chose suheidez yet  
Dout checun de nous grant prou. (41-43)

[“Sister,” he said, “you may have the wish. But, by God, wish for something that profits both of us.”]

The wife answers him excitedly:

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted by Noomen and van den Boogaard in *NRCF*, vol. 4, 192. The plot of the MS Digby 86 version is, however, the same as the others.

De par deu fest ele ieo suhet  
Mout volunteers noun pas enviz  
Que soyez chargez de viz. (44-46)

[“By God,” she said, “I wish very willingly and with no difficulty that you be covered with dicks.”]

The husband is, naturally, outraged by the result, but the wife offers a coy demurral that begins with a mild oath:

Par fay fest ele ieo vous diray  
Que ia de mot ne mentiray  
Ore vous diray saunz demorer  
Vn soul vit ne m’y auoyt mester  
Ne ieo nel preisoye une briche (66-70)

[“By faith,” she said, “I’ll tell you so that I don’t lie in a single word. Now I will tell you without hesitation that I have no use for a single dick—no more than I value a single brick.”]

This is the last oath in the narrative itself, although the added complaint against women includes two more, one by Saint Martin and the other by Saint Giles:

Pur ceo vous di par seint martin  
Que femmes sount de mal engine (131-32)  
[By this I tell you, by Saint Martin, that women are of an evil intelligence]  
...  
Que veust resun fere l’em deust part seint gile  
Riche femme qui sert de baret e’de gile  
E qui pur argent gainer vent sun cors auile (149-51)

[He who wants to do what is right, ought to, by Saint Giles. A rich woman (is one) who serves deception and guile, and who, in order to gain silver, sells her body greedily.]

In all, then, there are seven oaths in the tale, and on the surface, they seem to have little meaning. And perhaps they are insignificant, but it is at least worth noting that an oath is what sets this tale into motion. At the beginning of the two complete versions, the narrator tells his audience that the peasant-husband is a devotee of Saint Martin, who appears at the very moment that the husband invokes him:

Li vilains aloit un matin  
En son labor; si con il siaut,  
Saint Martin oblier ne viaut.  
“Saint Martin, dist il, hez avant!”  
Lors li vint saint Martins devant: (10-13)<sup>37</sup>

[The peasant was going one morning to his work. Just as he was accustomed to doing, he didn't want to forget Saint Martin: “By Saint Martin,” he said, “let's go!” Then Saint Martin appeared before him.]

It is not entirely clear whether the narrator considers the husband's oaths by Saint Martin as a mere plot device or as something more. Part of the answer depends on the addressee of the oath (line 12). On the one hand, Noomen and van den Boogard think the husband addresses the oxen pulling the plow, urging them to get to work, though none of the manuscripts mentions oxen or plowing. *Hez*, however, is an interjection used for goading animals to work, and *ches*, used in MS F,<sup>38</sup> is similar in form to *tchié*, defined, as Noomen and van den Boogard point out, as a “cry for stirring oxen to work.”<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, Robert Harrison, in his translation of this text,<sup>40</sup> renders the lines thus:

One morn this peasant, on his way  
to work as always, so as not  
to let Saint Martin be forgot,  
cried out: “Saint Martin, now come here!”  
Whereon Saint Martin did appear.

Oxen and plowing are not even implied here, and the husband's oath seems to function as nothing more than a benediction. Harrison is using MS A, which renders the line “Saint martin dist il or auant,” rightly translated as “now come here.” Likewise, Cobby seems to prefer MS

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<sup>37</sup> This is taken from Noomen and van den Boogard's critical text of the fabliau (*NRCE*, vol. 4, 211-16).

<sup>38</sup> Paris, Bibl. Nat., fr. 12603, fol. 244d. This version contains only the first 24 lines.

<sup>39</sup> Walther von Wartburg, *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, vol. 12 (Bonn: F. Klopp, 1928-2003).

<sup>40</sup> Robert Harrison, *Gallic Salt: Eighteen Fabliaux Translated from the Old French* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1974), 176-89.

A's reading and comments that there is nothing too unusual about a character literally invoking a saint's presence.<sup>41</sup> Harrison and Cobby's view may be right (and it is a reading with a kind of charm to it), but Noomen and van den Boogaard's seems preferable in the way that it acknowledges the wry and textured humor of the fabliaux. In Noomen and van den Boogaard's view, the reader is presented with a peasant at some particular kind of work, plowing, uttering an oath that is perhaps ironized by his impatience with his oxen. Further, the narrator's opening lines become ironic, too, because the husband's initial oath gives the lie to the simple-minded piety one might be expecting of him. The humor of Saint Martin's sudden appearance is heightened, then: a hard-bitten, shrewd, and foul-mouthed peasant flippantly invokes Saint Martin in a fit of anger, and to his great surprise, comes face-to-face with the saint himself. The poet thus humorously acknowledges the power of words, and specifically oaths, and the contrast between the husband's mundane expectations and supernatural reality. If I am right in my characterization of the husband and his oath, Saint Martin's greeting to him becomes subtly ironic:

Vilains, dist il, tu m'as mout chier:  
Ja ne voras rien commancier,  
Que toz jorz au conancement  
Ne me nomes premieremant.  
Je t'an randrai ja ta deserte. (15-19)

["Peasant," he said, "you have held me most dear. As each day begins, you won't start anything without invoking me first. Now I will give to you your reward."]

Saint Martin is chiding him for his language here, and in the end, the husband's *deserte* is not in fact his four wishes but the frustration of his desires by means of his and his wife's foolishness. So, obviously, this fabliau is not just about the perniciousness of women. It is, more accurately,

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<sup>41</sup> Cobby, "Calling upon the Saints," 177.

humorous speculation on the potential power of language, particularly oaths, and the existence of the magical/supernatural.

If *Les Quatre Sohais saint Martin* is in some essential way about the power of oaths, then it pays to consider the oaths it contains more closely. It is first of all interesting to note that in the rest of the narrative, none of the oaths used refers to Saint Martin and all but one refers to God.<sup>42</sup> It is difficult to say whether there is any significance to this. Maybe the lack of oaths invoking Saint Martin betrays the husband's shortsightedness and lack of gratitude; or maybe oaths invoking God reveal the husband and wife's complacent confidence that *he* will never appear and consequently their inability to learn a lesson; or maybe both. Second, the additional complaint against women in MS Z, which contains oaths to both Saints Martin and Giles, is intriguing in that the oath on Saint Martin is not in the other, later manuscript of *Le Blasme des Femmes*.<sup>43</sup> But again, it is hard to say if the oath means anything or is there simply for the purpose of rhyme.

Despite the apparent insignificance of most of the oaths in *Les Quatre Sohais saint Martin*, it is still safe to conclude that at least the first oath invoking Saint Martin is important, contributing to the overall meaning of the fabliau.

*Les trois Dames qui troverent un Vit (The Three Ladies Who Found a Dick)*<sup>44</sup>

Although nominally this fabliau is about *three* ladies on pilgrimage to Mount Saint Michael, only two really figure into the story. The first is the one to discover the penis (probably a dildo)—large, stiff, and partially obscured by a blanket. The second woman is her nemesis, demanding,

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<sup>42</sup> Likewise, in MSS A and B, the remaining oaths refer mostly to God and none to Martin.

<sup>43</sup> The other version is from MS Harley 2253. The same line reads “Pur ce vus dy tart e matyn” [For this I tell you late and early].

<sup>44</sup> *NRCF*, vol. 8, MS M. Facsimiles of this and the following three fabliaux can be found in *Facsimile of B.M. MS. Harley 2253*, introd. N. R. Ker, EETS (Oxford: OUP, 1965).

to no avail, that the first share the dildo. To settle this dispute, the ladies decide to state their cases to the abbess of a “house of nuns” situated nearby (35). The abbess, after hearing their case, asks to see the dildo, “looks at it eagerly, gives a great, deep, and long sigh,”<sup>45</sup> tells the ladies that this object is in fact the convent’s lost door bolt, and confiscates it. The ladies leave, outraged.

There are five oaths in the tale. The first occurs as the second lady appeals to the first lady for her share of the dildo:

Vous sauez bien se dieu m’enioie  
Qe nous sumes en ceste voie  
Compaignes e bones amyes (29-31)

[You know well, as God may give me joy, that we are companions and good friends on this journey.]

The second oath occurs in the narrator’s voice, just after the first lady has refused the second’s appeal:

L’autre ne le tient pas a gyw  
Mes iure soun chief qe si auera  
Quanque iuggé ly serra (34-36)

[The second lady does not give her fight up but swears by her head that she will have it, whatever judge will have the case.]

The third is in the first lady’s immediate response to this presumption:

Par foi fet l’autre il me plest  
Dite moi donqe qy ce est  
Qy dorra le iugement  
E ie le grant bonement (37-40)

[“By faith,” says the first lady, “that pleases me. Tell me, then, who it is that will give this judgment and I will grant it willingly.”]

When the second lady suggests for a judge the abbess of the convent, the first lady responds with another oath: “E ie le grant de par dé” [And I grant it, by God] (46). The fifth, and final, oath is

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<sup>45</sup> “le regarda volenters / Granz suspirs fist longz e enters” (87-88).

a mild one “by faith,” made when the abbess requests the dildo be brought forward for examination:

Par foi fet l'autre ie le graunt  
Compaygne metez le vyt auant  
L'abbesse dirra verité (79-81)

[“By faith,” says the second lady, “I will grant it. Companion, bring the dick forward. The abbess will speak the truth.”]

Obviously, these oaths are of little to no significance. There is, maybe, a bit of irony created by the contrast between these sacred oaths and the crude reality in which they appear, but this is probably all. Rather, the humor comes from the contrast between the supposed propriety and sanctity of a house of nuns and its actual rapacious lust.

*Le Chevalier a la Corbeille (The Knight of the Basket)*<sup>46</sup>

The title of this fabliau is indication enough that it is in part a parody of the courtly romance. In the style of a courtly romance, it features a love affair between a married noblewoman and a knight frustrated in the affair's consummation by a castle's high walls and towers, but also by—and this is where the tale becomes more recognizably a fabliau—an old woman who guards the lady and is also the lady's mother-in-law. She is described as being “une veele talevace” [an old wooden shield] (37) with the characteristics of a guard dog. The narrator curses her for these qualities: “Que male passiou la ocie!” [May a horrible disease kill her!] (68). One day, when the knight-husband is out of town participating in a tournament, the knight-lover visits his lady (with the mother-in-law hovering nearby, just out of earshot). The knight curses the old woman:

Dame, fet il, ja Dieu ne place  
Qe ceste veille vyvre puisse,  
Que ele n'ait brusé ou bras ou quisse,  
Que ele soit clope ou contrayte! (70-73)

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<sup>46</sup> *NRCF*, vol. 9, 265-78.

[“Lady,” he said, “may it surely not please God that this old woman is able to live, that she not be broken whether in her arms or legs, so that she might be maimed or crippled!”]

The lady agrees and details her own hopes for her mother-in-law’s violent end: “Mort la prenge e male rage” [May death and horrible madness seize her] (80). The knight replies that they may be avenged after all and then complains about being prevented from taking his pleasure with the lady:

Mes pur Dieu, qe frez vous de moi,  
Qe taunt vous aym en bone foy?  
Grant piece a, e bien le savez,  
Grant pechié de moy avez. (93-96)

[But, by God, what are you doing about me, the man who loves you in good faith? For a long time, and well you know it, you have given great misery to me.]

The lady replies that she would love to fulfill his desires but that her situation prevents it, though she would happily run away with him. Moved, the knight answers her:

Dame, fet il, par coardye,  
Si Dieu pust mon cors salver,  
Ne lerroi je pas a entrer  
En cet hostel, e tant feroi  
Qe uncore anuit seÿnz serroi,  
Si de vous quidroi exploiter. (104-09)

[“Lady,” he said, “cowardice won’t prevent me—as God may save my body—from coming into this castle, and so I would make it that again this night I will be here—if I were expecting to enjoy you.”]

The lady promises herself to him, and so he leaves with the plan of coming back that night. On his way out, he scrutinizes the castle’s architecture and finds a large window on the slanted wall of the great hall. The knight calls one of his squires and commands him to hide in a woodpile at the base of the wall until he makes his return that evening. Once the knight arrives, the squire will scale the wall and await his orders.

Under the cover of night, the knight returns with more of his men and a large basket. The knight gets into the basket and has his men haul him to the top, where apparently he descends into the castle through the window. He enters the lady's bedroom, and they begin to enjoy themselves. The old lady sleeps in a bed right next to the wife, however—so close, in fact, that she and her mother-in-law share the same sheet. As the knight “does his trade,” the sheet begins moving and the old woman demands to know what is the matter. Her daughter-in-law tells her she has an itch that she is scratching. This pacifies the old woman for a moment, but when the sheet continues moving, her suspicion is roused. She gets up, grabs a candle, and heads to the kitchen for a light. But on her way there, she inadvertently falls into the basket left behind by the knight. The knight's squires feel the ropes move, think it is their lord, and quickly lower the basket to the base of the castle wall. As the basket nears the ground, they see that the occupant is actually the old woman and decide to have some fun. They swing her around roughly, frightening her greatly, drop the basket, and then scatter. The old woman, dazed, slowly makes her way back to the room. When she arrives, she curses the sheet that started the whole thing:

‘Mal feu arde ton covertour!  
Tele noise ad anuit demenee:  
Malement me ont atornee  
Les damos que errerent par nuit.’ (246-49)

[“An evil fire burn your sheet! Such a disturbance has happened tonight. The demons that wander through the night have manhandled me.”]

The lovers are delighted by this news and thereafter are able to meet without the old woman's interference.

Certainly, the concerns of this fabliau are not with religion or morals. If there is a moral, it is that jealousy and suspicion are vicious qualities deserving of punishment. Though in some ways a parody of the courtly romance, the tale's *raison d'être* is clearly the old woman's

terrifying and bewildering ride in the basket. This is punishment for thwarting love, no doubt, but also a humorous excursus on youthful exploitation of the relative infirmity and easy befuddlement of the elderly.

Now certainly the narrator's oath wishing for the old woman's death provides insight into the moral standpoint of the fabliau, but do the others contribute anything to the fabliau? Perhaps, yes, if even only a little bit. The knight's oath wishing that the old woman's arms or legs might be broken (72-73) and the lady's corresponding oath (80) certainly further situate the narrative within the world of the fabliau and parody "the words that belong to love" in the dialogues of the typical courtly romance. The knight's next oath, "si Dieu pust mon cors salver," is not entirely straightforward. It may be there solely for rhyme, but there is still the question of what, exactly, it means. Earlier, I translated it "as God may save my body," with the *si* as an untranslated emphatic and *pust* as the third person singular present subjunctive of *pooir*. Carter Revard renders it "as God this body shall set free;"<sup>47</sup> Geneviève et René Metais put it as "que Dieu puisse me garder sain et saul,"<sup>48</sup> which seems to convey a fairly different sense from Revard's. Taken in the Metais' sense, the oath appears to be a wish that God might speed the knight's endeavor. For Revard, I am not entirely sure about the meaning. It could be religious, I suppose, and referring to something like the future glorification of the body, but again, the sense is unclear. My own translation is obviously ambiguous, too, but has less of a religious connotation than Revard's. The Metais' translation makes most sense in the context and is probably best. The knight will be soon be attempting to scale walls and descend through skylights, so a strongly stated desire that his body might be preserved "safe and sound" fits nicely. If understood

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<sup>47</sup> Carter Revard, "Four Fabliaux from London, British Library MS Harley 2253, Translated into English Verse," *The Chaucer Review* 40 (2005): 111-40, line 105.

<sup>48</sup> "Du Chevalier a la Corbeille," in *Les Fabliaux: 122 Fabliaux Textes et Traductions* (Bergerac: F. P. Editions, 1994), 21-25, line 107. This translation is in unrhymed, modern French verse.

religiously, the oath may, like the preceding two, add to the amusing coarseness of the protagonists—amusing especially in light of the figures in the courtly romance that they parody.

The final oath, the old woman's wish that "an evil fire" might burn the blanket, the *Metais*' translate as "le feu de l'enfer" (246) and Revard "a wild fire" (246). The *Metais*' translation, which understands a religious connotation to "mal feu," is, once again probably better in that it acknowledges the highly religious era in which the speakers live and that the old woman thinks she has just been victimized by the powers of hell. The religious nature of the oath, however, is probably not highly significant. Rather, it humorously emphasizes the old woman's extreme disgust.

*La Gageure (The Wager)*<sup>49</sup>

This fabliau has four players: A knight, his lady wife, the knight's squire, and the wife's handmaiden. The knight's wife, born of a distinguished family, disdains her husband for his humbler lineage. The squire, who is also the knight's brother, declares his love one day to the handmaiden, also the wife's cousin. Without reply, the handmaiden rushes to her lady's side and tells her that the squire is trying to bring her shame. When the lady learns that the squire truly loves her handmaiden, she tells her to grant him her love on condition that he kiss her "cul" [arse]. When the handmaiden returns to the squire and lays out this condition, he accepts it eagerly: "Volunters, fet il, par m'alme!" ["Willingly," he said, "by my soul!"] (48). The two of them agree to meet a few minutes later under a pear tree in the garden, where the agreement can be fulfilled. The handmaiden then returns to her lady and tells her the news. The lady sends her off and sashays over to her husband, smugly informing him that his brother has agreed to kiss her handmaiden's arse. The knight replies that his brother would do no such "vyleynie," but the lady insists he would, "par saint Martyn" (67) and that she will put up a tun of wine as a bet on it.

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<sup>49</sup> *NRCF*, vol. 10, 8-10.

The knight agrees, and they go as spies to the garden. There, they see the handmaiden expose her rear to the squire, who instead of delivering the promised kiss, decides to make the most of the opportunity and penetrate her. The lady is incensed and breaks her cover, screeching at her handmaiden:

Gwenchez trestresse, gwenchez puteyne!  
Gwenchez! Dieu te doint mal fyn!  
J'ay perdu le tonel de vyn. (86-88)

[Retreat, traitoress! Retreat, whore! Retreat! God give you a bad end! I have lost a tun of wine.]

The knight, delighted and amused, goads his brother on:

Tien tei, leres, je te comaunt!  
Frapez la bien e vistement,  
Je te comaund hardiement!  
De lower avez, par saint Thomas,  
Un cheval qe vaudra dis mars! (90-94)

[Hold on, you rogue, I command you! Strike her forcefully and quickly, I command you heartily! As a reward you will have, by Saint Thomas, a horse worth ten marks!]

The knight then tells his wife that he has won, scolds her for despising his lineage, and soon after, has the squire and handmaiden wedded.

Three of the four oaths in this fabliau (“par m’alme” [48], “par saint Martyn” [67], and “par saint Thomas [93]) appear to be of little significance. There does not appear to be any striking correspondence between Saint Martin of Tours and the context in which the knight is swearing by him. Likewise, Saint Thomas (of Canterbury, most likely),<sup>50</sup> in this context, carries little meaning, although it does accord with the English origin of this manuscript. The other oath, “Dieu te doint mal fyn” (87), which could probably be more loosely translated “God damn you,” conveys little meaning, but it does aptly express the extremity of the lady’s rage, which has

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<sup>50</sup> This is according to Noomen and van den Boogaard, probably because this version was written in England.

been moved not by concern for her cousin but for the loss of a tun of wine and a damaged family pride.

*Le Chevalier qui fist parler les Cons (The Knight Who Made Cunts Speak)*<sup>51</sup>

In this fabliau, an impecunious knight and his squire, Huet, go to a tournament in hopes of winning enough wealth to pay off their debts. On their way there, they see three young women bathing, their clothes and belongings lying nearby. Huet tells the knight to go ahead, and remaining behind, he snatches the women's clothes up, all the while ignoring their pleas for mercy. The young women then appeal to the knight (who has apparently returned), the eldest telling him that if he returns their things that she will give him the gift of being loved wherever he goes. The youngest promises him that if he shows mercy, she will make it so that any woman he desires will sleep with him. The last of them offers him the power to make any vagina speak, and if that fails, the *cul*. The knight returns their clothes and moves on. He then meets a chaplain riding a mare, who treats the knight with great courtesy. The knight and Huet are intrigued and so Huet suggests the knight try to make the mare's vagina speak. The knight commends this idea: "Vous ditez bien par saint Richer / Je le vueil assayer" [You speak well, by Saint Richer. I want to try it] (123-24). And so he does, asking the mare's vagina where the chaplain is headed. The vagina replies that they are on their way to see the chaplain's girlfriend, for whom he has brought along ten marks. The chaplain, abashed, hands the money over to the knight and scurries off to his mistress.

The knight and Huet continue on their way, eventually coming to a count's magnificent castle. There, they are once again greeted as honored guests. At a sumptuous dinner, the knight is seated next to one of the countess's handmaidens, whom he propositions for sex. She complies, and they meet later that night in his bedroom. After they have climbed into bed, the

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<sup>51</sup> *NRCF*, vol. 3, MS *M*.

knight thinks to ask the handmaiden's vagina if she is still a virgin and receives an emphatic denial. The handmaiden, horrified, runs back to her bed. The next morning, she tells the countess how the knight has shamed her, and after some initial skepticism, the countess swears to her handmaiden "dampne dee" [by the Lord God] (215) that she will find out the truth of the matter. The same day, after a meal, the countess, in company, informs her husband that their guest has the power "fere le coun parler" [to make a cunt speak] (222). Impressed, the count asks the knight if this is true, and the knight answers in the affirmative: "Oil sire a noun dee" [Yes, sir, in the name of God] (228). The countess doubts him and bets him a hundred pounds that he cannot make her own vagina speak. The knight agrees, putting up his own horse as a bet that he can. The countess excuses herself for a moment so that she can secretly stuff her vagina with cotton. Upon her return, the knight is unable to make her vagina speak. But Huet reminds him that he has been given the power to make a *cul* speak, too, and when the knight asks it why the countess's vagina is silent, it informs him that the lady has filled it with cotton. The countess is forced to remove the cotton and then the knight makes the vagina speak. The countess is humiliated, of course, but at the count's instigation, she and the knight make peace. The knight and Huet then leave for home and once there, pay off their debts. Their fame and "skill" earn the knight the title "chyualer de coun" [Knight of the Cunt] and Huet the surname "de culet" [the arsehole<sup>52</sup>].

Although the MS Harley 2253 version of this fabliau is 292 lines long, it contains only three oaths, a fairly good indication from the outset that oaths are not an important element in this story. The first oath, by "seint Richer" (123) may further distinguish the fabliau as Anglo-

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<sup>52</sup> *culet* may be a diminutive of *cul* ("anus; backside, arse," *Old French-English Dictionary*, eds. Alan Hindley, Frederick W. Langley, and Brian J. Levy [Cambridge: CUP, 2000]).

Norman since Saint Riquier was born near Amiens and spent several years in England,<sup>53</sup> but it does no more than that. The other two oaths, the countess's "dampne dee" (215) and the knight's "a noun dee" (228) contribute little meaning to the tale.

*Le Meunier et les deus Clerks (The Miller and the Two Clerks)*<sup>54</sup>

*Le Meunier* is one of two Old French fabliaux that I will be examining for its marked similarities to the Chaucerian fabliaux. In the case of *Le Meunier*, there are striking similarities between it and the *Reeve's Tale*, as my synopsis will make clear. Noomen and van den Boogaard point out<sup>55</sup> that while Chaucer's work resembles both extant versions of this tale,<sup>56</sup> it is, in fact, more similar to MS *C* than *B*. Of course, this does not mean that Chaucer was using either of these manuscripts as sources, only that trying to pin down an exact literary source is difficult; one must not forget that these stories were often written down from oral transmission only, which may have been the case with Chaucer. Because of the affinity between the *Reeve's Tale* and MS *C*, I shall look at the oaths that appear in both manuscripts of the tale.<sup>57</sup>

Manuscript *B*

The tale begins with a description of two clerics who are friends and fallen on hard times. One Sunday after a meal, when they encounter each other in front of the church, one asks the other what they ought to do to survive. The other comes up with a plan:

L'autre respont: "Par saint Denise,  
Je ne te sai faire devise,

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<sup>53</sup> Farmer, *Oxford Dictionary of Saints*.

<sup>54</sup> *NRCF*, vol. 7, 289-305.

<sup>55</sup> *NRCF*, vol. 7, 274.

<sup>56</sup> *B*: Berne, Bibl. De la Bourgeoisie, 354, fol. 164d-67b and *C*: Berlin, Staatsbibl. Preussischer Kulturbesitz zu Berlin, Hamilton 257, fol. 50c-52a.

<sup>57</sup> Noomen and van den Boogaard, in fact, use both of these manuscripts for their critical texts.

Mais que je ai un mien ami:  
Je lo que nos aillon vers li  
Por prendre un setier de froment  
A la vante que l'an lo vant;  
Et il m'an crerra les deniers  
Mout longuemant et volantiers  
Jusq'a la feste saint Johan  
Pour nos giter de cest mal an." (33-42)

[The other responds: "By Saint Denis, I don't know what to propose, except that I have a friend. . . I recommend that we go to him to take a setier<sup>58</sup> of wheat at the price that one sells it. And he will credit me the money for a long time and gladly until the feast of Saint John in order to get us through this bad year."]

The other cleric thinks this a good idea, adding that he can get a horse from his brother and the two of them can then become bakers. Having procured these necessities, the clerics go to a mill to grind their wheat. But the miller, spying their approach, decides to hide. When they see that there is no one at the mill, one of the friends stays behind with the horse while the other goes to the miller's house, nearby. When he enters, he sees only the miller's wife and asks her "por saint Martin" (73) where her husband is. The wife shoos him away, telling him he can find the miller in the woods next to the mill. As his friend undertakes his futile search for the miller, the other cleric, concerned by the delay, leaves their horse and enters the miller's house himself, asking the wife "por amor Dé" (85) where his friend has gone. She gives him a similarly curt dismissal, telling him "si aie je hanor" [as I may have honor] (87) that he has gone to search the woods.

While the two friends are wandering through the woods, the miller, with the help of his wife, hides their horse and sacks of wheat in his barn. Having finally given up their search, the clerics return to the mill and seeing the miller there, greet him eagerly: "Munier, font il Deus soit o vos! / Por amor Deu auancierz nos" ["Miller," they said, "God be with you! For the love of

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<sup>58</sup> "sixth part: measure of wine (approx.. one gallon); also of corn (much larger measure)," *Old French-English Dictionary*.

God, help us”] (101-02). The miller offers them his service, but returning to where their possessions were left, they find they have been robbed:

“Qu’est ice? Somes nos robé?”  
—Oïl, fait se l’uns, ce m’est vis:  
Pechiez nos a a essil mis!”  
Chascun escrie: “Halas, halas!  
Secorez no, saint Nicolas!” (108-12)

[“What is this? Have we been robbed?” “Yes,” said the other, “so it seems to me: our sins have brought us to this!” Each cried: “Alas, alas! Help us, Saint Nicholas!”]

The miller, with disingenuous naivety, asks them what has happened, and after they have told him, he recommends they look, once again, in the woods next to the mill. They do, but after some time, one of the clerics suggests giving up: “Possessions come and go like straw,”<sup>59</sup> he says, then recommends they seek lodging for the night at the miller’s house, and closes by wishing that “Deus nos doint l’ostel saint Martin!” [God give to us the lodging of Saint Martin] (138).

When the miller sees the two despondent and bedraggled clerics approaching his house, he begins to mock them, remembering their frantic prayer to Saint Nicholas (111-12): “What has Saint Nicholas done for you?”<sup>60</sup> he asks and then tells them to go looking for other wealth because what they had is now long gone. The clerics bear this with equanimity:

Meunier, font il, ce puet bien estre!  
Herbergiez nos, por saint Servestre:  
Ne savon mais hui o aler. (147-49)

[“Miller,” they said, “this may well be! Give us lodging, by Saint Sylvester: we don’t know now where to go.”]

The miller tells them they can eat dinner with him and his family (he has a wife, daughter, and infant) and sleep on the floor for the night. At dinner, the cleric seated next to the miller’s pretty

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<sup>59</sup> “Avoirs vient et va comme paille” (134).

<sup>60</sup> “Que vos a fait saint Nicolas?” (142).

young daughter hatches a plan to seduce her, which he begins to implement by stealing a ring from off of the andiron on the hearth. As they all go to bed that night, the same cleric spies the miller locking his daughter up in a hutch and slipping the key to her through the keyhole. Against his friend's advice, he waits till lights are out and then sneaks over to her hutch, telling her about the marvelous ring he possesses, invested with the power to preserve one's virginity so long as it is worn until daybreak. The daughter slips the key to the cleric, who climbs into the hutch and her eagerly awaiting arms.

A bit later, the miller's wife gets up, *tote nue*, to relieve herself, and the other cleric, still awake, comes up with a plan of his own. He moves the infant's crib next to his own bed and upon the wife's return, pulls the child's ear so that he begins to cry. The wife goes to comfort the child and then climbs into bed with the cleric, all the while thinking she is at the bed of her husband, the miller. Once she is in bed, the cleric forces himself on her, and she is both traumatized by and amazed at his vigor. Near daybreak, the first cleric leaves the hutch to return to his bed, but the crib's placement confuses him, too, and he crawls into bed with the miller, nudging him awake and boasting

Or sai je bien, se Deus me salt,  
Que j'ai aü boene nuitiee!  
Mout est la pucele envoisee,  
La fille a cest nostre meunier; (274-77)

[Now I know well, as God may save me, that I have had a good night! She is a very spirited girl, the daughter of our miller.]

and then encouraging him to try her out for himself. The miller, outraged, attacks the cleric, and the two begin to grapple. The wife, roused by the tumult, tells her "husband" that the clerics are fighting and that perhaps they ought to stop it, but the cleric, trusting in his friend's ability to take care of himself, says not to mind them. Eventually, the miller, managing to get free of the

cleric's grip, lights a candle and sees his wife in bed with the other cleric. He curses her for a whore and she replies that her crime is at worst unwitting whereas he has knowingly taken the cleric's horse and wheat and hidden them in his barn. At this, the cleric beats the miller up, leaves with their possessions, and grinds their wheat at another mill. The narrator then concludes that the cleric

orent l'ostel saint Martin,  
Et ont tant lor mestier mené  
Qu'il se sont do mal an gité. (320-22)

[have the dwelling of Saint Martin, and they have so well plied their trade that they are delivered from a bad year]

#### Manuscript C

This version of the fabliau is nearly identical in plot details but there are some differences in language. In fact, there are nearly twice as many oaths, although some of the oaths are the same in both. The first oath, for example, "Par seint Denise" (25) is used by the same character in the same context in both texts, as is the second "por seint Martin" (57). The third oath, however, is unique to MS C and is used by the wife when the cleric inquires about her husband's whereabouts. She replies, "par seint Omer" that he is in the woods next to the mill (59). When the second cleric comes looking for his friend, instead of asking after his friend "por amor Dé," he does so "por Saint Omé" (67).<sup>61</sup> As the wife answers him, she swears "par m'aneur" [by my honor] (69), just as in MS B. Later, when the cleric meets the miller for the first time and asks him for help, his reply includes an oath not found in MS B: "Avanchast? Dieus, et je de quoi?" [Help? God! And how?] (84). Likewise, when the cleric returns to find their things missing, an oath is included that is absent in the other manuscript: "Qu'est ce, Dieus, sommes nos gabé?" [What is this? God! Have we been deceived?] (89). But the next three oaths are basically the

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<sup>61</sup> *Omé* and *Omél* (lines 127 and 132), according to Noomen and van den Boogard, are variants of *Omer*.

same in both texts: “Hé, las! Hé, las! / Que feron nos, seint Nicolas?” [Alas! Alas! What will we do, Saint Nicholas?] (92-93) and “Dieus nos doint l’ostel seint Martin!” [May God give us the lodging of Saint Martin] (121). In both texts, the miller also mocks the clerics’ invocation of Saint Nicholas. In MS *C*, it runs “Que vos a fet seint Nicolas?” [What has Saint Nicholas done for you?] (125). When they respond that Saint Nicholas has done “nothing at all,” the miller’s response is essentially the same as in MS *B*, except that he adds an oath “par seint Omel” (127). An identical oath “par seint Omel” (132) is used by the clerks in their immediate response to the miller instead of the oath on Saint Sylvester in MS *B*.

After the clerics’ oath on Saint Sylvester, MS *B* contains only one more oath—“se Deus me salt”—spoken by the cleric as he begins to recount his sexual exploits to the miller. MS *C*, after the clerics’ oath by Saint Omer in the same exchange as in MS *B*, has three more and does not include the cleric’s boastful oath in MS *B*. The first of these three is used by the miller’s daughter after the cleric has approached her hutch: “Qui est ce, Dieus, qui est la hors?” [God! Who is this outside?] (193). The second is used by the narrator to describe the cleric’s thoughts after the miller’s wife passes his bed on her way out to relieve herself:

De son compaignon li sovint,  
 Qui ne la huche fet ses bons,  
 Et il a si petit des soens  
 Qu’il jure Deu et Seint Thommas  
 C’au revenir la retendra. (218-22)

[He thought about his companion who was doing his pleasure in the hutch. And he was having so little of his own pleasure that he swore by God and Saint Thomas that at her return he would detain her.]

The third oath the miller uses after he sees his wife in bed with the cleric:

‘Estes vos ça, fame desvee!’  
 Et entre en grande pensee:  
 ‘Par Deu, il est de vos tot fet!’ (274-76)

[“Here you are, foolish woman!” And then becoming very angry: “By God, you’ve done it all!”]

Finally, at the close of the fabliau, the narrator says that after the clerics pull themselves out of their desperate situation, they are “a Deu et a seint Nicolas / En rendent grasces haut et bas” [returning thanks wholeheartedly to God and Saint Nicholas] (290-91).<sup>62</sup>

Noomen and van den Boogaard speculate that MS *C*’s sloppy versification, “tight narration . . . innuendo, repetition, [and] jarring transitions” could function only “with the support of voice and gesture.”<sup>63</sup> Of the two manuscripts, then, they think *C* closer to the original oral version and the cleaner, more accomplished MS *B* a more literary reworking of it. If this is true, it is interesting to think about why MS *C* contains several more oaths than *B*,<sup>64</sup> especially considering the fact that MS *C* is, by 31 verses, the shorter of the two. One possibility is that oaths are convenient, easy rhymes more likely to be used in the rougher version of a tale, and also likely to be removed by someone not only smoothing out rhyme but also trying to embellish a text. Thus, in MS *C*, one reads:

‘Sire,’ fet el, ‘par seint Omer,  
En cel bois le poez trover  
Tres par dejouste cel molin.’ (59-61)

[“Sir,” she said, “by Saint Omer, in the wood right next to the mill you are able to find him.]

By contrast, MS *B* reads:

‘Sire clers, point ne m’an pesast!  
En ce bois lo porroiz trover,  
Se il vos i plaist a aler,  
Qui ci est joste ce molin.’

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<sup>62</sup> This description is a little too loose to count as a fourth instance of swearing but still, I think, worth mentioning.

<sup>63</sup> *NRCF*, vol. 7, 273-74.

<sup>64</sup> 14 oaths in *C* versus 10 in *B*.

[Sir Cleric, don't at all bother me! In the wood just next the mill you are able to find him—if it pleases you to go there]

The difference between the two is only slight, but nevertheless, the wife's speech in MS *B* does a better job of characterizing her as rude and impatient and the “Se il vos I plaist a aler” (78), which may seem like a throwaway line, nicely qualifies her dismissiveness: “Go if you'd like to. Or go to hell. It's all the same to me.” Of course, I do not mean to suggest that the writer of MS *B* is using MS *C* as a source. I am only noticing the tendency for oaths to be used as fillers. It makes sense, then, that someone trying to improve the quality of a text would not include so many oaths of this type.

Speculation aside, the oaths in these manuscripts can be understood in a few different ways. First, as in many other fabliaux, the oaths are another way of confirming the tale's origin. According to Noomen and van den Boogaard, the dialect of both manuscripts is from the region of Picardy.<sup>65</sup> The three oaths by Saint Omer (or Audomar),<sup>66</sup> bishop of Thérouanne in the neighboring region of Artois, therefore make sense. Likewise with Thomas, who, according to Dempster, is not Thomas the apostle but as in *Le Gageure*, the martyred archbishop of Canterbury. Both saints indicate that the poem has been composed in an Anglo-Norman setting. Second, the oaths further characterize the clerics as being professional religious. In MS *B*, they are the only characters to use religious oaths and in *C*, they also use the majority of them. One notes first, the contrast with the speech of the miller, which includes no oaths in MS *B* and second, in both versions, his jeering at what he thinks is the clerics' credulous religiosity when

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<sup>65</sup> *NRCF*, vol. 7, 275.

<sup>66</sup> d. ca. 699.

he asks them what their prayer to Saint Nicholas has done for them.<sup>67</sup> Thus, in MS C, the miller's invocation of God when he is first greeted by the clerks (84) may be a way of imputing to himself, if not some kind of righteousness, at least a kind of innocence.

In both manuscripts, the one oath on Saint Martin appears to be insignificant enough, but what about the allusions to his "ostel" [dwelling, shelter]? As Cobby mentions in her essay,<sup>68</sup> Saint Martin is perhaps most famous for the episode in which he gives half of his cloak to a beggar. Perhaps this is the "ostel" of Saint Martin, and perhaps it can be more broadly understood as "hospitality." If this is indeed the case, there appears to be an irreverent irony in the "ostel" that the narrator concludes that Saint Martin (along with God, in MS C) provides for the clerics. As in *Les Quatre Sohais saint Martin*, Saint Martin appears to be a crafty and mischievous saint.

The other oaths—by Saints Denis and Sylvester and, in various forms, God—appear to have little significance in their immediate contexts.

*La Vescie a Prestre (The Priest's Bequest)*<sup>69</sup>

This fabliau, considered a possible source for Chaucer's *Summoner's Tale*, begins with a priest who is terminally ill and wants to die well by properly distributing his wealth. He therefore appoints his dean and some friends to distribute his property according to his wishes once he has died. In the meantime, two Jacobin friars who have been wandering around preaching in hopes of boosting their reputation decide to stop by the priest's house to sponge a meal and some

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<sup>67</sup> It is also worth noting that the clerics' prayer to Nicholas when they discover they have lost their possessions is highly appropriate since he is often thought "to aid in recovering lost objects" (Noomen and van den Boogaard, *NRCF*, vol. 7, 399).

<sup>68</sup> Cobby, "Calling upon the Saints," 178.

<sup>69</sup> *NRCF*, vol. 10, 287-303. This fabliau existed in one manuscript, Turin, Bibl. Naz. L. V. 32, fol. 108v<sup>o</sup>-110v<sup>o</sup>, but was destroyed in a fire in 1904. The text used by Noomen is from a copy of this manuscript made in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

hospitality. When they arrive, they see that the priest is near death. One of them, Brother Louis, speaking aside to the other, Brother Simon, says they ought to see if they can convince the priest to bequeath them anything. Simon thinks this a good idea:

‘Vos dites voir, par Dieu no pere,  
Frere Lowis, or i parra  
Liqueis miez a lui parlera  
Et mostrera nostre besongne!’ (69-72)

[“You speak truly, by God our Father, Brother Louis. Now it comes to finding the right words in speaking to him and showing our need!”]<sup>70</sup>

The friars then approach the priest and tell him, because he is dying, that he ought to think of his soul and make a gift “for God.” The priest answers that he has kept nothing back. The friars wonder how exactly he has bequeathed his wealth and then inform him that the Scriptures exhort one to be wise in the distribution of alms. The priest then enumerates the gifts he has given and to whom, including an oath along the way “par saint Gilhe” [by Saint Giles<sup>71</sup>] (93). The friars commend him for his generosity and then ask if he has given anything to their house. When he replies that he has not, they tell him that he should, that their community is a sober and just one, and that he could not die well unless he gave to them. The priest is adamant that he has nothing left to give:

‘Par les oelz de ma teste!  
A doner n’ai ne bleif ne beste,  
Or ne argent, chanap ne cope.’ (114-16)

[‘By the eyes of my head! I have neither grain nor beast, neither silver, nor goblet, nor cup to give.’]

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<sup>70</sup> I’m not happy with this translation once it gets to “or i parra,” but am following Noomen’s suggestion in the notes (381).

<sup>71</sup> “A popular saint who lived in Provence between the sixth and eighth century,” Noomen, 388.

The friars then remonstrate with him, telling him that for the sake of his soul, he ought to withdraw one of the gifts he has already designated and give it to them. And “may God know,”<sup>72</sup> they will never disclose the amount of wealth he has at his disposal if he does so. The priest is fed up by all this and vows inwardly to avenge himself on these two greedy and officious friars. So he tells them that he will give them a “jewel” that he values very highly. Indeed, he says, “par saint Piere, / Je n’ai chose gaires plus chiere” [by Saint Peter, I don’t have anything I hold more dear] (138-39). He continues to elaborate on how precious this jewel is to him, finally assuring them that he will bequeath it once they have returned with their prior. The friars are overjoyed, shouting “God reward you!” and ask when they can return with their prior. “Tomorrow,” answers the priest, “I am where God pleases: You should seize your gift before I am much worse.”<sup>73</sup> The friars run off rejoicing, and upon arrival at their abbey, tell their brothers to throw a party because they are all about to be rich. All the friars rejoice, laying out huge sums for a sumptuous banquet at which they stuff themselves, get drunk, ring the abbey’s bells, and astound the neighbors. After a while, Brother Louis asks the revelers how they best ought to collect the gift from the priest. The brothers suggest going early the next morning after mass, swearing “as Jesus leads [them],”<sup>74</sup> it ought to be done before the priest dies.

An embassy of the brothers leaves early the next morning, and arriving at the priest’s house, greets him “de Deu” (222). The priest receives them graciously and advises that they fetch some local worthies to witness the bequest. Once everyone has gathered, the priest recounts his meeting with the friars the day before. He uses four oaths over the course of this

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<sup>72</sup> “Se sache Dieus” (129).

<sup>73</sup> . . . Je sui ou Diew plaisir:  
Vo promesse deveis saisir  
Ains que je trop aggreveis soie. (152-54)

<sup>74</sup> “se Jhesu m’avoie” (199).

speech. The first is used at the very beginning, as he asks everyone to attend to him: “Sangnor, vos estes mi ami: / Por Dieu, or entendeis a mi!” [Lords, you are my friends. By God, now listen to me!] (246-47). The second occurs as he describes his examination by the friars:

‘Il me virent et esgarderent,  
Et après si me demanderent  
Se j’avoie pensé de m’ame;  
Et je lor dis, par Nostre Dame,  
Ke j’avoie trestot donet.’ (254-58)

[‘They looked at me and inspected me, and afterwards they asked me if I had given thought to my soul; and I said to them, by our Lady, that I had given everything away.’]

He relates their question of whether he had bequeathed anything to their community: “Et je dis non: se Dieus m’avoie, / Il ne m’en estoit sovenu” [And I said no: as God may guide me, I did not remember them] (261-262). Then, after describing how the friars scolded him and begged for a gift lest he should die badly, he says, “par sainte Patenostre, / Ne welh pas morir malement” [by the holy Pater Noster, I didn’t want to die badly] (269-70).

After the priest announces that this jewel is, in fact, his bladder, the friars respond angrily:

‘Nos aveis vos ci por dechoivre  
Mandeis, foz prestres entesté?  
Avoir nos cuidiés ahonteis,  
Mais nen aveis, par saint Obert,  
Bien nos teneis or por bobert!’ (291-95)

[‘You have ordered us here to deceive, stubborn, fox priest? You think to shame us, but you haven’t, by Saint Aubert,<sup>75</sup> though you hold us now for simpletons!’]

The priest offers a stern rebuke, letting them know that he is treating them the way that they treated him. At this, the friars hang their heads and despondently make their way home. Their brothers, on hearing the news, faint away with laughter.

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<sup>75</sup> According to Noomen, the 7<sup>th</sup>-century bishop of Cambrai and Arras (389), though *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* includes an Aubert of Avranches who died ca. 720 and was bishop and founder of Mont-St-Michel.

The oaths in this fabliau do not contribute much to the story's meaning. The oaths used by Brothers Louis and Simon, for instance, besides providing rhymes, may indicate only their religious status. The oaths used by the priest, however, especially in his final speech, are good examples of oaths being used to shore up the truth of something, or to lend some kind of authority to speech. He asks his audience "by God" to hear what he has to say (247), that "by our Lady" (257) he told them he had already donated all his wealth, "as God may guide me" (261) he had not considered them as inheritors, and "by the holy Pater Noster" (269) he did not want to die badly. But obviously the priest is using these oaths coyly, too, to exaggerate his own gullibility and naivety. He is having fun with the friars, painting himself as some credulous fool all too easily bilked in order to make the revelation of his gift that much more of a pratfall for the friars.

#### Conclusion

It is obvious that many of the oaths and asseverations in these fabliaux seem to function as nothing more than rhymes or metrical fillers. *Les trois Dames qui troverent un Vit* and *Le Gageure* offer the best examples of these kinds of oaths. In both fabliaux, the oaths seem unconscious, reflexive. They certainly are effective at showing the extent of a character's emotion, but they do not, like those in *Dame Sirith*, set off reverberations through the rest of the story. But certainly the brevity of these two fabliaux (they are by far the shortest in the group) does not allow the poet to do much more than tell his joke.

Other oaths can convey more meaning, however. In *Le Meunier et les deus Clercs*, the clerics, when they appeal to Saint Nicholas upon realizing their goods have been stolen, do so probably because he is considered a saint helpful in recovering things lost. Their invocation of Nicholas therefore introduces another element into the story distinct from all of its hijinks, which

I shall discuss more particularly below. For the moment, it is worth remarking on the miller's mockery of their oath, which reveals his character's (and the poet's) sensitivity to religious oaths. If my reading of the peasant's oath by Saint Martin is correct, a similar sensitivity is on display in *Les Quatre Sohais saint Martin*. If nothing else, these examples should make it clear that oaths are not always unconsciously used by the *fableors* and therefore deserve closer scrutiny. The peasant's oath and the miller's reaction to the clerics' also imply the possibility of supernatural agency in the stories and perhaps situate them within a broadly ironic perspective.<sup>76</sup> The *fableors* are concerned mostly about making a good joke, of course, and as critics have noted, the *fabliaux* do not typically betray any overarching notions of justice. Rewards go usually to the clever and the resourceful. But these two examples are at least suggestive of a supernatural kind of justice operating behind the scenes. In its apparent mischievousness, however, this justice seems not so much Christian as pagan in flavor.

But so far, I have not added much to what Żółkiewska and Cobby have already said. It is therefore interesting to think about what these oaths contribute to the *style* of the *fabliaux*. Earlier, in my evaluation of Cobby's essay, I mentioned that the saints and their traditional associations might add something to the *fabliaux* by injecting them with the "color" of the Christian tradition. This is a point worth expanding upon. In the case of oaths, particularly religious oaths, the invocation of the saints may be meant to bring the saints into the story itself, albeit in a marginal, ephemeral kind of way—but in a way, I would suggest, much like art in illuminated manuscripts like the first leaf of the Peterborough Psalter, just for example, packed as it is with images of animals (some of them bizarre) and hunting scenes interwoven with detailed tracery; or like the monkey's procession along the bottom edge of the York Minster Pilgrimage Window; or like the Bookseller's Doorway in the north transept at Rouen that "has

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<sup>76</sup> I'm thinking here of a kind of divine perspective on worldly events.

an extraordinary collection of bas-reliefs carved in quatrefoils—hybrids, sirens, centaurs (one of them wearing a cowl and showing two human feet in boots behind), a philosopher with a boar’s head striking a pensive pose as he holds his snout, [and] a physician with a fish’s tail inspecting a urine flask.”<sup>77</sup> What I am interested in here is not primarily the strangeness of the images but with their contrast to the works in which they appear and their peripheral nature. They often do not have any substantial, thematic importance. They are more like an artistic lark, playful and irreverent, but intriguing as well—not intended as focal points but as a pleasant, curious diversion. They are often colorful, always vivid, and further evidence of medieval encyclopedic habits of mind. And perhaps one sees the same thing at work in many of the fabliaux. Religious oaths may certainly appear for the reasons that Żółkiewska and Cobby enumerate but also as incidental detail, as something like amusing marginalia. Medieval artists prefer the ornate, the intricate, the bright and colorful, the vivid, and in the fabliaux, one sees a similar inclination. This is obviously not news, and Muscatine ably discusses it as a part of the fabliau’s “texture.” Similar to their artistic contemporaries, the *fableors* took pleasure in the details of concrete reality and did not consider its inclusion as a violation of the work’s integrity. Thus, Muscatine points out the *borgois* in *Le Sacristain I*, who, after propping up a priest’s dead body in the privy, also puts a wad of hay in his hand.<sup>78</sup> Or, the wife of the peasant of Bailluel, who covers with a towel the cake she has made for her lover.<sup>79</sup> Or, in *Dame qui fist batre*, a lady, headed to bed with her lover, who “takes up a pasty and some wine, a white linen towel, and a fat wax

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<sup>77</sup> Derek Pearsall, *Gothic Europe: 1200-1450*, Arts, Culture and Society in the Western World (Essex: Pearson Education, 2001), 131.

<sup>78</sup> Muscatine, *Old French Fabliaux*, 61.

<sup>79</sup> *NRCF*, vol. 5, 123-27.

candle.”<sup>80</sup> All of this detail is beside the point, included because the storyteller finds it an interesting distraction and a kind of bauble for his tale. Oaths in the fabliaux can sometimes function in the same way. They are sometimes truly meant to conjure the image and associations of God or the saints<sup>81</sup> but into an evanescent, furtive kind of existence. They dance along the borders of one’s consciousness and in their small way contribute to the lively, variegated feel of the fabliaux.

For all that oaths may or may not do in these Old French fabliaux, there does seem a marked difference from the way that they are used in *Dame Sirith*. There, a consideration of oaths changes the way the reader views the tale and introduces a darker, more caustic kind of irony that underscores the shortcomings of all the characters. None of the fabliaux considered in this chapter seems to invest its oaths with quite as much meaning and be quite so acerbic. To put it colloquially, the *Dame Sirith* poet’s humor comes across as *mean* in comparison. These Old French fabliaux certainly have objects of ridicule (mainly women and religious figures) but their humor is never quite so severe as *Dame Sirith*’s. There remains a sense of lightheartedness and fun. Further, these fabliaux, with the exception perhaps of *Les Quatre Sohais*, never abandon their characters to badness in quite the same way. The ladies in *Les trois Dames* may be argumentative and lustful and the nuns deceptive and likewise lustful, but the story is so outlandish that it is impossible to think that it is meant as a universal satire. And in the other fabliaux I have considered, there are clearly “good” and “bad” guys. All of this brings to mind the question of whether *Dame Sirith*’s use of oaths and its black comedy are unique or if they indicate a difference between the Middle English and the Old French fabliaux. To answer this question, I shall ultimately consider oaths and humor in Chaucer’s fabliaux in the *Canterbury*

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<sup>80</sup> These two examples are also from Muscatine, 61.

<sup>81</sup> Or whatever else. The oath need not be religious to serve this purpose.

*Tales*, but before doing so, it would be instructive to look at the oaths and comedy of the fabliau-like stories in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which Chaucer may have used as sources for his own work.

### CHAPTER 3: RELIGIOUS OATHS AND ASSEVERATIONS IN SELECTED *NOVELLE* FROM BOCCACCIO'S *DECAMERON*

In this chapter, I turn to another Chaucerian analogue and probable source, Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*.<sup>1</sup> The *Decameron*, like the *Canterbury Tales*, is a frame story, and like the *Tales*, it probably draws much of its material from the Old French fabliaux. The connection between the *Decameron* and the *Tales* is, however, somewhat less certain, though in recent years, critics have begun to accept that Chaucer at least knew of Boccaccio's work.<sup>2</sup> Besides analogues in Boccaccio that may in fact be sources for Chaucer, there are certain scenes in the *Decameron* whose echo in the *Tales* seems more than coincidental.<sup>3</sup> And, of course, the frame structure of the *Tales* is very likely due to Boccaccio's influence.

The remarkable similarities in structure and content between the *Decameron* and the *Canterbury Tales* make for an illuminating comparison. Although the religious oaths and asseverations in the Old French fabliaux provide for some interesting parallels between themselves and Chaucer's fabliaux, a comparison of the *Decameron* and the *Tales* extends also to the way religious oaths operate, still in the context of their tales, in a frame. In this chapter,

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<sup>1</sup> Written between 1348 and 1358. In this chapter, for the Italian, I use an online edition of the text, based on Vittore Branca's Einaudi edition (1992) and available at [http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian\\_Studies/dweb/texts/](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/texts/). For some English translations, which I note, I use G. H. McWilliam, trans., *The Decameron*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Penguin, 1995). Unless otherwise noted, translations from the Italian are my own.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Donald McGrady, "Chaucer and the *Decameron* Reconsidered," *The Chaucer Review* 12 (1977-78), 1-26, and Helen Cooper, "Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: Reviewing the Work," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 19 (1997), 183-210.

<sup>3</sup> One scene that comes to mind is the wedding night and morning following in *Dec.* II. 10, wherein the old, rich Ricciardo is unable to please his pretty young wife and has to "swallow *vernaccia*, energy-tablets and various other restoratives to pull himself round." The resemblance between this scene and the wedding night of January and May in *The Merchant's Tale* is striking.

therefore, I shall look first at religious oaths and asseverations as they appear in some select *novelle* and then consider their import not only in their stories but in the frame itself. I shall be using in particular five of the *Decameron's* stories: II. 10, VII.9, VIII.1 and 2, and IX.6.

Certainly, there are other *novelle* that are either analogues to or sources for some of Chaucer's tales, but I wanted to focus on those tales more closely tied to Chaucer's fabliaux because of what I think is the importance of the genre to the meaning of the *Canterbury Tales*.

Boccaccio's work is, of course, written in prose rather than verse, and since the fabliaux' oaths and asseverations are used at least partly for the sake of rhyme, one would expect a prose work in a similarly popular vein to exhibit fewer oaths. And, in fact, the *Decameron* does contain a fairly low number oaths. In a fairly thorough (but not exhaustive) count of religious oaths and asseverations in the entire work, I reached a total of 63. Of these, only 14 (less than 25%) were used once. The rest were recycled regularly and displayed little creativity or variety. "Io giuro a Dio" [I swear to God], for instance, is used nine times. This is not to say, however, that oaths therefore have an unimportant or uninteresting role to play in the *Decameron*. But it does seem to indicate that they differ from the oaths that densely populate and color the Old French fabliaux. To find out more exactly *how* they differ, I shall now provide some close readings of the *novelle* mentioned above.

#### Day 2, Tale 10

Filomela presides over Day 2, and she proposes that the *brigata* tell stories of people who, after a series of misfortunes, experience unexpected happiness. Tale 10 is told by Dioneo, who has earlier insisted that he be allowed to tell whatever story please him, no matter its relation to the day's theme.<sup>4</sup> In exchange for his story-telling privilege, Dioneo must tell the final story of each

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<sup>4</sup> See the introduction to I.4. He is interested especially in telling amusing stories.

day, presumably so he will not interfere with a particular day's theme. His tale for Day 2, however, remains somewhat closely allied to tales of good fortune arising from disaster. This *novella* is probably not an analogue or source for any of Chaucer's fabliaux, but it is remarkably similar to *The Merchant's Tale*. One notices, first of all, the similarities between the wedding nights in both stories, and moreover, resemblances in the marriages themselves—old, established men taking young, pretty, and willful wives. And likewise, in both tales, though the husbands watch over their wives jealously, they lose out in the end to younger men.

Dioneo tells of Messer Ricciardo di Chinzica, a wealthy, old judge of Pisa, who decides to take to himself a wife “bella e giovane.” Eventually, he is granted the hand of Bartolomea, daughter of a Messer Lotto Gualandi. On their wedding night, Ricciardo just barely consummates the marriage and the next morning, is in such a state that he has to take restoratives before he can pull himself out of bed. Realizing that his powers can in no way satisfy the sexual desire of Bartolomea, he devises an out for himself by telling his wife that sexual unions are not allowed on saints' feast days (of which he points out very many), “holidays of obligation, the four Ember weeks, the eves of the Apostles and a numerous array of subsidiary Saints, Fridays and Saturdays, the sabbath, the whole of Lent, certain phases of the moon, and various special occasions.” Obviously enough, the sexual act occurs thereafter very infrequently—“once a month at the most”—much to Bartolomea's displeasure. In the meantime, Ricciardo watches over her jealously, to make sure she does not go looking for satisfaction elsewhere.

One day, Ricciardo decides to take his wife on a fishing expedition at a coastal spot just south of Pisa. Ricciardo and his fellows sail out in one boat in order to fish, while Bartolomea and some other ladies watch from a boat nearby. Ricciardo becomes distracted while fishing, allowing both boats to drift out further to sea, where of a sudden, they are surprised by the

infamous pirate Paganino da Mare, who gives chase as they flee back toward the shore.

Ricciardo's boat reaches land safely, but Bartolomea and the ladies are intercepted by Paganino, who, seeing Bartolomea's great beauty, takes her on board, leaving everything else behind.

Ricciardo, ignorant of where his wife has been taken, goes home distraught. Bartolomea likewise finds herself in great distress upon her seizure. Paganino first tries consoling her with words but these being of no avail, begins "comforting her with deeds, for he was not the sort of man to pay any heed to calendars." Bartolomea, pleased by his performance, soon forgets all about Ricciardo and settles down in Monaco as Paganino's kept mistress.

When Ricciardo eventually discovers that Paganino and Bartolomea are in Monaco, he departs immediately, ready to buy his wife back at any price. After he has docked, however, Bartolomea sees him at a distance and warns Paganino that her husband has come for her. The next morning, Ricciardo approaches Paganino and engages him in conversation, and after some time, broaches the subject of his wife, telling Paganino that he is willing to pay any amount of money for her. Paganino acknowledges that he is keeping a woman at his house but that he has no proof that she is Ricciardo's wife. But if the woman will confess Ricciardo as her husband, he will give her to him gladly, and what is more, at a price Ricciardo thinks right. After the two men have entered Paganino's house, Bartolomea is sent for, and when she enters the room, she treats Ricciardo as a stranger, even after he attempts to establish their connection. Ricciardo thinks her coldness is due to fear of discovery, so he asks Paganino for a private audience with her, which is granted. Ricciardo and Bartolomea move to her room and there, she drops pretense, telling Ricciardo that she both knows and despises him. Her current situation, she says, is "volute Idio" [by the will of God], and she scorns Ricciardo for having been "più divoto a Dio che a' servigi delle donne" [more devoted to God than to the service of ladies] (170.33). When

Ricciardo beseeches her to consider how her role as a kept mistress will besmirch her honor, she replies that she felt more like a whore living as his wife in Pisa than she does now with Paganino, and that “come egli mi concì Dio” [as God is my witness] (171.38), Paganino also provides great sexual satisfaction. She concludes by telling Ricciardo that being so used up and nearly dead, he ought go home (“v’andate con Dio,” [go with God] [171.41]) before she cries out that he has made a pass at her. Ricciardo returns to Pisa and, having lost his mind, dies soon afterward.

Clearly, this tale presents little in the way of religious oaths and asseverations. There is one asseveration, Bartolomea’s “come egli mi concì Dio,” and then her “v’andate con Dio,” which, though translated as a mild oath by McWilliam (“in God’s name”), really does not seem to qualify as one. Musa and Bondanella’s<sup>5</sup> “so, with God’s blessing, be off with you” is probably better, because it more aptly recognizes the Bartolomea and Ricciardo’s role reversal—it is as if she is dismissing a servant—and lends a little religious irony to the moment as well. That is, as far as Bartolomea is concerned, Ricciardo, with a piety feigned by a concern for religious feasts and holidays, can keep that as his consolation; “God” here is merely another one of Ricciardo’s set pieces. Bartolomea has removed Ricciardo’s mask and revealed his religious devotion as a sham. Little wonder that he becomes unmoored and a victim to despair.

There is, perhaps, some irony, too, in the fact that Bartolomea calls God as her witness to Paganino’s sexual prowess, not only because of the difference between Christian sexual ethics and Paganino and Bartolomea’s sexual behavior but also because God, in the form of Ricciardo’s piety, has so often been an obstacle to Bartolomea’s satisfaction. But, really, might this asseveration just be another way of lending some realism to the tale, emphasizing Bartolomea’s anger and underlining her satisfaction with Paganino? Maybe so, but the more one considers her

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<sup>5</sup> *The Decameron*, trans. Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella (New American Library, 1982), 186.

language in the larger context of the *Decameron*, the more one wonders. Boccaccio's celebration of the naturalness of sexual desire throughout his work might even lead him to associate this desire with a truer, more noble religious feeling. After all, Bartolomea says she feels greater peace in an "illicit" union with Paganino than she did in wedlock with Ricciardo; the fact that she is the only character in this tale invoking God may be a kind of advertisement for Boccaccio's sexual ethic.

#### Day 7, Tale 9

Dioneo presides over Day 7, whose theme is tricks played by women on their husbands. Tale 9, told by Panfilo, derives from the medieval Latin poem *Comoedia Lydiae*, by Matthew of Vendôme.<sup>6</sup> Though there are other French fabliaux that involve husbands being persuaded to disbelieve their eyes as they witness their wives having sex with their lovers,<sup>7</sup> Boccaccio's tale resembles Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* the most closely.

Panfilo's tale, set in ancient Greece, features a lord, Nicostratos, who in his old age has married a beautiful and vibrant young woman named Lydia. Lydia soon falls in love with Pyrrhus, a good-looking young man who is Nicostratos's highest-ranking and most trusted servant. Lydia sends her servant Lusca to Pyrrhus with a message asking him for his love. Pyrrhus is surprised and suspects that Nicostratos is using his wife to test his loyalty. He therefore scolds Lusca, telling her not to sully the honor of his lord and lady, warning her never to mention this again. Lusca rebukes Pyrrhus as a fool and returns to her lady, who is devastated by the news. But after a few days, she has recovered sufficiently to send Lusca with a second, similar message, for after all, "an oak is not felled by a single blow of the axe." In the meantime, Pyrrhus has been pondering Lusca's first message, concluding that if such an offer is made

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<sup>6</sup> McWilliam, *Decameron*, 849-50.

<sup>7</sup> e.g., *Le Prestre qui abevete* (NRCF, vol. 8) and *Le Vilain de Bailluel* (NRCF, vol. 5).

again, he will respond differently. So when Lusca apprises him once again of Lydia's love, he responds that he will be at her service if she will perform for him three deeds. First, she must kill in Nicostratos's presence his prized sparrowhawk; second, she must provide him with a tuft of Nicostratos's beard; and third, she must send to him "one of the best teeth [Nicostratos] has left in his jaw." Lydia agrees to his conditions and adds another, "since Pyrrhus seemed to think Nicostratos so intelligent": she will have sex with Pyrrhus in front of Nicostratos's very eyes and yet cause her husband to doubt his vision of the deed.

A few days later, as Nicostratos is throwing a banquet for some gentlemen, Lydia enters the room, elegantly dressed, grabs by its jesses the sparrowhawk nearby, and dashes it against the wall, killing it. Nicostratos flies into a rage, but she pulls him up short, asking the gentlemen for their judgment. She has killed the hawk, she claims, in vengeance, for it receives much more attention than she, who pines alone in bed while her husband goes out hunting. The gentlemen laugh heartily at all this, eventually persuading Nicostratos to give up his anger and in turn to become amused himself. Pyrrhus, also present, is moved by Lydia's deed and prays for continued success: "Alti principii ha dati la donna a' miei felici amori: faccia Idio che ella perseveri!" [The lady has given high principles to my happy love. God grant that she persevere!].

After another few days, while Nicostratos and Lydia are "jesting and sporting with one another" in bed, Lydia pulls a tuft of hair from her husband's beard, which she sends along to Pyrrhus. To procure one of Nicostratos's teeth, Lydia first tells the young men who serve Nicostratos at the table that they have bad breath and that they are to keep their heads up and to the side as they serve Nicostratos. After a bit, Lydia asks Nicostratos if he has noticed the servers' behavior. He admits that he has and has been meaning to ask them about it. Lydia tells

him that there is no need, that in fact they are reacting to his repulsive breath. Nicostratos wonders aloud what the source of his offensive breath could be, hitting presently on the possibility of a bad tooth. Lydia leads Nicostratos over to a window, looks at his teeth, and pretends to have spotted one nearly rotted out. At first, Nicostratos wants to call for a surgeon, but Lydia demurs, “Non piaccia a Dio che qui per questo venga maestro” [May it not be pleasing to God that a doctor come here for this], and convinces him to let her pull it. After a painful struggle, Lydia extracts the tooth but hides it away and instead presents to Nicostratos a decayed one she has brought for the occasion. The other, of course, she sends to Pyrrhus.

At this point, Pyrrhus offers himself to Lydia, but she insists on fulfilling her last, self-imposed condition. She begins by pretending to be ill and asking Nicostratos and Pyrrhus to help her out to the garden so that she can get some relief from the tedium of the sick-bed. Once they have settled down at the base of a pear tree, Pyrrhus climbs it and begins to drop fruit for them to eat. He has been briefed beforehand by Lydia and begins to play his part in the deception, yelling down to Nicostratos and Lydia that they ought to be ashamed of themselves for behaving so indecently in public. Nicostratos, genuinely confused, asks Pyrrhus what in the world he is talking about and Lydia plays along. Pyrrhus climbs down and tells them that until he reached the ground he saw them having sex. Lydia, feigning shock, swears that if she were well enough, that “se Dio mi salvi” [as God may save me], she would climb up the tree herself to witness such a marvel. In her stead, Nicostratos scales the tree, and as he does, Pyrrhus and Lydia begin having sex. Nicostratos sees it all from above and showers the couple with abuse as he climbs back down. Just as he reaches the bottom, Pyrrhus and Lydia resume their original places and ask Nicostratos what the fuss is about. Nicostratos repeats his accusations, to which Pyrrhus exclaims that the tree must truly be enchanted because what has happened to Nicostratos

happened also to him. Lydia pretends disgust: “Sia con la mala ventura” [bad fortune with you], she tells Nicostratos, if he thinks that she would behave so indecently before his very eyes. Abashed, Nicostratos apologizes and Lydia orders Pyrrhus to fetch an axe and cut down the pear tree, so that no other woman might be shamed by it. Pyrrhus fells the tree, and from then on, he and Lydia carry out their affair easily and with much joy and pleasure. Panfilo concludes by wishing, “Dio ce ne dea a noi” [may God give the same to us].

The oaths and asseverations in this *novella* seem to be doing little beyond lending some verisimilitude to speech. There may be some irony in Lydia’s proclamation “as God may save me,” but it is most likely inadvertent. Once again, the reader notices that it is the woman—in the tale, at least—who does all of the swearing.

#### Day 8, Tale 1

Lauretta presides over Day 8, whose theme is “tricks that people in general, men and women alike, are forever playing upon one another.” Tale 1, related by Neifile, is based on an Old French *fabliau* and is an analogue and possible source for Chaucer’s *Shipman’s Tale*.

Neifile begins her tale with a preamble reiterating the day’s theme, pointing out in the process that men are also fully capable of hoodwinking women. Her story, she says, will feature a man who avenges himself on a woman who surrenders her chastity for monetary gain. To do such a thing is reprehensible, to her mind, though a woman should not be so severely faulted if she succumbs merely to natural desire. The woman in this case is Madonna Ambruogia, the wife of a wealthy Milanese merchant, Guasparruolo Cagastraccio. A German soldier of fortune, Gulfardo, known for his assiduity in repaying debts, becomes a close friend of the couple, and though in love with the lady, manages to dissimulate his true feelings for some time. But eventually, he can resist no longer and sends a message to Madonna Ambruogia declaring his

devotion and seeking her love. The lady deliberates and then returns a message telling Gulfardo that she will be at his service on two conditions. One, that he tell no one, and two, that he pay her 200 gold florins since he is rich and she needs some money. Gulfardo is disgusted by what he sees as the woman's rapacity and determines to punish her. But he agrees to her conditions and is told that he will be summoned at the appropriate time.

In the meantime, Gulfardo approaches Guasparuolo, asking to borrow 200 gold florins so he can complete a business deal. Guasparuolo agrees gladly and hands the money over. A few days later, once he has left for Genoa on business, his wife sends for Gulfardo so that they can make their transaction. Gulfardo agrees to come and adds that he will bring along as a witness a companion who is privy to all of his affairs. Once Gulfardo and his companion are there, he hands the money over to Madonna Ambruogia and tells her to make sure this money is returned to her husband. The lady, thinking this is all being done for the sake of appearances, agrees. She then leads Gulfardo to her bedroom where he takes his pleasure with her many times over before her husband's return.

Once Guasparuolo has returned home, Gulfardo, accompanied by his companion, arranges to visit him when he knows Madonna Ambruogia will be present. In her presence, then, Gulfardo tells Guasparuolo that he did not need the 200 gold florins after all and that he returned them to his wife while he was gone to Genoa. Madonna Ambruogia, seeing the witness to the transaction present, can do no more than acknowledge receipt of the money. So Guasparuolo reassures Gulfardo that they are even and tells him to "go with God" [*andetevi pur con Dio*].

Once again, swearing has little to do with this tale. Nothing, in fact, since Guasparuolo's words are an exhortation. Again, one could point out some irony in

Guasparuolo telling Gulfardo to “go with God” but this can be explained away by the fact that such a saying is merely formulaic and that if Boccaccio were so concerned about the dissonance between sacred ideals and profane reality, he would have used more than a single religious exhortation at the end of his tale to make this point clear.

#### Day 8, Tale 2

Panfilo, taking the reins from Neifile, tells another story of a man fooling a wife. Like the preceding *novella*, this tale, in its plot outline, resembles *The Shipman’s Tale*. Here again, one encounters a wife who is paid for sexual favors and then deprived of her reward by a clever trick. There may also be some correspondence with *The Miller’s Tale*, furthermore, in the figure of the seducer-priest. Like Absolon, the priest leers at the wife while in church and tries to impress her by singing his *kyrie eleison* with particular vigor whenever she is around (one is reminded of Absolon playing “Herodes upon a scaffold hie” in his attempt to woo Alison).

Panfilo begins by telling the ladies that his story criticizes priests, who are always meddling with men’s wives, and that its moral is “that you shouldn’t believe everything that a priest tells you.” In this case, a priest of Verlungo<sup>8</sup> more well-versed in seduction than in the Scriptures has set his sights on one Monna Belcolore, a lascivious and “seductive-looking wench, buxom and brown as a berry,” given to dancing and playing the tambourine, and married to a farmworker, Bentivegna del Mazzo. Walking through town one day, the priest encounters Bentivegna driving a heavy-laden donkey before him. When the priest asks him what he is doing, Bentivegna replies, “Gnaffé, sere, in buona verità io vo a città per alcuna mia vicenda” [My word, Sir, in good truth I am going to town on some of my business], that he will be meeting with a lawyer to answer a summons from the judge at the assizes. Realizing that Monna

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<sup>8</sup> Small town near Florence.

Belcolore will be home alone, the priest scurries off to her house, and enters with a blessing: “Dio ci mandi bene: che è di qua?” [God bless us. Who is here?]. Monna Belcolore, hearing the priest from upstairs, calls down a welcome to him and then asks what he is doing there. “Se Dio mi dea bene” [As God may give me good], the priest answers, he has come to give her company since he has learned that her husband is away. Belcolore walks downstairs and begins to busy herself with sifting cabbage seed. The priest, already hot and bothered, asks her why she must drive him to despair. She laughs and asks what she has done to him, to which he replies, nothing, but that there is something ordained by God that he would like to do to her that she will not let him. Belcolore feigns shock: “Deh! andate andate! o fanno i preti così fatte cose?” [Oh! Go on, go on: or do priests make it thus that they do such things?]. The priest answers in the affirmative, letting her know that in fact priests do it the best because they wait to do their grinding “when the millpond’s full.” Belcolore continues to play coy until the priest mentions some kind of payment for his pleasure. To this, she responds that she needs five pounds<sup>9</sup> to buy back a dress she has pawned, and if the priest will supply the money, she will be at his service. “Se Dio mi de ail buono anno” [As God may give me a good year], the priest replies, he has not got the money on him but he will pay her back at his earliest convenience. Belcolore refuses, reminding the priest of the way he jilted a certain Biliuzza with the same kind of promise. “Alla fé di Dio non farete” [By God’s faith, you won’t do it]. Desperate, the priest mentions his cloak, made of the finest materials, he claims, and worth at least seven pounds. Belcolore expresses some skepticism, claiming “se Dio m’aiuti” [as God may help me] that she would never have thought it worth that much. Nevertheless, she takes a look at it anyway, and deciding that it will do the trick, tucks it away in a trunk and leads the priest out to the barn, where “dandole i piú

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<sup>9</sup> “cinque lire”.

dolci basciozzi del mondo e faccendola parente di messer Domenedio” [he gives many sweet kisses all over and makes her a relative of our Lord God].<sup>10</sup>

Afterwards, the priest is forced to hurry home in nothing but his surplice, scolding himself the while for giving up his cloak. Before long, however, he comes up with an idea of how to get it back. The next morning, he sends a neighbor’s child over to Belcolore’s house asking if the priest might borrow her stone mortar in order to prepare breakfast for some guests. She hands the mortar over unthinkingly. Then, a bit later, when he is sure that Belcolore and her husband will be ready to sit down and eat, the priest asks his sacristan to return the mortar and request of Belcolore the cloak that he gave her as surety for it. Upon hearing the priest’s message, Belcolore’s husband becomes incensed by her apparent stinginess and begins cursing her: “Dunque toi tu ricordanza al sere? Fo boto a Cristo che mi vien voglia di darti un gran sergozzone: va rendigliel tosto, che canciola te nasca!” [So you take a pledge from our lord? Faith I owe to Christ, what desire comes to me to give [you] a great blow on the throat. Go return it to him right away, a curse take you!]. She grudgingly returns the cloak with a message to the priest: “La Belcolore dice che fa prego a Dio che voi non pesterete mai piú salsa in suo mortaio: non l'avete voi sí bello onor fatto di questa” [Belcolore says that she swears to God that you will not grind any more sauce in her mortar. You have not shown great honor in this]. Belcolore refuses to speak to the priest the rest of the summer but begins to relent once he threatens to consign her to hell. Ultimately, they reconcile during the grape harvest “over a bottle of must and some roast chestnuts.” The priest also fits a new skin to Belcolore’s tambourine and tricks it out with a “pretty little bell, which made her very happy.”

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<sup>10</sup> The Italian verbs are past participles, but I translate them as present to keep things parallel.

Panfilo's claim regarding the moral of this *novella*, that one ought not to trust priests, is obviously rather arbitrary and inadequate, operating as nothing more than a conventional rhetorical gesture. The purpose of this tale, rather, is to entertain and amuse, and of all Boccaccio's *novelle*, it is one of the best at doing so. Like the Old French fabliaux, it is a tale full of incidental, colorful detail. Excluding the priest, all of the characters, even those who play no role, are given names, some of them humorous.<sup>11</sup> In McWilliam's fine phrasing, these absent characters "are personalities who flash momentarily into being and then subside, like sparks from a catherine wheel."<sup>12</sup> And the language is marked throughout by "Florentinisms and double meanings."<sup>13</sup> Then there are the descriptions of the priest putting on a show for Belcolore at church, or lusting over her during one of her suggestive dances; or of his attempts to woo by sending to her "a few cloves of fresh garlic, of which he grew the finest specimens thereabouts in his own garden, and sometimes a basket of beans, or a bunch of chives or shallots." And when Belcolore asks for money, Boccaccio does not leave it at that, but adds that the money is to buy back a skirt, and not just any old skirt, but a pawned one, black, worn on Sundays and even on Belcolore's wedding day.

Predictably enough, oaths and asseverations are also used with greater frequency and variety. There are seven in this tale, just as many oaths as in all of the preceding *novelle*. As in any story containing illicit deeds, any religious oath may appear jarring and ironic to the reader. Nevertheless, the religious oaths in this tale do not appear to be used intentionally for any kind of ironic effect. They certainly lend realism and color to the dialogue, but in the end, they are too

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<sup>11</sup> Indeed, speaking of color, Monna Belcolore's names means literally "Mistress Fincolour" (McWilliam, *Decameron*, 851).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

obviously formulaic to indicate any deeper kind of meaning. This is not to say that the tale does not have fun with the contrast between sacred ideals and profane reality. The priest's seductive behavior is meant to be in humorous contrast to religious ideals. There is, too, the narrator's description of his appearance after leaving Belcolore's house: it was "as though he'd been officiating at a wedding"—an image likely meant as some ironic commentary on the contrast between the priest's religious duties and actual behavior. But as much as the tale exploits the contrast between the sacred and profane, it does not appear to concentrate any of it in the use of religious oaths and asseverations.

#### Day 9, Tale 6

Emilia presides over Day 9 and for the day's theme, allows the storytellers to relate any story that pleases them. Panfilo tells Tale 6, which may draw on the Old French fabliaux *Gombert et les deus Cleres*<sup>14</sup> and *Le Meunier et les deus Cleres*<sup>15</sup> and be used as a source for Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*.

The tale takes place in the valley of the Mugnone,<sup>16</sup> and begins with a man who earns his living by selling food and drink to travelers. From time to time, he also offers his very small house for lodging, but only to those he already happens to know. This man has a very attractive wife and two children—a girl, Niccolosa, aged around 15 or 16 years, and an infant son, not yet a year old and still nursing. A young Florentine nobleman, Pinuccio, has fallen in love with Niccolosa, who has also taken a liking to him. Though they would like to consummate their love, Pinuccio hesitates out of fear of bringing censure on either one of them. After some time, however, overcome by desire, he hatches a scheme to fulfill their desires. He and his friend,

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<sup>14</sup> *NRCF*, vol. 4, 212-23.

<sup>15</sup> *NRCF*, vol. 7, 289-305.

<sup>16</sup> Near Florence.

Adriano, put some saddlebags stuffed with straw on two horses and approach Niccolosa's house at nightfall, requesting a room since they will not be able to reach Florence before nightfall.

Niccolosa's father, who knows Pinuccio, agrees to take them in, apologizing for the smallness of the house. Pinuccio, Adriano, and the family eat dinner together, and then the two friends go to bed. After the man thinks Pinuccio and Adriano have fallen asleep, he and the rest of the family go to their own beds in the same room. It is important to add here that there is only one bedroom in the house and it contains three beds. Two of the beds are alongside one wall and the other is alongside the opposite wall. Pinuccio and Adriano are in the "least uncomfortable bed," by itself along the one wall, while Niccolosa is in one of the two beds on the wall opposite and the man and his wife in the other. The infant is in a crib next to the man and wife's bed.

After everyone has fallen asleep, Pinuccio climbs into bed with Niccolosa who, though initially alarmed, welcomes him with open arms. Meanwhile, the man's wife, awakened by a cat knocking something over, gets up naked to investigate the noise. A moment later, Adriano wakes up to go relieve himself. On his way out of the room, he is forced to slide the crib next to his own bed in order to clear his path. He returns in a few moments and gets back into bed without bothering to move the crib. The wife, having scolded the cat, returns a few moments later, and discovering the crib next to Adriano's bed, slips into bed next to him, expressing shock ("in fé di Dio" [in God's faith]) at the fact that she nearly went to the other bed. She and Adriano then embrace to their mutual delight, though of course the wife is none the wiser. Pinuccio, having taken his fill of pleasure, decides to go back to his own bed, but when he feels the crib next to it, turns and gets into bed next to Niccolosa's father. Thinking that he is lying next to Adriano, he begins to tell him how "delicious" Niccolosa is and how, "al corpo di Dio" [by God's body], no man ever had so much enjoyment from a woman. Her father, outraged,

declares that “per lo corpo di Dio” [by God’s body] that Pinuccio will pay for this deed. His wife, in the other bed, hears the fuss and exclaims to the man she thinks is her husband, “Oimé!” [Alas], the two friends are fighting. Adriano laughs in reply: “Lasciagli fare, che Idio gli metta in malanno” [Let them be, [and] may God throw them into illness]. The wife, recognizing her husband’s voice among the quarrelers, suddenly realizes the peril of the situation and acts quickly. She picks up the cradle, moves it to Nicolossa’s bed, gets into bed with her, pretends to be wakened by the tumult, and asks her husband what the matter is. At his answer, she denies that Pinuccio was ever in bed with their daughter, for she has been there with her the whole night. Adriano, picking up on the game, shouts at Pinuccio to wake up from his sleepwalking, and the husband, completely taken in, begins trying to “wake” him. Pinuccio pretends to be confused and staggers back to his own bed. The man is greatly amused by all of this and pokes fun at Pinuccio the next morning. Pinuccio and Adriano depart with all in good spirits, and the wife, “who retained a vivid memory of Adriano’s embraces,” after questioning her daughter and becoming convinced by her story that nothing happened between her and Pinuccio, is left to conclude that “she alone had been awake on the night in question.”

This tale is unique among the others in featuring oaths on the body of God. With Pinuccio’s use of the oath, one may be tempted to see a contrast similar to my suggestion in *Dame Sirith*—that oaths by the sacring-bell may be intended to highlight the contrast between the sacred flesh of Christ and the fleshly sin of Wilekin and Margery. For here again is an oath on Christ’s body in the midst of bodily sin. True, but again, perception of this contrast is probably a modern phenomenon. As Muscatine argues, many in the medieval world were prone to compartmentalization and would not have felt much of a contrast in this instance. These oaths on God’s body are meant, rather, to emphasize intensity of feeling. Pinuccio is thrilled by his

achievement and emphasizes it with a strong oath and likewise, Nicolossa's father underscores the intensity of his anger by repeating the oath.

The other oaths in the tale lend little color or significance.

### Conclusion

The preceding discussions have clearly shown that Boccaccio, in the *Decameron*, uses oaths much less frequently than they are used in *Dame Sirith* or the Old French fabliaux. One reason for this may be historical. In his account of medieval Italy, Marvin B. Becker<sup>17</sup> discusses the change that Italy, and especially Florence, experienced in its 11<sup>th</sup>- to 12<sup>th</sup>-century transition from a "gift" to a "credit" culture. Becker describes Italy's early medieval gift culture as invested in tangible proofs of loyalty and narrow alliances, and distrustful of the "durability of human arrangements," including such things as credit and centralized government and administration of justice. Nearly all transactions in early medieval Italy were made by the exchange of gifts in the presence of witnesses and invoking the presence of God, the saints and their relics. This practice diminished during Italy's commercial and economic revival, however, as faith increased in governmental enforcement of written contracts. As a result, religious oaths, so often uttered to substantiate formal agreements, began, in the consciousness of the speakers, to lose their particular force.<sup>18</sup> Since, in western Europe, this economic revival occurred in Italy first, it would therefore make sense for an Italian writer such as Boccaccio to use fewer religious oaths than a *fableur* if they are to be used mainly for shock effect.

Another seemingly simple explanation is that the *Decameron* is written in prose and therefore has no necessity for providing the constant rhymes that religious oaths often provide.

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<sup>17</sup> Marvin B. Becker, *Medieval Italy: Constraints and Creativity* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1981).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

Perhaps this goes part of the way in explaining, too, the relative drabness of Boccaccio's work when compared to the fabliaux or Chaucer. That is, the exigencies of verse may *compel* incidental texture and color—a rhyme, thrown in for the sake of sound, cannot, because it is a word with a referent, operate as a mere sound. But, without a doubt, medieval literature abounds with dull verse, and I tend to think that for whatever reason, Boccaccio, as a writer, tends not to be terribly interested in the kinds of incidentals that make the fabliaux and Chaucer so lively in comparison, no matter whether writing in verse or prose. To get this point across, one need only compare *Decameron* 9.6 with either of the two versions of *Le Meunier et les deux Clercs*. In the fabliau versions of the tale, at least some of the characters are rounded out in a way they are not in the *Decameron*. The miller, for instance, the butt of the joke played by the clerics, is fleshed out as conniving, greedy, shrewd, and fiercely protective of his daughter. No such details exist in *Dec. 9.6*. In *Le Meunier*, the family and the clerics sit down to a meal of “bread and milk and water and cheese . . . the food of the woodland.”<sup>19</sup> Boccaccio mentions only the fact that the family and the two friends ate supper. Then the fabliau also features the unnecessarily elaborate trick of the magical ring played by the cleric on the miller's daughter, whereas in *Dec. 9.6*, Pinuccio simply climbs into bed with Niccolosa. These are only a few examples. What they make clear is that Boccaccio's *novella* is focused primarily on sexual achievement and the ability to hide it (which remains an important theme throughout the *Decameron*). This is not to say that *Dec. 9.6* is an artistic failure or that it lacks liveliness and humor. The wife and Adriano's quick thinking, for example, is a good example of both. But in comparison to the Old French fabliau (not to mention to Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*), Boccaccio's story does lack vibrancy, and I would venture to claim this about the other *novelle*, too. Very rarely does the reader have any idea of

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<sup>19</sup> “Pain et lait et eués et fromage: / C'est la viande del bochage” (171-72, MS B).

what a character or a room or a landscape *looks* like. They are not usually important beyond their contribution to the plot.<sup>20</sup>

Let me stress that this is not to say that Boccaccio is innocent of irony or less clever or sophisticated than the *fableors*. On the contrary, as Auerbach points out in his reading of *Dec.* 4.2, Boccaccio's irony is of the subtlest kind, catering to an audience who possess "sensitivity, taste, and judgment."<sup>21</sup> Though Boccaccio means to entertain and perhaps to instruct, his entertainment is not broad farce and any instruction he might provide is not conveyed by allegorical readings or tidy morals. He is purposely much more elusive, harder to define; intellectual refinement, for him, seems to be defined by an ironic perspective on all human activity, religious and lay alike, which rejects any sort of idealistic religious or erotic commitments. Boccaccio's dismissive stance towards Christian idealism is particularly important here, for it makes him less inclined to play with the contrast between the sacred and the profane, especially as it relates to oaths and asseverations. For all of his attempts at humor, Boccaccio seems fairly serious about and committed to the promotion of a sexual ethic that celebrates the naturalness of sexual desire and its consummation. To have fun with Christian ideals and profane reality would distract from this purpose and again, would be inconsistent with his own skeptical kind of irony. The irony of the *Dame Sirith* poet, for example, assumes static notions of good and bad, right and wrong in order to be funny and more importantly, to implicitly pass divine judgment. Though Boccaccio certainly does judge behavior himself, it seems to be rather from the perspective of a sophisticated, genteel society deriving its mores from a hodgepodge of basic religious ethical teachings, social custom, and utility. But is this not gross oversimplification? Surely many a fabliau writer had a similar background! To clarify,

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<sup>20</sup> Let me be clear, however, that there are exceptions to this rule. *Dec.* 8.2, as I mention earlier, is a notable one.

<sup>21</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1953), 216.

then, one is not presented on the one hand with the theologically orthodox and ethically systematic and consistent *fableor* and on the other with a muddling, inconsistent Boccaccio. Probably many a *fableor* adhered to views quite similar to Boccaccio's. Their most important difference must therefore lie in their purposes for writing. For the *fableor*, that purpose is entertainment and comedy; for Boccaccio, it is often these things, but also the promotion of his sexual ethic. I would insist, however, in regards to religious skepticism, that the *Decameron* places Boccaccio much farther on the edges than the typical *fableor*, who at times may really be interested in religious satire.

In the end, I think the historical explanation for the kind and number of oaths in the *Decameron* does not accomplish much. Even taking oaths out of consideration, Boccaccio makes it clear that he does not have any deep, abiding interest in the supernatural, sin, and hypocrisy. Again, to me, it seems that he is interested primarily in light, witty, and urbane entertainment with an ulterior purpose of (slyly) endorsing a more permissive sexuality. I should point out, however, that some disagree strongly on this point. Robert Hollander, for instance, in looking at Boccaccio's *Opere Minori in Volgare*, sees "two Venuses"—the celestial and chaste Venus who leads to marriage and the earthly and carnal one who leads to illicit sexual unions.<sup>22</sup> Boccaccio, Hollander argues, subtly endorses the celestial Venus by ironically undercutting the carnal Venus in his minor works. Boccaccio, in fact, supports the more rigid Christian notions of sexual behavior. Hollander stresses, however, that his argument does not necessarily apply to the *Decameron*. Hollander's exposition of the *Opere Minori* is thorough, however, and his interpretation of them seems sound—though one may sometimes wonder if Boccaccio's supposed irony can really explain away what appears at times a genuine interest in and

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Hollander, *Boccaccio's Two Venuses*, (New York: Columbia UP, 1977).

celebration of the carnal Venus. One can certainly ironize or allegorize a work to the point that it becomes nearly innocuous, but is the irony or allegory so fascinating and edifying that it achieves priority over the content of the story itself? In Boccaccio's case, he may have used subtly embedded irony or allegory as a palliative for his readers. But on a psychological level, I find it hard to believe that people want to hear stories about sex for any other reason than the fact that there is sex in them. Boccaccio, I think, shared and exploited that interest, though with great sophistication.

For all of Boccaccio's cleverness and subtlety, he often misses out on the color and texture of day-to-day life in a way that the *fableors* (and particularly Chaucer) do not. Almost all of his *novelle* seem to occur in the same flat, pale world, and his frame, though often elegant and enchanting, is likewise fairly static. All the members of the *brigata*, for example (with, perhaps, the exception of Dioneo), are nearly indistinguishable from one another. It is hard to pinpoint the reasons for Boccaccio's relative lack of exuberance and vitality, but one that may be important to my argument has something to do, I think, with his rather uninspired reading and use of the fabliau. For Boccaccio, that is, fabliaux appear to be used mostly for their plots, with their colors tingeing only bits and pieces of the *Decameron*. And furthermore, Boccaccio apparently does not see, or is not interested in, the jangling of worlds in the fabliaux. This may be intentional and a symptom of some of the emerging differences of style in renaissance literature.

Whatever the case, in his treatment of the sacred and the profane, in his use of the fabliaux, and in his construction of a frame tale, Boccaccio certainly differs from his near-contemporary Chaucer, the subject of the fourth, and final, chapter.

## CHAPTER 4: RELIGIOUS OATHS AND ASSEVERATIONS IN THE CHAUCERIAN FABLIAUX

Before turning to religious oaths in the Chaucerian fabliaux, I would like to review what an oath is, just so that understanding is clear in the mind as the subject is pursued in this final chapter. In an essay on oaths in Greek society, Alan H. Sommerstein offers a definition of the oath that is a helpful supplement to the one provided in Chapter 1:<sup>1</sup>

- 1) A declaration, which may be a statement about the present or past . . . or an undertaking for the future.
- 2) A specification of the ‘powers greater than oneself’ who are invoked as witnesses.
- 3) A curse which the swearer(s) call down upon themselves if their assertion is false or if their promise is violated. This curse is often left to be understood, implicit in the words of the oath itself, particularly in the performative verb ‘I swear’ . . . but when there is need for special assurance, it may be, and often is, spelt out.<sup>2</sup>

Such a definition is meant, of course, to apply to *formal* oaths, ritualized oaths purposely made to guarantee a promise. As the preceding chapters have shown, however, oaths in the fabliaux and Boccaccio’s *novelle* are not at all like that. Similar to formal oaths, these *informal* oaths often invoke “powers” greater than themselves to bolster their assertions, though not always: consider, for example, Wilekin’s oath “bi the somer blome” in *Dame Sirith* (294). Oaths like this, that substitute something else for higher powers, are often made to avoid swearing “in vain.” To invoke the name of a god (or some other higher power) in an oath flippantly or because of frustration or anger removes the god “from the assertorial or promissory context” and makes it so

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<sup>1</sup> p. 7, footnote 9.

<sup>2</sup> Alan H. Sommerstein, introduction, *Horkos: The Oath in Greek Society*, eds. Alan H. Sommerstein and Judith Fletcher (Exeter: Bristol Phoenix P, 2007), 1-8.

that he is “uttered in [himself], in vain, independently of a semantic context.”<sup>3</sup> According to Giorgio Agamben, such an oath is an example of blasphemy.

One sees care taken to avoid this kind of blasphemy early on in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the Decalogue (Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5), the Israelites are warned against using God’s name inappropriately: “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.” And in Leviticus 24.10-16, a man is executed for misuse of the Lord’s name:

Now a son of an Israelite woman born of an Egyptian man went out among the sons of Israel and argued in the camp with an Israelite man. When he had blasphemed and cursed the Name, he was led to Moses (his mother was called Salumith, daughter of Dabri from the tribe of Dan). And they confined him until they should know what God was commanding. God spoke to Moses, saying, “Lead the blasphemer outside the camp and let all who have heard him place their hands on his head and let all the people stone him. And to the sons of Israel you will say, ‘The man who curses God will bear on himself his sin, and he who will have blasphemed the name of God, let him die. The whole multitude will crush him with stones, whether he will have been a citizen or a foreigner. Anyone who blasphemes the name of the Lord, let him die.’”<sup>4</sup>

In the New Testament, Jesus forbids any kind of swearing whatsoever:

Again, you have heard that it was said by the ancients, you will not swear falsely but render your oaths to God. But I tell you not to swear at all, neither by heaven, because it is the throne of God, nor by the earth, because it is the footstool for his feet, nor by Jerusalem, because it is the city of the great king. Neither should you swear by your head, because you are not able to make one hair white or black. But let your speech be “Yes, Yes, No, No,” because anything more than these is from evil.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2011), 40.

<sup>4</sup> My translation of the Vulgate: *Ecce autem egressus filius mulieris israhelitis quem pepererat de viro egyptio inter filios Israhel iurgatus est in castris cum viro israhelite. Cumque blasphemasset nomen et maledixisset ei adductus est ad Mosen. Vocabatur autem mater eius Salumith filia Dabri de tribu Dan. Miseruntque eum in carcarem donec nossent quid iuberet Dominus, qui locutus est ad Mosen dicens, ‘educ blasphemum extra castra et ponant omnes qui audierunt manus suas super caput eius et lapidet eum populus universus. Et ad filios Israhel loqueris, ‘homo qui maledixerit Deo suo portabit peccatum suum, et qui blasphemaverit nomen Domini morte moriatur lapidibus opprimet eum omnis multitudo. Sive ille civis seu peregrinus fuerit qui blasphemaverit nomen Domini morte moriatur.’”*

<sup>5</sup> My translation of the Vulgate, Mat. 5.33-37: *Iterum audistis quia dictum est antiquis non peierabis reddes autem Domino iuramenta tua. Ego autem dico vobis non iurare omnino, neque per caelum quia thronus Dei est, neque per terram quia scabillum est pedum eius, neque per Hierosolymam quia civitas est magni Regis. Neque per caput tuum*

In this case, however, Jesus is not concerned with blasphemy in itself so much as not telling the truth (though breaking an oath could perhaps be considered blasphemous). But it is significant, as Geoffrey Hughes points out, that no punishments are prescribed here or elsewhere in the New Testament for “swearers.”<sup>6</sup>

During the Christian era (late antiquity through the middle ages), the authorities seemed to base their attitudes towards swearing<sup>7</sup> more on the Old Testament than the New. Æthelberht, who around 602-603 provides the first formal record of laws of an English people, records penalties for swearing, as does Henry I, who is said to have assessed fines for swearing “within the precincts of the royal residence.”<sup>8</sup> English Dominican John Bromyard reports that Louis IX of France (1214-1270) was much harsher and describes how he “ordered swearers to be branded with a hot iron on the face for a lasting memorial of the crime and afterwards saw to it that they were being displayed in a public place on a certain elevated wooden apparatus.”<sup>9</sup> Religious writers like Bromyard looked upon swearing with particular consternation and denounced it frequently, often with great color. Robert of Brunne’s *Handling Synne* (c.1300), for example, portrays the Virgin Mary chiding a “sinful swearer” for the effect of his words on the body of the Christ child:

All to-drawn were the guts;

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iuraveris quia non potes unum capillum album facere aut nigrum. Sit autem sermo vester EST EST NON NON quod autem his abundantius est a malo est.

<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey Hughes, *Swearing: A Social History of Foul Language, Oaths, and Profanity in English* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> Though I use “swearing” in a general sense here, my specific focus is, of course, on religious oaths and asseverations.

<sup>8</sup> Ashley Montagu, *The Anatomy of Swearing* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1967), 108.

<sup>9</sup> “. . . qui tales iussit ferro ignito in facie signare ad perpetuam rei memoriam, postmodum vero ordinavit que tales in quodam lingo alto in loco public ponerentur, . . .” John Bromyard, *Summa Praedicatorum, Pars Prima* (Venice: Dominicum Nicolinum, 1586), 424. Accessed at *Internet Archive*, <http://archive.org/details/JohnBromyardSummaPraedicatorumParsPrima1586>.

Of hands, of feet, the flesh off drawn;  
Mouth, eyes and nose, were all to-knowen,  
Back and sides were all bloody.  
'Thou,' she said, 'has him so shent,  
And with thy oaths all to-rent.'<sup>10</sup>

In the *Ayenbite of Inwit* (*The Remorse of Conscience*, c.1340) of Dan Michel, a brother of the Cloister of St. Austin at Canterbury, one reads that those who use inappropriate religious language "hold God in great contempt":<sup>11</sup>

And huanne me zuereþ be þe holy relikes and be þe halzen of paradys, me zuereþ be ham and be god þet ine ham woneþ. Efterward huanne me zuereþ vileynliche by god and by his halzen, ine þise zenne byeþ þe cristene worse þanne þe sarasyn þet nolden zuerie ine none manere ne nolden þolye þet me zuore beuere ham zuo vileynlyche be Iesu crist ase doþ þe cristene. Hi byeþ more worse þanne þe gyewes þet hine dede a-rode. Hy ne breken non of his buones, ac þise him tobrekeþ smaller þanne me deþ þet zuyn ine bocherie. Þise ne uorbereþ naȝt oure lheuedi and þise his tobrekeþ more vileynlaker and hire and þe oþre halzen þet hit is wonder hou þe cristendom hit þoleþ.<sup>12</sup>

Margery Kempe, while waiting in Lambeth Palace, London, to meet with the Archbishop, is roused by the swearing of those around her:

. . . ther wer many of the Erchebysshoppys clerkys and other rekles men bothe swyers and yemen which sworyn many gret othis and spokyn many rekles wordys, and this creatur boldly undyrname hem and seyde thei schuld ben dampnyd but thei left her sweryng and other synnes that thei usyd.<sup>13</sup>

She is even moved to remonstrate with the Archbishop himself:

Than this creatur boldly spak to hym for the correccyon of hys meny, seying wyth reverens, 'My Lord, owyr alderes Lord almyty God hath not gon yow yowr benefys and gret goodys of the world to maynten wyth hys tretowrys and hem that

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<sup>10</sup> This and the following two examples are taken from Hughes, though I have expanded the passage from the *Ayenbite of Inwit*.

<sup>11</sup> "habbeþ god in to grat onworþhede" (Hughes's translation).

<sup>12</sup> Ed. Richard Morris, *Dan Michel's Ayenbit of Inwit, or Remorse of Conscience*, EETS (London: Trübner, 1866), 64.

<sup>13</sup> *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Lynn Staley (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, 1996), 48.

slen hym every day be gret oths sweryng. Ye schal answer for hem les than ye correctyn hem or ellys put hem owt of yowr servyse.’<sup>14</sup>

In the English version of the *Gesta Romanorum* (c.1440), Mary once again rebukes the swearer for the dishonor and damage his language does to Christ:

‘Why come ye hidder?’ ‘For to shew the my sone, lo!’ she said, ‘here is my sone, lyeng in my lappe, with his hede all to-broke, and his eyen drawn oute of his body and layde on breste, his armes broken a-twoo, his legges and his fete also . . . .’<sup>15</sup>

And Jesus himself upbraids such sinners in John Mirk’s *Festial* (c. 1450):

And ouer þys þat greuyth me most, þou settyst noȝt by my passion that I suffryd for þe; but by me horrybull swerus all day, vmbraydys me sweryng by my face, by myn een, by myn armes, by myn nayles, by myng hert, by my blod, and soo forth, by all my body.<sup>16</sup>

One sees, then, a continual and pronounced concern for religious swearing in late medieval England. And, as Hughes points out, it is also noteworthy that Dan Michel and Robert of Brunne are both working from *French* sources;<sup>17</sup> the stigma attached to swearing is not localizable only to England.

These examples serve to remind the reader that there was a sensitivity to swearing during the Christian era and especially during the later middle ages. Now, obviously, that sensitivity varied. A Billingsgate fishwife probably had a rather dulled perception of swearing compared to a parish priest. One of the questions guiding this chapter is whether Chaucer himself was sensitive to it, particularly in *The Canterbury Tales*. His text indicates that he was certainly *aware* of sensitivity to swearing, though how much it vexed him is another question. Thus, in

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>15</sup> Ed. Sidney J. H. Herrtage, *Early English Versions of the Gesta Romanorum*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Humanities Text Initiative, 1997), 410. <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=cme;idno=GRom>.

<sup>16</sup> Ed. Theodor Erbe, *Mirk’s Festial: A Collection of Homilies*, EETS (London: Trübner, 1905), 113.

<sup>17</sup> Respectively from the *Somme des Vices et des Vertues* (1279) of Friar Lorens of Orléans and the *Manuel des Pechiez* (1250) of William of Wadington.

the *General Prologue*, he notes that the Prioress's "gretteste ooth was but by Seinte Loy" (I.120).<sup>18</sup> Then there is the well-known exchange between Harry Bailey and the Parson in the epilogue to the *Man of Law's Tale*:

'Sir Parisshe Prest,' quod he, 'for Goddes bones,  
Telle us a tale, as was thi forward yore.  
I se wel that ye lerned men in lore  
Can moche good, by Goddes dignitee!  
The Parson him answered, 'Benedicite!  
What eyleth the man, so synfully to swere?' (II.1166-71)

The Pardoner, in his sermon on the three revelers, includes among their sins

Hir othes . . . so grete and so dampnable  
That it is grisly for to heere hem swere.  
Oure blissed Lordes body they totere—  
Hem thoughte that Jewes rente hym noght ynough— (VI.471-75)

Here, one sees Chaucer closely echoing some of the examples noted just above, of medieval sermons' injunctions against swearing and their macabre depictions of the broken body of Christ.

Chaucer's *Friar's Tale* is intriguing in the way that it considers the intention behind swearing. As the Devil and a summoner are traveling down the road, they see a "cartere" and his horse-drawn cart of hay stuck in a rut. The carter is busy cursing his horses, the cart, and the hay:

'The feend,' quod he, 'yow fecche, body and bones,  
As ferforthly as evere were ye foled,  
So mucche wo as I have with yow tholed!  
The devel have al, bothe hors and cart and hey!' (III.1543-47)

Although the Summoner is eager to claim horse, cart, and hay for his companion, the Devil declines, telling the Summoner that the words of the carter's curse are "not his entente" (1556).

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<sup>18</sup> Skeat suggested (as reported in the *Riverside* notes) a medieval tradition that states that to swear by St. Loy is to swear not at all, since he himself refused to take oaths.

And to prove his point, they wait awhile, and upon witnessing the horses free the cart, hear the driver bless them in the names of “Jhesu Crist,” “God,” and “Seinte Loy” (1561-64).

Though these are just a few examples regarding swearing from *The Canterbury Tales*, they make it obvious that Chaucer at least knew that some people were sensitive to swearing and he was fairly realistic in the way he applied this awareness. On the one hand, rough and uncouth types like Harry Bailey and the Miller season their speech with numerous oaths and pay them little attention. On the other, refined and/or religious types like the Knight, the Prioress, and the Parson either swear less, more blandly, or not at all and furthermore show a heightened sensitivity to such language. But what was Chaucer’s view of swearing? That is not easy to tell. Perhaps it is significant that the Parson, the paragon of a certain type of virtue, treats all oaths as shameful, but it would be unwise to consider his character as Chaucer’s mouthpiece. In the end, Chaucer’s own view about the moral propriety of swearing may be unimportant, for what I am interested in is understanding how Chaucer *uses* swearing in *The Canterbury Tales*, especially in his fabliaux. In the following section, then, I shall look at each of Chaucer’s fabliaux—*The Miller’s Tale*, *Reeve’s Tale*, *Summoner’s Tale*, *Merchant’s Tale*, and *Shipman’s Tale*—and the religious oaths and asseverations contained therein. I should also note that in this section I shall operate much as I did in my third chapter—that is, my discussion will focus first on the oaths as they appear in the stories themselves and second in the frame itself. In the conclusion, the discussion will focus particularly on the significance of these oaths and the fabliaux over the whole of *The Canterbury Tales*. Also, because the plots of the fabliaux from the *Tales* are already so well known, I shall, in contrast to preceding chapters, omit any full-scale summaries here.

*The Miller's Tale*

The *Miller's Tale*, 667 lines long, contains some 36 oaths and asseverations.<sup>19</sup> Nicholas utters the first, an asseveration, as he begs Alison for her favor: “Lemman, love me al atones, / Or I wol dyen, also God me save!” (3280-1). A few lines later, Alison swears mildly as she initially rejects Nicholas’s plea: “I wol nat kisse thee, by my fey!” (3284). After Nicholas pleads his case a bit more, Alison relents and swears an oath by Saint Thomas à Beckett:

This Nicholas gan mercy for to crye,  
And spak so faire, and profred him so faste,  
That she hir love hym graunted atte laste,  
And swoor hir ooth, by Seint Thomas of Kent,  
That she wol been at his comandement,  
Whan that she may hir leyser wel espie. (3288-93)

The narrator asseverates at 3325, in the midst of his description of Absolon: “A myrie child he was, so God me save.” Later, Alison utters an oath after her husband asks her if it is Absolon they hear playing music outside their bedroom window: “Yis, God woot, John, I heere it every deel” (3369). John, as he worries about Nicholas’s absence during the first phase of the lovers’ ruse, swears fretfully,

. . . ‘I am adrad, by Seint Thomas,  
It stondeth nat aright with Nicholas.  
God shilde that he deyde sodeynly!’ (3425-27)

After his servant comes back with news of Nicholas’s condition, John invokes “Seinte Frydeswyde” (3449). Then, he swears once again by Saint Thomas as he recounts the ruin of a proverbial astronomer, who fell into a “marle-pit”: “[The astronomer] saugh nat that. But yet, by Seint Thomas, / Me reweth soore of hende Nicholas” (3461-62). He then swears “by Jhesus, hevene kyng” (3464) that he shall scold Nicholas for studying too much.

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<sup>19</sup> I use the qualifier “some” because there are cases in which what I’m counting as an oath or asseveration may be a borderline example some would reject and also because there are times when I count two oaths where someone else might count one (e.g., “For Jhesus love, and for the love of me” [3177]).

The next example I shall point to is technically a charm but will be helpful in my discussion, nevertheless. I mean the charm that John speaks as he tries to rouse Nicholas from his feigned stupor:

‘Jhesu Crist and Seinte Benedight,  
Blesse this hous from every wikked wight,  
For nyghtes verye, the white *pater-noster*!  
Where wentestow, Seinte Petres soster?’ (3483-86)

Once Nicholas comes to, he alludes darkly to a vision he has just experienced and swears John to secrecy, under penalty of madness. John commits himself with great ardor:

‘Nay, Crist forbede it, for his hooly blood!’  
Quod tho this sely man, ‘I am no labbe,  
Ne, though I seye, I nam nat lief to gabbe.  
Sey what thou wolt, I shal it nevere telle  
To child ne wyf, by hym that harwed helle!’ (3508-12)

One will recall that Nicholas warns John of the coming flood and in response to his question of whether there is any “remedie in this cas,” replies that “yis, for Gode,” (3526) there is. After Nicholas details the remedy, he commands John to “Go, God thee speede!” (3592) and collect all the materials necessary. Then, as John, Alison, and Nicholas prepare to ascend the ladders to the tub, Nicholas invokes the “pater-noster” to command silence (3638).

The next part of the tale returns to Absolon, his seeming discovery that John is out of town, and his resolution to try Alison once again:

‘So moot I thryve, I shal, at cokkes crowe,  
Ful pryvely knocken at his wyndowe  
That stant ful lowe upon his boures wal.’ (3675-77)

And he concludes that by doing this “Som maner confort shal I have, parfay” (3681). Alison, as one may recall, spurns Absolon’s entreaty with a heated and oath-filled reply:

‘Go fro the wyndow, Jakke fool,’ she sayde;  
‘As help me God, it wol nat be ‘com pa me.’  
I love another—and ells I were to blame—

Wel bet than thee, by Jhesu, Absolon.  
Go forth thy wey, or I wol caste a ston,  
And lat me slepe, a twenty devel wey!’ (3708-13)

Absolon decides to try a different tack, asking Alison for a consolatory kiss: “‘Thanne kysse me, syn it may be no bet, / For Jhesus love, and for the love of me’” (3716-17).

After Absolon kisses Alison’s “nether ye” and Alison claps the window to with a “Teheel,” Nicholas registers his delight with how things have turned out: “‘A berd! A berd!’”<sup>20</sup> quod hende Nicholas, / ‘By Goddes corpus, this goth faire and weel’” (3741-42). Absolon, after he has left Alison and made a beeline to the house of Gervase the smith, astounds the smith in coming by his place so early:

‘What, Absolon! for Cristes sweete tree,  
Why rise ye so rathe? Ey, benedicitee!  
What eyleth yow? Som gay gerl, God it woot,  
Hath broght yow thus upon the viritoot.  
By Seinte Note, ye woot wel what I mene.’ (3767-71)

When Absolon asks Gervase for a hot coulter, he accedes to the request gladly: “‘Thou sholdest have, as I am trewe smyth. / Ey, Cristes foo! What wol ye do therwith?’” (3781-82).

Absolon swears blandly after he knocks on Alison’s window for the second time, declaring that he is not, as she at first suspects, a thief, and promising a ring for a kiss:

‘Why, nay,’ quod he, ‘God woot, my sweete leef,  
I am thyn Absolon, my deerelyng.  
Of gold,’ quod he, ‘I have the broght a ryng.  
My mooder yaf it me, so God me save;’ (3792-95)

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<sup>20</sup> According to the text, at least, Absolon never voices the fact that he at first thinks that he has kissed a “berd” (3737). As the *Riverside* notes point out, “berd” may also mean trick, and thus be a play on words, but the question remains how Nicholas would know that Absolon initially thinks he has kissed someone with a beard. I’m inclined to think that there is no play on words here after all. Rather, Nicholas, in his characteristically cruel way, finds pure delight in Absolon’s gullibility and utter befuddlement. Though when read literally, Absolon’s reaction seems inward, Chaucer must have thought of him verbalizing these thoughts. The portrayal of inner discourse was still, I think, fairly rare at this point, and especially in a genre like the fabliau, which was often performed.

Absolon proceeds, memorably, to scald Nicholas “in the towte,” who is in turn moved to passionate exclamation: “Help! Water! Water! Help, for Goddes herte!” (3815). After Nicholas and John wake up the whole neighborhood with their noise, Nicholas and Alison hastily cover their trail by insisting that John was deluded into thinking that a flood was coming “and that he preyed hem, for Goddes love, / To sitten in the roof, *par compaignye*” (3837-38). Then, “With othes grete [John] was so sworn adoun / That he was holde wood in al the toun” (3845-46). Finally, the narrator concludes the tale: “This tale is doon, and God save al the rowte!” (3854).

### Analysis

Even putting *The Miller’s Tale* and its antithetical relation to the *Knight’s Tale* to one side, it is clear that this is a tale interested in the juxtaposition of very different registers. Alison’s description is quite obviously a parody of the romance *effictio*; Emily’s description in the *Knight’s Tale* makes it all the more piquant, but it is unnecessary for understanding what Chaucer is doing. Then, one witnesses the contrast between an overwrought love-song by Absolon that apotheosizes his feelings for Alison and indeed, Alison herself, and Alison’s immediate, terse, and salty response that suddenly puts the scene into another perspective: “Go fro the window, Jakke fool” (3708). The reader is reminded, no doubt, of a similar transition in *The Parliament of Fowls*, when the lesser fowl interrupt a long love-debate among the eagles:

. . . ‘Have don, and lat us wende!’  
[. . .]  
‘Com of!’ they criede, ‘allas, ye wol us shende!  
Whan shal youre cursede pletynge have an ende?’ (492, 494-5)

And, more to the point are the goose’s words: “Al this nys not worth a flye!” (501). Although the two sides of the love-debate are treated fairly even-handedly in the *Parliament*, in *The Miller’s Tale*, the mundane seems to prevail.

But there is also, as in *Dame Sirith*, a noticeable juxtaposition between the sacred (religious) ideals and profane reality. One notices it, for instance, when the narrator, after offering a portrait of Alison that both implicitly and explicitly (“And sikerly she hadde a likerous ye” [3244]) impugns her moral propriety and following with a scene in which she is easily seduced, then speaks of her going to the “paryssh chirche, / Cristes owene werkes for to wirche” (3307-8).<sup>21</sup> At this same church, the narrator presents to the reader Absolon, the “parissh clerk,” dressed ostentatiously and “sensynge the wyves of the parissh faste” (3341). And then he puts a fine point on how much of an ass Absolon is and how ill-suited to his position when he has him in his “love-longynge” declining to take women’s offerings to the church (3348-51). Furthermore, one notices the striking juxtaposition of the “melodye” made by Nicholas and Alison in bed (3652) and the ringing of the “belle of laudes” (3655) and the singing of “freres in the chauncel”(3656) that accompanies it. It is no stretch, then, to imagine that the tale’s oaths and asseverations might contribute to this jangling of discourses. Perhaps most striking are the frequent oaths by “Seint Thomas.” Ruth Huff Cline points out that St. Thomas “occurs as an expletive” only six times in *The Canterbury Tales*: “one of these examples refers specifically to St. Thomas of India but the others are indefinite or identify the saint as St. Thomas à Becket.”<sup>22</sup> Three of these occurrences are in *The Miller’s Tale*. Alison swears by Thomas once and John does twice. Cline argues that Chaucer assigns Thomas to these two because of their likely close connection to Oseney and the church of St. Thomas there. As she says, “St. Thomas à Becket, one of the most popular saints of his time, would have been particularly familiar to one

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<sup>21</sup> I should stress that the narrator is also having fun here and not trying to put Alison, or any of the fabliau’s characters, under judgment. Their hypocrisy is obviously meant to be amusing.

<sup>22</sup> Ruth Huff Cline, “Three Notes on *The Miller’s Tale*,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 26, no.2 (1963), 135.

employed, as the carpenter was, at Oseney Abbey.”<sup>23</sup> This is no doubt true, but might Thomas have some significance beyond a connection to Oseney Abbey? I think so. Ultimately, John and Alison’s oaths extend beyond *The Miller’s Tale* into the frame setting, where one witnesses once again various bold contrasts, including that of the sacred and profane. I will grant that when these oaths by Thomas are considered only within *The Miller’s Tale*, they seem fairly insignificant, but in the context of *The Canterbury Tales*, they take on new meaning. They further substantiate links that have already been made between both the tales themselves and the tales and the frame. They also intensify the ironic contrast, often noted, in the rapid moral shift that the Canterbury pilgrimage experiences in the transition to *The Miller’s Tale*. The tale’s presence is in odd contrast to a reverend pilgrimage, and the oath by Saint Thomas serves as a reminder of that.

Ironic contrasts play out as well in other parts of Nicholas and Alison’s initial exchange, which is marked by religious oaths and asseverations. Nicholas’s first asseveration, that he will die, “also God me save” unless Alison will love him “al atones” is fairly bland and insignificant. Alison’s response, however, that she “wol nat kisse” Nicholas, by her “fey,” is a little more interesting, especially since the narrator comments later on her superficial piety (3308). Her oath on her faith, then, to keep herself chaste—an oath she gives up rather quickly with Nicholas’s encouragement—is a sort of parallel to the contrast I mentioned above, in which Alison is described as being essentially lascivious and self-serving but with a semblance of piety. In that example it was clear that the narrator was commenting ironically on Alison going to church “Cristes owene werkes for to wirche.” Likewise, here, we see that same hypocrisy in Alison’s language and actions and naturally receive some insight into the quality of her religious belief.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

The narrator wants the reader to perceive a jarring contrast between Alison's real and apparent commitments and uses the idea of religious faith contrasted with an easy acquiescence to sexual indulgence. When put this way, my claim may sound solemn and serious, but let me be clear that I do not think the narrator means it this way. The contrast, as we see throughout *The Canterbury Tales* and the rest of Chaucer's work, is sometimes amusing and always intriguing. The humor here is parallel to that in *Dame Sirith*: while the characters there certainly do not live up to idealistic, and often puritanical, standards well-known to the audience (though probably not often embraced), the rub of the two worlds continues to be funny.

Religious language seems also to characterize the speech of male laborers. John either swears, or uses religious language, twelve times, much more than Nicholas (six), Alison (six), or Absolon (six). Gervase the smith, though he uses religious oaths only four times, does so over the course of a mere ten lines of speech and what is more, three of his oaths are unique to the tale. In these cases, I would argue first, that religious language is being used, again, for characterization—that is, to more realistically convey the speech of the working class, similar to the language given to the eponymous protagonist of the Old French fabliau *Estormi*.<sup>24</sup> Second, in John's case, the excessive religious language is surely meant to emphasize his obviously credulous, superstitious piety as well. Words pertaining to his faith are either used with unconscious reflexivity or like magical counters, moved with great clumsiness due to his deep-seated ignorance of the essentials of his faith (e.g. "Seinte Petres soster" [3486]). As Charles Muscatine puts it, John's piety is "all spells and asseverations."<sup>25</sup> Third, in Gervase's case, his language, besides being natural to a hard-bitten laborer, may carry a little more significance. His

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<sup>24</sup> pp. 27-28.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley: U California P, 1957), 226.

oath by “Seinte Note,” for instance, almost certainly refers to St. Neot, a monk and hermit who founded a monastery at Bodmin moor (northern Cornwall).<sup>26</sup> Mary P. Richards argues that Chaucer is using St. Neot here, and his associations with habitual early risings for prayer “before his fellow monks awoke” in ironic contrast with Absolon and the purpose for his early rising.<sup>27</sup> She says, more particularly, that this is “yet another instance of Chaucerian criticism of the clergy in the *Miller’s Tale*. Just as the clerk Nicholas perverts his learning to gull the ignorant miller [sic] and thereby seduce his wife, so Absolon misuses his office to pursue Alison and other young ladies of the parish.” As intriguing as Richards claim is, it probably goes too far in implying that Chaucer is satirizing the clergy here and elsewhere in the tale. Indeed, the oath is uttered in such a passing way, it may very well mean little or nothing at all. If the narrator *is* using St. Neot and his associations here intentionally, I would soften Richards’ claim a bit, and say that once again, one sees here conflicting registers—the discord between the figure of a saint and his reasons for early rising and the figure of Absolon and his very different reasons for doing so. The strength of Gervase’s other oaths are probably due to his great astonishment at seeing Absolon, though his expletive “Cristes foo” (3782) may echo thematically Absolon “bitaking” his soul “unto Sathanas” and, clearly, the devil-like image of him glowering and brandishing a hot poker.

Nicholas uses the tale’s strongest oaths: one by God’s “corpus” (3742) and the other by his “herte” (3815). Nicholas’s use of Latin in the one oath further characterizes him as superficially learned, but otherwise the oaths are so strong because they are being used at moments of great passion.

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<sup>26</sup> David Hugh Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. rev. (Oxford: OUP, 2011).

<sup>27</sup> Mary P. Richards, “The *Miller’s Tale*: “By Seinte Note,” *Chaucer Review* 9 (1975): 212-15.

Overall, then, the narrator uses oaths in this tale as a complement to his contrast between the sacred and the profane, to realistically characterize the speech of working-men, and to express extreme emotion.

*The Reeve's Tale*

403 lines long, the *Reeve's Tale* contains some 29 oaths and asseverations. The narrator mentions swearing near the beginning of the tale, remarking that anyone who dared to lay hands on the Miller, "swoor he sholde anon abegge" (3938). A little later, he mentions that the Miller, when confronted by the college's warden for stealing "mele and corn," blustered and "swoor it was nat so" (4001). Individual oaths and asseverations (as well as expletives) make their real appearance, however, once the dialogue begins. As Alan and John arrive at the mill, Alan uses a mild expletive in his greeting of Symkyn: "Al hayl, Symond, y-fayth!" (4022). Symkyn's reply includes an oath: "Aleyn, welcome," quod Symkyn, "by my lyf!" (4024). When he asks the two what they are doing there, John answers that "by God" (4026) necessity has forced them, instead of a servant, to come to the mill and have their corn ground. Symkyn replies that he will do it, "by my fay!" (4034) and asks them what they will do in the meantime. Alan and John's answer employs several oaths:

'By God, right by the hopur wil I stande,'  
Quod John, "and se howgates the corn gas in.  
Yet saugh I nevere, by my fader kyn,  
How that the hopur waggis til and fra."  
Aleyn answered, "John, and wiltow swa?  
Thanne wil I byneth, by my croun,  
And se how that the mele falles down  
Into the trough; that sal be my disport.  
For John, y-faith, I may been of youre sort;  
I is as ille a millere as ar ye.' (4036-45)

John swears again a bit later upon discovering that their horse has escaped into the fen:

'Oure hors is lorn, Alayn, for Goddes banes,

Step on thy feet! Com of, man, al atanes!  
 . . .  
 ‘Allas,’ quod John, ‘Aleyn, for Cristes peyne  
 Lay down thy swerd, and I wil myn als wa.  
 I is ful wight, God waat, as is a raa;  
 By Goddes herte, he sal nat scape us bathe!  
 Why ne had thow pit the capul in the lathe?  
 Ihayl! By God, Alayn, thou is a fonnel!’ (4073-74; 4084-89)

The next oath is used by Symkyn as he congratulates himself for tricking the clerks: “They gete hym [the horse] nat so lightly, by my croun” (4099). Then John swears after the Miller mockingly accepts their request for a night’s lodging: “Now, Symond,” seyde John, “By Seint Cutberd, / ay is thou myrie, and this is faire answerd” (4127-28). As Alan and John lie awake in bed listening to Symkyn and his family snore, Alan curses them angrily, “A wilde fyr upon thair bodyes falle!” (4172), and tells John that he will not be getting any sleep this night, and yet “als evere moot I thryve” (4177), he will turn it to his advantage: “Agayn my los, I will have esement, / By Goddes sale, it sal neen other bee!” (4186-87). After Alan has climbed into bed with Maline, John swears determinedly that he will profit something, too: “I wil arise and auntre it, by my faith!” (4209).

As Alan departs from Maline’s bed early in the morning, he asseverates mildly that “swa have I seel,” he is Maline’s “awen clerk” (4239). Maline, revealing her father’s theft of their corn, then sends Alan off with a sort of blessing: “And, goode lemman, God thee save and kepe!” (4247). Alan begins creeping toward his bed, but when he feels a cradle at the foot of it, swears in surprise: “By God,” thoughte he, “al wrang I have mysгон” (4252). The narrator then tells the reader that Alan heads, “a twenty devel way” (4257), for Symkyn’s bed. Alan gives “John” an earful once there:

‘Thou John, thou swynes-heed, awak  
 For Cristes saule, and heer a noble game.  
 For by that lord that called is Seint Jame,

As I have thries in this shorte nyght  
Swyved the milleres doghter bolt upright,  
Whil thow hast, as a coward, been agast.’ (4262-67)

Symkyn rises to the occasion, telling Alan that he shall die, “by Goddes dignitee” (4270). When, as they fight, Symkyn trips and falls onto his wife, she cries out with fulsome religious language:

‘Help! hooly croys of Bromeholm,’ she seyde,  
‘*In manus tuas!* Lord, to thee I calle!  
Awak, Symond! The feend is on me falle. (4286-88)

Finally, the narrator asseverates at the conclusion of his tale: “And God, that sitteth heighe in magestee, / Save al this compaignye, grete and smale!” (4322-23).

### Analysis

Readers have long observed that *The Reeve’s Tale*, considered in itself, is not quite the artistic achievement that is *The Miller’s Tale*. The plot, though certainly clever, does not compare to the sophisticated interweaving of storylines in *The Miller’s Tale*. The tale likewise exhibits less of the subtle, rippling interchange of discourses, though there is still evidence of romantic parody. *The Reeve’s Tale*, in spite of its delightful use of dialect, is also less colorful and more grim than its predecessor and indeed, does not “quite” *The Miller’s Tale* in the same manner that that tale does *The Knight’s Tale*. Of course, all of this may be the point. The way the tale is told may be meant as a reflection, or embodiment, of the character of the Reeve. At any rate, this same point holds for the contrast of religious ideals and profane reality, though the contrast is still there, particularly in the description of Symkyn’s wife as the daughter of a priest raised in a convent and the priest’s and Symkyn’s concern about “hooly” blood and the marriage of Maline—contrasted obviously with the wife’s and Maline’s dalliances with John and Alan. But in the end, this is just the Reeve sending up and skewering Symkyn’s (and by extension, perhaps, the Miller’s) social pretensions, which are all the more tawdry and pathetic for being based on a

priest's illegitimate child. Symkyn is quite clearly the target of this tale and all else is subsidiary to that.

For this reason, religious oaths and asseverations do not create quite as much of a dissonance in this tale. One might be tempted to work the significance of oaths on St. Cuthbert (1.4127) and St. James (1.4264), but doing so strains credulity.<sup>28</sup> It is interesting, however, that the narrator chooses to use Cuthbert, a Northumbrian saint associated with the north of England, for John to swear by—interesting because it is another nice, and accurate, touch on the “northernness” of the two clerks. Such an accurate realistic touch is properly understood as the work of Chaucer in this case, not the Reeve-narrator, and is another fascinating insight to the care Chaucer takes in making a character's speech grow organically out of his or her personality and background. As another example, one notices the religious hysterics of Symkyn's wife when she is awakened by his fall. Her oath on the “holy croys of Bromeholm,” the scrap of Latin from the liturgy,<sup>29</sup> and her conclusion that the “feend” has fallen on her can plausibly be seen as indications of her cloistered, religious upbringing. More particularly, as Robert M. Correale has shown,<sup>30</sup> her words recall the Compline service—that is, the short, responsary prayer derived from Psalm 30.<sup>31</sup> and verses from 1 Peter 5.8-9 concerning the devil.<sup>32</sup> In this moment, the wife returns by reflex to her former religious life and the text of Compline, the

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<sup>28</sup> Although Ruth Huff Cline points out that there is a story associated with St. Cuthbert in which he is awarded three hot loaves for entertaining some angels unaware. Cline sees the possibility here of an ironic contrast between the Miller and St. Cuthbert and their very different rewards (Cline, “Four Chaucer Saints,” *Modern Language Notes* 60 [1945]: 480-82.)

<sup>29</sup> In the Vulgate, *in manus tuas*.

<sup>30</sup> Robert M. Correale, “Chaucer's Parody of Compline in the 'Reeve's Tale',” *Chaucer Review* 1 (1967): 161-66.

<sup>31</sup> *In manus tuas commendo spiritum meum; redemisti me, Domine Deus veritatis.*

<sup>32</sup> *Sobrii, estote vigilate, quia adversarius vester diabolus tamquam leo rugiens circuit quarens quem devoret. Cui resistite fortes fide scientes eadem passionum ei quae in mundo est vestrae fraternitati fieri.*

nighttime service. It is amusing to see old pleas and fears reassert themselves as Symkyn is transformed into the “adversary the devil, going round just like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.” This scene shows the reader, too, the care Chaucer takes in creating the wife’s character. Rather than being a simple plot device, she is well-rounded, with an interesting background that nicely generates humor.

Based on their use in moments of extreme distress or excitement, oaths invoking God’s or Christ’s body or aspects thereof<sup>33</sup> (including, interestingly, his “soul”) appear to be the strongest kind available for use. And once again, clerks are responsible for using them. They are particularly noticeable during the runaway-horse episode, when John swears oaths on God’s “banes” and “herte” and Christ’s “peyne.” Alan’s oath on God’s “sale” appears as he is resolving himself to seduce Maline and then an oath on Christ’s “saule” when he returns to bed and begins bragging about his exploit. The significance of these oaths appears not to extend itself beyond an expression of pitched emotion. This does not mean, however, that they might not have some importance in the frame itself.

The rest of the oaths and asseverations used in the tale do little beyond provide rhyme and a realistic touch to the dialogue.

### *The Summoner’s Tale*

In 585 lines, the *Summoner’s Tale* includes approximately 41 oaths and asseverations. The first example, perhaps more properly considered an expletive,<sup>34</sup> is used by Harry Bailey as he silences the Friar of the Prologue, who has objected to the Summoner’s description of Friar

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<sup>33</sup> “Cristes peyne,” for instance in line 4084.

<sup>34</sup> This usage doesn’t fall under a strict definition of an oath as presented at the beginning of the chapter. Rather, as in the *OED* definition (n.), sense 2, of “oath” Harry Bailey makes “a casual or careless appeal invoking God (or something sacred) in asseveration or imprecation, without intent of reverence, made in corroboration of a statement, declaration, etc.; a profane or blasphemous utterance; a curse.”

John's behavior: "Pees," quod oure Hoost, "for Cristes mooder deere! / Tel forth thy tale, and spare it nat at al" (1762-3). The Summoner replies with an asseveration: "So thryve I," quod this Somonour, "so I shal!" (1764).

The next example is, technically, an invocation or greeting—"Deus hic!" (1770)—used by the Friar as he enters Thomas's house. This greeting sets the tenor of the Friar's succeeding religious language—polite and unctuous—until it is broken by his infuriated oath in response to Thomas's fart. The Friar goes on to greet Thomas personally. "God yelde yow!" (1772), he tells him as he sits down and inquires after his health. "God woot" (1784), the Friar says, he has been praying fervently for Thomas as well as their other friends, "God hem blesse!" (1787). When Thomas's wife enters the room, she greets the Friar "by Seint John" (1800). The Friar returns the greeting with intimate gestures, hugging and kissing her and proclaiming that "saugh I nat this day so fair a wyf / In al the chirche, God so save me!" (1808-9). The wife replies: "Ye, God amende defautes, sire, . . . / Algates, welcome be ye, by my fey!" (1810-1). After the Friar asks the wife's permission to hear Thomas's confession, she grants it willingly: "Chideth him weel, for seinte Trinitee!" (1824). Then, after the wife asks the Friar what he would like for dinner, he concludes his precious and self-congratulatory protestations by telling the wife that "[b]y God" (1850), he would reveal these things about himself to only a few. As she prepares to leave Friar John and Thomas to their own counsel, the wife informs the Friar that her child has died since he last visited. John does not miss a beat, and assures the couple that he saw the child's soul "born to blisse / In myn avision, so God me wisse!" (1857-8).

A bit later, Friar John, in the most cloying language, declares how dependent Thomas's well-being is on the prayers of the friars:

'Thomas, Thomas! So moote I ryde or go,  
And by that lord that clepid is Seint Yve,

Nere thou oure brother, sholdestou nat thryve.’ (1942-4)

Thomas demurs:

‘God woot,’ quod he, ‘no thing therof feele I!  
As help me Crist, as I in fewe yeres,  
Have spent upon diverse manere freres  
Ful many a pound; yet fare I never the bet.’ (1948-51)

Next is the Friar’s asseveration in reference to the “irous man,” whom he wishes that “God sende hym litel myght!” (2014). He then launches into a story originating in Seneca, in which a knight, found guilty of murder, discovers, on his way to execution, the man, also a knight, he is supposed to have killed. The two knights, along with the official responsible for overseeing the execution, return to the judge, who is enraged to see them: “Ye shul be deed,” quod he, “so moot I thryve! / That is to seyn, bothe oon, and two, and thre!” (2034-5). Next comes an anecdote in which a lord rebukes Cyrus for his drunkenness: “For Goddes love, drynk moore attemprely!” the lord urges (2053).

At the conclusion of his sermon, Friar John asks Thomas for his confession, which Thomas refuses: “Nay,” quod the sike man, “by Seint Symoun! / I have be shriven this day at my curat” (2094-5). So the Friar asks him for some money for the construction of their cloister, which, “God woot” (2103), has scarcely a foundation. What is more, he claims, “by God” (2106), they owe forty pounds for stones. He applies more pressure by begging for help “for hym that harwed helle” (2106) and producing a sob story about how all the friars will have to sell their books if the debt is not somehow covered. If Thomas allows the friars to be ruined, Friar John claims, “so God me save” (2112), it will be comparable to the world losing the sun. The Friar drives it home with a final plea: “Now Thomas, help, for seinte charitee!” (2119).

After Thomas offers a gift on condition that it be shared equally among the brothers, Friar John swears enthusiastically that this will be so: “I swere it,” quod this frere, “by my feith!”

(2137). This oath by the Friar's faith, coming at the conclusion of a self-righteous and sanctimonious sermon and some religious manipulation, creates an excellent setup for his following oath, in which he responds to Thomas's fart:

‘A false cherl,’ quod he, ‘for Goddes bones!  
This hastow for despit doon for the nones.  
Thou shalt abyge this fart, if that I may!’ (2153-5)

In a rage, the Friar hurries off to the “lord of that village,” whom he greets with “God yow see!” (2169). One notices that he has recovered enough from his shock to resume his former sanctimonious language. When the Lord asks him what is wrong, Friar John utters another bland asseveration, “God yelde yow” (2177), as he begins explaining that he has been just recently insulted. He asseverates similarly a few lines later, when in reference to his insult, he wishes that “God amende it soone!” (2193). The Lord asks the Friar “for Goddes love” (2197) to be patient and explain what exactly has happened. When the “lady of the hous” hears the details of Friar John's story, she cries out “Ey, Goddes mooder . . . Blisful mayde!” (2202). She continues with similar language after Friar John asks her what she thinks about all this:

‘How that me thynketh?’ quod she. ‘So God me speede,  
I seye a cherl hath doon a cherles dede.  
What shold I seye? God lat hym nevere thee!’ (2205-7)

Friar John laps this up eagerly and replies that “by God” (2210) he will be avenged on Thomas. The Lord, who has meanwhile been puzzling over the story, begins to speak about this problem of “ars-metrike,” scolding Thomas's cunning (“Ey, nyce cherl, God lete him nevere thee! [2232]) and concluding that “by my fey” (2236) no man can determine if a fart has been divided equally. He then curses Thomas once more: “Lat hym go hongre hymself a devel weye!” (2242). When the squire tells those assembled he has a solution, the Lord responds enthusiastically: “‘Tel,’ quod the lord, ‘and thou shalt have anon / A gowne-clooth, by God and by Seint John!’” (2251-

2). The squire offers a final asseveration, “there God hym save!” in reference to Friar John, as he details his solution.

### Analysis

In my first chapter, I drew some comparisons between *The Summoner’s Tale* and *Dame Sirith*.<sup>35</sup> I pointed in particular to Friar John’s oaths, which remain fairly bland until he receives Thomas’s fart, at which point his language swerves abruptly and he swears, similar to Harry Bailey, for “Goddess bones” (2153). The Friar’s reflexive oath, I argued, betrays his true self, which is all the more disgusting (and funny) for its comparison to the Franciscan ideal. This ideal, the yearning for a more primitive, apostolic Christianity through imitation of Christ’s poverty, and its ridiculous, corrupt realization in the persons of Friar John and his brothers, constitutes a main theme of the tale. One sees the contrast not only in the behavior of the Friar but also in the final scene, where Thomas’s fart and its collection by the friars seems to be a parody of the Holy Spirit’s descent at Pentecost.

Many of the religious oaths contribute to this theme. Thomas’s oath by “Seint Symon” is an interesting example. Earlier commentators, and indeed, the latest edition of *The Riverside Chaucer*, tentatively assume that this is an ironic reference to Simon Magus.<sup>36</sup> This is because, in Ann Haskell’s words, “[r]eference to lives of saints named Simon yields nothing that enhance the satire” and so “a non-saint is required.”<sup>37</sup> But as Glending Olson points out,<sup>38</sup> saints’ associations are not exhausted by saints’ lives. In the case of Simon the Apostle, there was an

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<sup>35</sup> pp. 23-24.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Ann Haskell, “St. Simon in the *Summoner’s Tale*,” *Chaucer Review* 5 (1971): 218-24.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>38</sup> Glending Olson, “On the Significance of Saint Simon in the ‘Summoner’s Tale,’” *Chaucer Review* 33 (1998): 60-65.

entrenched tradition that saw him as articulating the part of the creed that expresses belief in the remission of sins and the communion of the saints.<sup>39</sup> The second part of this belief, the communion of saints (*sanctorum communio*), was sometimes interpreted as referring to the sacraments rather than saints (translating *sanctorum* as “of holy things, i.e., the sacraments” instead of “of the saints”), which does not seem so far-fetched when one remembers that it follows the statement about forgiveness of sins, remitted as they are through baptism and confession. Thus, with these things in mind, Thomas’s oath “by Seint Symoun” that he has been shriven already by his curate suddenly becomes quite appropriate to the context. Thomas is calling to witness his claim the very apostle associated with confession and forgiveness of sins. Moreover, Thomas’s oath is putting Simon, a true apostle, up against Friar John, who “has falsely claimed that he follows the way of the apostles.”<sup>40</sup> Though seemingly a minor detail, this oath, when considered more closely, is seen to further advance the tale’s main theme, that the friars have strayed far from their founding ideals.

What this oath on Saint Simon reveals is that Chaucer is careful about details, including oaths. Friar John’s oath by “that lord that clepid is Seint Yve” (1943), for instance, is used for more than just rhyme. Though Cline proposes Ivo of Chartres and the *Riverside* follows her, Linda Georgianna<sup>41</sup> makes a better case for Ivo Helory of Brittany, “one of the new twelfth-

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<sup>39</sup> According to Olson, “[t]exts that give Simon one or both of these clauses include some of the most popular sources of religious instruction in later medieval England, such as the *Speculum Christiani*, *Fasciculus Morum*, and *Pore Caitif*,” 62. Further, “by the fourth century [the Creed] had acquired its own narrative of origins, which explained the genesis of the text as a result of the inspiration the apostles received at Pentecost from the descent of the Holy Spirit. The composition of the Creed was understood to be collective but apportioned, each apostle being responsible for one of its twelve articles,” 61.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>41</sup> Linda Georgianna, “Lords, Churls, and Friars: The Return to Social Order in the *Summoner’s Tale*,” in *Rebels and Rivals: The Contestive Spirit in The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Susanna Greer Fein, David Raybin, and Peter C. Braeger (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, 1991), 149-72.

century urban saints, the patron saint of lawyers, known for both his professional legal skill and for his zeal in establishing numerous lay societies of confraternity.”<sup>42</sup> Ivo’s connection to lay confraternities makes him especially suitable to this case because the Friar is speaking to Thomas in his role as a lay brother to the convent. The Friar would naturally attest to St. Ivo of Brittany, a well-known supporter of lay confraternities, to bolster his argument that Thomas and his ilk would not thrive without their professional religious brethren. And, as Georgianna argues, it may well show a legal aspect to the conversation: confraternity here is less about a spiritual transaction and more about a business arrangement that requires “ful many a pound” of its lay brothers. Clearly, this oath does not exactly signal any blatant hypocrisy on Friar John’s part; he uses Saint Ivo consciously. At the same time, his use of the oath does put a finer point on his religious manipulation. There is irony, too, in the ideals of these lay societies established by Saint Ivo and their descent into mere business, in which the saint is used as a pawn. But whether Chaucer intended the oath ironically is unclear. What is certain is that he used Saint Ivo for more than just rhyme.

In contrast to the oaths on Saints Simon and Ivo, the two oaths on “Seint John” (by the wife [1.1800] and the lord [2252]), do not appear to be highly significant. The “John” referred to in these cases is almost certainly John the Apostle, one of Jesus’s “sons of thunder,” traditionally assumed as author of one of the gospels as well as three New Testament letters and the Apocalypse. John was often represented by an eagle but also at times by a book, and by a viper in a cup, based on a story in which he was challenged by a high priest of Diana to drink from a poisoned cup. But none of these accoutrements appears relevant to his use in the story. The Friar is, as one may recall, named John (2171), and maybe one could argue that this makes for an

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

ironic contrast between John the Apostle and himself. But it would not be a very convincing argument.<sup>43</sup> Although the lord's addressing the Friar by a particular name may seem too gratuitous to be significant, it is probably nothing more than Chaucer adding to the fabliau's texture.

Then there are the religious oaths/expletives used by Thomas's wife, "for seinte Trinitee" (1824), and Friar John, "for seinte charitee" (2119). *Seinte* is used in a sense here that differs from the above examples of Simon and Ivo, cleaving in this case more closely to the original meaning of "consecrated, established as inviolable, sacred" as derived ultimately from the Latin *sanctus* through the Old French *saint/seint* (fem. *sainte/seinte*<sup>44</sup>), which also includes the same meaning. So, Thomas's wife's oath might be translated into present-day English as "by the Holy Trinity." Chaucer's reason for using "seinte" instead of "holy" (or one of its variant spellings), may be for the purpose of meter or it may be that oaths by "seinte Trinitee" were colloquial, being simply picked up from Old French as they were.<sup>45</sup> Using a French oath may be a subtle indication of the wife's intimacy with Friar John, who peppers his speech with French phrases, presumably in a show of sophistication. Or it could be a sign of her exasperation with her husband. But there does not appear to be any deeper significance in her choice of swearing by the Trinity.

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<sup>43</sup> As the *Riverside* notes to *The Shipman's Tale* (line 43) point out, *John* "is practically a generic name for a cleric."

<sup>44</sup> In the *Riverside* notes to *The Knight's Tale* (line 1721), Robinson mentions that *seinte* (used in this tale in an oath by "seinte charitee") "might be explained as a case of inflected adjective with a proper name, or as a dative, or as a French feminine."

<sup>45</sup> See the *OED*, "saint," def. 3, which mentions that *saint* was often "prefixed to various common nouns . . . in collocations taken over from Latin and French."

Thomas's oath by "seinte charitee" is used a couple of other times in *The Canterbury Tales*—by Palamon in the *Knight's Tale*, Part 2, after he and Arcite have been interrupted in their duel by Duke Theseus:

. . . 'Sire, what nedeth wordes mo?  
We have the deeth disserved bothe two.  
Two woful wrecches been we, two catyves,  
That been encombred of oure owene lyves;  
And as thou art a rightful lord and juge,  
Ne yif us neither mercy ne refuge,  
But sle me first, for seinte charitee!  
But sle my felawe eek as wel as me;' (1715-22)

This phrase is used again by the fox in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, when he asks Chanticleer, "for seinte charitee" to sing like his father used to do (3320-21). It is doubtful that there is any significant link between these oaths and the one used by Friar John,<sup>46</sup> but these passages are at least helpful in showing other contexts in which this phrase might be used. These contexts show that such an oath is probably a strong one, used in moments of (sometimes feigned) distress. As I mention in Chapter 1,<sup>47</sup> Friar John proliferates and intensifies his oaths to accomplish his purpose, as the reader certainly sees him doing here.

Perhaps more than in the previous two fabliaux, *The Summoner's Tale* proves that Chaucer does not often use oaths carelessly. He uses a host of bland, pious religious oaths by the Friar in contrast to his blasphemous oath "for Goddes bones" to underscore the Friar's hypocrisy; Chaucer uses an oath on Saint Simon the Apostle for a nice realistic touch and again, to show up the false apostle, the Friar; the Friar's use of Saint Ivo of Brittany, though not as pointedly ironic, remains quite appropriate to the context and situates the tale snugly within the medieval village/town milieu of the typical fabliau. And it also further characterizes the Friar as shrewd

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<sup>46</sup> Though the Friar and the Fox are similar in interesting ways.

<sup>47</sup> p. 7.

and completely given up to materialistic concerns. The oaths on “seinte Trinitee” and “seinte charitee,” though fairly innocuous, do perhaps add some nuance to one’s understanding of the wife and also, though Chaucer may not have meant it, establish some interesting links between the situations of Palamon, Friar John, and the Fox, for each uses his oath on “seinte charitee” less than heroically: Palamon, as he seeks both his *and* Arcite’s death at the hands of Theseus, and the Fox, as he tries to make a meal out of Chanticleer by convincing him to sing. What is perhaps more interesting is the possible link between the Friar and the Fox. One will recall, for instance, the scene in *The Fox and the Wolf* where the fox seems to stand in for a friar when he hears the wolf’s confession. Chaucer may be suggesting a humorous parallel, then, between Friar John’s behavior and the Fox’s. Whatever the case, these links are an interesting way of drawing some disparate situations and characters together.

#### *The Merchant’s Tale*

In this tale’s 1,173 lines, there are 34 oaths/asseverations. The first is used by the Merchant-narrator as he quotes the anti-matrimonial Theophrastus:

‘And if thou be syk, so God me save  
Thy verray freendes, or a trewe knave,  
Wol kepe thee bet than [a wife] that waiteth ay  
After thy good and hath doon many a day. (1301-1304)

Immediately after he finishes quoting Theophrastus, the Merchant, with irony, curses him: “This sentence, and an hundred thynges worse, / Writeth this man, ther God his bones corse!” (1307-08). As he continues in his praise of marriage, the Merchant uses another religious expletive:

A wyf! a, Seinte Marie, benedicite!  
How myghte a man han any adversitee  
That hath a wyf? Certes, I kan nat seye. (1337-39)

The old knight, January, swears next as he begins his speech explaining his desire to marry: “. . . ‘Freendes, I am hoor and old, / And almoost, God woot, on my pittes brynke;’” (1400-01).

Then, Placebo uses a nearly identical expletive while explaining how he has never contradicted any man whom he has served:

‘I have now been a court-man al my lyf,  
And God it woot, though I unworthy be,  
I have stonden in ful greet degree  
Abouten lords of ful heigh estaat;  
Yet hadde I nevere with noon of hem debaat.’ (1492-96)

And so Placebo of course ratifies January’s plan, with an oath to boot: “By God, ther nys no man in al this toun / Ne in Ytaille, that koude bet han sayd!” (1510-11).

Justinus, as he advises against marriage, swears, “For God it woot, I have wept many a teere / Ful pryvely, syn I have had a wyf” (1544-45). Again, a few lines later, Justinus says that despite all of the trouble his wife causes him,

‘. . . God woot, my neighebores aboute,  
And namely of women many a route,  
Seyn that I have the mooste stedefast wyf,  
And eek the mekeste oon that bereth lyf;’ (1549-52)

Then, he advises January particularly against taking on a young wife:

By hym that made water, erthe, and air,  
The yongeste man that is in al this route  
Is bisy ynough to bryngen it aboute  
To han his wyf allone . . . ’ (1558-61)

January rejects this advice and then wonders foolishly if the bliss of married life will prevent him from obtaining heaven. Justinus mockingly replies (1659-88) that God may be so generous as to send him suffering in his married life, allowing his soul to “up to hevene skippe.” He asseverates twice in this speech. First, near the beginning:

‘. . . God forbede but he sente  
A wedded man hym grace to repente  
Wel ofte rather than a sengle man!’ (1665-67)

And second, as he closes his speech: “Fareth now wel. God have yow in his grace” (1688).

The next three asseverations are used by January as he looks on May during their wedding feast and with regret as obviously feigned as it is overly optimistic, thinks about how she will soon lose her virginity:

And [he] thoughte, ‘Allas! O tendre creature,  
Now wolde God ye myghte wel endure  
Al my corage, it is so sharp and keene!  
I am agast ye shul it nat susteene.  
But God forbede that I dide al my myght!  
Now wolde God that it were woxen nyght . . .’ (1757-62)

After describing Damian’s love at first sight for May, the Merchant-narrator asseverates twice in an apostrophe to the “famulier foo” and January:

God shilde us alle from youre aqueyntaunce!  
O Januarie, dronken in plesaunce  
In mariage, se how thy Damyan,  
Thyn owene squier and thy borne man,  
Entendeth for to do thee vileynye.  
God graunte thee thyn hoomly fo t’espye! (1787-92)

Next, January swears to his friends as he asks them to send everyone home so that he and May can go to bed: “For Goddes love, as soone as it may be, / Lat voyden al this hous in curteys wyse” (1814-15). Much later, January swears when he realizes that Damian is not there to serve him at the table: “. . . Seynte Marie! how may this be, / That Damyan entendeth nat to me?” (1899-1900). After the other squires explain that Damian is sick, January shows his concern: “‘That me forthynketh,’ quod this Januarie, / ‘He is a gentil squier, by my trouthe!’” (1906-07). The Narrator utters the next expletive in an apostrophe on the double blindness of January. Speaking of Argus, he says, “Yet was he blent, and, God woot, so been mo” (2113). Then, the narrator claims that Ovid spoke the truth, “God woot” (2125), when he said that forbidden love will find a way.

At the beginning of the tale's final garden scene, January uses religious oaths as he addresses May:

'Now wyf,' quod he, 'heere nys but thou and I,  
That art the creature that I best love.  
For by that Lord that sit in hevne above,  
Leverich hadde to dyen on a knyf  
Than thee offende, trewe deere wyf!  
For Goddes sake, think how I thee chees,  
Noght for no coveitise, doutelees,  
But oonly for the love I had to thee.' (2160-67)

After January has exhorted May to be true to him and excused his own jealousy, she replies histrionically that she would never sully herself by being untrue and scolds January for his distrust. She asseverates once during this speech:

'I prey to God that nevere dawe the day  
That I ne sterve, as foule as womman may,  
If evere I do unto my kyn that shame,  
Or elles I empeyre so my name,  
That I be fals;' (2195-99)

The reader will remember that the scene shifts next to "Fayerye," where Pluto determines to restore January's sight to make him aware of May's unfaithfulness. Prosperina replies,

'Ye shal? . . . Wol ye so?  
Now by my moodres sires soule I swere  
That I shal yeven hire suffisant answere'" (2264-66)

She berates Pluto a bit later for considering Solomon a source of wisdom: "Ey! for verray God that nys but oon, / What make ye so muche of Salomon?" (2291-92). She criticizes Solomon for his many shortcomings and concludes thus:

'As evere hool I moote brouke my tresses,  
I shal nat spare, for no curteisye,  
To speke [Solomon] harm that wolde us vileynye.' (2308-10)

May eventually steers January to the pear tree and feigns a desperate desire for its fruit:

'Help, for hir love that is of hevne queene!

I telle yow wel, a womman in my plit  
May han to fruyt so greet an appetit  
That she may dyen but she of it have.’ (2234-37)

When January reminds her that his blindness prevents him from picking the fruit, she offers a solution, asking “for Goddes sake” (2341) that he crouch down so she can step on his back and climb up the tree.

After January is given back his sight, sees Damian “swyve” May in the tree, and reacts with great distress, May answers that she was simply “struggling” with “a man upon a tree. / God woot, I dide it in ful good entente” (2374-75). January is not convinced: “Strugle?” quod he, “Ye, algate in it wente! / God yeve yow bothe on shames deth to dyen!” (2376-77). May tells him that he has not seen rightly, but he demurs:

‘I se,’ quod he, ‘as wel as evere I myghte,  
Thonked be God! With bothe myne eyen two,  
And by my trouthe, me thoughte he [swyved] thee so.’

May shames him for his ungratefulness, and he apologizes quickly, telling her to come down from the tree:

‘ . . . and if I have myssayd,  
God helpe me so, as I am yvele apayd.  
But, by my fader soule, I wende han seyn  
How that this Damyhan hadde by thee leyn,  
And that thy smok hadde leyn upon his brest.’ (2391-95)

In reply, May tells him that his sight, being but newly restored, is bound to play tricks on him at first, so he ought to be careful about what he thinks he sees:

‘Beth war, I prey yow, for by hevene kyng,  
Ful many a man weneth to seen a thyng,  
And it is al another than it semeth.’ (2407-09)

Finally, the Merchant closes the tale with a religious benediction: “God blesse us, and his mooder Seinte Marie!” (2418).

## Analysis

In its plot structure, *The Merchant's Tale* is a fabliau, and its analogues and sources are all more or less fabliaux, too; but in addition to the fabliau, Chaucer also mixes in elements from several other genres—such as homily, encomium, exemplum, and romance.<sup>48</sup> Probably because of this tale's difference from the typical (Chaucerian) fabliau, including the fact that it has much less dialogue, one notices a difference in the kind and frequency of oaths used. Although over twice as long as any of Chaucer's other fabliaux, the tale has around the same number of oaths/asseverations as the others do. Of the 34 or so oaths used in this tale, several are used more than once.<sup>49</sup> Most of the oaths are unremarkable, as well: "God woot," "by God," "by my trouthe," "for Goddes sake," "For Goddes love," "wolde God," "God forbede" and the like.

Though much more complex, *The Merchant's Tale* resembles *Dame Sirith* in the way that it contrasts a kind of idealism with naturalism. Similar to *Dame Sirith*, the contrast reveals the idealism as a sham but the naturalism, too, is "bled of value."<sup>50</sup> The end result is ugly: "The two attitudes in this unpitying adjustment thus reduce each other to something worse than a moral nullity."<sup>51</sup> The comedy of these two tales is dark and bitter, eliciting at best only sardonic laughter. The contrast in *The Merchant's Tale*, however, is not turned into a universal satire as it is in *Dame Sirith*. Rather, the contrast between the ideal of courtly love (and marriage) and the reality exemplified in the "love" triangle of January, May, and Damian is most damning in its

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<sup>48</sup> Helen Cooper, "The Merchant's Tale" in *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales* (Oxford: OUP, 1989), 202-16.

<sup>49</sup> "God woot"/"God it woot" is used seven times and "for Goddes sake" and "by my trouthe," twice.

<sup>50</sup> Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, 231.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

indictment of January, an old, lecherous fool. But May, with her Eve/Mary associations, which I discuss more fully below, allows women to share in the blame as well.

The contrast in *The Merchant's Tale* also does not seem to play itself out so closely as in *Dame Sirith*, where religious oaths conjure up the moral background against which the characters play their parts. Instead, the world of courtly love (or, more accurately, marriage) is summoned by, among other things, the drift of the style (e.g., frequent astronomical references to the time, the elaborate description of the wedding feast, January's initial speech in the garden), actions (e.g. Damian's "lovesickness"), and images (e.g., the wedding feast, the garden). But the background is not exclusively courtly; added to it is a Christian notion of erotic love and marriage, evidenced by January and May's marriage service and the use of biblical allusions and a passage from the *Song of Songs*. Perhaps, then, the best way of describing this background would be as "idealized marriage." At any rate, in striking contrast to this background and its conventions creates in the reader are the persons and behavior of January, May, and Damian.

Included in the tale's courtly conventions is the lover's song about his lady—January's song to May to enter the garden, which draws heavily from the *Song of Songs*. According to Helen Cooper, this language was often interpreted figurally, as expressing "the love of Christ for the Church or for the individual soul, or as describing the immaculate purity of the Virgin."<sup>52</sup> The contrast between the highest, most refined, and sacred poetry and the service to which it is put in the tale is, certainly, as Cooper says, "dizzying." Of particular interest here is the contrast between May and the figural interpretation that sees the song as a description of the Virgin Mary. For, as Cooper makes clear, the imagery of the couple in the garden, the fruit tree, and tempter are at least suggestive of Eden, and though the tale never becomes strictly allegorical, May is at

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<sup>52</sup> Cooper, "*Merchant's Tale*," 205.

least colored by associations with Eve; further, the passage from the *Song of Songs* associates her with the “second” Eve, the Virgin Mary. I stress these details because they may after all point to religious oaths being used for the sake of ironic contrast. To be more specific, I mean the four oaths on Mary, two of them uttered by the narrator, the other two by January and May. Oaths invoking Mary are used throughout *The Canterbury Tales*, including two in *The Summoner’s Tale* and one in *The Shipman’s Tale*, but for four to be used in this tale is notable, especially considering the tale’s marriage theme. There are a few ways of explaining this relatively high number of oaths. They may be intended as a realistic reflection of the “original” narrator’s speech. I am referring here to J. M. Manly’s hypothesis—based on the narrator’s thrice implying that he is different from “folk in seculer estaat” (1251, 1322, 1390)—that the Monk was the tale’s original narrator and that his story was meant to “quite” the Wife of Bath’s originally-assigned tale, *The Shipman’s Tale*.<sup>53</sup> If one supposes a monk as the narrator of this tale, the narrator’s oaths, and his language in general, do fit nicely. There is some humor, too, certainly, in a celibate monk celebrating marriage paralleled in a similarly oblivious celebration by January. On the other hand, the oaths on Mary could be intended to drive home the difference between May and Mary. In this way, the oaths would be contributing to the ironic contrast already at work in the tale. A third possibility is that Mary might be intended to have some kind of resonance beyond the tale into the frame itself. Perhaps she is reiterated as a reminder that May does not represent all women—much as Custance answers the negative portrayals of women that precede her.<sup>54</sup> Chaucer certainly dedicates a good deal of his attention over the *Tales* to the suffering of virtuous women and invokes Mary’s aid in his Retraction. Women play no unimportant role in *The Canterbury Tales*. If this be the case, there is obviously some irony

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<sup>53</sup> Cooper, “*Merchant’s Tale*,” 202-03.

<sup>54</sup> Cooper, “*The Man of Law’s Tale*,” 134.

in the fact that the narrator invokes Mary, perhaps unconsciously, in a story that is at least in part condemnatory of women, for Mary clearly does not bolster the case against women.

Of these options, it seems to me that the first, dealing with a hypothetical original narrator, involves a bit too much speculation to be asserted strongly. The second, in which oaths on Mary contribute to an already current ironic contrast, seems reasonable, especially when these oaths are uttered by January and May. The third option, in which Mary is something like an icon that undercuts the narrator's case against marriage and women, has some merit to it. There remains, of course, a fourth option: the oaths on Mary mean nothing at all. But Chaucer's careful use of oaths in the preceding fabliaux may make one hesitant to discount these oaths completely, especially considering their frequency and context.

#### *The Shipman's Tale*

*The Shipman's Tale* includes 36 oaths over 434 lines. The first two are used by the Merchant's wife in reply to "Daun John," the Monk, after his leering question about her paleness. She answers,

'Ye, God woot al . . .  
Nay, cosyn myn, it stant nat so with me;  
For, by that God that yaf me soule and lyf,  
In al the reawme of France is ther no wyf  
That lasse lust hath to that sory pley.' (113-17)

When she claims to be in such trouble that she is contemplating either running away or killing herself, the Monk replies,

' . . . God forbede  
That ye, for any sorwe or any drede,  
Fordo youreself'; (125-27)

He then makes an oath on his “portehors”<sup>55</sup> that if she will tell him her troubles that he will counsel or help her and not betray any secrets (129-33). She likewise swears “by God” and on the same “portehors” (135) that she will not betray any secret he might tell her. The wife begins to unfold her secret trouble by claiming that given enough time, she could “telle a legend of [her] lyf” about the suffering she has endured because of her husband, though in a polite gesture, she acknowledges the kinship between the Monk and her husband. The Monk denies this relation emphatically:

‘Nay,’ quod this monk, ‘by God and Seint Martyn,  
He is no moore cosyn unto me  
Than is this leef that hangeth on the tree!’  
I clepe hym so, by Seint Denys of Fraunce,  
To have the moore cause of aqueyntaunce  
Of yow, which I have loved specially  
Aboven alle wommen, sikerly.  
This swere I yow on my professioun.’ (148-55)

Before the wife begins badmouthing her husband, she hedges by admitting that a wife ought not to speak ill of her husband:

‘God shilde I sholde it tellen, for his grace!  
A wyf ne shal nat seyn of hir housbonde  
But al honor, as I kan understonde;’ (166-68)

And yet, at least a bit of their counsel, “out it moot”: “As helpe me God,” she says (170), her husband is inadequate in the bedroom, and in particular, niggardly. His alleged tightfistedness is a problem because she is in desperate financial need:

‘But by that ilke Lord that for us bledde,  
For his honour, myself for to arraye,  
A Sonday next I moste nedes paye  
An hundred frankes, or ellis I am lorn.’ (178-181)

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<sup>55</sup> breviary.

If the Monk will lend her 100 francs, “pardee,” she will pay him back by doing “what plesance and service” that she can. And if she will not, then “God take on me vengeance / As foul as evere hadde Genylon of France” (193-94). The Monk assures her that he will see her out of this trouble:

‘ . . . I yow swere, and plichte yow my trouthe,  
That whan youre housbonde is to Flaundes fare,  
I wol delyvere yow out of this care.’ (198-200)

The Monk and wife then separate. The wife heads to her husband’s “countour-hous” to fetch him for dinner. When she knocks on the door and he asks who is there, she scolds him:

‘ . . . Peter! it am I,  
Quod she; ‘What, sire, how longe wol ye faste?  
How longe tyme wol ye rekene and caste  
Youre sommes, and youre bookes, and youre thynges?  
The devel have part on alle swiche rekenynges!  
Ye have ynough, pardee, of Goddes sonde;  
Com down to-day, and lat youre bagges stonde.’ (214-20)

The husband tells her that she does not understand the demands of his profession:

‘For of us chapmen, also God me save,  
And by the lord that clepid is Seint Yve,  
Scarsly amonges twelve tweye shul thryve  
Continuelly, lastyng unto oure age.’ (226-29)

After dinner, the Monk speaks privately to the Merchant, wishing him first a safe journey (“God and Seint Austyn spede yow and gyde!” [259]; “God shilde yow fro care!” [264]) before asking him for a loan of 100 francs to buy “certein beestes” with which to stock his monastery, though “God helpe me so, I wolde it were youre!” (274). The Merchant offers the loan gladly: “Take what yow list; God shilde that ye spare” (286).

The next asseveration comes a bit later in the tale, after the Merchant has returned from Bruges, and because of an outstanding debt due in Paris, goes seeking money to borrow from

friends. He visits with the Monk and eventually asks about the money that he has loaned him.

The Monk replies,

. . . ‘Certes, I am fayn  
That ye in heele ar comen hom agayn.  
And if that I were riche, as I have blisse,  
Of twenty thousand sheeld sholde ye nat mysse,  
For ye so kyndely this oother day  
Lente me gold; and as I kan and may,  
I thanke yow, by God and by Seint Jame!  
But nathelees, I took unto oure dame,  
Youre wyf, at hom, the same gold ageyn  
Upon youre bench’; (349-58)

The Monk takes his leave, and the Merchant goes to Paris, redeeming his bond. The Merchant, having made quite a profit from his transactions, returns home happily and celebrates by taking his wife to bed. After some time in bed, she seeks some respite: “Namooore,” quod she, “by God, ye have ynough!” (380). After a while longer in bed, the Merchant begins to reprimand her:

‘By God,’ quod he, ‘I am a litel wrooth  
With yow, my wyf, although it be me looth.  
And woot ye why? By God, as that I gesse  
That ye han maad a manere straungenesse  
Bitwixen me and my cosyn daun John.’ (383-87)

He details how he asked for the money back from the Monk only to be told that it had been given to his wife. He then mentions that he thinks the Monk was angry about this, though “by God, oure hevене kyng, / I thoughte nat to axen hym no thyng” (393-94). He then chides the wife for her negligence in telling him. The wife, quick to the game, replies,

‘Marie, I deffie the false monk, daun John!  
I kepe nat of his tokenes never a deel;  
He took me certeyn gold, that woot I weel—  
What! Yvel thedam on his monkes snowte!  
For, God it woot, I wende, withouten doute,  
That he hadde yeve it me bycause of yow  
To doon therwith myn honour and my prow,  
For cosynage, and eek for beele cheere  
That he hath had ful ofte tymes heere.’ (402-10)

She tells her husband, further, that she has spent the money but not wasted it:

‘For by my trouthe, I have on myn array  
And nat on wast, bistowed every deel;  
And for I have bistowed it so weel  
For youre honour, for Goddes sake, I seye,  
As be nat wrooth, but lat us laughe and pleye.  
Ye shal my joly body have to wedde;  
By God, I wol nat paye yow but abedde!’ (418-24)

She then asks for forgiveness, which her husband grants:

‘ . . . I foryeve it thee;  
But, by thy lyf, ne be namoore so large.  
Keep bet thy good, this yeve I thee in charge.’ (430-32)

The Shipman-narrator concludes with a benediction: “Thus endeth my tale, and God us sende /  
Taillynge ynough unto oure lyves ende. Amen.” (433-34).

#### Analysis

Similar to *The Reeve’s Tale*, this tale is notable for the way in which its oaths add local color to the narrative. Thus, since the story takes place in Saint-Denis, north of Paris, the characters use oaths on French Saints Denis, Martin, and Ivo (of Chartres<sup>56</sup>) and, moreover, swear in French—“pardee” for example.<sup>57</sup>

Of all Chaucer’s fabliaux, *The Shipman’s Tale*, in its use of oaths may most closely resemble *Dame Sirith*. That is, oaths are used very frequently in the tale and often in the most inappropriate circumstances. As Janette Richardson puts it,

. . . the man who has vowed his life to the service of God and the woman who constantly calls upon God to witness her veracity celebrate the Sabbath with the climax of all of their unholy actions, and they perpetrate this deception with oaths sworn in the name of God. Indeed, although many of Chaucer’s characters are notorious swearers, the

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<sup>56</sup> Cline’s argument (“Four Chaucer Saints”) that the oath here is on Ivo of Chartres rather than Ivo of Brittany or Ivo, “the Persian bishop who preached in England in the seventh century,” seems convincing.

<sup>57</sup> See the *Riverside* note to line 131.

three protagonists in this tale are unusually fond of supporting every assertion from sincere truth to blatant lie with religious oaths.<sup>58</sup>

What is more, the wife and the Monk swear to keep unholy counsel on his breviary (which oath the Monk later breaks when he leaves it to the wife to explain to her husband what happened to his money), and the Monk swears also on his “profession” that he has desired the Merchant’s wife above all other women. The irony here is bewildering, for, of course, the monk has sworn a vow of celibacy. As Richardson argues, religious swearing is so constant throughout that the reader is often moved to note the difference between the world referred to by these oaths and the world in which they are being used. The evocation of the spiritual world may be meant as “a counterbalance to the philosophy of money,”<sup>59</sup> which, as critics have long noted, Chaucer seems to skewer in the tale. This contrast may suggest that mercantalism renders its adherents spiritually blind by rendering all things material. Religion in this tale is, like money, or dress, either something to be used or mere ritualism, such as the mass that has to be rushed through before dinner. This spiritual blindness, in particular, is pointed out with sardonic humor when the Monk has his tonsure freshly shaved before he and the wife commit adultery on, of all days, a Sunday.

Probably less significant, but interesting nevertheless, is the wife’s oath on Saint Peter as she waits for her husband to open the door. The momentary comparison of the husband with Saint Peter, heaven’s porter, is amusing; further, as I mention in Chapter 2,<sup>60</sup> Saint Peter’s brief appearance, along with the other saints mentioned, injects color into the tale, however odd and marginal it might be.

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<sup>58</sup> Janette Richardson, “The Façade of Bawdry: Image Patterns in Chaucer’s *Shipman’s Tale*,” *English Literary History* 32 (1965): 303-13; this 310.

<sup>59</sup> Richardson, “The Façade of Bawdry,” 311.

<sup>60</sup> pp. 68-70.

## Conclusion

Religious oaths and asseverations are put to various uses in *The Canterbury Tales*. In *The Miller's Tale*, oaths strike again the discordant notes played more obviously over the rest of the tale—in the difference between Absolon's religious role and his adulterous desires, in Alison's easy movement between outward shows of piety and acts of sexual indulgence, in the juxtaposition of Nicholas and Alison's "revel" and "melodye" and the ringing of church bells and singing of friars. The oaths on Saint Thomas—Thomas of Kent, "the hooly blisful martir" himself—function significantly within the frame. In *The Reeve's Tale*, Chaucer shows care in the way that he assigns oaths. The northerner, John, swears by a northern saint, Cuthbert. The Miller's wife, subject to a sheltered, religious upbringing swears effusively on the "holy cros of Bromeholm" while recalling Compline. These oaths give texture to the characters and prove that Chaucer has spent some time thinking of them as *characters* and not just plot devices. In both this tale and *The Miller's Tale*, one notices that the most blasphemous swearing comes at moments of pitched emotion and from the mouths of clerks. In *The Summoner's Tale*, Friar John's crude and blasphemous oath on "Goddes bones" belies his former sanctimoniousness supported, as it was, with bland religious oaths and asseverations. The significance of swearing on certain saints is further confirmed by Thomas's oath on Saint Simon and Friar John's on Saint Ivo of Brittany. Also, the Friar's oath on "seinte charitee" establishes an intriguing link between the Fox and himself. In *The Merchant's Tale*, oaths are used much less frequently and with much less variety; nevertheless, the four oaths on Mary seem to have a resonance both in the tale and, similar to Thomas of Kent, in the frame itself. Finally, in *The Shipman's Tale*, oaths are used very frequently and have a satirical effect similar to that of *Dame Sirith*; the religious standards evoked by the oaths put a particularly fine point on the shortcomings of mercantilism

and especially the glibness and hypocrisy of the monk and the wife. And over all of these fabliaux, one sees that, as in the Old French fabliaux, the oaths inscribe the “margins” of the tales with the figures, rites, and beliefs of the Christian tradition.

The first conclusion to draw from Chaucer’s use of religious oaths in the fabliaux has to do with his reading of the fabliaux compared to Boccaccio’s. Long ago, C. S. Lewis showed that Chaucer, when retelling Boccaccio’s *Il Filostrato*, “medievalized” the tale, stressing much more the conventions of “courtly” love, adding rhetorical flourishes, and including *sententiae* throughout.<sup>61</sup> Though Boccaccio is almost certainly not the source for Chaucer’s fabliaux, one sees, if not a similar process in Chaucer’s retelling of the fabliaux, at least a sure indication of his role as a medieval writer. What changes Chaucer makes to any of the fabliaux (and in individual cases these are obviously speculative, since his sources are uncertain) proceed organically. The parody of courtly love that one notices in a fabliau like *Le Chevalier a la Corbeille*, Chaucer amplifies in his fabliaux—in the person and behavior of Absolon, in Alison’s *effictio*, in Alan and Maline’s parody of an *aubade* in *The Reeve’s Tale*; or he complicates and darkens in such a scene as January’s love-song to May upon their entry into the private garden. Chaucer perfects as well the fabliau’s interest in and celebration of the concrete, which one notices, among many other places, in his description of Absolon’s appearance, in Absolon’s description of the “ring” he has for Alison, in Friar John’s shooing the cat away before he sits, in the Monk’s blush. Chaucer also rounds out his fabliau characters in a way rarely, if ever, witnessed in the Old French fabliaux. Such a character as poor John the Carpenter in *The Miller’s Tale* has no real analogue in the Old French. Of course, this has all been observed before and discussed in detail. But I have said enough to illustrate some of the differences between Chaucer’s and Boccaccio’s

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<sup>61</sup> C. S. Lewis, “What Chaucer Really Did to *Il Filostrato*,” *Essays and Studies* 17 (1932): 56-75.

treatments. For in the Boccaccian fabliau-like tales, though they are no less distinguished in subtlety of humor or complexity of plot, and though they sometimes incorporate some fabliau-like “texture,” there is much less concern to cultivate the genre’s latent virtues. Instead, Boccaccio levels any generic distinctions and submits his fabliau-derived tales to a more diffuse purpose.

These differences extend, logically enough, to religious oaths and asseverations both within tales and in the frame itself. In the Old French fabliaux, oaths are at least colorful and often significant. In the English tradition, as exemplified in *Dame Sirith* and Chaucer, their potential is again tapped. Oaths color the English fabliaux, carry even more significance, and ably highlight a contrast between sacred ideals and profane reality. In Boccaccio, one sees no such thing. Religious oaths are nearly always (and maybe *always*) insignificant, and as insipid and unvarying as they usually are, add little else to any given tale. Further, Chaucer’s oaths are intriguing in that their significance is not limited merely to the fabliaux but applicable to the frame as well. As Chapter 2 makes clear, oaths *are* sometimes highly significant in the Old French fabliaux, especially in highlighting a contrast between idealized notions of religious belief and the often scurrilous world of the fabliau. But that contrast, as intriguing as it may be, is somewhat blurred, just because medieval religious belief was anything but homogeneous. Medieval Christianity provided some room for differences in questions of morality, particularly when it came to sexuality. The ironic humor of the contrast in these fabliaux would announce itself, therefore, to listeners and readers aware of the more rigorous attitudes toward religious belief. These attitudes, however, though clearly associated with certain figures and groups would nevertheless have no certain identification.<sup>62</sup> The relative vagueness of this contrast

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<sup>62</sup> The 13<sup>th</sup> century doesn’t have an easy association to religious zealotry that Chaucer did with Lollardy.

renders it, perhaps, a bit less vivid and interesting than it otherwise might be. In Chaucer's *Tales*, on the other hand, the fabliaux are imported into a frame that provides them with clear, concrete, and *deliberate* counterpoints, or contrasts. The religious oaths and asseverations in *Dame Sirith* and the Old French fabliaux, providing somewhat darkened passageways between religious piety and moral carelessness, are open windows in the *Tales* between the fabliaux and the other tales and the fabliaux and the frame. Alison's oath "by Seint Thomas of Kent" is a good example. The fact that Alison is swearing infidelity on a saint may strike the reader as slightly, but not deeply, ironic. Thomas does not come to mind as *the* medieval exemplar of chastity or faithfulness. But because this oath is being used in a story told by a pilgrim on his way to Saint Thomas's shrine at Canterbury, and because of the very particular religious associations that come with a pilgrimage, it becomes first of all, much more vivid, but also more obviously significant. The significance is multi-layered, like Chinese boxes: in other words, Chaucer uses Alison's oath to wryly point out not only her transgression but also the tale's, the tale teller's, and even the pilgrimage's. But why does Chaucer do this? Because, I think, he finds hypocrisy—a stark, unconscious difference between ideals and their (mis)application—funny in its irony; the multi-layeredness of the irony he uses perhaps as an artistic flourish and as another way of solidifying the links between the tales and the frame. This oath invoking Thomas is exceptional, however. As my analyses have shown, not all oaths are so meaningful. What, then, is important about them in the *Tales*? How do they differ from *Dame Sirith* and the Old French fabliaux? Here, I would expand on what I mention above, that the oaths are "windows" in the fabliaux to the rest of Chaucer's work. Contrary to the earlier, more free-floating fabliaux, Chaucer's fabliaux and their oaths are meant to be seen in contrast to the religious ideals of the pilgrimage and some of the pilgrims and their tales. A particularly strong oath ought not to call

to mind some rather vague and amorphous puritanism (as in the other fabliaux) but rather a particular religious undertaking, pilgrimage, comprising some representatives of religious prudishness and puritanism, like the Prioress and the Parson. The contrast, one sees, becomes much more palpable and concrete, much more interesting. The other fabliaux cannot do this. Boccaccio probably does not want to, though he was certainly capable of doing so.

A second, and final, conclusion concerns the importance of style in the fabliaux's use of oaths. As I argue in Chapter 2, even those oaths that are not highly significant may still contribute to the texture of the fabliaux. The difference that oaths make in the Old French and Middle English fabliaux can be seen once again in a comparison with the fabliau-derived tales in Boccaccio. In *The Decameron*, the reader not only does not experience much of the dissonance created by religious oaths in profane circumstances but also does not enjoy the colorful, marginal quality that these oaths confer on the fabliaux. Though Charles Muscatine's work on the Old French and Chaucerian fabliaux is undeniably brilliant, he nevertheless misses something by soft-pedaling both the Christian ethos that partially informs the culture in which the fabliaux were written and consequently, the religious oaths used by that culture and included in the fabliaux. For though dirty jokes have been told from time immemorial, these jokes are informed, consciously or subconsciously, by the cultures in which they are created or adapted. And medieval Christianity, as far as it may be from a particular *fableor's* conscious mind, still influences the fabliaux. This can be seen in deliberate contrasts of sacred ideals and profane realities, as in *Dame Sirith*, for example, or in the Christian tradition's marginal presence, as in oaths by various saints, relics, or rites. Muscatine is certainly right in offering the Old French fabliaux as a way of understanding 13<sup>th</sup>-century northern French culture,<sup>63</sup> but I would add that it

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<sup>63</sup> Charles Muscatine, *The Old French Fabliaux* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986), 152-69.

is also intriguing to think about how a Christian medieval culture can shape a very old form of discourse in its own particular way and, as well, illuminate that very discourse. In this view, one might make fruitful comparisons of the religious elements in tales of “bauderie” as they have appeared over time and in different cultures.

To bolster the conclusion that the fabliaux are often in deliberate contrast with medieval Christianity, or, more precisely, a kind of Christian puritanism, I would adduce the example of Chaucer and the *Dame Sirith* poet, who very obviously put this contrast to work in their own fabliaux. That is, both poets perceive the ironic presence of religious elements in the Old French fabliaux and employ them in their own work. Chaucer, of course, is an exceptional reader, but not so unusual, I think, that his ironic reading of the fabliaux is disqualified, especially when considered along with *Dame Sirith*. Now one could argue that Chaucer and the *Dame Sirith* poet, by including this irony, draw out a quality latent in the Old French fabliaux. The Old French *fableors*, in other words, did not sense the tension between ideal and pragmatic, sacred and profane. This may lead, then, to an interesting discussion of some differences between medieval French and English culture. But, to me, it seems much more likely that the *fableors*, the *Dame Sirith* poet, and Chaucer were all amused by and interested in the same irony.

However one may take the religious oaths used in *Dame Sirith*, the Old French fabliaux, Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, it is my hope that this study has discouraged anyone from taking oaths too lightly and stimulated some thought in new directions.

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