

# Answers to Prayer in Chaucer

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A thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Cardiff University

2016

## Abstract

This thesis analyses answers to prayer in Chaucer's works. It contextualises this analysis through attention to late-medieval devotion, arguing that Chaucer uses petitionary prayer both to explore important themes, such as the injustice of suffering innocence, and to challenge elements of contemporary religious practice. Chapter One explores petitionary prayer in theory, teaching, and lay practice, proving that late-medieval understandings of prayer's effectiveness are varied, contradictory, and at times problematic. Two of Chaucer's dream visions, *The Book of the Duchess* and *The House of Fame*, feature in the second chapter, which demonstrates that answers to prayer in these texts fulfil a dual function, operating both as literary device and as the means through which Chaucer examines themes of profound importance which recur throughout his works. Chapter Three addresses conflicting prayers in two romances, arguing that Chaucer uses answered prayer in *The Knight's Tale* to obliquely critique the weaponisation of prayer in contemporary Christian society, inviting a focus on human responsibility for conflict, and that this emphasis on agency is continued through relegating the role of prayer in *The Franklin's Tale*. Chapter Four analyses the divergent discourses surrounding prayer in the hagiographic tales, concluding that the extent to which the narratorial voice faithfully represents the answers to the hagiographic subject's prayers depends on the didactic purpose expressed. The final chapter examines the unanswered and unanswerable prayers of *Troilus and Criseyde*, arguing that Chaucer offers the poem's Trinitarian conclusion and a poetic recreation of the Boethian conception of time in response to the problems posed by these prayers. This thesis demonstrates that, rather than operating as a mere device for advancing plots, petitionary prayer provides Chaucer with a powerful tool with which to pursue several philosophical and theological issues at the heart of his writing.

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## Acknowledgements

First I would like to thank Professor Carl Phelpstead for his patience, humour, and unerringly excellent advice. I am also grateful to Dr Irene Morra and to Dr Ceri Sullivan for their comments on draft chapters, to Professor Helen Phillips, in whose seminars the idea for this thesis was born, for her continued interest in and encouragement of this project, and to Dr Rob Gossedge, for encouraging my initial application.

I am grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding this research and to the School of English, Communication and Philosophy for funding my attendance at the several conferences where much of this research has been presented. Thanks are also due to the always helpful administrative staff of ENCAP, especially Rhian Rattray and Julie Alford.

The wider medievalist community has played an important role for me during my studies, and they are too many to thank individually; but I would like specifically to mention Dr Megan Murton in thanks for her kindness in our correspondence and for drawing my attention to an item of research I might otherwise have overlooked, and also Dr Jenni Nuttall, in gratitude for inviting me to share a small taste of my research on her blog.

I am glad to have shared some time with a wonderful medieval and early modern community at Cardiff University, thanking especially Alison Harthill, Martha Baldon, Vicky Shirley, Dr Mark Truesdale, Sophie Battell, and Judith Dray. I would also like to acknowledge Greg Leighton, with many thanks for his advice on my Latin translations.

Heartfelt thanks are owed to the Rt Revd Dr Barry Morgan for practical assistance at crucial points during the last few years. Much gratitude is also due to Joseph Smith, without whose generosity the entire adventure would never have begun, and to Pat and Joe Smith, for their support throughout the project. Angela Amias and Julianne Chatfield have been refreshing sources of distraction and encouragement, for which I am very thankful.

To Naomi, Aidan, and Emily I offer thanks for keeping me firmly anchored in the twenty-first century with good humour and a remarkable tolerance for Chaucerian minutiae. Finally, gratitude immeasurable is reserved for Jesse, for his unwavering support.

### Table of abbreviations:

<i>ChR</i>	<i>The Chaucer Review</i>
EETS	Early English Text Society
<i>EWS</i>	<i>English Wycliffite Sermons</i> , ed. by Anne Hudson and Pamela Gradon, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983–96)
<i>MED</i>	<i>Middle English Dictionary</i> < <a href="http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med">http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med</a> >
<i>MLA</i>	<i>Modern Language Association</i>
<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i> < <a href="http://www.oed.com">www.oed.com</a> >
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologia Latina</i>
<i>PMLA</i>	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association</i>
<i>SAC</i>	<i>Studies in the Age of Chaucer</i>

### Texts used:

All references to Chaucer's works, unless stated otherwise, are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). The abbreviated titles used in the Riverside edition are used here, along with line numbers.

Biblical quotations are taken from the Vulgate: *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, ed. by Robert Weber OSB et al., 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, 2 vols (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1985).

### Translations:

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

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## Prayer: Asking and Receiving in Late-Medieval England

That Chaucer's career as an author both begins and ends, to all appearances, in prayer is a coincidence of such irresistible neatness that it is often remarked upon by those whose writing focusses on specific prayers in his works. The Marian lyric, *An ABC*, which many consider to be one of his earliest works, is in its entirety a prayer, while the 'Retraction' draws *The Canterbury Tales*, and thus the last of Chaucer's known works, to a close in prayer.<sup>1</sup> Georgia Ronan Crampton draws attention to the unique status of *An ABC* as Chaucer's only text which is in its entirety a prayer rather than a prayer embedded within another text:

Prayers figure, of course, throughout his work, entering plots, as in the story of the little *clergeoun*; revealing themes, as when the petitions of Palamon, Arcite, and Emelye in the Knight's Tale expose in triptych the inadequacy of human choice; and heightening characterisation, because praying is something that Chaucer's people do in richly varied ways.<sup>2</sup>

Crampton's parenthetical 'of course' encapsulates a normative critical approach to the prayers which appear in Chaucer's texts. Whether as a touch of verisimilitude, a rhetorical necessity, a selection of text incorporated wholesale from one of Chaucer's sources, an aspect of characterisation, or a plot device, these prayers inhabit a critical discourse in which their

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<sup>1</sup> Works discussing this relationship between *An ABC* and the 'Retraction' include Georgia Ronan Crampton, 'Chaucer's Singular Prayer', *Medium Ævum*, 59 (1990), 191–213 (p. 191) and Beverly Boyd, 'Chaucer's Moments in the Kneeling World', in *Vox Mystica: Essays on Medieval Mysticism*, ed. by Anne Clark Bartlett, Thomas Bestul, et al. (Cambridge: Brewer, 1995), pp. 99–105 (p. 99). The dating of the *ABC* draws upon Speght's title in his 1602 edition, in which the poem is claimed to have been written for the use of Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster. If written for Blanche, the poem would therefore have been composed before her death in 1368; this basis for dating the poem is tenuous, as many critics have noted. For a brief overview of the poem's dating, see Laila Z. Gross's 'Explanatory Notes' in *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 1076; also see Kathryn L. Lynch on the flimsy nature of the evidence: Kathryn L. Lynch, 'Dating Chaucer', *ChR*, 42 (2007), 1–22 (pp. 8–10). Helen Cooper suggests that the poem's sophistication might support a later date. See Helen Cooper, 'The Four Last Things in Dante and Chaucer: Ugolino in the House of Rumour', in *New Medieval Literatures 3*, ed. by David Lawton, Wendy Scase and Rita Copeland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 39–66 (p. 59n).

<sup>2</sup> Crampton, 'Chaucer's Singular Prayer', p. 191.

existence, or the manner in which they function, is rarely examined. Prayer does not merely draw the beginning and the end of Chaucer's career together in an irresistible fashion, but instead runs like a thread throughout his writing.

Prayer's ubiquity in Chaucer's works, as in many Middle English texts, manifests itself on the surface as an element of realism so expected and apparently repetitive that it almost encourages a lack of critical attention. Chaucer's corpus contains nearly four hundred prayers.<sup>3</sup> Prayers are offered at the beginnings of many texts, in conventional invocations to Mary and to Jesus as well as to several pagan gods and goddesses in a self-consciously literary style. Characters pray, narrators pray, and characters who are also narrators pray, as when Chaucer's Miller ends his tale by asking God to bless his fellow pilgrims: 'This tale is doon, and God save al the rowte' (*MilT*, l. 3854). The Miller's prayer is a reflexive utterance, almost an afterthought, a typical usage which encourages critical inattention to the function of prayer in Chaucer's texts.<sup>4</sup> The pervasive nature of such reflexive prayers, as well as those formulaic invocations which often open and close texts, encourages the reader to view them as part of the late-medieval backdrop, an expected flavour to every Middle English text, a commonplace of culture, or an aspect of realism, rather than the product of authorial deliberation. Such ubiquity conceals much of interest, however. As Roger Dalrymple shows in his study of devotional 'tags', or stylised addresses to God, in Middle English romance, examination of such textual religiosity reveals the judicious authorial care employed in choosing the pious formulae which would resonate both with the themes of the text and with the reader.<sup>5</sup> Prayers, like Dalrymple's devotional tags, offer an incisive tool with which to

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<sup>3</sup> These prayers include all addresses invoking a divine being whether in praise, invocation, lament or petition, and range from single lines such as the Miller's blessing of the company of pilgrims to the long set-piece Marian and Trinitarian prayers with which readers are more familiar.

<sup>4</sup> Helen Phillips notes the 'minimal care' with which Chaucer tailors such brief prayers to the pilgrim narrators. See Helen Phillips, 'Auchinleck and Chaucer', in *The Auchinleck Manuscript: New Perspectives*, ed. by Susanna Fein (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2016), pp. 139–55 (p. 146).

<sup>5</sup> Dalrymple specifically addresses the assumption that pious formulae function as metrical fillers or near-meaningless rhyming pairs: 'Recourse is made to God's names and traits less to fill out a line than to fill the



interrogate late-medieval texts, including those of Chaucer. That this is the case becomes further evident when considering his several more substantial prayers.

William A. Quinn describes *An ABC* as pointing outside the text, its address to Mary creating an ‘extraliterary tension’.<sup>6</sup> This tension results, in his view, from the reader’s expectation of a response:

Only for the reader inclined to clasp hands and pray does Chaucer’s *Priere* evoke a real response – from ‘Nostre Dame’. Its catalogue of traditional epithets to Mary is composed of real vocatives. And her anticipated reply both generates the extraliterary tension of Chaucer’s contrite petition and maintains his (and our) decorum in her presence.<sup>7</sup>

Discussing the religious lyric in terms of its potential use by the reader, Quinn emphasises the effective nature of the language, attempting to make concrete these abstract petitions through his repetition of the term, ‘real’: the vocative address is real, and actually addresses Mary, whose response, too, will be real.<sup>8</sup> The prayer, he argues, is not merely a literary exercise, but is intended for use and, by eliminating any distance between poet and poem, the text becomes the poet’s own prayer, ‘Chaucer’s contrite petition’. An impression is given of the reality of the ‘extraliterary tension’ caused by awaiting Mary’s reply. Yet this reply must also be extraliterary; the mercy requested a subjective and otherwise unknowable outcome of this prayer.

Quinn’s analysis hints at another way in which prayer might reach beyond the confines of the text. When the Parson, for example, asks for divine guidance before

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mind – with vivid images of creation, passion and redemption.’ See Roger Dalrymple, *Language and Piety in Middle English Romance* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2000), p. 138. Dalrymple refers to the way in which pious formulae operate in late-medieval texts as a ‘shared devotional consciousness’, ‘a single frame of reference’, and as a ‘hinterland’ shared by author and audience (pp. 29–35).

<sup>6</sup> William A. Quinn, ‘Chaucer’s Problematic *Priere*: *An ABC* as Artifact and Critical Issue’, *SAC*, 23 (2001), 109–41 (p. 131).

<sup>7</sup> Quinn, ‘Chaucer’s Problematic *Priere*’, p. 131.

<sup>8</sup> Quinn is not alone in considering the potential for ‘real’ prayer in *An ABC*. Considering evidence of *An ABC* as a ‘real’ prayer, Crampton also discusses Lydgate, who is noted for borrowing *An ABC* whole and accepted the poem as evidence of Chaucer’s genuine devotion. See Crampton, ‘Chaucer’s Singular Prayer’, p. 207. Helen Phillips discusses the devotional use of prayers from Chaucer’s source text, Deguileville’s *Pèlerinage de la vie humaine* in her ‘Chaucer and Deguileville: the *ABC* in context’, *Medium Ævum*, 62 (1993), 1–19 (p. 11).

beginning his tale, he hopes for a spiritual outcome on behalf of his temporary flock of pilgrim listeners:

And Jhesu, for his grace, wit me sende  
To shewe yow the wey, in this viage,  
Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrimage  
That highte Jerusalem celestial.

(*ParsT*, ll. 48–51)

Reminding the pilgrims of the celestial pilgrimage they traverse, a path whose eternal dimensions simultaneously transcend, while also mapping onto, the particularities of the earthly pilgrimage to Canterbury, the Parson asks for divine grace in his role as shepherd of the faithful. But unlike the other tellers of tales, whose audience might immediately judge the efficacy of the preceding invocation, the answer to whether the Parson is granted ‘wit’, or not, and whether he successfully shows the pilgrims the way to the celestial Jerusalem, lies beyond the scope of *The Canterbury Tales*. The status of his prayer remains unseen and unknowable. Chaucer’s audience can never know whether the fictional pilgrim pastor has been granted success. The reader, observing from outside the text, can only surmise whether God might have granted these pilgrims a place in the celestial Jerusalem.

While *An ABC* has attracted some critical analysis as a single text, and treatments of the ‘Retraction’ discuss its role as a prayer, as a distinct topic prayer throughout Chaucer’s corpus has been less well-served. Several unpublished theses in the past twenty years have addressed prayers in Chaucer’s works, however. Kevin S. Fleming examines prayers in the dream visions and *The Canterbury Tales*, arguing that Chaucer’s treatment of prayer remains consistent throughout his texts in promoting a Boethian approach.<sup>9</sup> Victoria D. Schooler analyses prayers in Chaucer’s poetry as speech acts, arguing that for Chaucer the words of a

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<sup>9</sup> Kevin S. Fleming, ‘Chaucer’s Prayers in the Dream Visions and the *Canterbury Tales*’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Houston, 1999).

prayer are less important than the conditions in which the prayer is uttered.<sup>10</sup> More recently, Megan Murton proposed a ‘poetics of prayer’ in Chaucer’s texts, arguing in her thesis that Chaucer uses prayer to reflect on poetry and the role of the poet.<sup>11</sup>

Each of these theses considers what might be termed the effectiveness of prayer, defining this effectiveness in various ways. This thesis, the first to focus specifically upon answers to prayer in Chaucer’s works, also examines his presentation of prayer’s effectiveness, although in terms expressed by the prayers themselves. A petitionary prayer, unlike one presented as praise or thanksgiving, expresses its desired answer in the request made to the divine. Petitionary prayer can also function as a literary device, performing a function described by Margaret Bridges as ‘narrative-engendering’.<sup>12</sup> In Bridges’s model, petitionary prayer works in late-medieval literature to allow the expression of a desire whose fulfilment leads to narrative movement. A simplistic model of the literary function of petitionary prayer can encourage straightforward explanations for prayers which do not lead to wish-fulfilment. The reader or critic might suspect that an unsuccessful prayer or one whose answer goes awry must be defective in some manner: the supplicant might be unworthy; the prayer might be expressed in the wrong way, ask the wrong things, or use the wrong words; or the gods themselves might be unreliable, as the capricious pagan gods are thought to be. Chaucer interrogates each aspect of this arrangement, challenging assumptions regarding a prayer’s effectiveness as being bound to the worthiness of the supplicant or the ability of the supplicant to express desires through prayer, as well as overturning the

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<sup>10</sup> Victoria D. Schooler, ‘Prayer in Chaucer’s Poetry’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Florida, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Megan Elizabeth Murton, ‘Chaucer’s Poetics of Prayer’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Cambridge, 2014). In addition to the three theses discussed above, Craig Robert Kinzer devotes a section of his thesis on prayer in Middle English literature to several late-medieval English poets, including Chaucer. See Craig Robert Kinzer, ‘Prayer in Middle English Literature: Theology, Form, Genre’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Riverside, 2007), pp. 281–329.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Bridges, ‘Narrative-engendering and Narrative-inhibiting Functions of Prayer in Late Middle English’, in *Religion in the Poetry and Drama of the Late Middle Ages in England*, ed. by Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (Cambridge: Brewer, 1990), pp. 67–82 (p. 68).

expectation that a divine answer will satisfy those desires. This thesis argues that rather than limiting its use as a mere device for advancing plots, Chaucer uses petitionary prayer both to challenge aspects of contemporary religious practice and to pursue theological and philosophical arguments of profound importance to his work.

Unlike the Parson's hopeful invocation, many prayers in Chaucer's texts are demonstrably answered within the confines of the text, and many of these answers change the course of the narrative and its meaning in surprising, and often disturbing ways. In his substantial and significant use of petitionary prayer and its invitation of a divine answer in his texts, Chaucer draws not only upon literary usage in texts with which he was familiar, but also upon the daily practice of prayer known to the laity of the fourteenth century. As this thesis will demonstrate, Chaucer engages with many forms of prayer outside of the Church's liturgy, including the particular expressions of piety found in books of hours, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Fourteenth-century Christianity presents a multitude of voices and understandings of prayer, many of which are evident in Chaucer's works. Depending upon a single, liturgical model of prayer cannot produce the fuller picture of Chaucer's devotional context at which this chapter aims.<sup>13</sup> To that end, we shall attempt to develop a less-monolithic view by examining prayer in theory, in heterodox and official church teaching, and in lay practice.

In order to examine Chaucer's literary use of petitionary prayer and its intra-textual response, it is first necessary to develop an accurate picture of late-medieval petitionary prayer. The complexities and contradictory beliefs and practice for which ample evidence exists will be the focus of the remainder of this chapter. In order to display the range of thought on the topic, the next section will present a theoretical view of petitionary prayer,

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<sup>13</sup> For a study of the influence of the liturgy in Chaucer's works, see Beverly Boyd, *Chaucer and the Liturgy* (Philadelphia: Dorrance, 1967).

drawing upon medieval theology, before considering how the theology of petitionary prayer was taught, especially in sermons. The final two sections will extend the analysis by exploring the practice of petitionary prayer amongst lay owners of books of hours, concluding by showing what the late-medieval lay person might have expected as an answer to prayer.

### *Prayer in theory*

Any examination of the matter of prayer risks raising more questions than it answers. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines prayer as, variously, a request or supplication for oneself or on behalf of another, addressed to a divine being or another person; a thanksgiving addressed to a divine being or other ‘object of worship’; also the act, text, form, or object thereof.<sup>14</sup> Prayer, therefore, encompasses both action and communication, as well as their substance and desired object, in addition to the form in which these are expressed. A prayer can be enacted, spoken, or merely thought; it might consist of many words, one word, or no words at all. In his twelfth-century sermon on the *Pater noster*, Peter Abelard teaches that the most devout prayer need not be stated, but can be carefully examined or inspected by God in the heart of the one who prays.<sup>15</sup> The fourteenth-century English contemplatives Richard Rolle and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* advocate prayers of a single word.<sup>16</sup> Whether spoken or unspoken, three elements remain constant amongst the various meanings ascribed to prayer: the first is that prayer is produced by a subject; the second that

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<sup>14</sup> See the *OED* definition for ‘prayer’, n.1, senses 1–5. *OED Online* <[www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)> [accessed 05.09.16].

<sup>15</sup> Rachel Fulton Brown, ‘*Oratio*/Prayer’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. by Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 167–77 (p. 168). Peter Abelard, *Sermo XIV: Expositio dominicæ orationis in diebus rogationum, quæ litanie dicuntur*, *PL*, 178 (1885), 489–95, col. 489C. For a discussion of Abelard’s teaching on prayer, see Susan R. Kramer, “‘We Speak to God With Our Thoughts’: Abelard and the Implications of Private Communication With God”, *Church History*, 69 (2000), 18–40 (p. 27).

<sup>16</sup> Fulton Brown, ‘*Oratio*’, p. 168. Also see Daniel McCann on the use of single prayer words in *The Cloud of Unknowing*: McCann, ‘Words of Fire and Fruit: The Psychology of Prayer Words in the *Cloud of Unknowing*’, *Medium Aevum*, 84 (2015), 213–30.

this production is directed, addressed, exposed, or communicated, whether orally or silently; and the third element is that this communication has an intended recipient.

Attempts to explain the purpose of prayer exhibit a similar imprecision. Describing prayer as problematic, and diagnosing this ‘problem of prayer’ as its innate inexplicability, the twentieth-century philosopher D. Z. Phillips writes of the disjunction between both philosophical and theological concepts of prayer and the practice of religious believers. If asked to describe prayer conceptually, he writes, the ‘believer is lost’:

It is not enough for him to say that praying is talking to God, adoring Him, confessing to Him, thanking Him, and making requests to Him, since what the enquirer wants to know is what it means to do any of these things. While praying, the believer knows what he is doing [...] but when he is asked to give an account of prayer, he no longer knows his way about.<sup>17</sup>

In characterising his intuitive, inarticulate believer, Phillips reduces prayer to its essence, the same three constants noted above: the praying subject, the communication itself, and the recipient to whom the prayer is addressed. In other words, prayer means relationship. Talking to oneself cannot be considered prayer. Whether a prayer is oral or silent, one who prays believes the words to be heard, or received, by someone else.<sup>18</sup>

Nesting within each of the three essential components constituting the relationship named ‘prayer’ are layers of complexity and further points of divergence. The first element, the praying subject, may seem the simplest to comprehend. The act of prayer would seem,

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<sup>17</sup> D. Z. Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> This definition of prayer excludes meditation as a mental or physical activity which is not a communication addressed to God, but is instead a form of preparation for contemplative prayer. Thomas H. Bestul writes that in medieval thought, meditation, while essential to a life of contemplation, ‘is almost always seen as training or preparation for the higher activity of prayer or contemplation.’ See Thomas H. Bestul, ‘*Meditatio*/Meditation’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. by Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman, pp. 157–66 (p. 157). Likewise, the definition of prayer above does not address contemplation, which is an act of devotion including both the mental preparation of meditation and the act of prayer itself. Walter Hilton describes prayer and meditation as elements of contemplation in his *The Scale of Perfection*, ed. by Thomas H. Bestul (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), I, 7, ll. 127–34. <<http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/bestul-hilton-scale-of-perfection>> [accessed 05.09.16]. For a useful definition of contemplation as a ‘state’ or a ‘way of life’, see Vincent Gillespie, ‘Preface’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism*, ed. by Samuel Fanous and Vincent Gillespie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. ix–xiv (p. x).

most straightforwardly, to be initiated by the one who prays. The inner state, or worthiness of the one who prays might correlate with the effectiveness of the prayer itself. A late-fourteenth-century bishop, Thomas Brinton, remarks on the necessity for virtue on the part of the one praying.<sup>19</sup> By extension, a lack of virtue might decrease the effectiveness of a prayer; this theme becomes prominent in Wycliffite teaching, especially in warning laity against depending on the prayers of sinful priests.<sup>20</sup> In Christian thought, the identity of the one who prays, or initiates prayer, is not altogether straightforward, however. St Paul identifies the Holy Spirit as the source of prayer:

Similiter autem et Spiritus adiuuat infirmitatem nostrum | nam quid oremus sicut oportet nescimus | sed ipse Spiritus postulat pro nobis gemitibus inenarrabilibus.

[Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmity. For we know not what we should pray for as we ought; but the Spirit himself asketh for us with unspeakable groanings.]<sup>21</sup>

According to Paul's teaching, the relative worthiness of the one who prays is barely relevant if the true initiator of prayer is the Holy Spirit. Indeed, an acknowledgement of the unworthiness of the subject often precedes late-medieval requests for intercession.<sup>22</sup> Whether one can deserve the object of a petition through practising virtue or whether instead the effectiveness of prayer depends only on God remains opaque, with fourteenth-century teaching on the matter demonstrating some disagreement.

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas Brinton, *The Sermons of Thomas Brinton, Bishop of Rochester (1373–1389)*, ed. by Mary Aquinas Devlin, OP, 2 vols, Camden Third Series, 85–86 (1954), II, p. 326.

<sup>20</sup> *English Wycliffite Sermons*, 5 vols, ed. by Anne Hudson and Pamela Gradon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983–96), IV, pp. 69–70.

<sup>21</sup> Romans 8:26, *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, ed. by Robert Weber OSB et al., 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, 2 vols (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1985), II. English translation taken from *The Holy Bible: Douay Version, translated from the Latin Vulgate (Douay: A.D. 1609; Rheims: A.D. 1582)*, ed. by Richard Challoner (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1956).

<sup>22</sup> In 1348, Bishop Edendon of Winchester, ordering penitential fasting, prayers, and processions in face of the Black Death, emphasises the unworthiness of the faithful, who are rather more worthy of suffering, in his view: 'Because God is benign and merciful, long-suffering, and above malice, it may be that this affliction, which we richly deserve, can be averted if we turn to him humbly and with our whole hearts, and we therefore earnestly urge you to devotion.' See William Edendon, 'Vox in Rama', trans. by Rosemary Horrox in *The Black Death* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 116–17.

Choosing how to direct a prayer requires some consideration. For adherents of polytheistic religious beliefs, choosing the appropriate god or goddess to petition greatly increases the likelihood of a request being granted. Praying to a goddess of childbirth is of little use to the drowning man. Less conventionally, an enterprising believer might take a tactical approach to prayer, as when Livy reports Scipio Africanus petitioning for a successful outcome to his military campaign by directing his prayer not to his own gods, but to the tutelary deities of the people he intends to conquer, the citizens of Carthage.<sup>23</sup> A positive outcome for this prayer, the granting of Scipio's petition, depends not only on choosing the gods and goddesses who are best placed to grant the request, but also rests on his expectation that those deities might favour him and switch allegiance. Prayers might also be directed to a god or goddess named by relevant attributes particularly valuable to the worshipper on the occasion. Despite Christianity's monotheism, in which all prayer is supposed to be directed ultimately to God, Christian prayers display a variety both in forms of address, and in persons addressed, especially those prayers asking for the intercession of the saints.

The third element essential to prayer, the content of the communication, is as infinitely variable as humanity itself. Rather than organising such diverse material by subject matter, theologians have often categorised this variety by intention. When D. Z. Phillips refers to believers praising, thanking, confessing to, and making requests of God, he is drawing upon a long tradition of categorising prayers by their function.<sup>24</sup> As a mode of communication, prayer can also vary by its form of transmission. Although any analysis of

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<sup>23</sup> Titus Livius, *Historiarum ab urbe condita*, ed. by A. Drakenborch, 4 vols (Oxford: W. Baxter, 1818), II, Book XXIX, 27, pp. 527–29. Scipio's prayer is not addressed in a haphazard manner to all gods and goddesses of any seas and lands, but, as Frances Hickson-Hahn explains, to those 'tutelary deities' responsible for protecting Carthage. See 'A Prayer of Scipio Africanus', trans. by Frances Hickson-Hahn in *Prayer From Alexander to Constantine: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Mark Kiley et al. (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 149–54 (p. 150).

<sup>24</sup> Mark Kiley uses similar categories: thanksgiving, adoration, intercession and petition. See Mark Kiley, 'General Introduction', in *Prayer From Alexander to Constantine*, pp. 1–5 (p. 1). Some cultures have included other types of prayer, such as vows, as a separate category. See, for example, the Greek *euchē*, which is used to mean both 'prayer' and 'vow' in the Septuagint, in Bonnie Thurston, 'Prayer in the New Testament' in *Prayer From Alexander to Constantine*, pp. 207–10 (p. 207).



literary or historical prayers concerns itself, of necessity, with written forms, prayer in Christian thought was originally and primarily understood through its dependence on utterance.<sup>25</sup> Medieval Latin prayer terminology recognises the essentially oral nature of prayer. *Oratio*, the term for prayer, has at its root the Latin *or-*, or ‘mouth’.<sup>26</sup> The key feature of such prayer is that it is spoken, an utterance directed to God. Drawing upon the sixth-century writer Cassiodorus, Rachel Fulton Brown describes *oratio* as an eminently rational activity, as ‘spoken reason’.<sup>27</sup> Reason alone, however, cannot reach the heights of prayer. Writing of the transcendence of the purest prayer, the twelfth-century Augustinian Canon, Hugh of St Victor, to whose treatise on prayer we now turn, presents reason as incompatible with a state of utter devotion. For Hugh, the mind engaged in pure prayer forgets the intended petition.<sup>28</sup> Thus, two types of prayer are placed in hierarchy, a lower, rational mode which might include petition, and a higher, suprarational mode in which petitions are abandoned.

Some of the greatest areas of disagreement on the practice of prayer hinge on one particular mode, petition. The relationship between worthiness and prayer, for example, is often couched in terms not of worthiness to address, but worthiness to receive the object of the request. Making a petition also involves an element of choice of addressee, even in monotheistic Christianity, a choice which at least sub-consciously ranks potential addressees by suitability, power, or approachability.<sup>29</sup> In Hugh of St Victor’s hierarchy, by often

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<sup>25</sup> Thurston lists these New Testament Greek words for prayer: ‘*entuexis* (“meeting with”, “an interview”, thus “intercession”), *eucharistia* (“giving of thanks”), *aitēma* (“what is asked for” or “petition”), *hiketēria* (“supplication”), *erōtaō* (“to ask” or “to beseech”) and *ainēsis* (“praise”).’ As Thurston writes, ‘the vocabulary suggests that in the New Testament prayer is understood first as a verbal activity.’ She also discusses the particular difficulty posed by the Greek for ‘petition’ - *deēsis* – because the term can apply to addressing humans or God. See Thurston, ‘Prayer in the New Testament’, pp. 207–8.

<sup>26</sup> See the etymologies for ‘oral’ and ‘oration’ in Walter W. Skeat, *An Etymology of the English Language*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1884).

<sup>27</sup> Fulton Brown, ‘*Oratio*’, p. 167.

<sup>28</sup> Hugh of St Victor, *De modo orandi*, PL, 176 (1880), 977–88, col. 980.

<sup>29</sup> Prayers to Mary, for example, frequently call upon her privileged relationship to Jesus as a reason why the supplicant should feel confident in the prayer being answered. See, for example, *Stella celi extirpavit*, De

involving the exercise of reason, petitionary prayer places itself lower than forms of prayer which are pure adoration. The problematic nature of petitionary prayer derives from its function, which to all appearances conflicts with the conception of divinity as an eternal quality. Prayers of adoration and thanksgiving address a present state of affairs, accepting that which already *is*. Worshippers offer praise to the gods for their eternal attributes or express gratitude for blessings which have already been received. Prayers of lament bewail a current state of affairs – again, that which *is*, demanding divine justification for seemingly inexplicable phenomena without explicitly asking for change. Prayers of petition, on the other hand, expect change. God is asked to intervene in nature and in time.

This expectation of divine intervention, essential to the act of petition, has posed problems to theologians for centuries. When the twentieth-century philosopher and theologian Herbert McCabe voices an unease with prayers of petition as religious acts which seem ‘less than respectable’, he engages with the same tradition in which Hugh of St Victor places petition as less than ‘*oratio pura*’.<sup>30</sup> His vivid analogy compares the view of God encouraged by petition as a cross between Santa Claus and a shopkeeper: ‘We have people openly acknowledging that they want something and apparently expect God to get it for them.’<sup>31</sup> As this section has demonstrated, attempts to explain petitionary prayer exhibit a diversity and complexity of meanings, even when focussing on the most basic elements of prayer: the praying subject, the recipient, and the content of the prayer. As we shall see in the next section, these meanings are further multiplied when prayer is the subject of clerical teaching.

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Mohun Hours, Boston Public Library MS 124, fol. 33<sup>r</sup>, trans. by Charity Scott-Stokes in *Women's Books of Hours in Medieval England: Selected Texts Translated from Latin, Anglo-Norman French and Middle English with Introduction and Interpretive Essay* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2006), pp. 105–6. This prayer is discussed on pp. 36–7 in this chapter.

<sup>30</sup> Herbert McCabe OP, *God Matters* (London: Mowbray, 1987), p. 217.

<sup>31</sup> McCabe, *God Matters*, p. 217.

*Teaching about prayer: treatises, homilies and commentaries*

In his influential treatise on prayer, *De modo orandi*, Hugh of St Victor differentiates prayer by kind, style, matter, and affect.<sup>32</sup> This categorisation produces a hierarchy of prayer, in which the highest form, *pura oratio*, is characterised by an absence of verbal, formal petition, being instead communicated directly to God through love, using nouns rather than verbs. The biblical example with which he illustrates this form of prayer is spoken at the wedding of Cana by Mary, who makes a simple statement of fact to her son: ‘Vinum non habent.’<sup>33</sup> As Hugh explains, Mary does not ask for the miraculous creation of wine neither does she describe what she would like Jesus to do. Yet her unstated desire is fulfilled. In naming the situation simply and drawing it to her son’s attention, Mary’s words illustrate *insinuatio*, the highest kind, or *species*, of prayer. Making no petition, she sets the situation before Jesus, who produces a miracle in response. Speaking from love, rather than fear, in Hugh’s teaching, propels her statement to the heights of *pura oratio*.<sup>34</sup>

Early Christian theology taught quite clearly that prayer must not be embarked upon with the intention of changing God’s mind. Theologians from at least the third century, with Origen, to Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, agreed that Christians pray in order to understand God’s will and to be prepared to receive that which God wills to give.<sup>35</sup> The role of the praying subject is to be purified and to align the human with the divine will. By this standard, a petition should ask only for a subjective change in the heart, mind, or will of the one who prays, rather than requesting any change in objective circumstances. St Anselm’s eighth *meditatio* demonstrates this teaching by modelling a penitential prayer which, after acknowledging that God both inspires and hears the petition, requests that the penitent be

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<sup>32</sup> Fulton Brown, ‘*Oratio*’, pp. 170–71. This brief summary of Hugh of St Victor’s categorisation of prayer is indebted to Fulton Brown’s explanation of his treatise, *De modo orandi*.

<sup>33</sup> [They have no wine.] Hugh of St Victor, *De modo orandi*, col. 981.

<sup>34</sup> Hugh of St Victor, *De modo orandi*, col. 981.

<sup>35</sup> Fulton Brown, ‘*Oratio*’, p. 169.

enlightened, made to rejoice, humbled, and strengthened.<sup>36</sup> Such alignment of the will with that of God is therefore the proper aim of prayer.<sup>37</sup>

For contemplative thinkers such as Walter Hilton, writing in fourteenth-century England, the goal of prayer is to effect a change within the human soul, rather than in outward circumstance. As he states in *The Scale of Perfection*:

Not for thou schuldest bi thi praier kenne oure Lord what thou desirest, for He knoweth wel ynowgh al that thee nedeth; but for to make thee able and redi bi thi praier that thou myght receyve as a clene vessel the grace that oure Lord wole freli gyve to thee, whiche grace mai not be felid til thou be purified bi fier of desire in devoute praier. For though it be so that praier is not the cause for whiche our Lord geveth grace, nevertheles it is a weie bi the whiche grace freli gyven cometh to a soule.<sup>38</sup>

Prayer should cleanse and purify the recipient of God's grace. It does not affect God's intentions, and certainly cannot be a 'cause' of God's actions. Rather, prayer creates a path; it is the 'way' by which grace is given. Like Peter Abelard, Hilton reminds his reader that God's knowledge of human need does not depend on its articulation. In Chapter Twenty-Five of his *Scale*, Hilton moves from considering the mechanics of prayer to its nature. Prayer is simply the rising of thoughts and desires to God: 'for praier is not ellis but a stiyngre desire of the herte to God bi a withdrawinge of thi mynde from alle ertheli thoughtes.'<sup>39</sup> The direction of prayer is involuntary; the comparison Hilton makes is with the flames of a fire which are drawn upwards by their nature, away from the lowly earth.<sup>40</sup> In an image of effortlessness, such 'stiyngre', or ascending, desire could be achieved merely by abandoning more weighty worldly thoughts.

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<sup>36</sup> Anselm of Canterbury, *Meditationes et orationes*, PL, 158 (1863), 711–1016, col. 747.

<sup>37</sup> Aligning the will of the supplicant with God's will as a mark of the saint is discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis.

<sup>38</sup> Hilton, *The Scale of Perfection*, I, 24, ll. 638–44.

<sup>39</sup> Hilton, *Scale*, I, 2, ll. 663–5. The MED defines 'stiyngre' as 'ascending'. See the second sense of 'stiinge' in the MED <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>> [accessed 05.09.16].

<sup>40</sup> 'And so is praier likenyd to a fier whiche of the owen kynde leeveth the lowenesse of the erthe and alwei stieth up into the eir. Right so desire in praier, whanne it is touchid and lightned of the goostli fier whiche is God, it is ay upstyande to Hym kyndeli whom it com fro.' Hilton, *Scale*, I, 25, ll. 665–68.

While the majority of the laity did not of course have direct access to theological treatises or to the writings of those who taught the methods of contemplative prayer, all lay people had indirect access to such teachings through sermons.<sup>41</sup> Thomas Brinton, Bishop of Rochester between 1373 and 1389, for example, quotes liberally from Augustine, Isidore, Gregory, Chrysostom, Pliny, and Anselm in his sermons.<sup>42</sup> And, in discussing prayer, he draws upon the language of Hugh of St Victor, referring to ‘oracio pura’.<sup>43</sup> Among its many reforms, the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 sought to improve the catechesis of the laity, primarily through ensuring a greater degree of clerical education.<sup>44</sup> All parish priests were expected to instruct their parishioners in the most fundamental catechetical material every year. In England, this *pastoralia* generally included the Creed, the *Pater noster*, the cardinal virtues, the seven capital vices, and the Ten Commandments.<sup>45</sup> Late-medieval congregations would have received much of their education on prayer through the medium of the homily, or sermon.

As an indication of the variety of preaching which late-medieval English laity might have the opportunity to hear, Siegfried Wenzel considers the evidence contained in *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Although Kempe’s extraordinary religious fervour makes her a very atypical member of the laity, the variety and quality of preaching which she heard sheds some light on the impact of late-medieval preaching. Wenzel lists some of the preachers and sermons which Kempe recorded hearing: a doctor of theology, a monk in York, a Franciscan

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<sup>41</sup> Siegfried Wenzel argues that scholarly sermons had a wider reach than might be expected, noting in particular that it is erroneous to equate the language in which a sermon was recorded with the language in which it would have been delivered. He suggests that sermons were likely to have been written in Latin before being delivered in English, although sometimes the order was reversed, with sermons being written in Latin after the occasion of their preaching in English. See Siegfried Wenzel, *Latin Sermon Collections from Later Medieval England: Orthodox Preaching in the Age of Wyclif* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 16–7.

<sup>42</sup> For a representative sample of authorities quoted, see Brinton, *Sermons*, I, pp. 100, 200.

<sup>43</sup> Brinton, *Sermons*, I, p. 43.

<sup>44</sup> Alastair Minnis, ‘1215–1349: culture and history’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism*, ed. by Fanous and Gillespie, pp. 69–89 (p. 71).

<sup>45</sup> Wenzel, *Latin Sermon Collections*, pp. 230–32.

friar at St. James, King's Lynn, a university-educated parson, a Dominican and a doctor of divinity in her parish church, an Augustinian friar, the prior of St. Margaret's Church, the Bishop of Norwich, and a famous friar preaching in a small village.<sup>46</sup> While acknowledging the partial nature of this list, Wenzel argues that Kempe's experience suggests that a great variety of priests were both highly trained and accessible to the laity by the early fifteenth century. Chaucer, with his connections in court, his travels to the continent and other parts of England, and his London location, would have had similar opportunities to hear a variety of preachers.

It might seem that 'orthodox' sermons preserved in Latin must have been preached in disregard for the laity, the majority of whom were not literate in the language. Such an impression would not be historically accurate, however. Wenzel maintains that the language in which a sermon was recorded does not always correspond to the language in which it was preached: vernacular sermons were often preserved in Latin.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, even those sermons specifically aimed at an educated, clerical congregation would have had an impact on the laity, as Wenzel argues:

In identifying sermons destined to be preached in the parishes we must also be aware that many sermons addressed to the clergy, at synods, visitations, or the university, were in fact meant to serve as models of what and how parish priests should preach in their parishes, so that even a good many pieces directed to 'Reverendi' can be taken to reflect an intended preaching ad populum.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, the use of Latin in the recorded version of a sermon does not indicate that the laity were excluded from, nor remained unexposed to, academic or theological discussions, including those regarding prayer.

A collection of sermons by Bishop Brinton provides eloquent evidence for the type of teaching about prayer to which at least some members of the laity were exposed. Brinton, by

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<sup>46</sup> Wenzel, *Latin Sermon Collections*, p. 240.

<sup>47</sup> Wenzel, *Latin Sermon Collections*, p. xiii, p. 10.

<sup>48</sup> Wenzel, *Latin Sermon Collections*, pp. 244–45.

virtue of his high-profile preaching, his participation in Parliament, and his location in Rochester, provides a good example of the type of scholarly preaching to which a member of the laity with Chaucer's social connections might have been exposed.<sup>49</sup> He teaches that prayer is both spiritually and physically effective, but also that prayer requires efforts towards virtue on the part of the faithful. In his sermon for the first Sunday of Lent, Brinton reminds his congregation of prayer's power:

In omni necessitate accedamus ad Deum fideli oracione, quia oracio est oranti presidium, diabolo incendium, angelis solacium, laus religionum, et feruor deuocionis.

[In every necessity we approach God with sincere prayer; since prayer is the fortress of the one who prays, it is fire to the devil, solace to the angels, the glorification of the rites, and the fervour of devotion.]<sup>50</sup>

Prayer to the eternal God, from the devoted and faithful worshipper, overcomes evil and gives solace to the angels. Brinton depicts prayer as exalted, with spiritually powerful effects. Moreover, its effectiveness is not limited to the spiritual: for Brinton, prayer could also wield earthly power. The tears and prayers of clerics and members of religious orders are the 'arma clericorum' against worldly enemies and troubling times.<sup>51</sup> In a sermon preached during a time of pestilence and political unrest, he urges his congregation to pray vigilantly.<sup>52</sup> In order to illustrate for his congregation the vigilance required, Brinton draws upon Psalm 101:

Vigilaui et factus sum sicut passer solitarius in tecto.

[I watched and became as the solitary sparrow on the rooftop.]<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Brinton was also a member of the Blackfriars 1382 Council which condemned Wyclif's teaching. See Wenzel's brief biography of Brinton in his *Latin Sermon Collections*, pp. 45–9.

<sup>50</sup> Brinton, *Sermons*, I, p. 223.

<sup>51</sup> Brinton, *Sermons*, II, pp. 325–26.

<sup>52</sup> Brinton, *Sermons*, II, pp. 325. Devlin draws attention to the sermon's historical context during a time of 'pestilence', dating the occasion of its preaching to the year 1376.

<sup>53</sup> Brinton, *Sermons*, II, p. 326. The numbering of the Psalms here follows that of the Vulgate Bible.

Whereas the Psalmist continues the lament by focussing on the God who has hidden his face, Brinton lays his emphasis on the role of the one who prays, focussing not on the feeling of solitude, but the effort expended in prayer.<sup>54</sup> Vigilant prayer, according to Brinton, means innocence in childhood, purity of heart in youth, fortitude and justice in adulthood and constant virtue in old age.<sup>55</sup> By linking effort, discernible as virtue, to effectiveness, Brinton's words imply that the prayers of the virtuous are more likely to be successful than might be those of the less virtuous.

The purity of prayer is its essence, for Brinton, and elsewhere he depicts it as transcending earthly bounds. Images of ascension frequently illustrate his teaching on prayer as 'oracio pura'. In a sermon preached during a time of plague, he encourages his hearers in prayer, portraying the act of prayer as a vital link between humanity and God. Meditating upon the words of Psalm 140, he draws attention to the naturally ascending properties of prayer:

Thus redolens in natura est oracio pura, dicente psalmo, *Dirigatur Domine ad te oracio mea sicut incensum*.

[Pure prayer is by nature fragrant incense; as the psalm says, 'Let my prayer be directed to you Lord as incense.']<sup>56</sup>

In another sermon preached during a time of plague, he uses the image of prayer as a ladder, ascending directly to God:

Scala est oracio pura, quia secundum Damascenum, oracio est ascencio mentis in Deum; angeli per scalam ascendant, quia oraciones nostras coram Deo offerunt; descendunt quando orantes multipliciter visitant et comfortant.

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<sup>54</sup> Compare Psalm 101:8.

<sup>55</sup> Brinton, *Sermons*, II, p. 326. 'In puericia per innocentiam, in adolescencia per mundiciam, in iuuentute per fortitudinem et iusticiam, in senectute per virtutum constanciam'. [In infancy through innocence, in adolescence through moral cleanliness, in youth through endurance and justice, in age through constant virtue.] 'Munditia' in medieval usage refers to purity, a sense captured in the Middle English borrowing of the term and applied to moral cleanliness. See 'mundificatio' in the *Medieval Latin Word-List from British and Irish Sources*, ed. by J. H. Baxter and Charles Johnson (London: Oxford University Press, 1934).

<sup>56</sup> Brinton, *Sermons*, I, p. 43 (quoting Psalm 140:2).



[The ladder is pure prayer, since according to the Damascene, prayer is the ascension of reason toward God; angels ascend by the ladder, since they offer our prayers in the presence of God; they descend when they visit and they comfort in different ways those who pray.]<sup>57</sup>

Prayer's ability to rise to God provides humanity with divine access: *oracio pura* scales the heavens to reach God, allowing the offerings of humanity to be carried into God's presence by angels, while also allowing angels to descend, bringing comfort to humanity. Crucially, the connection envisaged as a ladder works in both directions, bringing a divine response descending along the same means that the outpourings of God's people have ascended.

Brinton's audiences would have heard much about the value of prayer, its power to counteract evil and suffering, its ability to link heaven and earth. Although encouraged to be vigilant and to lead virtuous lives, his listeners must also have been reassured that prayer, that connection between themselves and their God, did not entirely depend on their personal virtue, instead ascending naturally from the lowliness of earth to the heights of heaven.

Other teachings on prayer also had the potential to inform Chaucer's views, perhaps especially including the teachings of Wycliffites. As Wenzel writes of Wyclif's influence on late-fourteenth-century thought:

Wyclif and his followers, whose moral seriousness and attention to the biblical text inspired and infused their own preaching, exerted a major impact on the intellectual and spiritual life of the period.<sup>58</sup>

Fiona Somerset argues that *The Summoner's Tale* demonstrates Chaucer's awareness of Wycliffite teachings, especially his understanding of the complexities of the Eucharistic debate, writing that he, like many of his contemporaries, was familiar with the 'highly charged controversies that were going on around him in England at the time'.<sup>59</sup> In light of

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<sup>57</sup> Brinton, *Sermons*, I, p. 201. Devlin suggest a date for this sermon of 1374–5, during a 'violent outbreak of the pestilence'.

<sup>58</sup> Wenzel, *Latin Sermon Collections*, p. xv.

<sup>59</sup> Somerset argues that Wycliffite ideas were not somehow separate from their English context, but were 'instead everywhere enmeshed with mainstream literary and cultural history'. See Fiona Somerset, 'Here, There, and Everywhere? Wycliffite Conceptions of the Eucharist and Chaucer's "Other" Lollard Joke', in *Lollards and their Influence in Late-Medieval England*, ed. by Fiona Somerset, Jill C. Havens and Derrick G.

this impact, we now turn to Wycliffite discussions on the topic of prayer, which present a stark contrast to the theoretical and mystical explanations we have seen thus far. As Jeremy Catto notes, ‘Wyclif showed no sign of interest in the interior devotional practice by which the art of contemplation was nurtured.’<sup>60</sup> Wycliffite homiletic teaching on prayer frequently displays unease, especially evident through the vivid language used to warn against corrupt practices and other failures in prayer. One representative example of such unease is found in the Wycliffite sermon for the Vigil of an Apostle, which takes its text from John 15:

I am a vine, ye are the branches. Who that dwells in Me, and I in him, this bears much fruit, for without Me ye moun nothing do. If any man dwells not in Me, he shall be cast out as a branch and shall wax dry. And they shall gather him, and they shall cast him into the fire, and he burns. If ye dwell in Me and My words dwell in you, whatever thing ye will, ye shall ask, and it shall be done to you.<sup>61</sup>

Conforming to the style typical of Wycliffite homiletic material, this sermon from *Comune Sanctorum* explains, expounds, and exemplifies its text line by line.<sup>62</sup> The sermon focusses on the metaphor of the vine, emphasising the alignment of the faithful with the will of Christ, fed and sustained by scripture. Such alignment will lead to successful prayer, defined as the achievement of heaven. This ultimate goal for the faithful is assumed in the homilist’s explication of the line ‘whateuere þey wolon, þei schal axse, and hit schal be don to hem’:

For money þenkon þat somme men ben fully lymes of þe feend and 3et þey endon hooly men, and comen to heuene for þer good liȝf; and somme men ben now hooly men, as ankerus, hermytes and freris, and eft þei ben apostotaas and dyon enemyes of Crist.<sup>63</sup>

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Pitard (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2003), pp. 127–38 (pp. 137–38). For a discussion of the use of Lollard vocabulary in *The Parson’s Tale* and the possibility that Chaucer shared Wycliffite sympathies, see Frances McCormack, *Chaucer and the Culture of Dissent* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007).

<sup>60</sup> Jeremy Catto, ‘1349–1412: culture and history’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism*, ed. by Fanous and Gillespie, pp. 113–31 (p. 119).

<sup>61</sup> John 15:5–7, *The Wycliffite New Testament* (1388), ed. by W. R. Cooper (London: The British Library, 2002).

<sup>62</sup> Wenzel divides homiletic material into two distinct types of sermons: ‘academic’ sermons, which follow a highly formal structure, and ‘traditional homilies’, which explain and exemplify their text line by line. Wenzel, *Latin Sermon Collections*, pp. 357–58.

<sup>63</sup> ‘In Vigilia vnus Apostoli. Sermo primus’, *EWS*, II, pp. 2–5, ll. 76–81.

Rather than addressing this direct reference to the efficacy of petitionary prayer, the sermon diverts from its text to a favourite Wycliffite topic: the hypocrisy of church leaders, ‘ankerus, hermytes and freris’. These figures, through their unvirtuous state, fail to attain the final goal of heaven. Such diversion indicates not only the attraction of a favoured anti-clerical topic, but might also hint at the Wycliffite homilist’s reluctance to expound on the concept of direct, unambiguous answers to prayer.

Wycliffites saw prayer as an aspect of Church practice in urgent need of reform. The summary of Wycliffite teaching on prayer provided by Anne Hudson and Pamela Gradon is notable for the negative slant to each polemical position taken by the reformers: prayers should not be said for the dead; preaching is of greater value than prayer; long prayers are of no especial virtue; prayer in procession is often worthless; public prayers can ‘beguile’ the unwary.<sup>64</sup> The physicality of oral prayer, in particular, seems to draw a criticism which verges on disgust. While the spoken word, in the form of sermons, is admirable and more worthy than prayer, prayers themselves are often the dangerous utterances of ‘waw yng’ lips.<sup>65</sup> One Wycliffite sermon warns specifically against ‘vnskilful preyzer’, defined by the homilist as praying for unacceptable outcomes:

And for þis cause monye men ben|vnherde in her preyzer, and turned into more yuel for þer vnskilful preyzer; and suche men weren bettur to leue þan to preyze on sych maner. For manye men preyzen for veniaunse and for worldis prosperyte, and in þe yre of God he 3yueþ hem þat þei axson; but hit were bettur to hem to preye not þus, ne to haue þis þing.<sup>66</sup>

Rather than praying for material gain, this homilist suggests that the best prayer is a life well-lived: ‘And for men wyton not for what þing þei schulden preyze God in syche casus, þerfore

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<sup>64</sup> *EWS*, IV. 68–9.

<sup>65</sup> A good life is worth more than a priest’s prayer uttered by ‘waw yng’ lips. A generalised disgust provoked by consideration of lips is evident in the next line: ‘Hou seuen þey hym moost wrþily wiþ þis part þat is so foul?’ ‘Feria iiij xj Septimane post Trinitatem’, *EWS*, II, p. 270, ll. 19–21.

<sup>66</sup> ‘Dominica proxima ante Ascencionem’, *EWS*, I, pp. 454–58, ll. 39–44.

good liȝf profiȝteþ more, and þe Hooly Goost axseþ þanne for hem.’<sup>67</sup> Despite the negative approach and a general preference for preaching on doctrine and virtuous living, a few positive Wycliffite pronouncements provide firm evidence for an understanding of petitionary prayer which sits easily alongside the teachings of their orthodox contemporaries. Two aspects of this teaching are relevant here. The first is the stress placed upon the *Pater noster*, which will be discussed at greater length below, and the second is a presupposition that prayers can be answered.

That prayer might be answered is assumed. This assumption even underpins Wyclif’s dismissal of the practice of praying for the intercession of the saints. Why pray to any saint, Wyclif asks, when only God is able to grant one’s prayer? A prayer directed to a saint, he writes, would be the equivalent of choosing to seek the intercession of a jester rather than petition the king.<sup>68</sup> The comparison to a worldly court draws upon conventional representations of God as a merciful king hearing the petitions of his subjects, while presuming that such prayers can be not only heard but answered. Nothing can be gained by asking the mediation of another: saints do not possess the power to grant the supplicant’s request.

Elsewhere, Wycliffite teachings consider the validity of the content of the prayer. God will not grant anything which would cause harm, or is something not good and right in itself.<sup>69</sup> Worthiness must also be present in the character of the one who petitions God. Those listening to Wycliffite sermons heard stern warnings against depending on the intercessory prayer of an unworthy priest, as Gradon and Hudson write, paraphrasing: ‘if the priest be damned, his prayer is little worth but harms living and dead – so men should pay

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<sup>67</sup> ‘Dominica proxima ante Ascencionem’, ll. 47–9.

<sup>68</sup> John Wyclif, *Dialogus cum supplemento dialogi*, ed. by Gotthard Lechler (London: Macmillan, 1869), p. 237.

<sup>69</sup> ‘Dominica proxima ante Ascencionem’, EWS, I, pp. 454–58, ll. 69–77. The sermon continues by lamenting the common view that worldly prosperity and the death of one’s enemies are signs of God’s love and even result from his miraculous working in the world (ll. 88–92).

him to stop.<sup>70</sup> Recognising the three-fold relationship of prayer between the one who prays, the prayer itself, and God in their theological and homiletic writing on the vital importance of correct belief and practice, Wyclif and his followers ultimately accept the fundamental presupposition that petitionary prayers, if prayed correctly and worthily, bring answers.

*Teaching about prayer: the Pater noster as exemplary*

Wycliffites were in agreement with contemporary devotional culture on the importance of the *Pater noster* as the supreme model for prayer, although they later went further in arguing that it is the only prayer necessary for any Christian to say.<sup>71</sup> A late-fourteenth-century commentary on the *Pater noster*, a Wycliffite addition to Archbishop Thoresby's Catechism, gives three reasons for its superiority over all other prayers. The foremost reason is the prayer's authority: this is the prayer which, according to scripture, Jesus taught his disciples when they asked him how to pray.<sup>72</sup> The second reason given is its comprehensiveness, which the author of the commentary describes as its subtlety:

Hyt passys also in sotylte. For we schulle vndyrstonde.  
 Pat in þese vij askyngkys are conteyned  
 alle þe poyntys of þis world in þe whiche is ony wyt  
 And so schortly to comprehend so moche wyt in playn wordys  
 ys a sotylte of god passing þe wyt of man.<sup>73</sup>

Any petition which might be asked of God has already been considered in the *Pater noster*, for it contains 'all þe poyntys of þis world in þe whiche is ony wyt'. The final reason the commentator gives is the direct link to Christ which it offers: 'no prayer in þe world is more

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<sup>70</sup> EWS, IV. 70.

<sup>71</sup> *Vae octuplex*, EWS, II, pp. 366–78, ll. 40–7. On Wycliffite views of the *Pater noster*, see Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 310–11.

<sup>72</sup> Matthew 6:9–13.

<sup>73</sup> *The Lay Folks' Catechism, or the English and Latin Versions of Archbishop Thoresby's Instruction for the People; together with a 'Wycliffite Adaptation' of the same, and the corresponding canons of the Council of Lambeth*, ed. by Thomas Frederick Simmons and Henry Edward Noloith, EETS, O.S. 118 (London: Keegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1901) pp. 7–8.

profitable to man sythen þat crist hym self schal here al.’<sup>74</sup> The reference to the profitability of prayer draws upon contemporary discourse concerning the effectiveness of prayer focussed on the correct attitude and sometimes the form which is best for the worshipper to use. Hilton, for example, describes prayer as ‘profitable and spedful to use’.<sup>75</sup> Such language addresses the effectiveness of prayer without specifying how an efficacious outcome might be judged.

The ubiquity of the *Pater noster*, in addition to its authoritative nature as the divine response to the human desire to know how to pray, makes it key to understanding both how petitionary prayer was taught and how it might have been perceived by late-medieval members of the laity. A member of the laity emulating the clerical and monastic practice of praying the liturgical hours by praying the Little Hours of the Blessed Virgin Mary would have said the *Pater noster* several times each day, possibly also supplementing this practice with the use of paternoster beads, in which each bead would have been accompanied by saying the prayer.<sup>76</sup> Less spiritually inclined laypeople would know the prayer both from religious instruction and perhaps from being asked to recite the prayer during a baptismal rite.<sup>77</sup> Added to this deep familiarity gained from exposure, the prayer formed an essential

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<sup>74</sup> *The Lay Folks’ Catechism*, p. 8.

<sup>75</sup> Hilton, *Scale*, I, 24, ll. 637–38.

<sup>76</sup> In *The Prymer*, the *Pater noster* is listed at the end of each Hour, with the exception of Matins and Compline, where it appears before the readings and before the anthems, respectively. See *The Prymer or Lay Folks’ Prayer Book*, ed. by Henry Littlehales, EETS, O. S. 105 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1895). Elsewhere, the number of times the *Pater noster* appears in the Hours might be as few as three. See Eric Palazzo, *A History of Liturgical Books from the Beginning to the Thirteenth Century*, trans. by Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993), p. 122. For a history of the Cathedral Hours and the development of the Breviary, see Robert Taft, S. J., *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West: The Origins of the Divine Office and Its Meaning for Today* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1986). The forerunner of the rosary, paternoster beads were also known as ‘Ave’ beads since the beads could be used to count the *Ave Maria* or the *Pater Noster* as it was prayed. For a history of the rosary, see Anne Winston, ‘Tracing the Origins of the Rosary: German Vernacular Texts’, *Speculum*, 68 (1993), 619–36 (pp. 619–23).

<sup>77</sup> On the requirement for godparents to recite the *Pater Noster* during the baptism liturgy (Use of Sarum), see Martin R. Dudley, ‘Sacramental Liturgies in the Middle Ages’, in *The Liturgy of the Medieval Church*, ed. by Thomas J. Heffernan and E. Ann Matter, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2005), pp. 193–218 (p. 201).

part of the *pastoralia* English priests were required to teach frequently.<sup>78</sup> Admired by theologians for its subtlety and comprehension of human need, the language of the *Pater noster* would also speak directly to those using it. And the blunt requests amongst the prayer's seven separate petitions bear little resemblance to much theological instruction on the higher, purer forms of prayer. In the Middle English translation contained in the lay prayer book later printed as *The Prymer*, these blunt, direct requests are: 'oure ech daies breed 3yue us to-dai', 'for3yue us oure dettis, as & we for3yuen to oure dettouris', 'lede us not in-to temptacioun', and finally, 'delyuere us from yuel'.<sup>79</sup> These petitions would certainly not be examples of *pura oratio*, in Hugh of St Victor's system of classification. In commentaries and *pastoralia*, including sermons on the prayer, these straightforward requests often were spiritualised, gaining further abstract complexities.

'De oracione dominica', John Mirk's late-fourteenth-century sermon addressing the pastoral need to teach the *Pater noster*, provides a good example of how Lateran IV's requirement was met in late-medieval England.<sup>80</sup> Like the anonymous Wycliffite author of the commentary on the *Pater noster*, Mirk refers in his homily to the positive benefits of saying the prayer. Drawing upon the notion of efficacious prayer, Mirk affirms that to pray in English, rather than in Latin, is 'miche more spedeful and merytabul'.<sup>81</sup> Mirk teaches that the prayer's seven petitions answer to the needs of every man and woman, providing protection from the seven deadly sins and therefore gaining the grace of God for the

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<sup>78</sup> The Lambeth Constitutions of Archbishop Pecham of 1281 aimed to ensure lay understanding of the prayer by directing all priests explicitly to teach the *Pater noster* on four occasions each year. Wenzel, *Latin Sermon Collections*, p. 232.

<sup>79</sup> *Pater noster*, in *The Prymer*, p. 5. This version is similar in most details to that used by Mirk in his sermon on the *Pater noster*: 'De oracione dominica sermo breuis ad parochianos' in *John Mirk's Festial: Edited from British Library MS Cotton Claudius A.II*, ed. by Susan Powell, 2 vols, EETS, O.S. 335 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), II, pp. 262–69.

<sup>80</sup> Susan Powell writes that Mirk's *Festial* was written to provide poorer parishes with 'accessible preaching material' and that his sermons were widely used. See her 'Introduction', in *John Mirk's Festial*, I, pp. xix–cxlv (p. xix).

<sup>81</sup> Mirk, 'De oracione dominica', p. 263.

supplicant. For Mirk, as for the Wycliffite commentator, the *Pater noster* is efficacious both practically and spiritually. In a manner similar to contemporary *pastoralia*, Mirk provides his audience with a substantial gloss for each petition, explaining the meaning of each phrase, describing the attitude required in order to be able to pray the words, and teaching the benefits that each petition provides in countering a particular deadly sin. For example, the gloss to the first of these petitions, ‘Fadur owron þat arte in heven, þi name be yhalowode’, requires correct belief, attitude, and action in order to be effective.<sup>82</sup> A child of God, one able to call on the name ‘Father’, must act righteously. Acknowledgement of the primacy of the one God, maker of heaven and earth, essentially enables the petitioner to offer the prayer in the correct attitude of humility. According to Mirk, this attitude is only possible if ‘ʒe lyven in luf and scharite and reste and pes vchone wit opur’.<sup>83</sup> In words which accord with the teaching of both Hilton and Bishop Brinton, Mirk instructs his audience meekly to ‘reysuth hup ʒoure hertus to hym’.<sup>84</sup> Spiritually, this first petition of the *Pater noster* results in the death of the first of the deadly sins, pride.<sup>85</sup>

Mirk’s sermon depicts the prayer relationship as requiring the cooperation of humanity with God. The spiritual benefits to be gained from the seven petitions require effort on the part of the believer; Mirk’s advice necessitates the active participation of the one who prays. His explanation of many of the petitions within the *Pater noster* recognises a vital partnership between the human and the divine. This working relationship is best demonstrated by the petition, ‘owre vche dayes brede þou ʒeff vs þis day.’<sup>86</sup> This petition, the laity is reminded, does not ask for an everlasting bread given freely and indiscriminately.

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<sup>82</sup> Mirk, ‘De oracione dominica’, p. 263.

<sup>83</sup> Mirk, ‘De oracione dominica’, p. 263.

<sup>84</sup> Mirk, ‘De oracione dominica’, p. 263.

<sup>85</sup> See for example the form of confession included in London, British Library, MS Additional 37787, fols 3<sup>r</sup>–11<sup>v</sup>. For the same text edited from the Vernon MS, see ‘I knowleche me guilti’, in *Yorkshire Writers: Richard Rolle of Hampole, and English father of the church and his followers*, ed. by Carl Horstmann (London: S. Sonnenschein, 1895–6), pp. 340–45.

<sup>86</sup> Mirk, ‘De oracione dominica’, p. 265.



Instead, man must work for his bread. As St Bernard has written, Mirk warns his audience, those who refuse to work on earth must work with fiends in hell. There is a limit to human effort, ingenuity, and science, however. Once the seed has been planted, ‘alle is in Goddys doinge and ȝeftur’.<sup>87</sup> Asking for bread does not imply simply sitting and waiting with hand outstretched. The provision of daily bread, here understood both in bodily and spiritual terms as physical sustenance and as nourishment for the soul, as well as that en-spirited bread, the consecrated host, only results from the labours of people working in cooperation with their God. In Mirk’s words, the prayer ‘makuth a man myȝty ffor to traelon for alle oþur þingus þat is ne | deful to hym’.<sup>88</sup> Thus prayers are granted through the combined work of humanity and God.

The fifth petition of the *Pater noster* reveals one essential aspect to the human and divine partnership: ‘and forȝeff vs oure trespase as we forȝevon hem þat trespases to vs’.<sup>89</sup> Along with labouring to bring human work and divine inspiration to fruition, the supplicant also has a responsibility to forgive others. While this requirement applies specifically to prayers for forgiveness, Mirk further extends its scope: ‘ȝif ȝe willon to haue mercy of God and forȝevenes off ȝowre trespase, þan mote ȝe forȝevon hem þat trespaseth aȝeynus ȝow, or ellys he will not here ȝowre preyoure’.<sup>90</sup> This last instruction, baldly stated halfway through the sermon, implies a much greater disaster than the refusal to grant one petition. Indeed, insofar as an unforgiving attitude derives from the sin of wrath, as Mirk teaches, an unyielding and unmerciful person is destined for the pain of hell, and unfit to be among God’s children. Here personal worthiness and virtue absolutely determine the efficacy of prayer. The lack of a single virtue leads to failed prayer.

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<sup>87</sup> Mirk, ‘De oracione dominica’, p. 265.

<sup>88</sup> Mirk, ‘De oracione dominica’, p. 265.

<sup>89</sup> Mirk, ‘De oracione dominica’, p. 266.

<sup>90</sup> Mirk, ‘De oracione dominica’, p. 266.

Mirk's sermon thus yokes together human responsibility and God's action, warning that the lack of human cooperation with the divine leads to the possibility of prayer being both unheard and ungranted. The correct attitude leads to efficacious prayer, as each virtue develops from the desire which gives voice to a specific petition. An attitude of love, for example, is prerequisite to the prayer, 'þi wille be done in erþe as hit is done in heuen'.<sup>91</sup> Because the ability to make this request depends upon the subordination of personal will, Mirk preaches that the request engenders a desire to love one's neighbour, giving due honour to those who are higher or lower in degree than oneself.<sup>92</sup> The attitude of virtue is both a prerequisite for, and an effect of, the petition. Anyone who can maintain the inner state necessary to say this prayer will thus 'sclene þe foule synne of envye'.<sup>93</sup> Mirk's sermon encompasses the role of the supplicant, the workings of virtue and human responsibility for the unheard or unanswered prayer.

*Petitionary prayer as 'profitable': answers to prayers in homiletic exempla*

We have seen so far that teaching on the efficacy of prayer emphasised virtue, human effort, and the alignment of the will with that of God. We have also seen that such blunt requests as 'give us this day our daily bread' would not qualify for categorisation as *pura oratio* and, furthermore, were explained not as miraculously achievable without human effort, but a product instead of God's blessing on human work. Given that homiletic teaching on the aims of petitionary prayer could at times be contradictory, occasionally displaying a tendency to avoid theological difficulties by referring more generally to the profitability of prayer, it is worth considering less direct methods of teaching. One indirect method favoured by preachers, the use of *exempla*, illuminates an understanding of petitionary prayer shared

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<sup>91</sup> Mirk, 'De oracione dominica', p. 264.

<sup>92</sup> Mirk, 'De oracione dominica', pp. 264–65.

<sup>93</sup> Mirk, 'De oracione dominica', p. 265.

between priests and the laity. Stories drawn from hagiography, historical tales, and parables from scripture or from everyday life frequently provided models of profitable petitionary prayer. In particular, those *exempla* which tell of prayers being directly answered give some indication of what a late-medieval layperson might legitimately have expected petitionary prayer to achieve.

Mirk's homilies include many *exempla* in which a supplicant requests and receives knowledge. Appropriately, one such exemplum occurs at the end of the sermon on the *Pater noster*. Following his explication of the prayer, Mirk relates a parable illustrating the importance of refraining from committing sins which have already been confessed and forgiven. In this parable, a man and his lover both die, but only after the woman, relenting to pressure from her lover, has fallen once again into sin after her confession. Wishing to know what befell the two reprobate lovers after their deaths, a holy man prays for knowledge of their fates and is rewarded with a vision of 'a blak derk miste owre þe watur, and in þat myste he herde þe man and þe womman spekon'.<sup>94</sup> The lesson for the hearers of the sermon is that those who are joined together by sin in their lives will not escape mutual recriminations after their deaths, but the exemplum also offers an unambiguous example of an answer to petitionary prayer. Although the issue at stake is the importance of resisting temptation and remaining constant in repentance, a non-moralised assumption of the exemplum is that devout prayer can receive an instantaneous answer.

Some minor details in this brief exemplum deserve further consideration. The first of these is the characterisation of the supplicant as a 'gode man holy' whose prayers are so constant that he prays while he walks.<sup>95</sup> The depiction of the supplicant both depends upon and supports the belief that the prayer of the virtuous will be heard. This belief, in turn, lends

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<sup>94</sup> Mirk, 'De oracione dominica', p. 268.

<sup>95</sup> Mirk, 'De oracione dominica', p. 268.

authority to the prayer for protection from consignment to hell with which Mirk concludes the homily: ‘from þe which payne God kepe you and me, yf hyt be hys wyll’.<sup>96</sup> By implication, assuming the preacher is also a good and holy man, his prayer for the safety of his flock will be answered. Another important detail to note is Mirk’s careful caveat aligning the prayer with the will of God, in recognition both of the third petition of the *Pater noster* and of a theology which rejects the possibility of human creatures causing change in the divine will. The holy man’s prayer for knowledge leaves open nonetheless the possibility that more worldly petitions might be granted.

A more practical exemplum might offer a model for members of the laity to follow, and here Mirk’s homily for the feast of St Michael the Archangel narrates a spectacular instance of efficacious petitionary prayer. This sermon includes four successful petitionary prayers in its multiple *exempla*. Two of these, the prayers of a bishop and of Saint Brendan, are similar to that of the holy man of ‘De oracione dominica’ in requesting knowledge. In Mirk’s account, both prayers result in angelic appearances.<sup>97</sup> A third prayer, by St Gregory, combats a pestilence of ‘arowes of fyre coming from þe eyre’ against the people of Rome.<sup>98</sup> The saint prays for the end of the pestilence, if it is God’s will, and this is granted. A fourth prayer, however, is that of Christian laity who are neither sainted, nor described as good and holy. Mirk describes the citizens of ‘Cepontyne’, who decide to battle their pagan oppressors:

þei preyed 3[ern]e to Seynt Michael of help. þan þe nyght before þe day of batel he apperud to þe byschoppe and badde hym ha no drede bot gone to þe batel boldely and he wolde helpon hem. þen on þe morow whanne þe batell schulde meton, þe

<sup>96</sup> This conclusion, a negative phrasing of a typical exhortation to bring the congregation and the priest to everlasting bliss, is not included in British Library, MS Cotton Claudius A.II, but is included in the other EETS edition of the *Festial*: John Mirk, ‘De Oracione Dominica’ in *Mirk’s Festial: A Collection of Homilies, by Johannes Mirkus (John Mirk), Edited from Bodl. MS, Gough Eccl. Top.4, With Variant Readings from Other MSS*, ed. by Theodor Erbe, EETS, E.S. 96 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1905), pp. 282–89 (p. 288).

<sup>97</sup> Mirk, ‘De sancto Michael archangelo sermo’, in *John Mirk’s Festial*, II, pp. 232–34 (p. 234). While the bishop receives a visitation from St Michael, St Brendan is granted the appearance of fallen angels seeking to return to God.

<sup>98</sup> Mirk, ‘De sancto Michael archangelo sermo’, p. 233.

hull of Garganes was hylode wyth a grete myste, and oute of þe myste com flying so þik arrowes of fyre and boltys of þondur þat þei w[o]nde þe paynemus so greusly þat flown alle þilk þat myghte flee and many of hem weron slayne.<sup>99</sup>

The aid granted to the supplicants of Cepontyne is physically effective despite its nebulous, spiritual source. Heavenly arrows of fire, while remaining mysteriously otherworldly, prove to be solid military assistance for an embattled people. St Michael's encouragement to the Christians of Cepontyne to fight implies both divine approval for their actions and a certain measure of just desert. In relating the prayers of the holy men such as saints and the bishop, Mirk carefully emphasises their piety and their desire to be in accordance with the will of God, and it is notable here that the bishop of Cepontyne receives the vision of St Michael. Nonetheless, the link between the piety of the successful supplicants and the response to their prayer remains implicit. Setting this story of a highly successful petition before a lay congregation, Mirk teaches the clear lesson that prayers for physical protection, at least, might be answered.

*Petitionary prayer in practice: prayer in books of hours*

Theological theories of prayer and clerical efforts to convey both heterodox and official church teaching only present a partial view of late-medieval prayer. Evidence of personal piety helps to create a more holistic, if not coherent, view. The picture which emerges is complex and contradictory, and often at odds with orthodox teaching. Copied from manuscript to manuscript, and travelling across space and time, sometimes gaining accretions, recorded prayers present an amalgamation of voices and a multiplicity of practices. Developing an in-depth understanding of how petitionary prayer was used outside the cloister and the sanctuary requires an examination of this multiplicity of voices, as well as

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<sup>99</sup> Mirk, 'De sancto Michael archangelo sermo', p. 233. 'Cepontyne' refers to Sipontus, located near the Adriatic coast of Italy.

an attempt to tease out the assumptions and expectations conveyed through the prayers of individual believers.

Despite the traditionally oral nature of Christian prayer, as discussed above, written evidence for the late-medieval practice of prayer is widespread and compelling. Likewise, the promotion of contemplative, silent prayer does not preclude the recording of evidence for how late-medieval Christians prayed and what the goals of those prayers were. Medieval devotional manuscripts preserve numerous prayers, both the liturgical prayers which were part of the Hours and more personal prayers intended for private use.<sup>100</sup> Those appearing most frequently are the liturgical. The frequency with which these were prayed during the Hours allowed them to be efficiently recorded by abbreviation, their opening formulae preserved as titles: *Pater noster*, *Gloria Patri*, and *Ave Maria*, for example.<sup>101</sup> While fulfilling an essential role at the core of the Hours in daily worship, these ancient prayers do not on their own present a full picture of the inner spiritual lives of the laity. Nor do they explain lay understanding of petitionary prayer. Ample written evidence for the individual and private prayer of the late medieval lay Christian can be found, however. As Eamon Duffy writes:

The prayers of late medieval English men and women do in fact survive in huge numbers, jotted in the margins or flyleaves of books, collected into professionally commissioned or home-made prayer-rolls, devotional manuals, and commonplace books, above all gathered into the primers or Books of Hours (*Horae*).<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> 'Personal' is used here to refer to prayers which are not said as part of the Hours and are not included in the Mass, but which are instead additions to devotional miscellanies, prayer books or other individually owned manuscripts.

<sup>101</sup> For examples of such shorthand, see the office of Compline in the York Hours: 'Ad Completorium', in *Horae Eboracenses: The Prymer or Hours of the Blessed Virgin Mary, according to the use of the illustrious church of York with other devotions as they were used by the lay-folk in the Northern Province in the XVth and XVIth centuries*, ed. by C. Wordsworth, Surtees Society (Durham: Andrews, 1920), pp. 59–61. Also see 'De Beata Maria', in *Horae Eboracenses*, pp. 62–70.

<sup>102</sup> Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c. 1400–c. 1580*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 209.

The medieval book of hours, with its many prayers designed for times of particular need and its personalised additions alongside the traditional prayers and readings for the Hours of the day, provides a rich resource of written prayers.<sup>103</sup> These more personal prayers offer an insight into the concerns and devotional practices of the laity, which do not always correspond exactly with the teachings of the Church. Duffy argues for the reliability of such evidence, writing that the apparent absence of Church regulation of form and content allows ‘some degree of confidence in using the resulting compilations as indicators of lay opinion’.<sup>104</sup> Books of hours provide an important insight into how the laity prayed and what they prayed for. Although possession of a book of hours indicates the likelihood of the owner being both wealthy and literate, at least until the advent of printing and more widespread ownership, such collections of devotional material were inarguably well-used and popular amongst Chaucer’s contemporaries.<sup>105</sup>

Through the inclusion of borrowed and highly personal material books of hours present a detailed portrait of late-medieval lay devotion. Duffy describes the eclectic nature of these and other additions to the standard inclusions:

The additions were very varied: portraits of the owners, or customised prayers into which their names had been inserted: extra prayers in Latin, French or English, added to the flyleaves or margins: detailed information about times of births for use in the casting of horoscopes: charms and cures and recipes: notes on financial transactions [...]: holy pictures and pilgrim souvenirs, glued or stitched in: requests for prayers and affectionate remembrance: the range seemed endless.

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<sup>103</sup> Books of hours are repositories for two forms of prayer: traditional set prayers and readings modelled upon the liturgical offices of the Breviary, and those personally chosen and added by or for the owner. A typical book of hours collected together the Little Hours of the Virgin, Vespers and Matins from the Office of the Dead, known respectively as *Placebo* and *Dirige*; the seven Penitential Psalms; the fifteen ‘Gradual’ psalms; and prayers dedicated to the Holy Cross, the Joys of the Virgin Mary and the Five Wounds of Christ. These final items tend towards the affective piety popular in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Communally important items such as almanacs and calendars marking the feast days of the saints were annotated to include such important personal dates as the births and deaths of family members. For a description of a ‘standard’ book of hours, see Scott-Stokes, *Women’s Books of Hours*, pp. 5–12. For the Hours of the Blessed Virgin Mary in English, see *The Prymer*, pp. 1–36. For a typical calendar and almanac, see *Horae Eboracenses*, pp. 3–20. For the personalised use of calendars as a remembrance of dates of birth and death, see Eamon Duffy, *Marking the Hours: English People and their Prayers 1240–1570* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 44–6.

<sup>104</sup> Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, p. 234.

<sup>105</sup> The book of hours’ popularity is attested by the number of surviving manuscripts, over eight hundred of which remain from England alone. See Duffy, *Marking the Hours*, p. viii.

Here was an extraordinary archive, a series of unexpected windows into the hearts and souls of the men and women who long ago had used these books to pray.<sup>106</sup>

Each unique book of hours offers a glimpse into an individual's private hopes and fears.

Considered together, these prayer books display the extent to which private concerns were commonly shared; the desires and anxieties of the individual were also those of a larger community. One example of communal concerns being evident in personal prayers is the prevalence of petitions addressing domestic and familial matters in devotional manuscripts owned by women.<sup>107</sup> Several books of hours known to have been owned by women have additional prayers asking for protection in childbirth, while others request marital harmony and peace in the home.<sup>108</sup> Such texts open a window into the matters considered worth bringing to divine attention, as felt individually and as collectively shared. A textual intersection of orthodox theology, expressed through the office liturgies, and individual piety, the book of hours provides a richer and more thorough source of information about the prayer lives of the laity than could be found through restricting source material to theological and dogmatic texts.<sup>109</sup>

The types of petitionary prayers which were commonly included in books of hours as additional material ranged from meditative texts encouraging *imitatio Christi* to those requesting specific interventions in the supplicant's earthly circumstances. All, however, are likely to have played a role in forming a lay person's understanding of what it meant to make

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<sup>106</sup> Duffy, *Marking the Hours*, p. ix.

<sup>107</sup> Books of hours were often personalised through the inclusion of a portrait of the owner praying or through the substitution of a name in first-person prayers asking for mercy or for protection. Kathryn A. Smith writes that by choosing favourite prayers or personalised prayers for inclusion, owners 'could insert themselves into the sacred time and sacred history that shaped their illustrated manuscripts'. See Kathryn A. Smith, *Art, Identity and Devotion in Fourteenth-Century England: Three Women and their Books of Hours* (London: The British Library and University of Toronto Press, 2003), pp. 57–8. For other methods of personalisation, see Roger S. Wieck, 'Prayer for the People: The Book of Hours', in *A History of Prayer: The First to the Fifteenth Century*, ed. by Roy Hammerling (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 389–440 (p. 392).

<sup>108</sup> For examples, see Scott-Stokes, *Women's Books of Hours*, pp. 128–32.

<sup>109</sup> The inclusion in books of hours of prayers to be said by the individual at specific points during the Mass is an especially clear example of this textual meeting of corporate religious and individual lay piety. For prayers to be said at the elevation of the Host, at the elevation of the chalice, and before, during and after receiving the Host, see *Horae Eboracenses*, pp. 70–4.



a petition to God. An early example of a meditative petitionary style is the *Adoro te*, a prayer known from the early ninth century and often included in books of hours.<sup>110</sup> Like the later ‘Prayer of the vii Words on the Cross’, *Adoro te* couples its petitions to episodes in the life of Christ, thereby encouraging *imitatio Christi*. A prayer of adoration precedes each prayer of supplication, leading the faithful petitioner to meditate upon aspects of Jesus’s human life and divine nature before asking for a related spiritual virtue. The fifth of these petitions, for humility, offers an example of this style:

Domine iesu christe adoro te in utero uirginis descendentem et ex uirgine natum et in praesepe positum et circumcicum depraeor te qui humilis uenisti ad creandos nos. Firma in me humilitatem ueram.

[Lord Jesus Christ I adore you in the virgin’s womb descended, and from the virgin born, and in a manger placed, and circumcised; I beseech you, who humbly came to be born for us, strengthen in me true humility.]<sup>111</sup>

The humility of the divine Jesus in becoming incarnate, taking on the frailty and pain of embodiment offers a perfect model of the virtue of humility for the believer. Just as Jesus is humble, the supplicant prays for true humility.<sup>112</sup> Such meditative petitionary prayers tend towards a spiritual focus on praying for virtues and contemplating Christ’s life.

In devotional manuscripts, spiritual, meditative petitions focussed on aligning the supplicant’s desires with the divine will are intermingled with many other prayers seeking a robust, concrete physical response to human need. A longing for physical safety in particular makes itself manifest in the prevalence of prayers for protection from enemies, or from more

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<sup>110</sup> *Adoro te*, in *The Prayer Book of Aedeluald the Bishop, Commonly Called the Book of Cerne: edited from the MS in the University Library, Cambridge, with Introduction and Notes*, ed. by Dom A. B. Kuypers (Cambridge: The University Press, 1902), pp. 114–17. An abbreviated version of the *Adoro te* is also included in *Horae Eboracenses*, p. 81.

<sup>111</sup> *Adoro te*, pp. 114–17 (p. 115).

<sup>112</sup> The *Adoro te* continues likewise through the life of Jesus, drawing upon incidents such as his baptism, his miracles, the raising of Lazarus from the dead, through to his Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension, petitioning both for mercy and for the granting of virtues linked to those demonstrated by Jesus’s life. Although the abridgement of this prayer to focus upon Christ’s Passion was more popular for late-medieval owners of Books of hours than the full version of the *Book of Cerne*, the expressed longing for inward virtues remains the same. Although Duffy describes this change as a decisive alteration of the prayer, his argument addresses the preference for affective forms of piety apparent amongst late-medieval laity, rather than the theological understanding of the nature of petitionary prayer. See Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, pp. 238–43.

specific dangers such as pestilence.<sup>113</sup> One prayer which demonstrates a shift from the expectation of spiritual change to a hope for physical benefits is *Stella celi extirpavit*, intended for use against pestilence. Appearing frequently in fourteenth-century books of hours, this prayer pleads for protection from the plague:

The star of heaven who suckled the Lord with her milk, rooted out  
The mortal pestilence that the first parent of mankind implanted;  
May that star now graciously constrain the constellations  
Whose battles are delivering the people to the ulcer of dire death.  
O glorious star of the sea, give us help and protection from the plague.  
Hear us, for your son honours you, and denies you nothing;  
Jesus, save us, as your virgin mother prays for us.<sup>114</sup>

Like prayers such as the *Adoro te*, *Stella celi extirpavit* brings into remembrance an aspect of salvation history, Mary's physical motherhood and feeding of the infant Christ. Mary's reversal of the Fall of Man through her divine motherhood is figured as a prior defeat of the pestilence of sin, making her the ideal intercessor and protector from plague. The prayer also demonstrates a tendency in medieval petitions to move from one addressee to another, as the final two lines first appeal to Mary to intercede with her son, who refuses her nothing, before directly addressing Jesus, asking him to respond to his mother's prayer.

Calling upon divine mercy, *Stella celi extirpavit* turns from its request for Mary's intercession to petition God the Father directly:

God of mercy, God of pity, God of forgiveness, you have taken pity on the  
affliction of your people, and have said to the avenging angel who is striking them  
down, 'It is enough, hold back your hand'; for love of that glorious star whose  
precious breasts you so gently sucked, countering the venom of our sins, grant us  
the help of your grace, so that we may be freed from pestilence and ill-prepared  
death, and saved from the assault of perdition.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Scott-Stokes, *Women's Books of Hours*, pp. 105–6; Duffy, *Marking the Hours*, pp. 32–3.

<sup>114</sup> Scott-Stokes, *Women's Books of Hours*, pp. 105–6. For a history of the prayer, see: Christopher Macklin, 'Plague, Performance and the Elusive History of the *Stella celi extirpavit*', *Early Music History*, 29 (2010), 1–31.

<sup>115</sup> Scott-Stokes, *Women's Books of Hours*, p. 106.

Having asked for divine intervention which will directly affect physical health, the prayer shifts once more into recognisably spiritual territory. The final petition begins with the desire for a material response, to be saved from the plague, but ends with a purely spiritual petition, to be saved from hell. The mid-point in this request, to be saved from an ill-prepared death, balances the temporal and spiritual: physical death recalls the present peril of plague, but the reference to being 'ill-prepared' refers to the spiritual danger of dying unshriven.<sup>116</sup> *Stella celi extirpavit* serves in many ways as a model late-medieval prayer. Its multiplication of addressees, appeals to prior aid, and mingling of physical and spiritual concerns are key features of late-medieval petitionary prayer which are abundantly evident in literary prayers, too, including Chaucer's.

A daily potential for sudden disaster features strongly in prayers preserved in books of hours. Some prayers mingled their spiritual and material petitions so thoroughly that they are difficult to disentangle. Protective prayers especially demonstrate this tendency, as well as strongly indicating the preoccupations of those who used them. To judge by their popularity in books of hours, the fear of daily peril overshadowed the thoughts of many late medieval Christians. As Duffy writes, 'The sense of defiance in the face of relentless enemies is an insistent and striking feature in prayer after prayer of the *Horae*.'<sup>117</sup> The act of stepping outside the safety of one's room at the beginning of each day was to become vulnerable to, or even invite, danger. One prayer, included in the York Hours with the instruction to 'be sayd or ye departe out of your chambre at your vprysynge', invokes the cross and its power against enemies.<sup>118</sup> The prayer which follows, to be said before leaving the house, orders enemies to flee, 'fugite partes adverse', invoking the magi and the angels against all adversaries.<sup>119</sup> The

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<sup>116</sup> On the late-medieval popularity of prayers for a good death, see Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, pp. 310–13.

<sup>117</sup> Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, p. 266.

<sup>118</sup> *Horae Eboracenses*, pp. 34–5.

<sup>119</sup> *Horae Eboracenses*, p. 35.

identities of these adversaries, whether mortal or immortal, internal or external, is left unstated.

A unique prayer composed by Isabel Ruddok and included in her early-fifteenth-century book of hours highlights the all-encompassing nature of the enmity with which late-medieval prayers for protection are concerned. While her prayer book was compiled after Chaucer's death, Ruddok's own prayers fall comfortably within the tradition of petitionary prayer which we have been examining. Drawing upon Biblical precedents for divine intervention against the persecutors of the faithful, she asks God to deliver her from 'the visible and invisible enemy'.<sup>120</sup> While this line allows for a dual meaning of enmity in the physical or spiritual sense, an earlier passage from the prayer is more revealing:

Lord God almighty, father and son and Holy Ghost, grant to me, your servant Isabel Ruddok, victory against all my enemies and antagonists, so they shall not be able to harm me, stand up against me or contradict me, but rather let their strength and counsel turn towards good, or come to naught.<sup>121</sup>

Ruddok's request for victory over her 'enemies and antagonists' might easily be applied to the deadly sins. The fact that these sins were personified in morality plays such as *The Castle of Perseverance* demonstrates a strong perception of a conscious, willed psychic enmity.<sup>122</sup> Petitions against such spiritually malign influence were often brief and direct, as in the refrain added to each confession of deadly sin in the fifteenth-century Bolton Hours: 'I cry for mercy to almighty God.'<sup>123</sup> Ruddok's emphasis and tone, however, particularly in reference to her enemies' actions against her, betray a greater concern with living enemies than with

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<sup>120</sup> 'Isabel Ruddok's Prayer', Isabel Ruddok's Hours, Bristol Public Library, MS 14, fols 46<sup>r</sup>–46<sup>v</sup>, trans. by Scott-Stokes in *Women's Books of Hours*, pp. 135–36 (p. 136).

<sup>121</sup> Scott-Stokes, *Women's Books of Hours*, p. 135.

<sup>122</sup> *The Castle of Perseverance*, in *The Macro Plays*, ed. by Mark Eccles, EETS, O.S. 262 (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 1–111.

<sup>123</sup> 'I knawe me gilty to God almyghty', Bolton Hours, York Minster, MS Additional 2, fols 1<sup>r</sup>–4<sup>r</sup>, 209<sup>r</sup>–210<sup>v</sup>, in Scott-Stokes, *Women's Books of Hours*, pp. 140–44. The short, protective prayer uttered repeatedly by Sir Owain against the deadly sins during his time in purgatory is exemplary of the directness and brevity of such petitions. See 'Purgatorium sancti Patrici abb[at]is', in *The Early South-English Legendary or Lives of Saints: MS. Laud, 108, in the Bodleian Library*, ed. by Carl Horstmann, EETS, O.S. 87 (London: N. Trübner, 1887), pp. 199–220.

spiritual dangers. For these beings not only harm and oppose her, as her sins might, they also ‘contradict’ her. And, although it is easy to imagine a specific sin, such as *ira*, having a spiritual strength, it is rather more difficult to imagine personified sins capable of giving good counsel. Ruddok has physical, human enemies in mind here, as shown by her appeal later in the prayer to the biblical histories of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, Peter, Paul, and Susannah.<sup>124</sup> Without ignoring the interpretation of their trials as spiritual battles, these characters’ stories clearly relate confrontations with unquestionably human adversaries. Ruddok’s prayer calls for a temporal, earthly response.

*Expecting an answer: prayer rubrics in books of hours*

To read a petitionary prayer is to begin to discern the hopes and desires of the supplicant. Like the request for protection from the plague expressed by *Stella celi extirpavit*, many of the prayers contained in books of hours plead for a response of an entirely earthly nature. These types of prayers are often concerned with the unavoidable pain and difficulty of human life: for safety in childbirth, for protection from enemies, for physical healing from maladies. One especially moving example is the extended prayer for safety in childbirth, *Dampne dieu roy omnipotent*, included in the early-fourteenth-century Percy Hours.<sup>125</sup> Calling on God the almighty king, Jesus the saviour, Mary his mother, the ‘holy company of the Apostles’, and the martyrs, this prayer states human need directly and clearly.<sup>126</sup> Its specific petitions include the alleviation of pain and the safe delivery of the child:

By the great humility  
Of your incarnation as man,

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<sup>124</sup> ‘As you liberated Susannah from false accusation, Daniel from the lions’ den, the three youths, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, from the flame of the fiery furnace, Paul from chains, and Peter in peril on the sea, so deign to liberate me, your servant Isabel Ruddok, from every evil deed, past, present or future. Amen.’ Scott-Stokes, *Women’s Books of Hours*, p. 136.

<sup>125</sup> Scott-Stokes dates the manuscript to c. 1322–1340, although the British Library catalogue identifies the manuscript as early fifteenth century.

<sup>126</sup> *Dampne dieu roy omnipotent*, Percy Hours, British Library, MS Harley 1260, fols 176<sup>v</sup>–178<sup>v</sup>, trans. by Scott-Stokes in *Women’s Books of Hours*, pp. 128–31.

Listen to my prayer.  
 Jesus, true saviour of the world,  
 I am in danger of death,  
 Woeful and comfortless,  
 If I do not have your help  
 I have no hope of survival,  
 So I beseech you, true father,  
 For the love of your gentle mother,  
 Alleviate my harsh pain,  
 And grant that I may bear the child  
 I am carrying as pleases you.  
 And bring it to holy church  
 To receive the holy law,  
 That it be not struck down by death or hatred,  
 That it never suffer loss of vital limb,  
 That the devil assail neither it nor me.<sup>127</sup>

Although the full prayer is careful to refer both to the will of Jesus and to that of his mother, Mary, concluding with a request for grace, strict adherence to theological teaching is not its priority. Inward spiritual change is not a sufficient response to the fear and anguish of childbirth. The suppliant prays explicitly for her physical survival, for the alleviation of pain, and for the safe delivery of the baby. Protection from death, hatred, and loss of limb are also requested on behalf of her child. Although this prayer would have been composed and recorded in prayer books outside its intended context of labour, it retains some of the qualities, such as the reference in the present to 'harsh pain' and to being 'woeful and comfortless', and the use of first person pronouns, which could reasonably be expected of a labouring woman's impromptu prayer. The effect is of a suppliant driven to beg for the most genuinely useful response to her current need, safety for herself and for her child.

As direct and powerful as this prayer for divine protection at the limits of human endurance and need at the border between life and death is, it cannot offer the suppliant any guarantee of divine response. While the model of the *Pater noster* definitively established the principle that petitionary prayer could bring material blessings, no one could be certain of

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<sup>127</sup> Scott-Stokes, *Women's Books of Hours*, pp. 129–30.

being given the desired answer to such a prayer. A woman praying for a safe delivery would have had no theological justification for absolute assurance of the physical survival of herself or her child confronted as she was with what Duffy describes as ‘the iron laws of cause and effect’.<sup>128</sup> In face of such uncertainty, the introductions, or rubrics, to some prayers popular in books of hours betray a hunger for a solid guarantee of worldly effectiveness. For example, the rubric prefixed to the Percy Hours’ prayer for protection in childbirth, seen above, makes this bold promise: ‘a woman who says it will never die in childbirth.’<sup>129</sup> Its attribution to the mother of St Thomas of Canterbury adds authority to the claim. While the subject matter of *Dampne dieu roy omnipotent* strictly conforms to homiletic teaching on the appropriate use of petitionary prayer, the rubric has no theological, biblical or homiletic basis. Its addition alters the prayer from the humble, trusting petition of a faithful worshipper to a formula akin to magic.<sup>130</sup> Late-medieval books of hours include many promises of this nature, often attached to the most unimpeachably orthodox prayers.<sup>131</sup>

The juxtaposition of theologically literate petitionary prayer and the confident worldly guarantees of the rubrics is a striking feature of late-medieval piety. *O Maria piissima*, a twelfth-century prayer for Mary’s intercessions commonly included in books of hours, is prefixed in the early-fifteenth-century Malling Abbey Hours by the promise that anyone who says the prayer every day ‘will see the blessed Virgin Mary *without doubt* before death.’<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, p. 186.

<sup>129</sup> Scott-Stokes, *Women’s Books of Hours*, p. 129. The rubric for the same prayer included in the DuBois Hours states: ‘Feme que ceste oreisun dirra | a sun enfantement ne perira’. DuBois Hours, Pierpont Morgan Library MS M.700, fol. 141<sup>v</sup>, quoted in Smith, *Art, Identity and Devotion*, p. 28.

<sup>130</sup> Duffy describes some of the rubrics as showing ‘a bizarre mixture of piety and magic’, sometimes containing ‘extraordinary promises’ and ‘apocryphal attributions’, or, in at least one example, a ‘bowdlerized version of a legend’. He argues, however, that some of these seemingly unorthodox texts were ultimately drawn from the liturgy, especially blessings and exorcisms. See Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, pp. 266–87.

<sup>131</sup> Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, p. 287.

<sup>132</sup> See the rubric added to the prayer in the Malling Abbey Hours, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Gough liturg. 9, fols 233<sup>v</sup>–234<sup>r</sup>, trans. by Scott-Stokes in *Women’s Books of Hours*, p. 104 (emphasis added).

The lines of the prayer which correspond to the rubric ask especially for Mary's presence and guidance at the hour of death:

Cum finis uite uenerit meis te prebe oculis. ut terrorem sathane p[er] te queam euadere. conductricem te habeam. redeundo ad patriam. ne callidus diabolus me p[er]turbet aditus.

[When the end of life has come present yourself to my eyes. So that I may through you evade the terror of Satan, that I may have safe conduct through you, in returning home, so that the cunning devil does not trouble me on approach.]<sup>133</sup>

This spiritual request, to be saved from Satan at the hour of death, follows a short list of petitions for inner, spiritual change: to be kept from evil, to be released from vice, to be confirmed in virtue, and to be kept in tranquillity and peace.<sup>134</sup> The Marian prayer is entirely conventional: it requests Mary's intercession with Jesus on behalf of the supplicant and refers to Mary's role in defeating human sin, as the mother of Jesus, in asking for her guidance through the terrors of death. Unlike the prayer, the rubric does not refer to sin or worthiness. Instead it is a formula similar to a medical prescription, advising the daily recitation of the prayer. The promise that anyone following the formula will see Mary before death 'without doubt' introduces a certainty not given by the *exempla* of answered prayers seen in Mirk's sermon for the feast of St Michael, nor in the commentaries on the *Pater noster*. Where these teachings offer the hope that a faithful petitioner's prayers might be answered, the rubric substitutes surety.

A key, and often overlooked, element of late-medieval piety, and one which seemingly arises independently of theological teaching or direction, prayer rubrics present

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<sup>133</sup> *O Maria piissima*, mid-twelfth to early-thirteenth century, London, British Library, MS Cotton Nero C IV, fols 135<sup>r</sup>–135<sup>v</sup>. For the entire prayer, see Chapter Four, pp. 175–76.

<sup>134</sup> The fifteenth-century version of the prayer included in the Malling Hours continues by recalling the archangel Michael, 'whose task it is to rescue all good people from the devil'. See *O Maria piissima*, trans. by Scott-Stokes in *Women's Books of Hours*, p. 105. A rubric in an early-fifteenth-century book of hours later owned by Richard III promises that saying the prayer of the 'Seven Last Words', traditionally attributed to Bede, would protect the supplicant not only from hell and unshriven death, but also from being harmed by an evil man (Lambeth Palace Library, MS 474, fols 136<sup>v</sup>–138<sup>r</sup>). See Anne F. Sutton and Livia Visser-Fuchs, *The Hours of Richard III* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1990), p. 52.



evidence of a deep desire for security and an expectation of God's favourable response. In face of life's precariousness, prayers with such rubrics offer surety. Their promises could be more wide-ranging and extravagant than in the two examples considered above. For instance, several protective prayers in the early-fourteenth-century DuBois Hours requesting typically spiritual boons such as mercy, help, and forgiveness are preceded by a long rubric promising more immediate, physical forms of aid. This rubric, which is given in full and discussed in detail in Chapter Three, states that daily recitation will result in a multitude of beneficial effects including protection while travelling and in battle, the cessation of storms, and the healing of mental illness.<sup>135</sup> Another prayer to Mary in the same manuscript includes a rubric directing the prayer to be said five times each day in honour of the Five Joys of Mary. If followed, this rubric promises similarly extravagant physical protection:

Ja ne ceste siecle hunte ne avera ne del enemi engine ne serra ne en pecche criminal  
ne girra. Ne en curt de terrien seignur a tort jusge ne serra. Ne desconfes ne murra  
e si ço est femme ja d'enfant ne perira.

[Never in this world will he have shame; he will not be tormented by the enemy; he will not lie down in deadly sin; he will not be judged wrong in the court of an earthly lord. He will not die vanquished and if this one is a woman, never will she perish with child.]<sup>136</sup>

The boldness of the promises in some of the rubrics attempts to remove any elements of doubt and trust that might be required of the act of prayer. As we shall see in Chapter Four, some rubrics promise that daily recitation or even wearing the prayer on the body would protect from death by drowning, fire, battle or judgement.<sup>137</sup> Analysing the motivations

<sup>135</sup> DuBois Hours, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS M.700, fols 145<sup>v</sup>–146<sup>r</sup>, trans. by Smith, *Art, Identity and Devotion*, p. 254. This prayer rubric will be discussed in further detail in Chapter Three; see pp. 137–38.

<sup>136</sup> DuBois Hours, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS M.700, fols 130<sup>v</sup>–131<sup>r</sup>. For the text of this rubric, see Ruth J. Dean, ed., with Maureen B. M. Boulton, *Anglo-Norman Literature: A Guide to Texts and Manuscripts* (London: Anglo-Norman Text Society, 1989), pp. 407–8.

<sup>137</sup> For a discussion of the rubric often attached to the prayer *Deus propicius esto*, see Chapter Four, p. 185–86.

behind including semi-magical material in devotional manuscripts, Kathryn A. Smith identifies the book of hours as ‘a repository of “magical” and protective prayers’.<sup>138</sup>

Viewing the evidence presented by this multiplicity of late-medieval voices praying or discussing prayers, it is clear that no one monolithic understanding of petitionary prayer held sway. How to pray, how virtuous one ought to be, what to pray for, and what to expect are all questions to which several possible answers exist. An additional, quiet possibility is that prayers could remain unanswered, too:

Whoever is in tribulation in this world, because of the place where she is, or through anguish of the heart, let her pray wholeheartedly and with good faith to God for deliverance, and have Masses sung as set out here, with the alms, and your prayer will be heard; but let the prayer be in accordance with God’s will.<sup>139</sup>

The rubric, added to the manuscript in a fifteenth-century hand, is careful to stress that the prayer must align with the will of God. It also offers a purely spiritual reward in words which accord with the teachings of both Bishop Brinton and Mirk. The outcome to be desired by the supplicant is of an inward spiritual nature; she ought to ask to be delivered of any tribulations caused by distress and heartfelt pain or by her circumstances. The rubric makes no promises of divine intervention, instead assuring the devout reader that God will hear her prayer.

A prayer that is heard is not necessarily a prayer that is answered; God might hear a petition but choose not to grant it. A fifteenth-century chronicle illustrates the distinction nicely. The chronicler reports a cautionary tale of a thief who, repentant of stealing several pyxes from London churches and appalled at the heretical acts consequent to his theft, prayed

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<sup>138</sup> Smith, *Art, Identity, Devotion*, p. 252. Smith writes that promises such as those contained in these rubrics were sometimes semi-magically attached to the wearing of a prayer around the affected part of the body (p. 255).

<sup>139</sup> ‘Ki est en tribulacion de cest siecle’, De Reydon Hours, Cambridge University Library, MS D.4.17, fol. 78<sup>r</sup>, trans. by Scott-Stokes in *Women’s Books of Hours*, pp. 138–39 (p. 138).

solemnly for God's mercy.<sup>140</sup> Despite his penitential prayer, he was unable to obtain a vision of Christ's body in the consecrated host at four consecutive masses. Only after he was sufficiently penitent to confess to a priest was he able to regain the blessed vision. While the purpose of this account is to promote the practice of sacramental confession while also solemnly warning against heresy, the episode also raises an important question about the nature of responses to prayer. The partial, and particular, loss of vision experienced by the thief could be considered a result of his theft. If so, his prayer for mercy is not granted until he shows a sufficient degree of repentance. Another possibility is that the loss of vision could be considered a response to his first, unsuccessful, appeal for mercy. In this case, his prayer remains ungranted, but is answered, albeit negatively. This moral tale demonstrates a real difficulty in distinguishing the resulting effects of petitionary prayer, as they might be understood by the supplicant or any interested observers. A prayer which does not gain the desired result can be unanswered, ungranted, or even unheard. The frequency of the refrain 'Domine, exaudi orationem meum' acknowledges the distinction while also implying that a prayer might just possibly go astray or be ignored.<sup>141</sup> An unsuccessful prayer might invite an explanation for its lack of success.

The chronicler's tale of the repentant thief and his restored vision represents a negative exemplum in which one of the consequences of unconfessed sin is prayer unheard and unanswered. Any judgement on the efficacy of prayers for protection must be similarly subjective and cannot of course form the object of analysis as a historical event. Whatever befell Isabel Ruddok during her lifetime, whether she believed her prayer against her enemies to have been effective or not, an objective view on its efficacy remains an impossibility.

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<sup>140</sup> William Gregory's *Chronicle of London*, edited by J. Gairdner, *The Historical Collection of a London Citizen*, Camden Society, 123 (1876), 55–239 (pp. 234–35).

<sup>141</sup> [Lord, hear my prayer.] The refrain occurs frequently in the Little Hours. For examples, see *Horae Eboracenses*, pp. 62–70.

While it is uncertain who Ruddok's enemies were, or whether they ceased to trouble her, other historical prayers were materially unsuccessful. In a century when prayers for military success were not at all unusual, Richard III provides a typical example. His book of hours, which was compiled circa 1420, not long after the death of Chaucer, includes many prayers for protection.<sup>142</sup> These prayers include *Deus propicius esto*, *Dominator domine omnium*, and *O mi angele* and to these Richard had added several leaves with additional protective prayers.<sup>143</sup> One of these, a fourteenth-century prayer written in the first person and adapted to include Richard's name, asks protection from all enemies, especially those plotting against him.<sup>144</sup> As in Ruddok's prayer, these enemies represent worldly, as well as spiritual, foes.<sup>145</sup> Given that the book of hours containing this prayer joined the spoils of war in the aftermath of the battle of Bosworth Field, Richard III's prayer would seem to have been comprehensively unsuccessful, as Duffy notes. Describing Lady Margaret Beaufort's subsequent possession of the king's book of hours, he writes, 'the prayer didn't work, of course, and after the battle the book was given by the victorious enemy Henry VII to his mother.'<sup>146</sup> Judging the success of a literary prayer would seem to be an easier task, especially when the narrator informs the reader that God or the gods have responded to the prayer. As we shall see, however, with Chaucer this task will not be as straightforward as it would appear.

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<sup>142</sup> On the date of the book of hours and its subsequent ownership, see Sutton and Visser-Fuchs, *The Hours of Richard III*, pp. 39–40. For the protective prayers, see Sutton's and Visser-Fuchs's 'Analysis of Contents', in *The Hours of Richard III*, pp. 41–66.

<sup>143</sup> Sutton and Visser-Fuchs, *The Hours of Richard III*, pp. 39, 61–6.

<sup>144</sup> For the history, analogues, and full text of the prayer, see Sutton and Visser-Fuchs, *The Hours of Richard III*, pp. 67–78. For a discussion of the prayer, see Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, p. 267.

<sup>145</sup> Like Ruddok's prayer, this prayer invokes God's protection of numerous biblical figures (here, most comprehensively, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Noah, Lot, Moses, Aaron, the people of Israel, Saul, King David, Susannah, Judith, Daniel, the three young men in the furnace, Jonah, the daughter of the woman of Cana, Adam, Peter, and Paul). See Sutton and Visser-Fuchs, *The Hours of Richard III*, pp. 76–7. Prayers of this type are discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis, see pp. 186–87.

<sup>146</sup> Duffy, *Marking the Hours*, p. 33.

As the preceding sections have shown, late-medieval understandings of prayer are varied, contradictory, and contested. Theory, teaching, and practice are rarely in perfect alignment and the texts which offer evidence for how prayer was practised often present sharply contrasting understandings of prayer on a single manuscript folio. Petitionary prayer is the site in which the greatest contradictions play out, primarily because this is the form of prayer which expects change through the means of a divine response. In order to understand how such prayers operate in a literary context, especially in texts written by a member of the laity, such as Chaucer, it is vital to bring these contested views of prayer to bear on their literary counterparts. The multiplicity of late-medieval Christian prayer practice is taken up and explored in Chaucer's work, presenting an in-depth analysis of every aspect of petitionary prayer, from the relationship between the supplicant's virtue or worthiness and the divine response; the potential for destruction in mutually incompatible petitions; the relationship between the supplicant's own alliance with divine will, or knowledge of correct form, and outcome; the desire for surety revealed in the rubrics and their bold promises of material gain affixed to spiritually focussed prayers; to the terrifying final possibility that prayer itself will go unanswered, injustice un-remedied, the supplicant unheard. Chaucer's texts display a serious consideration of petitionary prayer. This begins in the earliest texts with an exploration of prayer as narrative device, and an examination of the idea of petition, decoupling desert from reward. In later texts, ambivalence, the problematic, and finally the unanswered prayer become more prominent.

We now turn from the late-medieval Christian context for Chaucer's work to the intermingled pagan and Christian settings of his dream visions. Chapter Two argues that Chaucer problematises answers to prayer in two of his dream visions, *The Book of the Duchess* and *The House of Fame*. In these texts he explores the potential for petitionary prayer as a creator of narrative, employing prayer in what Bridges calls the 'narrative-

engendering' model. In both texts, prayer represents a transition for the poet dreamer from one state to another. This simple provision of narrative movement is complicated in each of the two texts, however, by the poet's analysis of the problem of prayer. Chaucer subverts the inherent simplicity expressed in the use of petitionary prayer as a literary device, disrupting the connections between the expressed desire, the worthiness of the supplicant, and the response of the gods to prayer. *The Book of the Duchess* explores the disjunction between the content of a petition and its response, using pagan prayer as the means through which to approach the discomfort of Christian answers to prayer not necessarily offering effective consolation. *The House of Fame* presents a forensic examination of the nature of petition. In particular, the text systematically dismantles the relationship between the notion of just desert, the specific request made, and the outcome of the petition, decoupling the outcome from the virtue of the supplicant.

Chapter Three analyses conflicting prayers in two of Chaucer's romances, *The Knight's Tale* and *The Franklin's Tale*. The chapter begins with the earlier text, *The Knight's Tale*, which deploys petitionary prayer again in its 'narrative-engendering' role, but moves swiftly into an exploration of mutually exclusive prayers and the disastrous consequences when two equally deserving supplicants pray against one another. The chapter argues that the tale offers a critique of the use of prayer as a weapon, a practice common during Chaucer's lifetime and one which was encouraged by bishops on both sides of contemporary battles. The chapter considers *The Franklin's Tale* as an answer to the problem presented; the tale offers an alternative method of resolving conflicting prayers. Although Dorigen's and Aurelius's prayers are at cross purposes, due to their irreconcilable desires, the answer to their conflict lies with human action, rather than divine intervention. The significance of answers to prayer is relegated in the tale: the protagonists' prayers do not remove the conflict, which can only be resolved by the same human agency responsible for its creation.

Chapter Four considers Chaucer's hagiographic tales, arguing that these tales exhibit divergent discourses of prayer in which the voices of the four narrators differ both from one another and from their hagiographic subjects as they interpret the answers to their prayers. The prayers of the saints, and the saint-like, are the most likely to be answered in Chaucer's works. This petitionary success results from the protagonists' desire to align their wills with God, knowing both how to pray and what to pray for. The texts range from the pure hagiographic form of *The Second Nun's Tale*, which evinces little narratorial intervention in the interpretation of her prayers, to the evident manipulation of the narrators both in *The Prioress's Tale* and in *The Man of Law's Tale* as each interprets answers to prayer in a manner suiting a didactic purpose. Although answered, the prayers in these tales inevitably result in death and suffering. The chapter ends with an analysis of *The Clerk's Tale*, in which the hagiographic form is exploited to create an exemplum from Griselda, whose perverse prayers undermine the Clerk's concluding sentence.

Chapter Five shifts from the answered prayers of the rest of the thesis to an exploration of the many unanswered and unanswerable prayers in *Troilus and Criseyde*. The multitude of unanswered prayers heighten the sense of the tragic, as the unhappy result of the love affair is known both to the audience and to the narrator who perceive the consequent hopelessness of the protagonists' prayers. This chapter argues that Chaucer uses the concentric structure of the poem to present two answers to the problems raised by otherwise unanswerable prayers. Criseyde's lament on the transience of joy is answered by Chaucer's poetic replication of Boethian time, which produces an eternal moment of bliss at the poem's heart, while Troilus's prayer for 'binding' love receives a response in the Trinitarian prayer of the poem's conclusion.

– Two –

## Problematising Answers to Prayer in Dream Visions

The previous chapter established that the teaching, practice, and, above all, expectations of petitionary prayer were not fixed or agreed amongst Chaucer's contemporaries. This thesis is not, however, a history of prayer, but rather an exploration of Chaucer's use of petitionary prayer in his poetry. In Bridges's 'narrative-engendering' model, the literary use of petitionary prayer can appear a straightforward process: a request made in prayer will be granted, the desire expressed fulfilled through the author's ability to direct divine intervention as it operates fictively. If a prayer is not granted, or is given a response that somehow goes awry, the reader might be tempted to search for the faulty element in the workings of prayer: the supplicant must not be worthy, the gods are capricious or cruel, or the petition must not have been expressed correctly. In the two dream visions which feature answers to prayer, Chaucer subverts simplistic expectations of prayer's effectiveness, drawing upon the inherently problematic nature of petitionary prayer.

In his two earliest dream visions, *The Book of the Duchess* and *The House of Fame*, dated around 1368 to 1372 and mid-1370s to early 1380s respectively, Chaucer employs petitionary prayer as a narrative device.<sup>1</sup> Prayer in both poems serves as an impetus to

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<sup>1</sup> Possible dates for *The Book of the Duchess* range from the *terminus a quo* of 1368, when Blanche the Duchess of Lancaster and presumed subject of the dream vision died of plague, to 1374, the year in which her alabaster tomb was dedicated. For details on these generally agreed dates, as well as a proposal that the poem's composition post-dates the beginning of John of Gaunt's relationship with Katherine Swynford around 1371–2, see Michael Foster, 'On Dating the Duchess: the Personal and Social Context of "Book of the Duchess"', *Review of English Studies*, n.s., 59 (2008), 185–96. *The House of Fame* is typically dated to the years between 1374 and the mid-1380s. Howard H. Schless proposes a date as early as 1374, following Chaucer's first travel to Italy and potential encounter with the works of Dante. See his *Chaucer and Dante: A Revaluation* (Norman, Oklahoma: Pilgrim Books, 1984), p. 41. The latest date suggested is 1384, which Cooper argues on the basis that the 10<sup>th</sup> of December of that year coincided with the Second Sunday in Advent, liturgically dedicated to Judgement. See Cooper, 'Four Last Things', pp. 63–4. For a discussion on dating *The House of Fame*, see Nick Havely, who also suggests 1374 as the earliest possible date due to Chaucer beginning work as Controller of Customs in that year and mid-1380s as the latest, since Thomas Usk paraphrases lines from the poem: Nick Havely, 'The House of Fame: Introduction', in *Chaucer's Dream Poetry*, ed. by Helen Phillips and Nick Havely (London: Longman, 1997), pp. 112–25 (p. 112).



further narrative events. In *The Book of the Duchess*, the narrator prays for sleep, thus allowing the dream to unfold, and in *The House of Fame*, the dream narrator's bewildered prayer is answered by the arrival of an eagle, whose appearance enables the further expansion of the vision into the celestial spheres. Neither of these examples, however, sits entirely comfortably within Bridges's description of prayer's function in narrative as one of 'wish-fulfilment' in which the command or desire of a character enables the next stage of plot development to occur.<sup>2</sup> In both cases, the dream or shift within the dream would be achievable without the prayer, either making the petition superfluous, or, as this chapter argues, implying that the prayer serves a greater function than mere plot device. Chaucer relies on the impetus created by the fulfilled dream in order to provoke narrative movement, but also explores in greater detail the capacities and capabilities of petitionary prayer more broadly. In both texts he uses intertwined pagan and Christian elements in dialogue with one another in a manner which he continues to develop throughout his writing career, as we shall see in Chapters Three and Five. In both texts he problematises answers to petitionary prayer through exposing the problematic nature of this mode of prayer as well as through disrupting the connection between the expressed desire of a petition and its outcome.

We will first consider the earlier of the two texts, *The Book of the Duchess*, exploring Chaucer's use of prayer in a pagan exemplum and his layering of Christian over pagan referents. The chapter will continue by analysing Chaucer's use of similar strategies in employing literary prayers in *The House of Fame*, exploring the development of complexity in prayer as a means of creating shape and structure in a text as well as a means of drawing out themes of importance to Chaucer such as the injustice of suffering innocence and the earthly triumph of evil. While *The Book of the Duchess* questions the ability even of an

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<sup>2</sup> Bridges, 'Narrative-engendering and Narrative-inhibiting Functions of Prayer', pp. 68–9. Bridges singles out *The Knight's Tale* as an example of prayer functioning in this straightforward fashion common to Latin epic poetry and medieval romance.

answered prayer to fulfil desire, *The House of Fame* interrogates the very concept of petition, especially the relationship between the request, the worthiness of the supplicant, and the outcome to a petition.

*Problematic answers to petitions in The Book of the Duchess*

This section considers Chaucer's problematisation of the answers to the two petitionary prayers of *The Book of the Duchess*, one spoken by Alcyone, the other by the narrator. In this poem, the narrator's prayer for sleep marks the transition between the dream and its frame. As a simple cause, the petition links the romance of Seys and Alcyone to its effect, the dream which it influences. This literary act of devotion therefore fits the basic criterion of a 'narrative-engendering' petitionary prayer: the narrator's desire for that which he lacks, which in this instance is sleep, is fulfilled when his prayer leads to a dream encounter with the Black Knight. The encounter, however, and, in fact, the dream itself go beyond his simple desire for sleep. The narrator has read about Alcyone praying to Juno for a vision of her husband and has seen Morpheus's consequent provision of the vision to the supplicant, and he decides to follow her example, praying directly for sleep rather than for a vision. This act allows the transition from the frame narrative, with its insomniac narrator, to the dream vision which occupies the majority of the text. Yet the narrator's prayer accomplishes more than the simple movement from one state, insomnia, to another, dreaming. While the prayer is 'narrative-engendering' in that it directly causes the continued narrative, the narrator's expressed desire to sleep, although granted, hardly seems the point of the dream vision which follows.

At one level, then, the prayer operates as a seemingly simple narrative device; consequently, the mechanistic function of the prayer has drawn some attention. John McCall acknowledges Chaucer's use of prayer as a literary device when he writes that the prayer's

first function is ‘simply and mechanically to shift the narrative from book to dream’.<sup>3</sup> He also, however, sees the prayer as enabling a shift in mood, which he argues is from the tragic to the comic, from heaviness to levity. Taking the narrator’s reference to his ‘game’ as a signal that the poem asks to be taken lightly in all that follows, he describes the narrator’s actions as perverse and parodic.<sup>4</sup> By describing the prayer as a mechanistic device with the dual purpose of furthering the narrative while creating an ironic distance between the ignorance of a pagan widow and the superior knowledge of the narrator, McCall diminishes the relationship between the dream and its fictional inspiration. He reduces the tale of Alcyone to a negative exemplum whose sole function is to highlight the pathetic, unnatural self-indulgence of the Black Knight’s grief.<sup>5</sup> Carolynn Van Dyke, by contrast, dismisses the purpose of divine intervention in the poem as merely a plot device, arguing that the intervention is unnecessary: ‘the narrator might simply have dreamed about the Black Knight’.<sup>6</sup> The presence of the pagan gods, in her view, leads to a narratorial humility open to empathy, a state modelled for an empathetic reader.<sup>7</sup> Yet the narrator’s decision to follow Alcyone’s example is not fuelled by compassion, but by his own myopic desire. Alcyone’s misfortune lies with the inability of Juno, despite her empathy, to offer consolation. The narrator, by contrast, in his absurd attempt to follow the pagan exemplum, is unexpectedly presented with a Christian consolation which neither feels comforting nor corresponds to his expressed desire.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John P. McCall, *Chaucer Among the Gods: The Poetics of Classical Myth* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State Press, 1979), p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> McCall also describes the narrator’s act as a ‘parody of Alcyone’s pathetic prayer’. See McCall, *Chaucer Among the Gods*, pp. 19–20.

<sup>5</sup> McCall, *Chaucer Among the Gods*, p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> Carolynn Van Dyke, *Chaucer’s Agents: Cause and Representation in Chaucerian Narrative* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005), p. 115.

<sup>7</sup> Van Dyke, *Chaucer’s Agents*, pp. 116–17.

<sup>8</sup> The poem is often read as a consolation, a point which will be discussed in detail below. Strong exception to this reading is taken by David Lawton, who rejects the idea that Chaucer would have presumed to offer consolation to the powerful John of Gaunt. Instead, he argues that the poem presents the awakening of feeling,

In *The Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer explores the thematic potential of answered prayer through the intermingling of pagan and Christian elements: the Christian narrator follows the pagan exemplum of Ovid's Alcyone. Among the tales of pagan queens and kings, fables, and other inconsequential 'thinges smale' contained in the romance with which he aims to banish his insomnia, the narrator finds himself drawn to the story of Seys and Alcyone, the unhappy subjects of Book XI in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (BD, ll. 57–61). Faced with the characters' love, loss, and insufferable grief, the narrator focusses myopically on a single facet of the tale: Alcyone's miraculous sleep, the result of her desperate prayer to Juno to receive news of her husband's fate. Setting the scene for his apparent inability to comprehend the cause of the Knight's grief in the dream vision which follows, the narrator overlooks the pathos of the tale he has just recounted for his reader, dwelling instead on Juno's response to the prayer. The transition from insomniac midnight reading to miraculous vision occurs as a direct consequence of this decision to follow the pagan woman's pious example. With a naive air, the narrator claims never to have heard of Morpheus before and expresses fascination with the concept of a god who holds within his power the ability to grant sleep:

I had never herd speke or tho  
Of noo goddes that koude make  
Men to slepe, ne for to wake  
For I ne knew never god but oon.

(BD, ll. 234–36)<sup>9</sup>

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especially empathy, in the poet, and the reconciliation of the two narratorial personas in the text. See David Lawton, *Chaucer's Narrators* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1985), pp. 54–6.

<sup>9</sup> Phillips suggests that the lines might represent a 'recognition of the pre-Christian nature of Ovid's fables'. See Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Book of the Duchess*, ed. by Helen Phillips, in *Chaucer's Dream Poetry*, pp. 50–111 (p. 61n).

Despite his assertion, echoing the *Credo*, that he knows only the One God, and, furthermore, has never yet heard of any others with such power over humanity, the narrator finds himself tempted by this account of divine intervention.<sup>10</sup>

His credal statement accomplishes two tasks. Firstly, it denies power to those same pagan deities whose intervention the narrator will almost immediately seek. And secondly, it points beyond the text to the Christian belief in resurrection. By referring to gods who can make men sleep, the narrator reminds the audience of a God who can make men awaken. As Rodney Delasanta has argued, the symbolism of resurrection in which the dream and the concluding frame narrative abound encourage interpretation of sleeping and waking as death and life.<sup>11</sup> By assuming an open-minded ignorance of the pagan gods in spite of his orthodox beliefs, the narrator is able to linger in wonder over their actions on behalf of Alcyone; his orthodox statement follows prolonged study of the tale, in which he ‘overlooked hyt everydel’ (*BD*, l. 232). He signals a residual willingness to believe that gods of sleep could exist when he wonders ‘yf hit were so’ (*BD*, l. 233). The obvious humour of the prayer which follows the narrator’s statement can seem to imply an ironic mockery of pagan beliefs, a view espoused by McCall. This easy dismissal evades accounting for the significance of using an answered prayer to a pagan deity as a narrative device, however, and indeed the causal

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<sup>10</sup> The narrator claims a knowledge of one God, echoing the Nicene Creed without explicitly quoting its first statement: ‘Credo in unum deum patrem omnipotentem factorem celi et terre uisibilium omnium et inuisibilium’ [I believe in one God, Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.] *Credo in unum deum*, in *Missale ad usum Ecclesie Westmonasteriensis*, ed. by John Wickham Legg (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1999), pp. 498–99. For the baptismal rite according to the Use of Sarum, the laity were expected to be able to recite the Apostles’ Creed (‘Credo in deum patrem omnipotentem’), which lacks the ‘unum’ of the Nicene Creed. On the baptismal liturgy, see Dudley, ‘Sacramental Liturgies in the Middle Ages’, p. 201. Although originally part of the baptismal rite, the Roman Rite provided for the recitation of the Nicene Creed during the Mass. As Gabriela Ilnitchi writes, ‘During the Middle Ages it seems sometime to have been recited by the congregation, sometimes sung by the clergy.’ See Gabriela Ilnitchi, ‘Music in the Liturgy’, in *The Liturgy of the Medieval Church*, ed. by Heffernan and Matter, pp. 589–612 (p. 611). The first line of the Nicene Creed in the Westminster Missal (above) is written with musical notation.

<sup>11</sup> Delasanta specifically notes the repeated appearance in the dream of blowing trumpets, birds (including the phoenix), and imagery derived from the Song of Songs. See Rodney Delasanta, ‘Christian Affirmation in “The Book of the Duchess”’, *PMLA*, 84 (1969), 245–51 (pp. 249–51).

relationship between the prayer and dream more frequently goes unmentioned.<sup>12</sup> In addition, Chaucer's use of pagan deities and characters is more subtle than an analysis such as McCall's allows. John Marenbon discusses Chaucer's approach to the 'Problem of Paganism' as one of dual perspective. Chaucer, he argues, writes from an imaginative viewpoint 'within a pagan world, whilst aware, as his readers too would be, that there is an external Christian perspective on it, which is only partly accessible from his viewpoint on the inside'.<sup>13</sup> It is this inability fully to access a Christian perspective from within the imagined pagan worldview which allows Chaucer to avoid the condemnation of pagan characters which has been so often assumed in critical writings on his treatment of pagan subject matter.

Chaucer was not the first poet to emulate Ovid in introducing a prayer to Juno or Morpheus for sleep. In *Le Paradys d'Amours*, Froissart's narrator prays to Morpheus, Juno and Oleus for sleep, which is granted, resulting in a dream.<sup>14</sup> Whereas Froissart portrays the causal relationship simply, Chaucer's self-identified Christian narrator does everything possible to disguise his actions in seeking sleep from pagan deities, succeeding, of course, only in drawing greater attention to his actions. Vacillating between playfulness and

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<sup>12</sup> Critical discussions tend to mention the narrator's emulation of Alcyone before proceeding to discuss the dream, without addressing the causal nature of the prayer. See, for example: Delasanta, 'Christian Affirmation', p. 248; Piero Boitani, 'Old Books Brought to Life in Dreams: *The Book of the Duchess*, *The House of Fame*, *The Parliament of Fowls*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, ed. by Piero Boitani and Jill Mann, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 58–77 (p. 64); and Julia G. Ebel, 'Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess*: A Study in Medieval Iconography and Literary Structure', *College English*, 29 (1967), 197–206 (p. 202). One exception to this tendency is Van Dyke's discussion of the episode, in which, she writes, 'the narrator sets out to test the story's truth claim.' She also draws attention to the prayer's success: 'As both narcotic and muse, Morpheus comes through'. See Van Dyke, *Chaucer's Agents*, pp. 114–15. John M. Fyler acknowledges the connection obliquely, but refers to the dream as a miracle produced by the agency of Nature. See his 'Irony and the Age of Gold in the *Book of the Duchess*', *Speculum*, 52 (1977), 314–28 (pp. 316–17).

<sup>13</sup> John Marenbon, *Pagans and Philosophers: The Problem of Paganism from Augustine to Leibniz* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 214.

<sup>14</sup> Jean Froissart, *Le Paradys d'Amours*, ed. and trans. by B. A. Windeatt in *Chaucer's Dream Poetry: Sources and Analogues* (Woodbridge: Brewer, 1982), pp. 41–57 (p. 42). For a brief discussion of the passages on which the narrator's request to Juno and Morpheus is loosely modelled, see Fyler, 'Irony and the Age of Gold', p. 316, as well as Windeatt, *Chaucer's Dream Poetry*, p. x. Earle Birney rejects the idea that either Chaucer or his contemporaries were indulging in parody or burlesque, locating the humour instead in depictions of a 'cave of sleep' and the manner in which Morpheus is awoken. The tale of Seys and Alcyone, he writes, serves as a 'complimentary classical parallel' to John of Gaunt and Blanche. See Earle Birney, 'The Beginnings of Chaucer's Irony', *PMLA*, 54 (1939), 637–55 (p. 646).

fearfulness, between the fantastically ridiculous and the mundanely mercantile considerations of his offered sacrifice to Morpheus, Juno or ‘som wight elles’, this believer in one God places his hopes in Alcyone’s pagan gods.<sup>15</sup> The parenthetical phrasing and other interpolated clauses hint at two conflicting desires: one to disguise and another to acknowledge his unorthodox act.

The narrator’s decision to proceed with a course of action contrary to his beliefs requires some deft verbal gymnastics. His account of his dealings with Morpheus aims to obscure rather than to illuminate. Veering from playfulness to parenthetical self-justification to pathos and back again to humour, the narrator displays an oddly mixed commentary on his own behaviour. Paradoxically, by making the narrator’s vacillations the centre of attention, Chaucer almost disguises their final outcome. Whereas the success of Alcyone’s prayer is marked with the narratorial comment, ‘for as she prayede, ryght so was don | in dede’, Chaucer omits to mention the success of the narrator’s own petition (*BD*, ll. 131–32). Having made his credal statement, he suggests that all that follows should not be taken seriously:

And in my game I sayde anoon  
 (And yet me lyst ryght evel to pleye)  
 Rather then that y shulde deye  
 Thorgh defaute of slepyng thus,  
 I wolde yive thilke Morpheus,  
 Or hys goddesse, dame Juno,  
 Or som wight elles, I ne roghte who –  
 ‘To make me slepe and have som reste  
 I wil yive hym the alderbeste  
 Yifte that ever he abod hys lyve.’

(*BD*, ll. 238–47)

<sup>15</sup> The presence of pagan gods in the poem is usually discussed metaphorically and symbolically. Ebel presents an interesting study of the poem’s structure as a triptych, arguing that the use of pagan iconography should be viewed as a literary representation of pictorial structure familiar from Renaissance art (although based on medieval visual representations of perspective). Ebel views the structure as composed of three planes: the ‘realistic’, the ‘emotive’ (the plane containing Seys, Alcyone and the pagan gods), and the ‘fantastical’. See Ebel, ‘Chaucer’s *The Book of the Duchess*’, p. 197. She also views Morpheus as having been domesticated by the narrator (p. 201). Jane Chance draws upon the many infernal references in *The Book of the Duchess* to compare the separate descents into hell of Seys, Alcyone, and the Black Knight. The poem, she argues, presents the waking state as one of virtue, rationality, and self-control, in opposition to sleep/death. See Jane Chance, *The Mythographic Chaucer: The Fabulation of Sexual Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pp. 25–36.

The narrator's offer to Morpheus, as he explains before divulging the details, had been made merely in game. McCall accounts for the contrast between the narrator's apparently sincere concern over his insomnia and his playfulness as demonstrating a growth in the complexity of his character: 'Even though he does not want to, he can still be playful; he feels sympathy for Alcyone but he toys with the divinities that she worshiped'.<sup>16</sup> The complex methods by which the narrator delays revealing the exact details of his dealings with pagan deities achieve more than greater depth of character, however. By offering a justification for his act before revealing the act itself, he delays the moment when he must admit to having addressed a god in whom he does not believe. Further delaying tactics are evident in the parenthetical phrases which interrupt the flow of his recount. Immediately upon assuring his reader that he had indulged himself in a mere game, the narrator interjects a contradictory note to insist that he certainly was not feeling playful at the time. This interruption is then followed by a self-justification in which the narrator melodramatically presents his petition to the pagan gods as a better alternative to a potentially fatal case of insomnia.

Finally, with six lines intervening between the word 'sayde' and the beginning of his recounted speech, the narrator reaches the crux of the matter, the deal he made with Morpheus. His offer to the god is excessive and conditional. His sacrifice will be the best gift the god of sleep has ever received: a feather bed of purest white, striped with gold, arrayed with sumptuous black satin and pillowcases of the finest linen, along with the painting and redecoration of the god's gloomy cave. All this the narrator tells his audience he promised and would deliver, in return for sleep, if only he knew where to find Morpheus. The breathless rush enumerating his ever more extravagant and ridiculous promises comes to a sudden halt in another parenthetical phrase as the narrator explains that he does not know

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<sup>16</sup> McCall, *Chaucer Among the Gods*, p. 20.



‘where were hys cave’ (l. 262). And so the flight into the fantastical which begins by addressing gods unknown ends by acknowledging its own impossibility once again: the hopeful narrator cannot fulfil his own side of the bargain.

By making legible the tactics used to disguise and simultaneously to draw attention to this prayer, Chaucer underlines its significance. While Chaucer’s later works continue to present prayers in pagan contexts and to pagan gods, such prayers uttered by a narrator are significantly rarer than those voiced by characters. Apart from the classically inspired invocations to pagan deities in the proems of *The House of Fame*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, and the first four books of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer’s works contain only two further examples of his narrative persona praying in petition to a pagan god.<sup>17</sup> One of these is found in *The House of Fame* and addresses Venus; the other is the narrator’s intercession with Janus in Book II of *Troilus and Criseyde*.<sup>18</sup> In the first of these examples, the narrator prays to Venus for protection and the relief of suffering: ‘The whiche I preye alwey save us, | And us ay of oure sorwes lyghte!’ (*HF*, ll. 466–67). The second example concerns the narrator asking Janus, rather unnecessarily, to guide Pandarus along the well-worn way to his niece’s house: ‘Now Janus, god of entree, thow hym gyde!’ (*Tr*, II. 77). Each of these examples lacks key aspects which distinguish the narrator’s prayer to Morpheus in *The Book of the Duchess*. Neither demonstrates the self-consciousness of a narrator deliberately choosing a

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<sup>17</sup> The narrator of *The House of Fame* invokes Morpheus, the ‘god of slep’ (*HF*, l. 69); the narrator of *The Parliament of Fowls* invokes Cytherea (*PF*, ll. 113–16); and the narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde* invokes Thesiphone, Cleo, Venus and Caliope, the Furies and Mars respectively in I. 6–7, II. 8–11, III. 1–46, and IV. 22–48. Van Dyke refers to the role of theophany in three of the dream visions, including the role ascribed to Venus by the narrator of *The Parliament of Fowls*, as ‘inessential’. See Van Dyke, *Chaucer’s Agents*, p. 115. In *The Parliament of Fowls*, The narrator ascribes his dream to Venus’s prior intervention, and now desires her aid to tell his tale; whether the dream itself is a response to a desire expressed in prayer by the poet is left open.

<sup>18</sup> The narrator/dreamer of *The Romaunt of the Rose*, Chaucer’s translation of *Le Roman de la Rose*, twice addresses the ‘god of Love’ directly, as does the narrator in the original. Since the ‘god of Love’ appears figuratively as a feudal lord in the text and the language used (‘I pray you’ and ‘I pray Love’) is identical to multiple examples where Chaucer’s characters plead formally for a favour from another character, this example is not considered relevant here. In addition, these two examples occur in the fragment of the work not attributable to Chaucer (*Rom*, ll. 2142–4; ll. 4604–7). See also Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. by Daniel Poirion (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1974), ll. 2049–50; ll. 4210–12.

course of action contrary to his stated beliefs. More importantly, neither results in an outcome which had seemed unlikely prior to the prayer. The apparent answer to the narrator's prayer for sleep makes this passage unique amongst the various references to pagan gods and goddesses in Chaucer's works.

Significantly, the ostentatiously ridiculous nature of the narrator's prayer invites comparison with the sobriety of Alcyone's. His petition, like hers, receives an instantaneous response. The narrator reports:

I hadde unneth that word ysayd  
 Ryght thus as I have told hyt yow,  
 That sodeynly, I nyste how,  
 Such a lust anoon me took  
 To slepe that ryght upon my book  
 Y fil aslepe...

(*BD*, ll. 270–75)

The narrator's emphasis here is on the suddenness with which his prayer has achieved results. The words 'unneth', 'sodeynly', and 'anoon' mutually reinforce the image of a sleep which overtakes the narrator so swiftly that he does not even have a moment first to close his book. This, he takes care to show without ever stating that his prayer has been answered 'in deed', is no natural drifting into sleep caused by a gradual submission of conscious control over the body, but is instead an irresistible state which seizes him despite his insomnia. As in the introduction to his prayer, his anxiety about his actions repeatedly interrupts the narrative, although rather than merely delaying the acknowledgement of his own actions, the aim here is to reassure the reader of his account's truthfulness. He highlights both the accuracy with which he reports the event, 'ryght thus as I have told hyt yow', and his ignorance of the means through which it has been accomplished, claiming, 'I nyste how'.

Chaucer creates an explicit disjunction between the Christian narrator's approach to the gods and the faithfulness modelled by his pagan exemplum. The narrator has learned the wrong lesson. Reading his romance, he sees a transaction: a positive divine response is

almost guaranteed by the promise of a devout worshipper to undertake particular actions.

Alcyone's prayer, the model for the narrator's, is as sincere and straightforward as his own petition is convoluted and insincere. On her knees and weeping, she petitions Juno:

‘A, mercy, swete lady dere!’  
 Quod she to Juno, hir goddesse,  
 ‘Helpe me out of thys distresse,  
 And yeve me grace my lord to se  
 Soone or wite wher-so he be,  
 Or how he fareth, or in what wise,  
 And I shal make yow sacrificise,  
 And hooly yours become I shal  
 With good wille, body, herte, and al;  
 And but thow wolt this, lady swete,  
 Send me grace to slepe and mete  
 In my slep som certeyn sweven  
 Wherthourgh that I may knowen even  
 Whether my lord be quyk or ded.’

(BD, ll. 108–21)

Although her prayer promises sacrifice in return for Juno's gift – an element to her devotions followed by the narrator – Alcyone's petition bears little resemblance affectively to the mercantile transaction of the narrator. Her offer of sacrifice is whole-hearted; she promises everything she has, body, heart, and will, to Juno in return for knowledge of her husband's fate. Her request is clear; she asks the goddess to make her sleep and to send her news in a dream. Here, too, the narrator differs: his request to Juno and Morpheus is hesitant and indirect. The style of his request is certainly humorous. But beyond the humour in the narrator's prayer lies an implicit invitation to contrast its merits with the pagan model which it follows so imperfectly. As we shall see, such an invitation extends as well to a comparison of the two answers received and the nature of the consolation offered each supplicant.

The sincerity of Alcyone's prayer stands in stark contrast to the frivolity, extravagance, and ambivalence of the narrator's own. This contrast undermines any impression that Alcyone's beliefs or her gods are the objects of mockery in the narrator's

petition, rather than himself.<sup>19</sup> Her heartfelt supplication offers little material ripe for mockery. Its tone and length both result from significant alterations Chaucer made to the two versions of the tale of Ceyx and Alcyone known to him: Ovid's original, in his *Metamorphoses*, and Guillaume de Machaut's fourteenth-century retelling in *La Fonteinne Amoureuse*.<sup>20</sup> Despite her tendency to weep and faint at other points in Book XI, a sober and dutiful Alcyone emerges at the point of her prayer in *Metamorphoses*.<sup>21</sup> Ovid, however, grants Alcyone no speech of her own, instead describing her actions in interceding with Juno for her husband's safety. Machaut, by contrast, allows the queen nine words:

Je te pri,  
Riche deesse, oy mon dolent depri.

[I pray you  
mighty goddess, hear my sorrowful prayer.]<sup>22</sup>

Chaucer further increases the queen's role by giving her a substantial passage in which she calls on Juno's pity, promises a full and honest sacrifice, and makes a clear and concise petition. The sober, thoughtful, faithful queen would seem to offer a sound exemplum in practice, if not in pagan belief. Any mockery which might be detected in the narrator's tone is not directed at the faithful pagan woman, but at himself.

The narrator follows Alcyone not by his own faithfulness, but by choosing to regard her promised sacrifice as a form of transaction in which he can also engage. The word with which he concludes his plea for divine intervention is not 'amen', but 'payd', for he frames

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<sup>19</sup> Fyler suggests that the narrator's error is not in following Alcyone's example, nor in focussing on the wrong desire, but in drastically limiting his request. If the narrator were to learn of Machaut, Froissart, and Deschamps, he would ask more of Juno and Morpheus. See his 'Irony and the Age of Gold', p. 316.

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of correspondences between *The Book of the Duchess* and Chaucer's sources for the tale of Ceyx and Alcyone, including Ovid and Machaut, see James Wimsatt, 'The Sources of Chaucer's "Seys and Alcyone"', *Medium Ævum*, 36 (1967), 231–41.

<sup>21</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. by Frank Justus Miller, 2 vols (London: Heinemann, 1968), II, XI. 577. Unless stated otherwise, all translations of *Metamorphoses* are Miller's.

<sup>22</sup> Guillaume de Machaut, *La Fonteinne Amoureuse*, in *Oeuvres de Guillaume de Machaut*, ed. by Ernest Hoepffner, 3 vols (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Edouard Champion, 1908–21), III, pp. 143–244, ll. 559–60.

his petition in commercial terms. If he were to be granted sleep, he promises, Morpheus would be rewarded:

And thus this ylke god, Morpheus,  
May wynne of me moo feës thus  
Than ever he wan; and to Juno,  
That ys hys goddesse, I shal soo do,  
I trow, that she shal holde hir payd.

(*BD*, ll. 265–69)

If granted, the narrator has promised these pagan gods that he will repay their good will in an extravagant sacrifice of material goods. Through repeated recourse to levity and through framing his prayer as an economic transaction, the narrator does not so much comment upon as depart from his pagan exemplum. Despite these tactics, and his attempts at obfuscation, his contractual relationship with the pagan gods is upheld. His prayer is answered with sleep.

Yet, while Alcyone's petition receives an immediate, positive response, that response is not consolatory. While following his sources in employing the prayer in a 'narrative-engendering' fashion, Chaucer also confounds simple expectations of effectiveness by problematising the divine answer, exposing the extent to which even an answered prayer may fail to fulfil desire. The narrator depicts the success of Alcyone's prayer purely in terms of the immediacy of the divine response it evokes. His straightforward description of Juno's response to Alcyone's petition exhibits none of the equivocation he will later use in narrating the result of his own prayer. Ignoring the likelihood that her grief-stricken state is responsible for the swoon which concludes her prayer, the narrator chooses to view her unconscious state as sleep, a gift direct from Juno. He makes this point emphatically:

and thus the dede slep  
Fil on hir or she tooke kep,  
Throgh Juno, that had herd hir bone,  
That made hir to slepe sone.  
For as she prayede, ryght so was don  
In dede.

(*BD*, ll. 127–32)

Alcyone places herself entirely in the hands of the goddess; at the moment her prayer ends, she sinks into passivity. She does not fall asleep; instead, sleep falls upon her. Juno's response to the prayer, by contrast, is active: in the narrator's retelling of his reading, she hears Alcyone and makes her sleep immediately. The prayer of Juno's faithful worshipper is both heard and granted. The goddess's power to grant petitions extends to bidding other deities to obey her commands. Iris the messenger and Morpheus, the god of sleep, become conduits for Juno's power. Gesturing forward to the narrator's later moment of wonder at the power of pagan gods, Chaucer adds an emphasis lacking in both Ovid and Machaut when he writes: 'For as she prayede, ryght so was don | In dede.'<sup>23</sup> His statement leaves no room for doubt at this point.

In answering the petition, Juno responds to its literal meaning, Alcyone having requested knowledge of her husband's fate. Aranye Fradenburg points to this prayer as evincing a fractured communication between the human and the divine:

Alcyone's petitions illustrate the frailty of human communication. We appeal to those we cannot see and who perhaps will not hear us on behalf of those who may already be beyond help.<sup>24</sup>

Hearing Alcyone's prayer, Juno rewards her faithful devotion with a response both literal and limited. The prayer is dramatically answered when the goddess sends an envoy to

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<sup>23</sup> Machaut also emphasises the direct intervention of the gods :

Alchioine vit Ceïs en dormant  
Or vous diray la maniere comment:  
Dieus de sommeil le fist par son commant  
Et l'endormy'

[Alchioine saw Ceïs in [her] sleep  
Now I will tell you how:  
The god of sleep did it by his command  
And made her sleep.]

Machaut, *La Fonteinne*, ll. 567–70. Ovid, by contrast, emphasises the futility of Alcyone's devotions by pointing out that her prayer that her husband might not love another is the only one which could be granted (*Metamorphoses*, II, XI. 581–82).

<sup>24</sup> L. O. Aranye Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 116.

Morpheus's cave, and by the consequent raising of Seys's dead body in order for Morpheus to ventriloquise Juno's message to Alcyone. Indeed, the narrator's reference to the story as a 'wonder thing' directly recalls the meaning of the Latin *miraculum*: 'object of wonder'.<sup>25</sup> Although her prayer is answered swiftly, the answer itself brings no comfort: as consolation, the response of the goddess is ultimately unsatisfactory. However miraculous in appearance, the granting of Alcyone's petition is brutal. Learning of her husband's drowning proves fatal: 'With that hir eyen up she casteth | And saw noght. "Allas!" quod she for sorwe, | And deyede within the thridde morwe' (*BD*, ll. 212–14). Juno offers nothing beyond the natural, physical outcome of a sunken ship and a drowned king.

If the dream vision and the encounter with the grief of the Black Knight is meant to be consolatory, as many have argued, the retelling of Alcyone's loss in the frame narrative ought to function either in opposition or as a classical parallel to the Knight's grief. It would seem therefore that either Alcyone's faith in her goddess must be misplaced or Juno's intervention must be in some way consoling. Earle Birney sees both the dream and the divine action in response to Alcyone's prayer as consolatory, arguing that the poet narrator replicates Juno's act when he represents the dead Blanche to her grieving Knight.<sup>26</sup> Delasanta also views Juno's intervention as a form of consolation, although noting that Chaucer's omission of Alcyone's metamorphosis, alongside that of her husband, into a bird refuses the 'beneficent' illusion of immortality given Ovid's pagan characters.<sup>27</sup> Arguing that the poem's focus is on the emotions of those who mourn, rather than on the fate of the dead, Helen Phillips links

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<sup>25</sup> See the etymology for 'miracle', *OED Online* <[www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)> [accessed 05.09.16]. Van Dyke refers to the episode as a 'small pagan miracle'. See Van Dyke, *Chaucer's Agents*, p. 114.

<sup>26</sup> Because he argues for a light-hearted, non-tragic vision, however, Birney does not address the dark implications of such an unmediated imitation of the goddess's act. See Birney, 'The Beginnings of Chaucer's Irony', p. 646.

<sup>27</sup> Delasanta, 'Christian Affirmation', p. 249. A. J. Minnis, by contrast, views the replacement of Ovid's happy metamorphosis as a pragmatic decision appropriate to the poem's intended reader, a grieving John of Gaunt. A. J. Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1982), p. 20. Gower keeps the metamorphosis of the pair into birds. See John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. by Russell A. Peck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), IV. 3088–119.

Chaucer's omission of metamorphosis instead to an addition he makes to his sources, the words of Seys to his wife.<sup>28</sup> This speech corresponds to the text's focus on the transience of life, she writes, and represents a 'compassionate assertion of the fact of mortality'.<sup>29</sup> Yet this divine reminder offers only hopelessness when received at Juno's hands. Linking the limits of Juno's 'consolation' with the lifeless images of Troy contained in the beautiful windows of the dreamer's bedroom, Peter W. Travis emphasises this absence of hope: 'The voice of a pagan god may summon a body from the vasty deep, but no divine language is able to inspire that matter with being'.<sup>30</sup>

The assurances Juno offers through the speech of Seys's reanimated body are of a grotesque sort. Alcyone awakes to the sight of her husband speaking words of love:

My swete wyf,  
Awake! Let be your sorwful lyf,  
For in your sorwe there lyth no red;  
For, certes, swete, I am but ded.  
Ye shul me never on lyve yse.  
But, goode swete herte, that ye  
Bury my body, for such a tyde  
Ye mowe hyt fynde the see besyde;  
And farewel, swete, my worldes blysse!

(BD, ll. 201–9)

When Alcyone hears her husband's repeated endearments, she does not know what the narrator knows: her vision is not mystical, nor dreamt, but instead shockingly physical. Her husband's drowned body stands before her, animated by the god Morpheus. When the words spoken to Alcyone are perceived as those of her husband, they appear consolatory, as in Phillips's analysis of Chaucer's additions and when Stephen Knight describes Seys as

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<sup>28</sup> Helen Phillips, 'General Introduction', in Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Book of the Duchess*, ed. by Helen Phillips (Durham: Durham Medieval Texts, 1982), pp. 3–52 (p. 24).

<sup>29</sup> Phillips, 'General Introduction', pp. 24–5.

<sup>30</sup> Peter W. Travis, 'White', *SAC*, 22 (2000), 1–66 (p. 50).



speaking ‘only to relieve his widow’s misery’.<sup>31</sup> The god Morpheus is, however, the active subject of the lines: he ‘took up’ the drowned body, he bears it to the bedside, he ‘stood ryght at hyr beddes fet’ (*BD*, ll. 195–99). As the lines continue, the god remains the actor; he ‘called hir ryght as she het | By name, and sayde “My swete wyf”’ (*BD*, ll. 200–1). Ruth Evans writes of Morpheus as a creepy ‘imposter’: ‘Morpheus here isn’t shape-shifting; he is literally crawling inside a dead body. It’s a Gothic moment *avant le fait*: Seys’s uncanny double is a reanimated corpse.’<sup>32</sup> Morpheus, not Seys, calls her ‘swete wyf’, ‘goode swete herte’, and, in a term later echoed by the Knight, his ‘worldes blysse’. These second-hand endearments voiced by Morpheus offer little consolation. He suggests that Alcyone ‘let be [her] sorwful lyf’, presumably intending her to relinquish her unprofitable sorrow.<sup>33</sup> Instead she relinquishes life itself, not by suicide, as in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, but by rapid decline into death.

The vision of the Black Knight, whose grief parallels that of Alcyone, jolts to its end when the Knight is forced bluntly to state the cause of his sorrow: ‘She is ded’ (*BD*, l. 1309).<sup>34</sup> Machaut’s version of Ovid’s tale creates a similar shock by giving Ceyx’s speech to his widow an emphatic sense of finality:

Resgarde moy, et de moy te souveingne.  
Ne pense pas, bele, qu’en vain me plaingne:  
Voy mes cheveus, voy ma barbe grifaingne;  
Voy mon habit  
Qui de ma mort te moustre vraie enseinge!

<sup>31</sup> Stephen Knight, ‘Classicizing Christianity in the Dream Poems’, in *Chaucer and Religion*, ed. by Helen Phillips (Cambridge: Brewer, 2010), pp. 143–155 (p. 144).

<sup>32</sup> Ruth Evans, ‘A Dark Stain and a Non-Encounter’, in *Dark Chaucer: An Assortment*, ed. by Myra Seaman, Eileen Joy and Nicola Masciandaro (New York: Punctum Books, 2012), pp. 29–42 (p. 34).

<sup>33</sup> James Wimsatt compares the passage to similar ghostly advice on the pointlessness of grief in the *Aenied*, also acknowledging these as the words of Morpheus ‘in the guise of Seys’. See Wimsatt, ‘The Sources of Chaucer’s “Seys and Alcyone”’, p. 237.

<sup>34</sup> The end of the dream invites a return to a consideration of the tale which provides inspiration for, and a means of interpretation of the dream itself. T. S. Miller refers to this circular interpretive structure of the poem, arguing that only the experience of the dream allows the narrator to ‘render a satisfactory reading of the tale of Ceyx and Alcyone’. See T. S. Miller, ‘Writing Dreams to Good: Reading as Writing and Writing as Reading in Chaucer’s Dream Visions’, *Style*, 45 (2011), 528–48 (p. 528).

[Look at me and remember me.  
Do not think, fair one, to lament me in vain:  
See my hair, see my fierce beard;  
See my garment  
That reveals to you a true sign of my death.]<sup>35</sup>

Morpheus gives Alcyone no choice but to know that her husband no longer lives. At this point her vision, powerfully invoked with the repetition of the imperative ‘voy’, ends and the apparition vanishes in spite of its own invoked materiality. Machaut and his audience know what Alcyone does not, of course, which is that the evidence of her eyes is deceptive. Her husband might appear real, but his words are those of Morpheus.

In *The Book of the Duchess*, this disjunction between Seys’s dead body and Morpheus’s animating spirit is made more disturbing by another significant addition Chaucer makes to Ovid’s and Machaut’s versions of the tale: a prayer for the bereaved wife. Chaucer’s drowned king takes his leave with a blessing: ‘Farewel, swete, my worldes blysse! | I praye God youre sorwe lysse’ (*BD*, ll. 209–10). Within three lines – and three days – Alcyone is dead. Given that this prayer is spoken by a deity, rather than the mortal Seys, it is all the more surprising that a request to lighten Alcyone’s sorrow is followed so swiftly by death. The relationship between the event and Morpheus’s prayer gives rise to three unsatisfactory possibilities: the first of these is that his prayer on Alcyone’s behalf to a more powerful god goes unheard; the second is that the response received is negative, the prayer ungranted; and the final possibility is that the petition is heard and granted by the gift of death. Either of the first two possibilities would be likely in other situations involving disagreement among the gods, such as the situation produced by the seemingly irreconcilable prayers in *The Knight’s Tale*. The context in *The Book of the Duchess* is of divine cooperation, rather than conflict: Juno bids Iris to take her message to the god of sleep, a task she willingly fulfils; Iris, in turn, bids Morpheus to appear to Alcyone in Seys’s corpse, which

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<sup>35</sup> Machaut, *La Fonteinne Amoureuse*, ll. 675–79.

he does immediately. In the absence of divine irascibility and jealous competition, the third possibility remains open, that the prayer to lessen Alcyone's grief is granted and that relief from sorrow can only be found in death. The Black Knight's plea with death for an end to his grief parallels the solution found in the pagan exemplum:

The pure deth ys so ful my foo  
That I wolde deye, hyt wolde not soo;  
For whan I folwe hyt, hit wol flee;  
I wolde have hym, hyt nyl nat me.

(BD, ll. 583–86)

Unlike Alcyone, the Black Knight is denied death. He must instead recognise the sin that suicide, and his own *acedia*, represent; he is not a classical figure, despite the refuge he seeks in the 'remedyes of Ovyde' (BD, l. 568).

The addition of the ventriloquised prayer is especially striking in the context of Chaucer's omission of the many hopeless prayers in Ovid's tale. Although Chaucer adds the petition spoken on behalf of the dead Seys, he omits an earlier prayer voiced by the drowning king in *Metamorphoses*. The climactic scene in which the storm finally conquers Ceyx's ship also overwhelms the drowning sailors with failure, hopelessness, and loss. Ovid emphasises the futility of the men's prayers. Where the action of each drowning man exemplifies those of others, Ovid describes the act of prayer thus:

hic votis numen adorat  
bracchiaque ad caelum, quod non videt, inrita tollens  
poscit opem.

[One calls on the gods in prayer and lifts unavailing arms to the unseen heavens,  
begging for help.]<sup>36</sup>

To judge by Ovid's description of the reception Juno gives to Alcyone's prayer, it might be best if the drowning men remain ignorant of their prayers' destination, for the queen's devotions at Juno's shrine prove to be an irritation to the goddess:

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<sup>36</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II, XI. 540–42.

Ante tamen cunctos Iunonis templa colebat  
 proque viro, qui nullus erat, veniebat ad aras  
 utque foret sospes coniunx suus utque rediret,  
 optabat, nullamaque sibi praeferret; at illi  
 hoc de tot votis poterat contingere solum.

At dea non ultra pro functo morte rogari  
 sustinet.

[Most of all she worships at Juno's shrine, praying for the man who is no more, that her husband may be kept safe from harm, that he may return once more, loving no other woman more than her. And only this prayer of all her prayers could be granted her. But the goddess could no longer endure these entreaties for the dead.]<sup>37</sup>

Alcyone's prayers for the safety of her husband are as futile as those of the drowning men.

The man she wishes Juno to protect no longer exists, as Ovid states bluntly, using the imperfect tense, '*erat*'. Only the persistence of the unknowingly bereaved woman and the taint of death she brings to the goddess's altar prompt Juno to intervene.<sup>38</sup> By referring to Ceyx as '*extincti*', even while in the process of arranging to grant the queen a vision, the goddess acknowledges the impossibility of satisfactorily answering Alcyone's prayer.<sup>39</sup>

Juno's response is to extinguish the widow's unreasonable hope.

Unlike Ovid's cold and distant goddess, the divine being envisaged by Chaucer and Machaut takes pity on her worshipper.<sup>40</sup> Chaucer's Juno is immediately willing to grant Alcyone's petition. Rather than lacking compassion, she lacks power to offer anything other than sorrow and death. Unwisely emulating the pagan queen, the narrator, who prays for sleep, receives a vision instead and awakens once more to life. Delasanta notes that the proliferation of imagery of sleep and of awakening from sleep in the poem is matched by a similar recurrence of resurrection imagery both within and after the narrator's dream vision,

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<sup>37</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II, XI. 578–84.

<sup>38</sup> Giving Juno's reason for acting, the passage quoted above continues, '*...utque manus funestas arceat aris..*': ['and that she might free her altar from the touch of the hands of mourning...']. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II, XI. 584.

<sup>39</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II, XI. 587.

<sup>40</sup> Alcyone's plea to know where, why and when her husband perished evokes the pity of the goddess, as Machaut writes, '*Si que Juno, la deesse, ot si grant | Pit  de li*'. [So that Juno, the goddess, had such great pity for her.] Machaut, *La Fonteinne Amoureuse*, ll. 565–66.

including the sounds of the bells and the birds which awaken the dreamer.<sup>41</sup> The resurrection motif, he argues, points to a pattern of Christian consolation, in which the melancholic dreamer and the Black Knight, who grieves for his lost duchess, are both reminded of the promise of resurrection. The poet is touched by death and grief and yet finds himself returned to his own bed, still holding his book of romance, in the precisely the same conditions he experienced before his vision.<sup>42</sup> In the poem, prayer brings answers, but these may be unexpected, not necessarily pleasant, and even if intended to comfort, may not be felt as such.

At its simplest, a literary petitionary prayer operates by initiating the desired response. In *The Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer problematises this straightforward relationship by distinguishing between an answer to a prayer and the fulfilment of the desire expressed in a petition. Even when positively and definitively answering a prayer, Chaucer's pagan gods exercise divine agency, leading to unpredictable and sometimes perverse outcomes for the supplicant. The use of a positive pagan exemplum, albeit rewarded with an unsatisfactory response, allows the interrogation of the relationship between the desire at the heart of supplication and the divine answer invoked. By altering the petitions which Ovid gives to his characters in Book XI of *Metamorphoses*, and by creating a narrator who takes the surprising decision to imitate a pagan prayer, Chaucer invites an attentive focus on the Christian hope of resurrection without diminishing the reality of the hope and pain endured by his pagan characters. Just as Alcyone's vision brings knowledge without comfort, Christian characters are presented with consolation which does not remove feelings of grief. *The Book of the Duchess* juxtaposes Alcyone's faithful prayer and its resulting dream in which unreliable appearances deliver unpalatable truth with the Christian narrator's confused mimicry of her

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<sup>41</sup> Delasanta, 'Christian Affirmation', pp. 249–51.

<sup>42</sup> Rosemarie P. McGerr discusses the nature of consolation in the poem as 'problematic', arguing that the poem reveals 'the limited nature of consolation through poetry'. See Rosemarie P. McGerr, *Chaucer's Open Books: Resistance to Closure in Medieval Discourse* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), p. 60.

prayer and his own encounter with painful truth. The narrator, the Black Knight, and, by extension, the reader are reminded that consolation may not appear or feel consoling to those who have been bereaved. In this earliest of dream visions, one of Chaucer's earliest texts, his interest in the literary possibilities of prayer is established. He expands the literary possibilities of petitionary prayer by showing its divine response to be problematic, creating a gap between the outcomes of the prayers and the supplicants' desires. An answer to a prayer might not be fulfilling, nor feel consoling. The pagan context of *The Book of the Duchess* becomes a conduit through which discomfiting ideas can be explored. As the next section demonstrates, Chaucer continues to use mingled pagan and Christian settings in *The House of Fame* to overturn expectations of comfortable answers to prayer. Rather than examining the ability or likelihood that an answered prayer will fulfil desire, here Chaucer thoroughly subverts any expectation that answers to prayer will be proportional or just, using petitionary prayer to explore the unavoidable injustices of human life.

#### *Disconnecting petition and response in The House of Fame*

Like *The Book of the Duchess*, *The House of Fame* hinges upon a narratorial prayer and its immediate divine response enabling a shift in the narrative, although in this case not from a waking state to a dream vision, but from one stage of a dream to another. In the latter of these two dream visions, pagan and Christian elements are thoroughly intertwined, an intermingling exemplified by Jove sending an eagle in response to the desperate Christian prayer of the narrator. In the classical, pagan setting of Fame's court, petitionary prayer is itself interrogated through a forensic examination of the relationship between the responses to supplication and the relative merits of the supplicant in order to dismantle the connection between petition, outcome, and worthiness to receive the gift requested.

Prayers shape *The House of Fame* to a much greater extent than the prayer for sleep which prompts the dream vision in *The Book of the Duchess*. In a further development of the

‘narrative-engendering’ capacity of petitionary prayer, prayers in *The House of Fame* enact shifts between stages of the poem.<sup>43</sup> This movement is not always provided in the form of a simple fulfilled desire, often taking the narrative in surprising directions instead. As in the earlier poem, a narratorial prayer to Morpheus introduces the dream: ‘And to this god that I of rede | Prey I that he wol me spede | My sweven for to tell aryght’ (*HF*, ll. 77–9). This shift from proem to dream account is just one amongst many in the complex structure of *The House of Fame*, which has been likened variously to a labyrinth, nested boxes, and a ‘do-it-yourself poem kit’.<sup>44</sup> Transitions between the various layers in this structure are often effected by prayer. Rather than providing a single shift from waking to dreaming, the poem’s multiple prayers lead the reader along with the poet narrator through a series of changed states. From the opening lines of the poem, which refer all dreams, including those of the audience, to God’s providence, to the prayer which summons the eagle to rescue the poet from his desert, petitions both mark and enable transitions between the various layers of the text. Through petition, the audience is drawn into the world of the poem, the poet obtains his original vision, and gains, in addition, his vision within the vision. Moreover, the eagle, himself a dream manifestation and product of supplication, reveals himself to have engaged in a petitionary prayer granted by Jove. Lying in wait at the culmination of the many

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<sup>43</sup> Katherine H. Terrell argues that the prayers interrupt the narrative, serving to ‘draw the reader back to a conscious viewing and evaluating of the work as a product of the author’s craft’. See her ‘Reallocation of Hermeneutic Authority in Chaucer’s *House of Fame*’, *ChR*, 31 (1997), 278–90 (p. 281).

<sup>44</sup> Chance describes the poem’s layered structure as nested boxes: ‘The levels of artifice are three, forming a kind of Chinese box containing smaller boxes’. See Chance, *Mythographic Chaucer*, p. 52. Penelope Doob argues that the poem represents the pinnacle of the medieval labyrinthine tradition. For a comprehensive discussion, see Penelope Reed Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 307–39. Sheila Delany envisages the structure of the poem as one traversing abstract fields of knowledge: ‘The poem takes us, therefore, from psychology through history to cosmology, from microcosm to macrocosm, from the world of the mind through the world of men to the created world at large.’ See her *Chaucer’s House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1994), p. 36. A. C. Spearing describes the disparate parts of the poem as a ‘do-it-yourself poem-kit’. See his *Medieval Dream Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 73. The poem has also been seen as a representation of memory. Ruth Evans writes that *The House of Fame* is about the ‘exploration of memory, the scene of writing, and the preservation of the past’. See Ruth Evans, ‘Chaucer in Cyberspace: Medieval Technologies of Memory and *The House of Fame*’, *SAC*, 23 (2001), 43–69 (p. 56).

successful prayers which effectively enable narrative transitions is a direct challenge to naive understandings of petitionary practice: these successful prayers ultimately bring the audience and poet to a site in which petition itself is challenged. Before the end of the poem, as this chapter will now argue, Chaucer systematically dismantles the notion that the outcome of a petition is logically related either to the content of the supplication or to the deserving nature of the supplicant.

Like *The Book of the Duchess*, *The House of Fame* intermingles pagan and Christian references, using especially ambiguous language in introducing and addressing prayers. Rather than the playful obfuscation of the narratorial prayer to Morpheus for sleep in *The Book of the Duchess*, this text presents instead a narrator whose muddled devotional language only gradually develops in clarity as the poem progresses. In the first book of the poem, the prayers move from the imprecise and indirect, ambivalently pagan or Christian, to the precise, direct, and explicitly Christian. In order to appreciate this shift, it is first necessary to examine the illusion of clarity created by the text's first several prayers. The first line presents the audience with a seemingly straightforward petition: 'God turne us every drem to goode' (*HF*, l. 1). The statement itself is simple; any ambiguity might appear to hinge on its meaning alone. Laurence K. Shook views the line simply as the poet's desire for inspiration, while A. C. Spearing, more literally, points out that the line asks God that people may profit from their dreams.<sup>45</sup> T. S. Miller argues that the prayer expresses the hopes of an author who must relinquish control over his work, and might be repeated as a 'sort of apotropaic charm' in the face of authorial helplessness.<sup>46</sup> These explanations assume God unequivocally to be

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<sup>45</sup> Laurence K. Shook, 'The House of Fame', in *Companion to Chaucer Studies*, ed. by Beryl Rowland (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 341–54 (p. 347). While Shook sees the statement as an expression of desire, Spearing refers to the first line as a prayer, pointing out the care taken in its phrasing: 'It begins by praying, "God turne us every drem to goode!" – not "May all our dreams come true", but "May God make every dream profitable for us".' While he is concerned with the status of truth in dream visions generally and *The House of Fame* particularly, his statement touches on a key question of the poem, which is what response to prayer can reasonably be expected? See Spearing, *Medieval Dream Poetry*, p.75.

<sup>46</sup> T. S. Miller, 'Writing Dreams to Good', p. 541.



the addressee whose blessing or inspiration is sought, but the syntactic ambiguity of this line is instead a sign of the opaque language of prayer to come in the rest of Book I.

The syntax of the line lends itself to alternate interpretations. It is not altogether clear whether this statement is an expression of desire addressed to the audience or a prayer addressed to God.<sup>47</sup> Although the two forms of address are not always clearly distinguished in Chaucer's work, the lack of a direct address to God can be contrasted with his usage elsewhere when a character or narrator unambiguously addresses a divine being. In the invocation to Book I of *Troilus and Criseyde*, for example, the narrator directly addresses one of the Furies: 'Thesiphone, thow help me for t'endite' (*Tr*, I. 6). Another indicator of direct prayer is the use of the vocative, as when Cecile prays, 'O Lord, my soule and eek my body gye | Unwemmed' (*SNT*, ll. 136–37). The opening line of *The House of Fame* maintains its ambiguity of address in its lack of a second-person pronoun or a vocative. The abruptness of the opening line therefore makes an address to the audience, naming a shared desire, more likely than an explicit petition. While a minor detail in itself, especially in the context of one of Chaucer's most labyrinthine of texts, this pseudo-prayer's address signals a haziness in religious references which will continue until the end of the first book of the poem. Such haziness of address leads into a dream-like lulling of the audience into the classical pagan setting of the poem, increasing the shock of the narrator's eventual direct appeal to Christ at the end of the first book. As we shall see, these shifting meanings allow occasional glimpses through the fantastical pagan world to Chaucer's familiar fourteenth-century Christian society beyond.

Following the proem, the next prayer, to the god of sleep, multiplies ambiguities amongst a thicket of detail describing the cave where Morpheus can be found. Here the narrator misdirects his petition, fails to name the god addressed, and asks for a gift which

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<sup>47</sup> Delany refers to the phrase as a 'wish'. See Delany, *Chaucer's House of Fame*, pp. 41, 67.

might not be in Morpheus's remit. As if inspired by the narrator of *The Book of the Duchess*, who asks Morpheus for sleep and receives a dream, this narrator goes one step further and asks for inspiration to tell his dream well.<sup>48</sup> His focus is on his audience, rather than on the god. And it is this audience who is directly addressed, as it had been in the first line of the poem:

And to this god that I of rede  
 Prey I that he wol me spede  
 My sweven for to telle aryght,  
 Yf every drem stonde in his myght.

(HF, ll. 77–80)

Although this prayer is reported rather than directly addressed to the god, the narrator makes clear that he not only desires to tell his dream accurately, but also that he expects the god of sleep to help him do so. Nevertheless, the poet is not entirely sure that this gift stands within Morpheus's power to grant. By qualifying his request with an 'if', the narrator does not submit entirely to the pagan world of the poet's creation and Chaucer thus maintains a dual pagan and Christian discourse which this chapter will argue invites the audience to read further into the later scene in Fame's court.

From this point in the text, the narrator begins to turn towards Christian forms of address. That his devotional language is still muddled is apparent in that this transition takes place midway through his invocation to the god of sleep. Directly following his expression of doubt in the extent of Morpheus's sway, he employs a multivalent address to the Mover of All:

And he that mover ys of al,  
 That is and was and ever shal,  
 So yive hem joye that hyt here  
 Of alle that they dreme to-yere,  
 And for to stonden alle in grace  
 Of her loves, or in what place

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<sup>48</sup> Chance writes that Chaucer draws here upon Bersuire's gloss on Morpheus linking the deity to *honores* and *dignitates*, making him the ideal son of the god of sleep to invoke in a poem concerned with the pursuit of fame. See Chance, *Mythographic Chaucer*, p. 56.

That hem were levest for to stonde,  
 And shelde hem fro poverty and shonde,  
 And from unhap and ech disece,  
 And sende hem al that may hem plese,  
 That take hit wel and skorne hyt noght,  
 Ne hyt mysdemen in her thocht  
 Thorgh malicious entencion.

(*HF*, ll. 81–93)

By adding an invocation to ‘he that mover ys of al’, Chaucer leaves open the possibility of either a Christian or a pagan interpretation, since the address to the Prime Mover employs a phrase capable of standing independently of specific religious beliefs. Chaucer borrows this phrase from Dante, who begins the *Paradiso* by describing the universe and, specifically, the celestial realm with which his poem concerns itself, as having been created by ‘He who moves all things’.<sup>49</sup> Although entirely applicable, therefore, to the Christian Creator, the phrase maintains a vagueness which leaves it open to interpretation and allows a more subtle and gradual shift to specificity. Boethius, for example, designates the Creator as the original Cause which puts everything into motion; here Chaucer follows the deliberately dual phraseology chosen by Boethius to discuss a Creator philosophically rather than in specifically Christian terms.<sup>50</sup> The Boethian formulation also appears in *The Knight’s Tale*, when Theseus refers to God as the ‘Firste Moevere of the cause above’ in ambiguous, yet appropriately pagan, language (*KnT*, l. 2987). The transition to Christian language becomes more pronounced in the following line, which applies to ‘he that mover is of al’ a phrase

<sup>49</sup> ‘Colui che tutto move.’ Dante Alighieri, *Dantis Alagherii Comedia*, ed. by Federico Sanguineti (Florence: Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2001), *Paradiso*, I. 1.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Among thise thinges sitteth the heye makere, kyng and lord, welle and bygynnyng, lawe and wys juge to don equite, and governeth and enclyneth the bryddles of thinges. And tho thinges that he stireth to gon by moevynge, he withdraweth and aresteth, and affermeth the moevable or wandryng thinges’ (*Bo*, IV, m.6, ll. 40–3). Havely suggests that Chaucer might have written *The House of Fame* during the same years in which he translated Boethius’s *De consolazione philosophiae*. See Havely, ‘*The House of Fame*: Introduction’, p. 119. On Boethius’s combination of Christian and classical philosophical discourses, Douglas C. Langston writes that he ‘pursued basic Christian doctrines by examining closely related philosophical doctrines that capture the Christian point of view while moving it beyond a purely Christian perspective’. See his ‘Introduction’, in Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, ed. by Douglas C. Langston (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010) pp. vii–xx (p. viii).

drawn from the *Gloria Patri*: ‘that is and was and ever shal’.<sup>51</sup> By echoing the Trinitarian formula in this invocation to an eternal creator, the prayer shifts to a Christian identification for the Mover of All.

Having indicated in increasingly less ambiguous terms that he makes the following supplications to the Christian God, the narrator proceeds to his list of intercessions on behalf of his audience. The requested blessings are extraordinarily generous in nature: he asks that they might stand in grace with their lovers; be protected from poverty, disgrace, ill chance and every disease; and be given everything that might be pleasing. This is a remarkable list, and its extravagant, unspiritual, and impossible gifts ought to arouse the suspicion of the audience for whom such riches are requested. For these gifts are revealed to be contingent upon the reception of the narrator’s account of his dream, reserved for those ‘that take hit wel and skorne hyt noght | Ne hyt mysdemen in her thoght’. McCall presents a persuasive ‘ironic’ reading of this prayer for blessings by comparing the invocation of Book I with that of Book III. He contrasts the boastful poet of Book I, whose invocation displays his own vainglory, with the more subdued, modest poet responsible for Book III, which, he writes, ‘turns out to be the richest and most elaborate in the whole work’.<sup>52</sup> It is, however, worth looking beyond the function of these invocations as ironic self-portraits to examine this invocation’s positioning of audience, dividing them into groups which are either deserving or undeserving of these blessings. This division by desert is later echoed by the similar categories dividing the groups of petitioners in Fame’s court.

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<sup>51</sup> ‘Gloria Patri et Filio; et Spiritui sancto. Sicut erat in principio et nunc et semper: et in secula seculorum. Amen.’ *Gloria*, in *Horae Eboracenses*, p. 37. *The Prymer* includes a literal translation into Middle English: ‘Glorie be to þe fadir, & to þe sone, & to þe holi goost! As it was in þe bigynnyng, & now, & euere in-to þe worldis of worldis. amen!’ See *The Prymer*, p. 1. The Trinitarian formula is Chaucer’s addition and does not follow the reference to the First Mover in *Paradiso*.

<sup>52</sup> McCall, *Chaucer Among the Gods*, pp. 56–7.

Readers must earn the narrator's generous intercessions by receiving and valuing the poem correctly. Those undeserving members of the audience who receive the poem with scorn are presented instead with a curse:

And whoso thorgh presumpcion,  
Or hate, or skorn, or thorgh envye,  
Dispit, or jape, or vilanye,  
Mysdeme hyt, pray I Jesus God,  
That (dreme he barefot, dreme he shod),  
That every harm that any man  
Hath had syth the world began  
Befalle hym therof or he sterve,  
And graunte he mote his ful deserve.

(*HF*, ll. 94–102)<sup>53</sup>

Through this prayer the narrator constructs one ideal audience who will listen, understand, and appropriately value his work, and another audience prepared to misjudge and to heap scorn upon his poetic efforts. This unappreciative audience deserves every possible harm in punishment for its guilty commission of a set of seven literary sins: presumption, hate, scorn, envy, despite, jape, and villainy. Chaucer constructs a narrative persona here which is similar to several of the Canterbury pilgrims who are also prepared to ask God to curse those with whom they are grieved. Harry Bailly, for example, curses the drunken cook by asking God to give him sorrow, the Reeve asks God that the Miller might break his neck, and the Canon's Yeoman, rather colourfully, asks God that the devil might flay the Canon (*MancT*, l. 15; *RvT*, l. 3918; *CYT*, ll. 1273–74). The mock outrage of the narrator draws attention to the division of an appreciative audience deserving of every good blessing from an unreceptive audience, condemned to innumerable harms by their literary intercessor. The key to this prayer is that this division hinges upon the notion of just desert by which some deserve reward while others deserve punishment, an idea to which Chaucer later returns in Book III.

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<sup>53</sup> Delany remarks that this section takes part in a long literary history of addressing the 'envious detractors', but argues that Chaucer's version goes beyond the topos in asking the reader to judge rather than to believe. See Delany, *Chaucer's House of Fame*, pp. 42–3.

By the end of the invocation, the poem is situated in a dual reality, a Christian context in which Trinitarian language is understood and Jesus might be invoked against enmity, and a classical context in which Morpheus draws forth dreams. Together, the two contexts form intertwining strands in this complex poem, where pagan discourse applies to literary endeavour, inspiration, art, and fame, while Christian discourse hints at more abiding concerns. Prayer in *The House of Fame* offers structure by providing the mechanisms by which the text progresses from one setting to another and from one mode to another. Shifts also occur within a deceptively singular space, such as the temple, or later, Fame's house. Pagan elements, such as Venus's temple, are overlaid with Christian concepts, such as 'chirche', while this classical locus can be exited through a commonplace late-medieval wicket. A. J. Minnis accounts for this type of detail in Chaucer's work as a realistic touch. The poet's creation of pagan settings and characters, he writes, displays 'impressive verisimilitude'.<sup>54</sup> Minnis argues that whenever lacking historical information, Chaucer 'improvised by converting Christian beliefs and "modern" mores into their pagan equivalents'.<sup>55</sup> Yet the word 'temple' appears on five occasions in the poem, including in the original description of Venus's temple as one made of glass.<sup>56</sup> In this instance, though, by using the word 'chirche', Chaucer creates one of the many dislocating shifts the narrator experiences in the text.<sup>57</sup> The narrator passes through the wicket, and escapes the desert surrounding the temple as a result of a Christian prayer which is revealed to have been answered by means of a pagan prayer; he arrives at a court reminiscent of the Final Judgement of the Apocalypse of St John, only to witness the judgement of a pagan deity. The hesitation to commit decisively either to a pagan or to a Christian discourse confirms that

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<sup>54</sup> Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*, p. 22.

<sup>55</sup> Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*, p. 22.

<sup>56</sup> *HF*, ll. 120, 130, 468, 1844, and 1858.

<sup>57</sup> 'Chirche' fits both the metre of the line and the rhyme scheme. Practicalities of versification do not, however, rule out its additional role in signalling the shift which will arrive at a prayer to Christ within a few lines.

the poem relies upon both in its meaning. By continuing both strands of discourse, Chaucer is able to question beliefs underlying Christian practice from within the safety of a fictional pagan world. As Chapter Three will argue, this tactic is crucial to the themes of *The Knight's Tale*.

In *The House of Fame*, Chaucer commits to a single point of clarity at the moment when the classical pagan world threatens to overwhelm the narrator. The arrival by the end of Book I at a firmly Christian prayer takes place as the scene shifts from one of opulent surroundings to one of emptiness and lack. Such development is apparent where the dream narrator responds to his vision of Venus's temple. Having been confronted with this temple of glass and the conflicting narratives of Aeneas's sojourn with Dido, the narrator begins to feel unmoored.<sup>58</sup> He contrasts his own uncertainty and lack of knowledge with the nobility and richness of his surroundings, acknowledging his lack in a brief prayer to the Christian God, referred to as the one 'that madest us' rather than explicitly named:

‘A, Lord,’ thoughte I, ‘that madest us,  
Yet sawgh I never such noblesse  
Of ymages, ne such richesse,  
As I saugh graven in this chirche;  
But not wot I whoo did hem wirche,  
Ne where I am, ne in what contree.  
But now wol I goo out and see,  
Ryght at the wicket, yf I kan  
See owhere any stiryng man  
That may me telle where I am.’

(HF, ll. 470–79)

Central to this prayer is the narrator's sense of loss and disorientation. He has lost his bearings, his sense of place, and his understanding of what he sees. His first response to the disorientation is to attempt to locate himself through the help of another, 'any stiryng man', who can serve as a source of knowledge and authority. Confident in his own agency, the

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<sup>58</sup> Delany links the narrator's dislocation to his encounter with the 'conflicting truths' concerning Dido and Aeneas. See Delany, *Chaucer's House of Fame*, pp. 48–57.

narrator believes himself capable of negotiating a new landscape, with a bit of human help. His prayer reflects his certainty that clarity will be restored.

Instead, the dislocation provoked by the interior of Venus's 'chirche' is magnified by its environs, the desert sands of Libya. The narrator finds himself in a world of emptiness and instability, with no recognisable landmarks on the horizon by which he can orient himself, no living creature to help him make sense of his experience. The mental confusion provoked when the temple door fails to open onto greater knowledge or security, leads to a prayer of perfect clarity. His dislocation complete, the narrator panics; from this moment of utter powerlessness arises the text's first explicitly Christian prayer (discounting the earlier curse), in a temporary abandonment of the ambiguous dual meanings used before this point:

'O Crist,' thoughte I, 'that art in blysse,  
Fro fantome and illusion  
Me save!' And with devocion  
Myn eyen to the hevene I caste.

(*HF*, ll. 492–95)

The use of the vocative leaves no doubt that the prayer is directly addressed to Christ. The additional phrase, 'that art in blysse', refines the address to make explicit the petition's invocation of Christ, resurrected and enthroned in his celestial realm in majesty. This form of address sets the prayer apart from those of Chaucer's suffering, saint-like characters, who more typically address the suffering Jesus of the cross.<sup>59</sup> Such an address signals a temporal and spiritual shift. By appealing to Christ in majesty, the prayer removes the poet from time-bound, earthly realms to the eternal and celestial. This shift appropriately lends itself to, and prepares the audience for, the dream vision's references to the Apocalypse of St John in Book III.

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<sup>59</sup> The prayers of Cecile, Custance, and Griselda will be discussed in Chapter Four.



The petition itself is a simple one, to be saved from deceptive appearances, whether ‘fantome’ or illusion.<sup>60</sup> An inversion of the extravagant prayers to the Mover of All, this is a simple, direct petition which makes no reference to the deserving nature of the supplicant. Its simplicity is answered with extravagance. The prayer for protection from all forms of deception – a prayer, in fact, for reality – receives in answer an eagle, alighting from the celestial realms to which the dreamer turned his eyes in hope. This vision within a vision is both evoked by and contained within thought. Its appearance, however, represents a new form of instability. As the manifestation grows in size and power, the dream poet undermines its reality through a successive questioning of his own senses:

Thoo was I war, lo, at the laste,  
 That faste be the sonne, as hye  
 As kenne myghte I with myn yë,  
 Me thoughte I sawgh an egle sore,  
 But that hit semed moche more  
 Then I had any egle seyn.  
 But this as sooth as deth, certeyn,  
 Hyt was of gold, and shon so bryghte  
 That never sawe men such a syghte.

(HF, ll. 496–504)

As the prayer itself was expressed through thought, so too the answer to the dreamer’s prayer appears in thought. Visual perception is mediated through mental perception, allowing the apparition to seem even greater than a soaring eagle. Having prayed for protection from fantome and illusion, the dream poet receives an eagle which *seems* greater than an eagle in its natural form. Although the dreamer acknowledges, by his use of the word ‘semed’, his own perception’s potential to be faulty, he continues by describing an apparent certainty: the eagle is of gold, not in its appearance, but in its substance.

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<sup>60</sup> Using this line from *The House of Fame* as an example, the *MED* gives this definition as the first sense for ‘fantom’: ‘That which has only a seeming reality, permanence, or value; vanity (of the world, its riches, joys, etc.); also, any of the world’s vanities.’ See the *MED* <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med>> [accessed 05.09.16]. ‘Illusion’, by contrast, is given this definition (second sense): ‘something that deceives the senses or imagination; a deceptive appearance or sensation, an apparition, an illusion’. For a detailed discussion of ‘fantome’, see Delany, *Chaucer’s House of Fame*, pp. 58–68.

So sure is the dreamer of this apparition that he describes the golden substance of the eagle as ‘sooth as deth’. In the context of an answer to an explicitly Christian prayer, the certainty of death presents a paradox: although death is certain in material fact, the Christian belief in resurrection overturns that certainty. A flying eagle made of gold challenges the rational mind with the evidence of the senses in the same manner as biblical accounts of the resurrection of a dead body, yet both can be comprehended in the realm of thought, of vision, of ‘seeming’. The poet’s prayer against deceptive appearances and a willed self-deception is sent an answer, by the poet himself, in an eagle which can only be made fully manifest in thought. Moreover, the brief allusion to the belief in resurrection prepares the reader to confront the destination to which the eagle conveys the poet. Another site of dual meaning, the pagan court of Fame asks to be read through the imagery of the Last Judgement.

The eagle represents, variably, inspiration, revelation, truth, or a divine messenger.<sup>61</sup> He is a product of Chaucer the poet’s imagination, but not of the dream narrator’s fantasy. The narrator presents his flight as taking place in the world of the senses. Being airborne with the eagle is physically uncomfortable: its talons are capable of causing pain, their fearsomeness described in the phrases, ‘grymme pawes stronge’ and ‘sharpe nayles longe’ (*HF*, ll. 541–42). The dreamer, too, causes discomfort to his guide, giving the eagle reason to complain that he is ‘noyous for to carye’ (l. 574). These details incarnate the poet’s experience; his ascension through the spheres is an embodied one.<sup>62</sup> Most importantly, the Eagle represents both pagan and Christian strands: it arrives as a response to the dreamer’s

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<sup>61</sup> The eagle lectures the poet on the properties of sound, imparting knowledge; transports him to the celestial realms and the source of his poetry; and arrives at the command of Jove. The sources from which he is derived include the Eagle from Dante’s *Purgatorio*, the eagle of the Apocalypse and Ovid’s account in *Metamorphoses*, Book X, of Jupiter taking the form of an eagle in order to abduct Ganymede. For discussion of the Eagle as a representation of contemplation, see John M. Steadman, ‘Chaucer’s Eagle: A Contemplative Symbol’, *PMLA*, 75 (1960), 153–59. For a discussion of each of the influences, with a particular focus on the myth of Ganymede, see Dean Swinford, ‘Stellification and Poetic Ascent in the *House of Fame*’, *Modern Philology*, 111 (2013), 1–22.

<sup>62</sup> This point is noted by Stephen F. Kruger in his ‘Dreaming’, in *A Concise Companion to Chaucer*, ed. by Corinne Saunders (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 71–89 (pp. 85–6).

prayer to Christ, but is itself a servant of Jove and has interceded with Jove on the dreamer's behalf.<sup>63</sup> As Venus's temple occupies two sites simultaneously, that of the pagan imagination, albeit through a medieval Christian interpretation, and that of an ordinary church, the Eagle transports the dream narrator to another dual locus, the House of Fame, in which Christian concerns will be interrogated through pagan pageantry.

So far we have seen that answers to prayers may not correspond to the desires expressed and that supplicants' expectations are encoded in their prayers, although not always clearly. We have also seen how Chaucer maintains an intertwined Christian and pagan discourse in which the language of prayer can be ambivalent and its answers might be difficult to interpret, where even something as 'sooth as deth' might not be what it seems. The remainder of this chapter demonstrates how in Book III of *The House of Fame* Chaucer dismantles the very notion that a supplicant might 'deserve' a petition to be granted. While criticism of the poem tends to focus upon the relationship between history, poetry, and truth, and the contingency found in all aspects of human knowledge, less attention has been paid to the vision central to Book III, where Geoffrey the poet has finally reached the House of Fame.<sup>64</sup> The scene is usually summarised as demonstrating the capricious nature of Fame, while the details of the procession of supplicants, lengthily enumerated by Chaucer, evade discussion. J. Stephen Russell's explanation for omitting the scene in which Fame receives the supplications of humanity from his analysis of the text is instructive:

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<sup>63</sup> McGerr notes Chaucer's insistence on retaining ambiguity by presenting the eagle as a pagan response to a Christian prayer. See McGerr, *Chaucer's Open Books*, p. 71.

<sup>64</sup> Kathryn L. Lynch discusses the passage in detail in her *Chaucer's Philosophical Visions* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2000), pp. 74–9. Delany views the scene as repeating what is already known, writing, 'The purpose of the judgment scene is obvious. It restates allegorically the point that has already been made in other ways: that tradition, or fame, is no reliable guide to factual truth'. See Delany, *Chaucer's House of Fame*, p. 88.

The events of Book Three, while spectacular, need not detain us here. They are, once more, a continuous emblem of the contingency and capriciousness of written, literary discourse.<sup>65</sup>

The procession of supplicants, in Russell's view, is merely repetitive, a 'spectacular' dramatisation of the text's fundamental message that writing is itself unstable and untrustworthy. The substance which gives rise to this message, the lengthy exchanges between Fame, her trumpeter Eolas, and the supplicants, is not evaluated in Russell's focus on the contingency of fiction. Russell's use of the word 'capriciousness', a quality so often identified as applicable to pagan deities, can be applied equally well to the semi-divine figure of Fame, whose judgements bear no relationship to the merit of her supplicants.<sup>66</sup> As Barry Windeatt remarks, the scene in Fame's court represents Chaucer's 'most extended exploration of granted and ungranted petition and the relationship between petitioners and the recipient of petition'.<sup>67</sup> Surrounded by the accoutrements of the Last Judgement, the pageantry of the supplicants reveals a deeper anxiety underlying Geoffrey's vision than the likelihood of achieving literary fame.

The poem, with its accretions of meaning developed through each temporal and spatial shift, layers Fame's court of judgement over an imagery and sequence of events derived from the Apocalypse of St John. In this way, the procession to the foot of Fame reveals that authorial anxieties about fictional contingency have been layered over a deeper concern with petition, specifically the absence of a correlation between deeds and the outcomes of supplication. The poem elides the biblical dream vision's depiction of the

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<sup>65</sup> J. Stephen Russell, *The English Dream Vision: Anatomy of a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1988), p. 192. Shook refers to Book III as having a 'somewhat mediocre and awkwardly-conceived plot' (Shook, 'The House of Fame', p. 347).

<sup>66</sup> Lynch draws attention to Fame's near-divine status in Book III: 'Fame stands in the position of a god, and her decrees must simply be accepted.' See Lynch, *Chaucer's Philosophical Visions*, p. 75. 'Capricious' appears to be the standard adjective with which Fame is described: see Kruger, 'Dreaming', pp. 15 and 21; Lynch, *Chaucer's Philosophical Visions*, p. 75; and Shook, 'The House of Fame', p. 351.

<sup>67</sup> Windeatt also draws attention to the significant proportion of the poem devoted to the scene. See Barry Windeatt, 'Plea and Petition in Chaucer', in *Chaucer in Context: A Golden Age of English Poetry*, ed. by Gerald Morgan (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2012), pp. 189–215 (pp. 211–12).

angels' heralding of the seven plagues with its more brief account of the final judgement of the dead. In St John's vision, the dead are judged for their deeds in life. The presence of a name written in the 'Book of Life' is accounted evidence of good works:

Et iudicatum est de singulis secundum opera ipsorum.

[And they were judged, every one according to their works.]<sup>68</sup>

Fame's supplicants expect the same treatment as their counterparts at the Final Judgement: each group upon approaching Fame announces the worthiness or otherwise of their deeds. With the narrator unobtrusively observing, each group to be judged enters, approaches the throne of Fame in order to make a petition, and receives Fame's judgement. The correspondence with the Apocalypse is not exact: Fame's disappointed supplicants, for example, receive a hellish blast of Eolas's trumpet in place of being cast into the 'stagnum ignis'. Yet enough correspondences exist for the Christian vision to serve as a powerful interpretive framework for the scene describing the procession of Fame's supplicants. In borrowing much of the symbolism associated with Christian understandings of a final Judgement, Chaucer underlines the apparently frivolous consideration of the vagaries of fame with a more serious meaning. And at the heart of this pagan pageant, underpinned with Christian references and symbolism, is a thorough exploration of the disconnection between what people ask for, what they deserve, and what they are given.

Over three hundred lines, representing a significant portion of the third book, are dedicated to an exploration of petition. Nine distinct groups of supplicants appeal to Fame; the outcomes of their various petitions seemingly bear no relationship to their respective requests or to any criteria of just desert.<sup>69</sup> These groups appear at first as a crowd. Emphasising their representation of humanity, the narrator notes their heterogeneity:

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<sup>68</sup> The Apocalypse of St John the Apostle 20:13. English translation taken from the *Douay-Rheims Version*.

<sup>69</sup> The first, second, third, fourth and fifth companies have accomplished good works; the sixth and seventh companies have accomplished neither good nor ill; the eighth and ninth companies have done ill with their lives.

Tho gan I loke aboute and see  
 That ther come entryng into the halle  
 A ryght gret companye withalle,  
 And that of sondry regiouns,  
 Of alleskynnes condiciouns  
 That dwelle in erthe under the mone,  
 Pore and ryche.

(*HF*, ll. 1526–32)

This crowd, in making their pleas to Fame, divide themselves into nine distinct groups. Of these groups, some have achieved good in their lives, others have not; a few have in fact accomplished ill; some supplicants ask for fame, others ask not to be remembered; one group even desires the ill repute it has earned. Fame quickly dispels the supplicants' belief that the results of their petitions will bear any relation to their deeds during life. The first three groups have accomplished good; Fame acknowledges the truth of their accounts, telling the second group: 'Good werkes shal yow noght availle | To have of me good fame as now' (*HF*, ll. 1616–17). Of the first three groups, each of which desires and believes itself deserving of fame, only the third receives the good renown requested.<sup>70</sup> Of the remaining two groups, the first is informed that they and their deeds will never again be spoken of and those in the second 'deserving' group face the knowledge that their names will be slandered. Their reputations, in essence, are consigned to damnation when Eolas blows his trumpet in a blast of sickly-coloured smoke which takes on the stench of hell (*HF*, ll. 1636–56). Chaucer shows that rather than being justly deserved rewards, the outcomes of petitions are independent both of request and of worthiness. The mingled pagan and Christian referents of this scene, and the poem as a whole, subtly invite the audience to examine its own expectations of prayers.

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The first, second, third, sixth, seventh and eighth companies ask for good fame; the fourth and fifth companies ask for no fame; the ninth asks for evil fame. Good fame is granted to the third, fifth and sixth companies; no fame is granted to the first, fourth and eighth companies; ill fame is given to the second, seventh and ninth companies.

<sup>70</sup> Delany identifies the ninth as the only company in which there is a 'just correlation between desire, merit, and reward'. See Delany, *Chaucer's House of Fame*, p. 88. The third company also exhibits this correlation, however.

Having considered the outcomes for those supplicants who desire good fame in return for their good lives, the next section of the text proceeds to those rare people who are aware of the goodness of their lives, but wish for obscurity. Fame's capriciousness dictates that one of these two groups will be remembered well nevertheless, while remembrance of the other will fade. Of these, the fourth group of supplicants asks to be forgotten and Fame obliges. The fifth, however, otherwise indistinguishable from the previous group, awaken the 'goddess's' wrath by holding her gifts in contempt.<sup>71</sup> These, she promises, shall be widely known for their good works which they have offered for 'contemplacioun | And Goddes love' (*HF*, ll. 1710–11). The final supplicants are divided into two groups of idle people who have accomplished neither good nor ill and two groups of evil-doers. The idlers all wish for good fame; to one group this is groundlessly granted and to the other it is denied. Fame's injustice is evident in her agreement to grant the sixth group all that they have requested, to be remembered despite their idleness as 'worthy, wise, and goode also, | And riche, and happy unto love' (*HF*, ll. 1756–57). Of the ill-doers, the penultimate group is denied the good fame requested despite their undeserving lives, and the final group deserves, requests, and receives, ill fame. Not only are the worthy denied their petitions, but those who are least deserving receive the gifts which they have requested.

The thoroughness with which differing possibilities are explored displays a detailed interest not only in the injustice of fame, but also in the relationship between supplication, moral qualities, and the granting of (semi-)divine favour. J. A. W. Bennett views Fame's judgement as enacting the 'grace' of Jove, who rewards the deserving.<sup>72</sup> He argues that fame is denied to those who desire it most. By implication, their desire removes any worthiness to receive the object of their desire. Being forgotten, Bennett writes, is 'the fate decreed for

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<sup>71</sup> This group, interestingly, are accused by Fame of 'dispit', one of the deadly literary sins earlier cursed by the narrator (*HF*, l. 1716).

<sup>72</sup> J. A. W. Bennett, *Chaucer's Book of Fame* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), p. 148.

those overzealous for earthly fame'.<sup>73</sup> The inherent justice in Fame's decisions is also assumed by Lesley Kordecki, who states, 'Even if we cannot distinguish the deserving from the underserving, Fame apparently can and does, in sometimes monstrous speeches befitting her appearance.'<sup>74</sup> Fame's monstrosity does not preclude the justice of her choices, in Kordecki's view. The whimsical decisions made in Fame's court incline Piero Boitani to see the incident as a parody of the Last Judgement.<sup>75</sup> Yet Chaucer is careful to remove any association between personal failings and the outcome of petition. Whether supplicants deserve their request has no bearing whatsoever on what they receive. Almost as if he were setting out a logical puzzle, each of the nine groups of supplicants combines a distinctive set of propositions which can be diagrammatically mapped out as the mass of humanity appearing before Fame are classified into various groups.

The logical basis for the scene in Fame's court has been noted by Kathryn L. Lynch, who writes:

In some ways, if she is judged by the standards of formal logical argument, she is the epitome of logic, for logic is an attempt to describe and systematize propositions about the world, and correspondence to that world is a primary criterion of logical truth.<sup>76</sup>

By systematically dividing humanity into logical propositions, Chaucer interrogates the relationship between deeds and outcomes. His first division sorts those who have lived well, those who have been idle, and those who have done ill during their lives; the second division, which applies to each of the three subcategories above, separates groups by the outcome requested in their petitions, subgrouping the supplicants into those who ask for good fame, no fame, or ill fame. To highlight the capriciousness of Fame, the final division corresponds to her response: paired groups displaying identical qualities are given opposing answers

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<sup>73</sup> Bennett, *Chaucer's Book of Fame*, p. 149.

<sup>74</sup> Lesley Kordecki, 'Subversive Voices in Chaucer's *House of Fame*', *Exemplaria*, 11 (1999), 53–77 (p. 72).

<sup>75</sup> Piero Boitani, *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame* (Woodbridge: Brewer, 1984), p. 172.

<sup>76</sup> Lynch, *Chaucer's Philosophical Visions*, p. 75.



without discernible reason. Two groups are equally deserving; both request good fame and only one group receives it. Two groups are equally deserving of fame, but do not desire it; one group's wishes are honoured, the other's are not. Two groups are equally undeserving of fame, but request it nevertheless; one group has fame granted, while the other is denied.

Correlated conditions fail to result in the same outcomes. As Lynch writes,

On their face, the alternatives Fame offers her petitioners constitute a series of seemingly contradictory conditional statements (if a, then b). One might suppose intuitively that conditionals stand to one another in such a relationship that two opposing conditionals with the same form cannot both be true ('if a, then not b,' as does 'if not a then b'). Common sense suggests that a self-consistent conditional ought to be formulated something like this: 'If a person does well, he will receive good fame'; and that, moreover, the same antecedent ought not to permit opposing consequents or an opposing antecedent the same consequent.<sup>77</sup>

Fame, as Lynch demonstrates, operates entirely logically. The fault lies with 'common sense' understandings and intuitive extrapolation, and with expectation. The belief that one can deserve the object of a petition, and *therefore ought to receive it*, lies behind the view of Fame as operating perversely. By illustrating with such precision the expectations which create this view of Fame as unjust, Chaucer exposes the transactional and ultimately illogical nature of these expectations. While Fame's court tries those who wish for the blessing she is able to give, renown, the apocalyptic resonance of the passage invites Chaucer's audience to look for spiritual lessons too.

Within the pagan confines of Fame's celestial court, Chaucer systematically removes any suspected link between desert and the granting of petition, thus questioning the expectations which give rise to a sense of injustice. Fame's lack of fairness provokes complaint both by the narrator and by the first unsuccessful supplicants, who are unique in questioning their sentence: "“Allas!” quod they, “and welaway! | Telle us what may your cause be”" (*HF*, ll. 1562–63). Unmoved, Fame refuses to justify her decision. Before

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<sup>77</sup> Lynch, *Chaucer's Philosophical Visions*, p. 75.

relating the procession of supplicants in detail, the narrator explicitly draws attention to the inexplicability of her judgements:

And somme of hem she graunted sone,  
 And somme she werned wel and faire,  
 And some she graunted the contraire  
 Of her axing outterly.  
 But thus I seye yow, trewely,  
 What her cause was, y nyste.  
 For of this folk ful wel y wiste  
 They hadde good fame ech deserved,  
 Although they were dyversly served.

(*HF*, ll. 1538–46)

Two shortened lines, 1541 and 1543, halt the metre, drawing attention to the dream poet's surprise at Fame's contrary responses and also at the seeming lack of reason behind her decisions.<sup>78</sup> Yet the narrator reports his acceptance of her decisions despite his lack of understanding: 'But what, hyt moste nedes be' (*HF*, l. 1635). Resignation, it would seem, is the only response possible where both logic and the consequences of the exercise of agency are disregarded. These specific injustices remain safely in Fame's court, bound to the literary concerns of the poet and enclosed by classical referents. Yet the underlying Christian model of the Apocalypse and the earlier successfully answered Christian prayer hint at greater issues with petitionary practice itself. These issues, especially the relationship between the deserving nature of the supplicant, the content of the prayer, and its outcome, continue to be a focus for Chaucer in his later work in both pagan and Christian contexts. Of course, the dream narrator does not find his final answers in the court of Fame, or indeed ever, given the poem's (un)ending. Instead he finds himself amongst the chaotic, very human world of the House of Rumour, to which we now turn in a brief look at a passage which enumerates the

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<sup>78</sup> Bennett refers to Fame revealing her capricious nature, commenting on the poet's delivery of these lines: 'Nowhere in the poem is his comment so deliberate or so emphatic.' See Bennett, *Chaucer's Book of Fame*, p. 146.

raw materials from which Chaucer's poetry will be created, the very sources of those petitionary prayers which play an important role in many of these poems.

*Sorrow, disaster and loss: the raw materials of prayer*

In her mythographic reading of *The House of Fame*, Jane Chance notes the way in which the poet narrator aligns himself not with those heroes, such as Aeneas, who achieve fame, but with those, such as Dido, who experience failure and abandonment.<sup>79</sup> Such identification finds echoes in the final section of the poem in which Geoffrey turns his back upon the House of Fame and finds instead the House of Rumour. The House of Rumour is associated both with chaos and creativity; Nick Havely encapsulates the dominant impression of this final locus of the poem as grotesque, a place which 'appears to be entirely dominated by grotesque images, sounds and activities'.<sup>80</sup> The dream poet's brief sojourn in the whirling house of wicker builds upon the lessons learnt in Fame's court. If the detailed interrogation of petition in the first part of Book III highlights Chaucer's interest in the relationship between moral goodness and life's outcomes, the second, chaotic part of the Book displays his concern with the often disastrous nature of those outcomes. The apparent injustice at the heart of human life, embodied by the figures of Fame and Fortune, is rarely far from the surface in Chaucer's writings and is often brought to the fore through his depictions of the relationship between prayerful supplication and desert. A second concern, which arises from the first, is his emphasis on the inherent difficulty of daily life, of the major and minor disasters to which all of humanity is prey. In *The House of Fame*, the relationship between these dual concerns is expressed through the dream poet's movement from Fame's hall to the House of Rumour. In turning his back on those concerned with their own fame, the dream poet is presented with an

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<sup>79</sup> Chance, *The Mythographic Chaucer*, pp. 47–9.

<sup>80</sup> Havely, 'The House of Fame: Introduction', p. 122.

even greater and more diverse ‘congregacioun’ of people in the whirling house of wicker (*HF*, ll. 2034–37).

Questions of just desert, of the unpredictability of joy and sorrow, resonate too with the life of Everyman, the lives of the crowd gathered together at the text’s (un)ending. The whispers, gossip, and tidings spilling out from the Domus Dedaly, or Labyrinth, encompass all of human experience, the good and the bad, telling

Of werres, of pes, of mariages,  
Of reste, of labour, of viages,  
Of abood, of deeth, of lyf,  
Of love, of hate, acord, of stryf,  
Of loos, of lore, and of wynnynge,  
Of hele, of seknesse, of bildynge,  
Of faire wyndes, and of tempestes,  
Of qwalm of folk, and eke of bestes;  
Of dyvers transmutacions  
Of estats, and eke of regions;  
Of trust, of drede, of jelousye,  
Of wit, of wynnynge, of folye;  
Of plente, and of gret famyne,  
Of chepe, of derthe, and of ruyne;  
Of good or mys governement,  
Of fyr, and of dyvers accident.

(*HF*, ll. 1961–76)<sup>81</sup>

This list at first appears to offer a balance of good and ill. Peace counterbalances war; rest is paired with labour, death with life; where wit begins a line, folly provides its end. This impression of balance is strengthened by those lines which contain within themselves a perfect equality between good and ill, such as this line: ‘Of love, of hate, accord, of stryf’, in which love and accord account for four syllables as do hate and strife. As good and ill alternate in the lines, the equal treatment evident in the number of syllables dedicated to each lends the impression that they counterbalance one another. Considering the entirety of the passage, however, such equity is an illusion. Just as individual lines alternate and shift the

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<sup>81</sup> On these lines, Delany writes: ‘We see, first, that the matter narrated by the historical and literary authorities was once the stuff of daily life, that before being transmuted into art it was no more than the usual succession.’ See Delany, *Chaucer’s House of Fame*, p. 106.

balance from joy to sorrow, only to return to joy, the passage itself is weighted at either end. The tone of this list hinges upon lines 1967 and 1968, where a shift occurs and the earthly joys more prevalent in the beginning of the passage become overwhelmed by life's inevitable sorrows.<sup>82</sup> The tidings of human life tend eventually towards sorrow, especially those sorrows to which people of every estate and condition are vulnerable, creating the effect of a litany in which the promptings of prayer are visible, while the prayers themselves remain implied.

This litany not only resembles a similar passage in *The Knight's Tale* in which Saturn reels off a list of his own work and effect on human lives, but also resembles a list of the subjects of prayer which would have been familiar to Chaucer's contemporaries from sermons for Rogationtide, a three-day period of prayer and fasting before Pentecost.<sup>83</sup> The devout are reminded of the terrible effects caused by demons at large in the world, effects which can only be countered through the exorcising prayers of the Rogation procession:

þan þei reryen werres, makyth tempeste | in þe see, drowneth schyppes and men; þei makyth debates betwyssen neghburres and manslawtes þerewith; þei tendon fyres and brennyn howses and townes; þei reren wyndes and tempests and bloweth down howsys, stepulles and trees, and þei makyth womman to ourelygge her schylder; þei make men to sclen himself, hongyn himself, or drown himself in wanope, and suche oþyr many cursyd dedys.<sup>84</sup>

Like Mirk's enumeration of the deeds of demons on earth, Saturn's list, in *The Knight's Tale*, of unexpected and violent deaths and various disasters makes no attempt at balance. This possibly earlier incarnation in *The House of Fame* is weighted dramatically towards the Saturnine list of sudden disasters by its conclusion. And just as the works of Saturn, as

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<sup>82</sup> Between lines 1961 and 1967, positive terms (defined here as all those relating to the pleasant, the fulfilling, the life-sustaining), include: 'pes', 'mariages', 'reste', 'viages' 'abood', 'lyf', 'love', 'acord', 'lore', 'wynnynges', 'hele', 'bilynges' and 'faire wyndes'. Purely negative terms in the same lines include: 'werres', 'deeth', 'hate', 'stryf', 'seknesse', and 'tempestes'. From lines 1968 to 1976, few positive terms are listed; these are: 'trust', 'wit', 'wynnynges', 'plente' and good government. The same lines include the following negative terms: 'qwalm of folk, and eke of bestes', 'drede', 'jelousye', 'folye', 'gret famyne', 'derthe', 'ruyne', 'mys governement', and 'fyr'.

<sup>83</sup> Saturn's 'litany' will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three (see pp. 126–27).

<sup>84</sup> Mirk, 'De rogacionibus sermo breuis', in *John Mirk's Festial*, I, pp. 138–39 (p. 139).

named in *The Knight's Tale*, encompass the grand misfortunes which curtail the joys of the noble classes as well as the everyday causes of misery, such as grumbling, malady and chance drowning, to which anyone might be liable, so the litany of Rumour attempts to be comprehensive in scope. War, dearth, ruin, famine, pestilence, or fire could affect the lives of all. When Geoffrey the poet turns away from the lives of those who would be great, he confronts the sorrows shared by men and women in the great 'congregacioun | Of folk' (*HF*, ll. 2034–35). In the poem's consideration of the matter of poetry and the nature of authority, this passage is significant. For this will be the subject matter of Chaucer's own poetry, so much of which will explore the intermingled joys and sorrows of life. Drawing upon Ovid's own description of the House of Rumour, Havely argues that it is a locus for creation for Chaucer.<sup>85</sup> Crucially, fallen Creation comprehends suffering, disaster, and injustice, in forms great and small, and these will become some of the key themes of Chaucer's own creation.

The dream poet originally prayed to be protected from 'fantome' and illusion. The eagle, arriving in response to this prayer, brings him to the House of Fame, where the poet is confronted with the spectacle of injustice and irrationality. It is only through turning his back on this scene that he arrives at the House of Rumour. His request to remain, spoken upon seeing the eagle perched nearby, is met with a surprising response: helping Geoffrey enter the *Domus Dedaly* is precisely the eagle's intent. Furthermore, he will aid Geoffrey in this aim because it is the will of Jove, who has taken pity on the poet's distress and despair. Not only has the eagle been charged with helping the poet gain access to the tidings and learning for which he longs, but this charge is a direct response to the eagle's own prayer at the end of Book II: 'And God of heven sende the grace | Some good to lernen in this place' (*HF*, ll. 1087–88). The eagle reports Jove's express commandment, received in response to this petition:

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<sup>85</sup> Havely, 'The House of Fame: Introduction', p. 121.

To further the with al my myght,  
 And wisse and teche the aryght  
 Where thou maist most tidynges here.  
 Shaltow here anoon many oon lere.

(*HF*, ll. 2023–26)

The prayer and the command raise questions. When the eagle prayed that the poet might learn in ‘this place’, he referred to the House of Fame. If his prayer were answered, as he implies that it has been, the good that the dream narrator has learned might have been to reject all that he saw there. In a movement from apotheosis to incarnation, the poet’s ascent into the heavenly spheres has brought him, conversely, to earth, to a reminder of the everyday concerns of humankind.

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Literary petitionary prayer, as Bridges argues in relation to *The Aeneid* and to medieval romance, can operate as a practical technique for enabling a text’s narrator or characters to achieve their desires. In *The Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer follows in literary tradition by introducing the narrator’s dream following a prayer. Although his decision to use the pagan deities Juno and Morpheus to fulfil this dream might have been novel in terms of the English vernacular, this choice, too, follows in literary tradition through his French sources. As we have seen, however, Chaucer also departs from this tradition, reframing the darkness implicit in Ovid’s account and showing answers to prayers to be problematic in order to explore the disjunctions possible between expressed desires and outcomes, between divine gifts and human feelings. For Chaucer, the literary use of prayer not only opened up the structural possibilities which he went on to exploit fully in *The House of Fame*, but also seems to have prompted an interest in the ways in which the workings of petitionary prayer could be used in a literary exploration of the fundamental injustices to which humanity is subject. As a response to pain, sorrow, and unfulfilled desire, prayer both as a theme and as a mode of

speech becomes entrenched in Chaucer's exploration of Fortune and the dark and difficult underpinnings of incarnate life.

Chaucer employs pagan settings, as well as the use of the ambiguous divine addressee, in order to speak to, and comment upon, contemporary Christian society. In *The Book of the Duchess*, the futility of Juno's intervention on behalf of Alcyone is mirrored by the inability of the Christian doctrine of resurrection to promise effective comfort in the face of grief. In *The House of Fame*, Chaucer comprehensively subverts expectations that the outcomes of petitions are by necessity related to the worthiness of the suppliant. While this overturning of expectations is set in the pagan confines of Fame's court, the pervasiveness of Christian referents in the poem invites his audience to question its own expectations. In *The Knight's Tale* and *The Franklin's Tale*, which we will consider in the next chapter, Chaucer continues to explore and to present problematic answers to prayer in pagan settings. In these two tales, Chaucer uses conflicting and mutually exclusive prayers to expose the multi-layered and often hidden desires expressed through prayer as well as the incompatibility between the expectation of divine intervention and the acceptance of human responsibility in the resolution of conflict.



– Three –

## Conflicting Prayers in Romance: *The Knight's Tale* and *The Franklin's Tale*

Sancti martyres nostra præcedent agmina, quorum incenderunt memorias, quorum atria cædibus impleverunt. Virgines sanctæ licet pugnæ dubitent interesse, pro nobis tamen oratione pugnabunt. Amplius dico, ipse Christus apprehendet arma et scutum, et exurget in adjutorium nobis.

Aelred of Rievaulx, *Relatio de standardo*<sup>1</sup>

In the previous chapter we saw how Chaucer uses petitionary prayer in two of his dream visions as both a literary device to provide narrative movement and as the basis for addressing two related themes to which he returned throughout his career: the injustice of suffering innocence and the lack of correspondence between people's actions and the events which befall them in life. By overlaying the pagan settings of *The Book of the Duchess* and *The House of Fame* with Christian references, Chaucer encourages multiple ways of reading the prayers and their answers which go far beyond the simply ironic or an easy dismissal of his pagan *exempla*.

This chapter focusses on Chaucer's use of prayer in romance, where conflicting petitions strongly feature. The relationship between the deserving nature of a supplicant, the content of a petition, and its outcome, which is thoroughly dismantled in *The House of Fame*, and the use of the pagan setting also feature in Chaucer's romances, alongside an additional emphasis on human agency. In *The Knight's Tale*, with which the bulk of this chapter is concerned, Chaucer continues to use prayer as a plot device through allowing divine intervention to influence the course of events. As in the dream visions, he also problematises

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<sup>1</sup> [The holy martyrs, to whose shrines they set fire, whose halls they filled with the slain, will go before our army. The holy virgins hesitate to participate in battle; however, they will fight for us with prayer. Furthermore, Christ himself will take up arms and shield and rise up to our aid.] Aelred of Rievaulx, *Relatio de standardo*, in *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II, and Richard I*, ed. by Richard Howlett, 4 vols (London: Longman, 1884–89), III, pp. 181–99 (p. 189). Aelred attributes the speech to Walter Espec.

these answers: granted prayers prove not to be straightforward rewards for the devout and also reveal the subconscious desires and concomitant agency of the supplicants. Arcite and Palamon each desire to have Emelye; Arcite prays for the victory which will secure her as his wife, while Palamon prays for her whether he wins or loses the decisive tournament. The gods grant each prayer, although Arcite's death becomes a necessary condition for Palamon's request to be successful. In presenting the successfully answered prayers of this text, Chaucer problematises the answers by exposing the resultant violence to have arisen from the supplicant's barely acknowledged desires. He thus moves beyond the use of prayer as a literary device in order to explore the dark and violent underpinnings of his tale. This chapter considers *The Knight's Tale* as oblique commentary on Chaucer's contemporary context, one in which Christians prayed to the same God for aid while waging war against one another. Emelye's denied petition introduces a theme taken up in a consideration of the relegated place of prayer in *The Franklin's Tale*.

In *The Franklin's Tale*, the later of Chaucer's two romances to make a prominent feature of prayer, conflict is resolved without the aid of divine intervention.<sup>2</sup> As the concluding section of this chapter will demonstrate, in *The Franklin's Tale* Chaucer abandons

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<sup>2</sup> *The Franklin's Tale* is generally considered to have been composed at a later date than *The Knight's Tale*. The latter is usually dated to the early 1380s, falling after one of Chaucer's trips to Italy, where he is supposed to have encountered Boccaccio's works, in 1372–3 and 1378, but before the *Prologue* to *The Legend of Good Women* was composed, circa 1386–8, because the tale of Palamon and Arcite is mentioned there as one of his existent works (see *LGW*, ll. 408–9 (G); ll. 420–21 (F)). William E. Coleman argues that *The Knight's Tale* was written after Chaucer's second trip to Italy, since it was not until after that year that his works began to show the influence of Boccaccio. See William A. Coleman, 'The Knight's Tale' in *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, ed. by Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel, 2 vols (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2005), II, pp. 87–247 (p. 98). Johnstone Parr argues for a date after mid-1390 for Chaucer's revision to the poem, based on the combination of astrological evidence, the occurrence of historical events which seem to parallel those mentioned in Saturn's litany of disasters, and Chaucer's involvement in overseeing work for a royal tournament in that year. See Johnstone Parr, 'The Date and Revision of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*', *PMLA*, 60 (1945), 307–24. Robert A. Pratt argues convincingly against the persuasiveness of the evidence offered for the extensive late revisions to the tale proposed by Parr. See Robert A. Pratt and Johnstone Parr, 'Was Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* Extensively Revised after the Middle of 1390?', *MLA*, 63 (1948), 726–39. Less evidence exists for dating *The Franklin's Tale*, which is usually assigned to the mid-1390s, along with the rest of the 'Marriage Group'. See Vincent J. DiMarco's 'Explanatory Notes' in *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 895. The poem is not mentioned in the *Prologue* to *The Legend of Good Women*, and might be assumed to have been composed after *The Knight's Tale*.

the use of answered prayer as a narrative device, employing the same construct of incompatible prayers to refocus attention instead on the human agency which both causes and resolves conflict. The gods do not step in, either to solve or to complicate human problems. The hidden nature of the divine in the later romance elucidates the many instances in Chaucer's texts in which prayers are denied or remain unanswered. Aurelius is famously unsuccessful in his appeal to Apollo and while his prayer is perhaps not suitably humble, this need not be an obstacle to his success, as we have seen with the narrator's prayer to Morpheus and Juno in *The Book of the Duchess*. In the face of his unsuccessful prayer, he turns to human ingenuity in order to orchestrate the outcome desired, a fitting response in a tale concerned with human agency.

*Praying to the pantheon: choosing a divine champion in The Knight's Tale*

The pilgrim Knight, teller of the tale of Palamon and Arcite, the ill-fated Theban cousins, is steeped in classical lore: his tale is of Theseus, Duke of Athens, worshipper of pagan deities, conqueror of cities, promoter of tournaments. The Knight, however, is himself a Christian engaged in a pilgrimage, an activity encompassed by prayer in its beginning and its end. Like many of the other pilgrims of *The Canterbury Tales*, he concludes his tale with a petition, an intercessory prayer of blessing for his fellow pilgrims: 'Thus endeth Palamon and Emelye; | And God save al this faire compaignye! Amen' (*KnT*, ll. 3107–8). Yet petitionary prayer becomes one of the most problematic issues in his tale, its results leading to a tangle of unpleasant conclusions.<sup>3</sup>

Received by its pilgrim audience as a tale both suitable to the nobility of its teller and pleasingly appropriate to the Host's stated aims in the storytelling competition which

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<sup>3</sup> Writing on 'prayerful petition' in Chaucer's works, Windeatt notes that the significance of petition and petitionary prayer in *The Knight's Tale* is indicated from the moment early in the text when the Theban widows successfully petition Theseus. See Windeatt, 'Plea and Petition in Chaucer', pp. 201–4. He argues that the text demonstrates a rare absence of petition, however, when neither of the Theban knights is able to petition Emelye as a lover.

provides the basis for the *Canterbury Tales*, the Knight's tale of Palamon and Arcite relies on prayer both as an impetus to the narrative and as an embodiment of conflict when the two men appeal to the gods as their champions. The tale reaches a tidy conclusion when the gods respond to supplication by intervening in earthly affairs, thus resolving the conflict.<sup>4</sup> Chaucer raises serious questions about divine justice and the efficacy of petitionary prayer only for these to be swept away in the tale's carefully constructed end. Only by suppressing such questions in the momentum towards a neat resolution can the tale achieve a conclusion appropriate to its romance genre and accurately be described as 'comedy', the designation for which Crampton argues in distinguishing the text's features from those of classical tragedy.<sup>5</sup> Yet the comic resolution of the tale represents a response to conflict which, rather than healing the rupture between the only surviving representatives of Theban nobility, fatally ends their division. That this disastrous resolution occurs not despite, but because of, the supplications of the two men should give pause.

The conclusion, with its rush to marry off Palamon and Emelye after the death of Arcite, silences the questions and objections raised in the course of the tale. Such hastiness magnifies a dissonance resulting in part from Chaucer's use of Boethius's *De consolazione philosophiae*, which he draws upon heavily in his reworking of Boccaccio's fourteenth-century *Teseida delle Nozze d'Emilia*.<sup>6</sup> The inclusion of the Boethian debate on the nature of providence highlights the tragic elements underlying the *Teseida*, which Piero Boitani identifies as 'problems of justice, of the ethics of love and war, of man's response to the

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<sup>4</sup> The pilgrim audience is not entirely unanimous in its reception, as the narrator notes an especially positive response from the 'gentils everichon' (*KnT*, l. 3113).

<sup>5</sup> Georgia Ronan Crampton, *The Condition of Creatures: Suffering and Action in Chaucer and Spenser* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 71.

<sup>6</sup> While not the originator of the tale of Arcite and Palamon, Boccaccio is here considered as Chaucer's 'immediate source' for the tale. See Helen Phillips, 'The Matter of Chaucer: Chaucer and the Boundaries of Romance', in *Chaucer and Religion*, ed. by Phillips, pp. 65–80 (p. 73). Chaucer also had access to Statius's *Thebaid* as a source, but its influence was secondary, as William A. Coleman argues, writing that Chaucer primarily 'used the *Thebaid* "through" the *Teseida*'. See William A. Coleman, 'The Knight's Tale', pp. 133–34.

powers that rule his life'.<sup>7</sup> Boitani suggests that although these elements are present in Boccaccio's text, they remain unrealised, observing that the author raises problems 'while often losing sight of the main thread of his story and thus diluting the compactness and consequentiality of his theme'.<sup>8</sup> The addition of a Boethian exploration of fate and fortune undermines the otherwise apparently happy ending his text presents. This aspect of Chaucer's borrowing from Boethius has received the greatest critical attention, especially in reference both to Theseus's final speech to the 'Firste Moevere' and to the laments from the *Consolatio* voiced by Arcite and Palamon.<sup>9</sup> In consideration of the crucial role which the prayers of three of the characters play both in the resolution of the plot and in the perception of injustice engendered thereby, it is worth also acknowledging the reflections on prayer included in the *Consolatio*. Prayer, a link of hope between the human and the divine, as Boethius writes, becomes in *The Knight's Tale* a means of destruction.

The gods' responses to the three petitionary prayers which precede the tournament in *The Knight's Tale* make possible the tidy conclusion by recourse to literalism. Their cruelty has been the focus of much critical attention, which often conveys a sense that the gods have betrayed expectations. The pagan deities are described as if they fail to uphold their side of a contract between humanity and the divine. Minnis, for example, describes the gods as guilty of 'callous treatment of Arcite', while Mark Miller accuses them of conducting a 'divine

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<sup>7</sup> Piero Boitani, 'Style, Iconography and Narrative: the Lesson of the *Teseida*', in *Chaucer and the Italian Trecento*, ed. by Piero Boitani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 185–99 (p. 186–87).

<sup>8</sup> Boitani, 'Style, Iconography and Narrative', p. 187.

<sup>9</sup> For Theseus's speech, see *KnT*, ll. 2987–3074; for Arcite's lament, see ll. 1251–67; for Palamon's lament, see ll. 1303–27. Bernard L. Jefferson identifies the source for Theseus's speech as *De consolazione philosophiae*, Book IV, pr.6 and m.6; the source for Arcite's lament as Book III, pr.2; and the sources for part of Palamon's lament as Books I, m.5 and IV, pr.1. See his *Chaucer and the Consolation of Philosophy of Boethius* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1917), pp. 142–43. For a discussion of Theseus's speech as Stoic consolation, see Barbara Nolan, *Chaucer and the Tradition of the Roman Antique* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 278–81. For an overview of the influence of the *Consolatio* on the tale, see Elizabeth Salter, *Chaucer: The Knight's Tale and The Clerk's Tale* (London: Edward Arnold, 1962), pp. 18–23, 35–36. For an extended discussion of the imagery of imprisonment in the poem and its relationship to Boethius, see V. A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales* (London: Edward Arnold, 1984), pp. 136–49.

conspiracy' and Crampton refers to the divine solution to the knights' quarrel as deriving from a 'shabby technicality'.<sup>10</sup> Because the answers to the prayers of the three protagonists play a key role in the plot's resolution, this focus on the slippery nature of divine justice is hardly surprising. Beyond this divine resolution, directly borrowed from Boccaccio, lies an adaptation which has received relatively little notice: the place of prayer shifts considerably and systematically in *The Knight's Tale*.<sup>11</sup> Chaucer's alterations to the prayers of the *Teseida* involve a threefold repositioning: a change to the position within the narrative of each of the three primary petitions; an adjustment to the degree of importance each prayer has in relation to its speaking subject; and a significant alteration to the physical space in which each prayer is uttered. Read in the context of the additional Boethian passages, the prayers and, more importantly, their answers, lend *The Knight's Tale* its dark mood.

While Arcite's and Palamon's sorrowful laments, drawn from the *Consolatio*, are key additions Chaucer makes to his sources, Boethius's definition of prayer should also be considered as contributing to the tragic turn Chaucer gives to Boccaccio's material. In the fifth book of the *Consolatio*, the narrator allies the human expression of hope to its outpouring in supplicatory prayer:

And this is oonly the manere (that is to seyn, hope and preieris) for whiche it semeth that men mowen spekyn with God, and by resoun of supplicacion be conjoyned to thilke cleernesse that nis nat aprochid no rather or that men byseken it and impetren it. And yif men ne wene nat that hope ne preieris ne han no strengthis by the necessite of thingis to comen iresceyved, what thing is ther thanne by whiche we mowen ben conjoyned and clyven to thilke sovereyne prince of thingis?

(*Bo*, V, pr.3, ll.199–210)

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<sup>10</sup> Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*, p 135; Mark Miller, *Philosophical Chaucer: Love, Sex, and Agency in the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 102; Crampton, *The Condition of Creatures*, p. 70.

<sup>11</sup> In an exception to this lack of attention, Robert Epstein relates the changes in the place of prayer to Chaucer's emphasis on Theseus as the builder and designer of the lists, or the theatre in which the tournament takes place. For Epstein, the displacement of the temples from the realm of the gods to Theseus's realm emphasises Theseus's power. See Robert Epstein, "With many a floryn he the hewes boghte": Ekphrasis and Symbolic Violence in the *Knight's Tale*, *Philological Quarterly*, 85 (2006), 49–68 (pp. 53–5).

Petitionary prayer comes to the forefront of this passage: humanity speaks with, or approaches, God through supplication. The power of this human act is in its ability to reach the ineffably divine, or ‘thilke cleernesse that nis nat aprochid’.<sup>12</sup> Only through prayer might creature be conjoined with creator. This is not the vision of prayer expressed by the Theban knights as they pray for possession of Emelye, however. In *The Knight’s Tale*, Chaucer presents readers with a world in which prayers attempt to bring the will of the gods into alignment with the will of the supplicant, dragging the gods down to earth and its concerns while raising human conflict itself to the realm of the gods. He achieves this anti-ascension by removing the homes of the deities from Boccaccio’s vision of them in the spiritual realm, recreating them in the human arena of Theseus’s tournament theatre. This movement does not merely anthropomorphise the pagan gods, but rather insists upon the earthly and natural workings out of their wills. Although dependent on the tale’s pagan setting, the apotheosis of conflict does not merely invite comment on the pantheon as objects of classical devotion. Through questioning the ultimate responsibility of the gods in causing human misery, albeit in a fictional, pagan setting, Chaucer refocusses attention on human agency and the inevitable consequences of violent solutions to conflicting desire.<sup>13</sup>

The setting in pagan Athens enables Chaucer, following Boccaccio in essence, although not in detail as shall be seen, to pair each protagonist with a divine champion. He positions each of the two young rivals as a devotee of a single deity chosen from among the Graeco-Roman pantheon. Arcite’s devotion to Mars and Palamon’s to Venus serve to

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<sup>12</sup> The author of the late-fourteenth-century *The Cloud of Unknowing* expresses similar sentiments in discussing the failure of the ‘bodely wittes’ to apprehend God: ‘For whi that thing that it failith in is nothing elles bot only God. And herfore it was that Seynte Denis seyde: “The most goodly knowing of God is that, the whiche is knowyn bi unknowing”’. See *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. by Patrick J. Gallacher (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), p. 96.

<sup>13</sup> Addressing the use of a pagan setting for *The Knight’s Tale*, Phillips writes that Chaucer uses pre-Christian settings ‘to explore questions that are actually of great importance for Christians’. She defines these concerns as fate and human suffering. See Helen Phillips, ‘Medieval Classical Romances: The Perils of Inheritance’, in *Christianity and Romance in Medieval England*, ed. by Rosalind Field, Phillipa Hardman, and Michelle Sweeney (Cambridge: Brewer, 2010), pp. 3–25 (p. 11).

differentiate two characters who might otherwise appear, as Ardis Butterfield describes the two Thebans, 'indistinguishable'.<sup>14</sup> Both men are capable knights; both languish in amorous despair. Yet when each protagonist chooses to spend time praying in an oratory before Theseus's tournament, the audience can easily define the desire uppermost in his mind. Chaucer's Arcite seeks the spoils of war in his service of Mars, while his Palamon seeks the rewards of love by serving Venus. By contrast, Boccaccio's rival knights appeal almost indiscriminately to any and every deity who might have the power to affect the outcome of the tournament which will decide who is to wed Emilia. Rather than exhibiting faithfulness to a specific god, they call upon the aid of each god and goddess honoured by the dedication of a temple in Athens:

Palaemon and Arcites went humbly and with pious sentiments to pray to the gods. Placing bright fires on their altars, they offered incense, and with fervent desires they prayed that the gods would help each of them in their needs.<sup>15</sup>

Only after they have completed their rounds of all the temples can the two young knights of the *Teseida* be distinguished from one another in their devotions.

In the *Teseida*, the devotional divisions between Arcites and Palaemon finally become apparent as each chooses the site in which to conclude his prayers. Although one cousin is associated with Mars and the other with Venus, these differences are not as significant in the *Teseida* as in *The Knight's Tale*. While Arcites's additional prayers to Mars spring from a 'devout heart and great devotion', he approaches the god of war as an appropriate conclusion to the solicitation of favour from as many deities as possible.<sup>16</sup> In comparison, Palaemon

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<sup>14</sup> Ardis Butterfield, *The Familiar Enemy: Chaucer, Language, and Nation in the Hundred Years War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 182. Crampton notes that, if anything, Arcite exhibits to a greater extent than Palamon the traditional symptoms of love-sickness which might be associated with a follower of Venus. See Crampton, *The Condition of Creatures*, p. 70. Boitani, on the other hand, describes Boccaccio's Arcites as 'gentle, suffering, pensive' and Palaemon as 'bellicose'. See Boitani, 'Style, Iconography and Narrative', pp. 190, 194. With the exception of Arcite's love-sickness, as noted by Crampton, these characteristics do not distinguish Chaucer's characters from one another.

<sup>15</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Book Of Theseus: 'Teseida delle Nozze d'Emilia'*, trans. by Bernadette Marie McCoy (New York: Medieval Text Association, 1974), VII. 22.

<sup>16</sup> Boccaccio, *Teseida*, VII. 23.



displays an almost cynical approach to his worship; the indiscriminate nature of his devotions is evident in Boccaccio's depiction of his sacrificial largesse:

Palaemon had also smoked up every temple in Athens and he had not omitted a god or goddess in heaven whom he had not constrained to intercede for him. But that day it pleased him to honor Cytherea more than any of the others.<sup>17</sup>

Cytherea, or Venus, represents an intercessor of convenience for the occasion, worship at her altar an important part of Palaemon's preparations for the tournament. An element of whim, as well as self-interest, leads him to honour Venus above the other gods. In the *Teseida*, Emilia sets a more devoted example; she differs from both knights by choosing and serving one goddess faithfully. Although she implies a willingness to transfer her allegiance if she must relinquish her status as a virgin, she directs her prayers only to Diana. The subtle alteration in *The Knight's Tale* of each of these allegiances creates greater division between the characters and amongst the gods, a demarcation also emphasised through prayer.

Chaucer strengthens and narrows the devotional focus of each supplicant by presenting two Theban knights who equal Emelye in their dedication to the one god each has chosen from among the many. By substituting 'oratorie' for Boccaccio's '*il tempio*', Chaucer places the act of prayer at the centre of the characters' devotions (*KnT*, ll. 1902–13).<sup>18</sup> Built over the gates of the walls surrounding Theseus's lists, these oratories mark the boundary between the languishing and plotting which has preceded the tournament and the brutally physical ground in which the cousins' fates are decided. Arcite and Palamon, unlike their counterparts in the *Teseida*, each arise early on the morning of the tournament to go directly to a single oratory in order to pray to one chosen deity. In *The Knight's Tale*, Arcite chooses Mars over Venus; Palamon chooses Venus over Mars. That Arcite subsequently prays for

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<sup>17</sup> Boccaccio, *Teseida*, VII. 42.

<sup>18</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *Teseida della Nozze D'Emilia*, in *Opere Minori in Volgare*, ed. by Mario Marti, 4 vols (Milan: Rizzoli Editore, 1969–72), II, pp. 247–765, VII. 36. The *OED* traces the meaning of the word 'oratory' as a place of prayer to the French 'oratorie', as well as Latin 'oratorium'. See 'oratory, *n.1*' in *OED Online* <www.oed.com> [accessed 05.09.16]. The etymology of 'oratio' as prayer is discussed in Chapter One, p. 11.

victory while Palamon prays for love is altogether unsurprising. As a follower of Diana, Emelye's wish to remain unmarried also seems unremarkable. The choice of divine recipient therefore emphasises the primary aim of the petition while also implying a rejection of other gods who might have the power to intervene.

In their apparent mutual incompatibility, the petitionary prayers offered on the morning of Theseus's decisive tournament by Arcite, Palamon, and Emelye result in a display of the capricious nature of pagan gods, whose responses invite the reader to question the relationship between an answered prayer and the supplicant's genuine desire. As in *The Book of the Duchess*, a divine response, even if positive, might not be quite what the supplicant expects. Divine intervention in *The Knight's Tale* results in a disastrous outcome, the unforeseen destruction of life. The gods, however, represent the desires of their supplicants, which are irreconcilable. The tale's setting in classical Athens allows an exploration of the process in which responsibility for the reconciliation of incompatible human desires is projected onto the gods by associating each human desire with a separate deity. A series of competing petitions dramatise the human propensity to allocate to the heavenly realm responsibility for the resolution of earthly conflict. Rather than portraying the monotheist world inhabited both by the narrator and his audience, a world in which belief held that one God hears all the needs, wishes, and desires of his worshippers, the tale offers its audience the gods of classical Athens, who are free to take the part of one person over another. Worldly arguments quickly escalate to involve celestial champions. When the object of a prayer is material, in the form of physical, personal gain, this desire quickly comes into conflict with the desires of others. *The Knight's Tale* lifts the mundane argument between two men over a woman to the celestial realm, crystallising their conflicting prayers into the opposing celestial forces embodied by Mars and Venus, as each cousin prays to the

detriment of the other. The war between their irreconcilable desires achieves for itself an apotheosis.

Chaucer employs traditional structures for the prayers of his three protagonists; each of these petitions conforms to an ideal pattern which aims to maximise the chance of success. Having chosen their dedicated celestial champions, each of the supplicants presents a prayer in which the deity is addressed in terms which recall past interventions and express hopes for a favourable response. Despite being addressed to deities of opposing aspects, love and war, the formal qualities of Arcite's and Palamon's petitions are highly similar. Both knights offer praise, naming the attributes of the divine being addressed; recall a relevant incident associated with the deity's actions in the physical world, drawing upon this incident to implore divine pity; and complete their opening invocations by acknowledging their own helplessness to achieve their desire. After these preliminaries, the two Thebans place their desire before their chosen deity; promise future devotion and extravagant sacrifice; and finally end with a brief restatement of their petition. Palamon's invocation of the love which Venus bore for Adonis, which follows his address to the goddess and marks the formal beginning of his supplication, illustrates this ideal petitionary form.<sup>19</sup> In addition to naming the goddess addressed, the invocation fulfils two further purposes. The first of these functions is to be a reminder of her past actions, demonstrating his faith in her ability to act in the world; the second, related, purpose is to inspire the goddess's pity for a kindred lover. Similarly, Arcite praises Mars for his strength and his power to affect the destiny of men of arms. Mars, Arcite declares, 'hast in every regne and every lond | Of armes al the brydel in thyn hond' (*KnT*, ll. 2375–76). The knight expresses confidence in Mars's ability to control

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<sup>19</sup> Late-medieval Christian petitionary prayer often exhibits a similar form. For example, prayers for protection frequently refer to biblical figures who benefitted from divine intervention in the same manner desired by the supplicant, with references to Susannah, Daniel, and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego being especially popular. See Chapter One's discussion on protective prayers in general (pp. 37–8) and Chapter Four's discussion of prayers which invoke in particular the divine protection offered to Susannah, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (pp. 186–87).

the affairs of men, although circumstances later prove this confidence both to be unfounded and also not entirely true to Arcite's inner thoughts.

As the last chapter demonstrated, Chaucer dismantles the connection between the worthiness of a supplicant from the outcome of a petition in *The House of Fame*. In *The Knight's Tale*, he disentangles the inner desire which gives rise to a petition from its outward expression, introducing a divide which capricious pagan gods are only too willing to exploit. This distinction between inner desire and its outward expression in supplication is a quality shared by the petitions of the two knights, in addition to the similarity of form. Arcite, implicitly understanding Theseus's decree to be law in heaven as in Athens, asks for the victory Theseus requires in order to win Emelye's hand in marriage. In contrast, Palamon asks directly for his wish, seeking the gift of Emelye herself, rather than triumph in battle. Aiming for his goal, rather than for any intermediate steps, he specifies all that he does not ask of Venus:

I kepe noght of armes for to yelpe,  
Ne I ne axe nat tomorwe to have victorie,  
Ne renoun in this cas, ne veyne glorie  
Of pris of armes blowen up and down;  
But I wolde have fully possessioun  
Of Emelye.

(*KnT*, ll. 2238–43)

Each knight reveals the implicit desire at the heart of his explicit request. Although Palamon eschews military victory with its consequent spoils, his conception of love equates to possession: Emelye herself will become his prize, however achieved. Arcite's request has been taken as evidence of his simplicity: Boitani, for example, associates Arcites's literal interpretation of Theseus's decree with the 'gentle' nature given him by Boccaccio, a character trait he sees as shared by Chaucer's Arcite.<sup>20</sup> Yet Arcite's focus on straightforward success in arms as a method of obtaining a wife follows the precedent set by Theseus, whose

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<sup>20</sup> Boitani, 'Style, Iconography and Narrative', p. 190.

marriage to the defeated queen of the Amazons begins *The Knight's Tale*. Military might, in his view, ought to provide him with victory and with the woman he desires. As he states to Mars, 'And wel I woot, er she me mercy heete, | I moot with strengthe wyne her in the place' (*KnT*, ll. 2398–99). For Arcite, as for Theseus, the conquering of enemies is intimately connected to the conquering of women. His equation of the two forms of conquest make his choice of Mars a clear tactical decision, rather than a reflection of a naive literal-mindedness.

Yet these petitions are not as straightforward as they might appear. As everyone knows, Palamon prays for Emelye and Arcite prays for victory, but a closer look at the prayers reveals a subtext of deeper, almost unacknowledged, desires. We shall examine each of these prayers in turn, beginning with that of Arcite, whose petition less successfully conceals his deeper desire. Although he, like Palamon, wishes to win Emelye, the promise of proving victorious in the tournament holds added value in representing a victory over the woman who has unmanned him. His prayer is brimming with violent imagery. He praises Mars as subjugator of Venus, addressing the god as one who once 'usedest the beautee | Of faire, yonge, fresshe Venus free, | And haddest hire in armes at thy wille –' (*KnT*, ll. 2385–57). In Ovid's portrayal, Venus, as the wife of Vulcan, bears equal responsibility for the affair with Mars; Arcite's choice of language, however, depicts the goddess as a young virginal creature, whose fair beauty and freshness of youth can be 'used' or spoilt by Mars's superior strength of body and will.<sup>21</sup> Omitting the expected possessive 'your' gives the phrase 'in arms' a decidedly military ring. Boccaccio's Arcites, by contrast, prays more simply to the god who 'passionately enjoyed' Venus's beauty.<sup>22</sup> Chaucer's additions to the source of this prayer include Arcite's reference to Emelye's indifference to his suffering: 'For she that dooth me al this wo endure | Ne reccheth nevere wher I synke or fleete' (*KnT*, ll.

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<sup>21</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II, Book IV.

<sup>22</sup> Boccaccio, *Teseida*, VII. 25.

2396–97). Considered alongside his depiction of Venus, the impression given by this comment on Emelye during Arcite's prayer hints at an element of hurt pride. If Arcite were to become the champion of the tournament, Emelye would no longer have the freedom not to notice him, nor not to care whether he 'synke or fleete'. Arcite's complaint betrays a subconscious determination to vanquish the indifference of a woman. Beneath his apparently simple, explicit request lie barely submerged layers of complex and competing desires.

In his own prayer, Palamon acknowledges the impossibility he feels of coexisting with his cousin, although his petition frames the violence of their confrontation as suicidal despair. Palamon's deepest desire is not to obtain Emelye, but to be spared the thought of anyone else winning her. First to rise and 'wenden on his pilgrimage', he kneels humbly before Venus and reflects that she, as goddess of love, holds an even greater sway in heaven than the might of Mars. Palamon rejects the lure of prowess in the lists and before his peers; he has no wish to win the tournament for its own sake. He gives voice to his despair as he petitions the goddess:

If ye wol nat so, my lady sweete,  
 Thanne preye I thee, tomorwe with a spere  
 That Arcite me thurgh the herte bere.  
 Thanne rekke I noght, whan I have lost my lyf,  
 Though that Arcita wyne hire to his wyf.  
 This is th'effect and ende of my preyere:  
 Yif me my love, thow blisful lady deere.

(*KnT*, ll. 2254–69)

Although he intends the gift of his beloved to be the 'effect and ende' of his prayer, the preceding five lines express a darker plea. Death at his rival's hands is preferable to the sight of his rival's bliss. Palamon's suicidal wish does not spring, however, from selflessness, as the prior request for death at Theseus's hands, expressed during his outcry in the grove, demonstrates: 'I axe deeth and my juwise; | But sle my felawe in the same wise, | For bothe han we deserved to be slayn' (*KnT*, ll. 1739–41). He does not relinquish the field, nor the

prize, to his cousin. Deep selfishness pervades each layer of desire betrayed by the petitions of both men.

Against these two selfish prayers conveyed through an ideal form, Chaucer sets Emelye's singularly unsuccessful, though equally ideal petition. Despite sharing formal characteristics with the petitions of the two men, her prayer is unlike the others in its close alignment of outer expression and inner meaning, being internally consistent in its desire for peace and the return of harmonious relations between the cousins. In this her prayer is further distinguished from those of her two suiters. The request to retain her status as a virgin also represents a desire for self-determination. She does not ask for personal gain, but to escape Theseus's bestowal of her hand and responsibility for her fate. Her prayer, which follows a similar format to that of the two knights, includes an implicit, heartfelt desire; an explicit petition; and the sub-clause of a pragmatist. First, Emelye invites Diana to recognise her deepest desire: the goddess of virginity is reminded that she knows the suppliant as her own devoted servant. Diana knows her servant's love of hunting and walking in the wild woods, her wish never to marry or bear children. After expressing these hopes for herself, Emelye's explicit prayer is intercessory, for the good of others: 'This grace I preye thee withoute moore, | As sende love and pees bitwixe hem two, | And fro me turn away hir hertes' (*KnT*, ll. 2316–18). Despite the distress her own predicament might cause, Emelye remembers the two who have created the coercive situation in which she finds herself trapped and prays for their good. Also aware, perhaps as a defeated, captive Amazonian, that prayers are so often ungranted, Emelye attaches a pragmatic rider to her petition.<sup>23</sup> If she must marry one of the two men, the least Diana could grant is for her husband to be the man who loves her best. And while this interpretation can potentially be read into the eventual outcome of

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<sup>23</sup> Shunichi Noguchi regards the prayers of all three supplicants to have been granted on the basis of this pragmatic request made by Emelye. In face of Diana's immediate negative response, however, Emelye's prayer is here categorised as ungranted. See Shunichi Noguchi, 'Prayers in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*', *Poetica*, 41 (1994), 45–50 (p. 48).

the tournament, when Emelye and Palamon are united, the gods' denial of the only prayer which is explicitly for peace points to the ultimate victory of violence in the tale.<sup>24</sup> As this analysis has demonstrated, the prayers of the three protagonists express much more than the single straightforward petitions to which the gods will respond, instead betraying hidden, even ugly, desires. As we shall see, these desires come to fruition through human authority working in concert with the divine.

Divine intervention in *The Knight's Tale* operates within the arena of human power. Despite Theseus's imposition of his own earthly authority over their fates, Emelye, Palamon and Arcite turn to supernatural intervention to arbitrate the outcomes sought by their conflicting desires. Although the invocation of divine aid holds the potential to undermine human authority, the prayers of the three supplicants paradoxically confirm their reliance upon the laws and decrees of Theseus to be as great as their trust in the gods. Neither the human realm nor the divine maintains the pretence that such arbitration will necessarily prove just in its results. In their eschewal of fairness, the divine and the human realms mirror one another. The manner in which Theseus extends his authority assumes at least an appearance of legitimacy. His law requires those in his power, however, to accept two unjust premises: the first, that the Duke undoubtedly exercises the right to bestow a captive woman on the possessor of the greatest military strength and skill, and the second, that such prowess in arms can be undeniably proven in the artificial environment of a tournament. Having willingly accepted these two premises, the two Theban knights interpret the gods' reactions to their petitions accordingly. The instantaneous responses evoked by their prayers lure the men to trust in their imminent success as recipients of divine favour. Palamon leaves Venus's oratory believing 'that his preyere accepted was that day | For thogh the signe showed a delay

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<sup>24</sup> Minnis argues that the text is undecided on this point: 'There is no suggestion that Palamon was the most deserving, or indeed that Emelye got the man who loved her most.' See Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*, p. 136.



| Yet wiste he wel that graunted was his boone' (*KnT*, ll. 2267–69). Arcite, too, is satisfied by the result of his petition when he hears the cry of 'Victory' echoing within the statue of Mars before making his way home filled with 'joye and hope wel to fare' (*KnT*, l. 2435). Trust in the gods ultimately depends on an unquestioning faith in the sway of earthly law embodied by the Duke of Athens.

The interdependence of earthly and celestial authority retains a hold despite subtle challenges from Palamon and Emelye. In asking Venus to win his beloved even if he does not succeed in the contest in the arena of the tournament, Palamon slyly seeks to undercut Theseus's will. His tactics provide the gods with their eventual resolution to the conflicting prayers of the two cousins, although implicit consent to the rule of Theseus is evident in Palamon's agreement to participate in the tournament. Emelye's attempt to evade Theseus's power over her future by direct appeal to Diana bears no fruit. The decree of the gods upholds the rule of Theseus, who has conceived only two possible outcomes for his sister-in-law, both involving marriage. She alone leaves her devotions in the knowledge that her petition has been dismissed by the gods. Diana is seemingly powerless to grant her prayer, but must instead support the rule of the divine council. The goddess's appearance in the oratory offers no reassurance to her faithful worshipper. Emelye's destiny, her inevitable marriage to one of the two Thebans, has been 'affermed | and by eterne word writen and confermed' (*KnT*, ll. 2349–50).<sup>25</sup> Religious values echo the secular as her fate receives a divine stamp of approval to uphold Theseus's royal seal. Just as the secular and earthly

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<sup>25</sup> Karl Steel draws attention to the distinction between Boccaccio's use of 'parola', which, he argues, emphasises the nature of the gods' decision as deliberative, even if already taken, and Chaucer's references to an irrevocable written decision. He notes that Chaucer's choice of words emphasises the sense of a 'diktat' made by forces unknown. This argument, however, glosses over Diana's explicit reference in line 2349 to the gods who have made the decision. See Karl Steel, 'Kill Me, Save Me, Let Me Go: Custance, Virginia, Emelye', in *Dark Chaucer: An Assortment*, ed. by Seaman, Joy, and Masciandaro (New York: Punctum Books, 2012), pp. 151–60 (pp. 158–59).

authority of Theseus leaves no room for Emelye's consent, so also do the gods deny her any choice.

The accord between heaven and earth also rules out a favourable response to Emelye's prayer for peace between the Theban knights. Instead, earthly conflict destabilises the celestial realm. The actions of Venus and Mars in granting incompatible petitions cause strife amongst the gods. The semi-comic scene in which the two deities must appeal for arbitration to a higher authority replicates in the heavenly sphere the earthly conflict between the young knights. At first appearance, the promises made by Venus and Mars are irreconcilable: even Jupiter, putative ruler of the celestial realm, seems unable to disentangle their mutual grievances, just as Theseus had been unable to mediate between Arcite and Palamon in the grove.<sup>26</sup> But whereas Theseus had been moved to mercy by the intercession of the queen and her women, repealing the death sentence he had pronounced on the two knights moments previously, mercy plays no part in the resolution of the celestial conflict. For the restoration of divine peace and goodwill, the gods depend on the unlikely figure of Saturn, who intervenes and offers to resolve the heavenly dispute.<sup>27</sup> By his will, the seemingly impossible becomes simple to accomplish, as he promises Venus:

That Palamon, that is thyn owene knyght,  
Shal have his lady, as thou hast him hight.  
Though Mars shal helpe his knyght, yet nathelees  
Bitwixe yow ther moot be som tyme pees,  
Al be ye noght of o compleccioun,  
That causeth al day swich divisioun.  
I am thyn aiel, redy at thy wille;  
Weep now namoore; I wol thy lust fulfille.

(*KnT*, ll. 2471–8)

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<sup>26</sup> Epstein equates Saturn's position as the 'outermost planet in Ptolemaic cosmology' to his greater power in relation to Jupiter. He also draws attention to the implications for Theseus's authority in Jupiter's failure to resolve the disagreement between Venus and Mars. See Epstein, 'With many a floryn', pp. 57–8. McCall views Saturn as a 'figure for Time and Fortune'. See McCall, *Chaucer Among the Gods*, p. 76.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Brown and Andrew Butcher write that Saturn's role is one of Chaucer's significant additions to the *Teseida*. For an extended historicist treatment of Saturn's place in *The Knight's Tale*, see Chapter Five in their *The Age of Saturn: Literature and History in the Canterbury Tales* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 205–39.

The outcome of this heavenly debate might comfort Venus, but its cold logic has no power to console the human observer. Heavenly accord and the preservation of divine dignity will require human sacrifice: both of the Theban cousins' prayers can be fulfilled through Arcite's fatal wounding in victory.

Critical discussions of the actions of the pagan gods in *The Knight's Tale* often present characters as ignorant of their methods and consequently innocent of Arcite's death. As Crampton writes of the earthly authority whose decree leads to this state of affairs: 'Theseus has not the reader's view into the councils of the gods; if he had, his midnight's and his noon's repose would be the more disturbed.'<sup>28</sup> Minnis also implies that Theseus is somehow blind to the nature of the gods he worships: 'The difference between what the pagans think their gods are like and what they are really like is quite startling, and the gods fare very badly from the comparison.'<sup>29</sup> Having been responsible for the construction of the three oratories as integral parts of the structure of the royal lists, however, Theseus cannot be surprised by the gods' methods.<sup>30</sup> As Brenda Deen Schildgen notes, his arena 'incorporates the disorderly forces of the gods whose actions and histories he cannot control and the emotions of the characters whose chaotic desires he seeks to control'.<sup>31</sup> The arbitrary and cruel aspects of these gods are on full display, both for the audience of *The Knight's Tale*, as well as for any suppliant who has ventured into one of the three oratories. These very structures demonstrate the folly of relying on the gods for human well-being. As we shall

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<sup>28</sup> Crampton, *The Condition of Creatures*, p. 68.

<sup>29</sup> Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*, p. 141.

<sup>30</sup> Epstein notes Theseus's active participation in the construction of his lists, including the oratories, describing the duke as 'initiating a Works Projects Administration for ancient Greece'. He argues that Theseus's involvement emphasises the temples as human works of art, rather than objects of divine creation. See Epstein, 'With many a floryn', p. 55. Such emphasis on the human origin of these buildings further reinforces an impression of pagan clear-sightedness in relation to the nature of their deities. Lee Patterson interprets Theseus's design of the oratories as expressing his awareness and fear of his own powerlessness. See his *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. 224.

<sup>31</sup> Brenda Deen Schildgen, *Pagans, Tartars, Moslems, and Jews in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), p. 31.

see, however, Chaucer, unlike Boccaccio, ensures that the reader and the characters share a full awareness of the nature of the gods whose intervention in human affairs is sought. We shall first examine the depiction of each oratory in turn, before considering the impact of Chaucer's reordering of the *Teseida* which brings these depictions to the fore in *The Knight's Tale*.

The danger and occasional futility of praying for divine intervention is on open display in the oratories.<sup>32</sup> The design and decoration of these sites of worship in *The Knight's Tale* would seem calculated to discourage devotees from placing any trust in the gods, yet the three supplicants choose to rely on divine intervention nonetheless. That such unreliable forces appear more amenable to human will than does Theseus speaks of a deep distrust in the human authority he represents. Capriciousness and vindictiveness are two of the most familiar traits exhibited by the Graeco-Roman pantheon; these characteristics are recalled in vivid detail by Chaucer's depiction of the three oratories. Diana's temple, the most succinctly described of the three, is 'depeynted [...] up and down' with the warning images of those whose ineptitude or mischance led them to anger the goddess (*KnT*, l. 2054). Chief among the paintings of these unlucky mortals is that showing the grisly death of Actaeon, devoured by his own hounds after his metamorphosis into a hart in punishment for accidentally seeing Diana naked (*KnT*, ll. 2065–68). Also present is a life-like image of a woman in childbirth, whose suffering in a long labour leads her to cry out in prayer to Diana 'ful pitously' (*KnT*, l. 2085). The outcome of this labouring woman's prayer remains unknown since it is not portrayed on the oratory's walls. As Robert Epstein writes, her labour is depicted as unfruitful and her goddess as pitiless since the woman 'writhes eternally

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<sup>32</sup> For a discussion of the terrible aspect of each temple and its decoration, see Salter, *Chaucer: The Knight's Tale and The Clerk's Tale*, pp. 25–8. For the tradition of the iconography in the temples, see Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*, pp. 113–23.

unaided'.<sup>33</sup> Permanently frozen in her attitude of prayer, the desperate woman serves as a reminder of the many others suffering similarly whose prayers for divine intervention have gone unanswered or ungranted.

Venus's oratory, like Diana's, also advertises the inadvisability of entrusting human hopes to the goddess. The lustful, the foolish, the lovelorn, and many others misfortunate enough to be caught in Venus's net decorate the walls of her oratory. Drawing upon the depiction of the deceptively merry *locus amoenus* in *Le Roman de la Rose* in its portrayal of figures representing attributes such as youth and beauty, or emotions such as hope or jealousy, the decor of Venus's oratory, too, ought to encourage wariness in the viewer. Here the negative *exempla* include the sorceresses Medea and Circe alongside Solomon in his folly, Croesus in his captivity, and the doomed Turnus, all entangled in Venus's 'las' (*KnT*, l. 1951). In case any might doubt the fickleness of Venus, the narrator assures the audience that he could list in addition to these examples 'a thousand mo' (*KnT*, l. 1954). The stasis of those entrapped by the goddess of love contrasts with a sense of Venus's changeability, expressed by images of movement: the goddess's statue is 'fletyng in the large see', her body partially obscured by 'wawes grene', with 'dowves flikerynge' above her head (*KnT*, ll. 1955–62). Those who venture into her oratory and choose to honour Venus entrust themselves to a goddess whose divine freedom corresponds with captivity for her followers.

Whereas Venus promises psychological entrapment, the dangers inherent in trusting to Mars are immediate and physical in nature. The architecture of Mars's oratory embodies the pain and suffering for which violence is responsible. Long and straight, built entirely of burnished steel, its shape and the material from which it is made represent a sword, its entrance a fearsome reminder of a wound: 'Ther stood the temple of Mars armypotente, | Wroght al of burned steel, of which the entree | Was long and streit, and gastly for to see'

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<sup>33</sup> Epstein, 'With many a floryn', p. 57.

(*KnT*, ll. 1982–4). Rather than triumphalist portraits of illustrious military victories, a horrific, hellish vision adorns the interior of Mars’s oratory:

Ther saugh I first the derke ymaginyng  
 Of Felonye, and al the compassyng;  
 The crueel Ire, reed as any gleede;  
 The pykepurs, and eek the pale Drede;  
 The smylere with the knyf under the cloke;  
 The shepne brennyng with the blake smoke;  
 The tresoun of the mordrynge in the bedde;  
 The open werre, with woundes al biblesde;  
 Contek, with bloody knyf and sharp manace.  
 Al ful of chirkyng was that sory place.  
 The sleere of himself yet saugh I ther –  
 His herte-blood hath bathed al his heer –  
 The nayl ydryven in the shode anyght;  
 The colde deeth, with mouth gapyng upright.

(*KnT*, ll. 1995–2008)

The god of war has himself been metamorphosed into the god of violent ends and shameful death, giving home in his temple to Mischance, Complaint, Outcry, Outrage and Madness. As Epstein notes, Mars’s temple bears less relation to his military persona than to the violent forces more relevant to the fourteenth century: ‘while some of the agony and destruction is mythic and Ovidian, much is quotidian and arbitrary and not at all martial.’<sup>34</sup> The figure of Conquest, with which Mars is more usually associated, has been removed to a seat of ‘greet honour’ above which a sword dangles by a thread (*KnT*, ll. 2028–30). Military victory itself appears as fleeting and perilous as any of the dangers encountered in its pursuit. Any worshipper believing against all evidence that Mars might have any care for the well-being of humanity must confront the final figure: the wolf at Mars’s feet, its eyes blazing red and its mouth eternally devouring man.

Although Chaucer borrows these discouraging depictions of the gods and their deeds from Boccaccio, by situating them earlier in the narrative than their corresponding place in

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<sup>34</sup> Epstein, ‘With many a floryn’, p. 56.

the *Teseida* he ensures that the characters are as well-suited as his audience to judge the amenability of the chosen deities to petition. In Boccaccio's poem, the three supplicants pray and are not granted the subsequent view of the personified prayers' arrival in the dwelling places of the gods. Although Diana's 'choir' appears in answer to Emilia and Mars visits his temple in response to Arcites's prayer, neither Emilia nor Arcites sees the depictions of the disastrous results of humanity's trust in the divine.<sup>35</sup> While his characters remain unaware of the reception of their prayers, Boccaccio's audience could easily appraise the unlikelihood of such gods giving favourable responses to petitions. By displacing the descriptions and thus separating the moment of prayer from the portrayal of the environment in which the prayer is divinely received, however, Chaucer ensures that his audience is not only informed of the nature of the gods, but also knows that the three supplicants must share this awareness. Crucially, this clear vision of divine nature precedes each supplicant's decision to approach the gods. Emelye, Palamon, and Arcite have seen from the murals decorating the oratories that human foolishness, misery, and tragedy are of little concern in the celestial realm. Yet they still choose to pray. By drawing attention to the disjunction between the requests made of the gods and the supplicants' knowledge that their prayers are committed to unreliable beings, Chaucer undermines the role of divine intervention in the final outcome, thereby inviting greater attention to the power dynamics in play in Theseus's Athens.

Chaucer presents us with characters who determinedly pray to gods who are not only capricious, not only unmoved by the violence, suffering, and disaster of human life, but can also be strikingly powerless. The supplicants, moreover, implicitly recognise this divine impotence in their prayers although they seemingly fail to realise the consequent implications. When Palamon asks Venus's pity on his tears in honour of the love she felt for the ill-fated Adonis, he expects a divine empathy with humanity, asking the goddess: 'For

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<sup>35</sup> Boccaccio, *Teseida*, VII. 39, VII. 88–9.

thilke love thow haddest to Adoon, | Have pitee of my bittre teeris smerte, | And taak myn humble preyere at thyn herte' (*KnT*, ll. 2224–26).<sup>36</sup> Yet he expects the empathy he attempts to evoke to be born of the goddess's remembrance of her grief over the lifeless body of her beloved. The divine aspect Palamon chooses to address reveals that Venus's power in matters of love, even in her own affairs, is limited. Arcite likewise recalls Mars's experience of love in order to evoke pity for his own plight:

Whan Vulcanus hadde caught thee in his las  
And foond thee liggyng by his wyf, allas! –  
For thilke sorwe that was in thyn herte,  
Have routhe as wel upon my peynes smerte.

(*KnT*, ll. 2389–92)

This is an extraordinary invocation even in its own terms. In support of his petition for victory in battle, Arcite not only recalls an incident when Mars, through another's trickery, failed in a physical confrontation with an adversary despite his designation as the god of war, he also asks Mars's pity on his 'peynes smerte' immediately after this reminder of the god's public humiliation. Arcite expects pity from a god who is more likely the cause of pain, at least of the physical sort sustained in battle, than of its soothing. Like Venus, Mars appears powerless to control his own affairs, even in the area of his own expertise. Although as they continue their prayers neither Arcite nor Palamon questions the ability of the chosen deities to grant their petitions, Chaucer's audience has been presented with striking images of the powerlessness of the pagan gods.<sup>37</sup> Even if the gods felt moved to pity, they might well lack the wherewithal to intervene effectively. Furthermore, any gifts granted by such beings ought to be suspect. By emphasising the capriciousness of the gods, as well as the protagonists' full awareness of this trait, Chaucer invites the reader to examine more closely

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<sup>36</sup> For the episode to which Palamon refers, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II, X. 725–27.

<sup>37</sup> Rather than calling upon Mars's pity, Boccaccio's Arcites refers explicitly to the compassion which Neptune showed Mars after Vulcan's humiliation of the god. See Boccaccio, *Teseida*, VII. 25.



human responsibility for the consequences of praying to celestial champions. As we have seen, the deepest desires of Arcite and Palamon inform their petitions and speak to the darker traits of the gods they worship. In the next section we shall see how Chaucer presents divine involvement in the dispute between cousins less as supernatural interference on earth and more as an elevation of human conflict into the celestial realm.

*Strife in heaven as on earth: the apotheosis of conflict*

Petitionary prayer plays a prominent role in *The Knight's Tale*, both encapsulating the conflict between the cousins and making plain the route through which the pagan gods will provide its dramatic denouement. The high profile given the prayers and their answers in the tale marks the text as an ideal example of 'narrative-engendering' prayer, as Bridges argues.<sup>38</sup> Yet, in Chaucer's hands, as we shall now see, the use of this otherwise simple narrative device invites an examination of the motives and the desires of the characters, as well as their responsibility for the fatal outcomes of their actions. The prayers of Arcite, Palamon, and Emelye are immediately and dramatically effective; each of the three protagonists' supplications receives an instantaneous response from the gods. The deities speak through flames, whistling, rattling doors, sweet smells, a shaking and echoing statue, branches which burn and bleed, arrows clattering to the ground, and a speaking apparition. These effects are earthy and sensual: the supplicants perceive sounds, smells, and sights in response to their prayers. These physical sensations require interpretation, however, for the answer to be understood. The narrator reports the undeniably physical phenomena which directly follow the end of Arcite's prayer: the rings on the door clatter, the fires on the altar burn brighter and a sweet smell rises from the ground. Taken aback by these occurrences, Arcite receives a sign:

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<sup>38</sup> Bridges, 'Functions of Prayer', p. 69.

...and atte laste  
 The statue of Mars bigan his hauberk ryng,  
 And with that soun he herde a murmuryng  
 Ful lowe and dym, and seyde thus, "Victorie!"

(*KnT*, ll. 2430–33)

The immediacy with which this marvel follows Arcite's request for victory strongly suggests a divine response. Yet the reference to Arcite's sensory perception of the event distinguishes the objective phenomenon, the sound of the ringing hauberk, from his subjective understanding of the sound. The possibility of misinterpreting divine communication is made more explicit in Palamon's case. Of the three penitents, his prayer receives the most cryptic response. Yet, when Venus's statue shakes and makes an unidentified sign, he interprets this as a promise that his prayer will be granted:

But atte laste the statue of Venus shook,  
 And made a signe, wherby that he took  
 That his preyere accepted was that day.  
 For thogh the signe shewed a delay,  
 Yet wiste he wel that graunted was his boone,  
 And with glad herte he wente hym hoom full soone.

(*KnT*, ll. 2265–70)

The audience remains ignorant of the nature of Venus's sign, which is given in addition to the physical phenomenon of her shaking statue. Palamon, the only witness to this sign, interprets it to mean that he has been heard and his prayer accepted. His failure to distinguish between a petition answered and a petition granted is evident from the speed with which he leaps to the conclusion that Venus will fulfil his desire.

The most dramatically and unambiguously answered prayer in this text is the one ungranted petition. The effects of Emelye's prayer differ radically from those experienced by the Thebans, leaving no room for interpretation: although her petition, like those of the two knights, results in perceptible, physical events, the divine reply she receives is a denial. Diana's response is spectacular and unmistakable. Fires burn brighter before being

quenched: one burns again, the other dies. Even more dramatically, a burning brand oozes great drops of blood before Diana appears to her follower: ‘And therwithal Dyane gan appeere, | With bowe in honde, right as an hunteresse, | And seyde, “Doghter, stynt thyn hevynesse’ (*KnT*, ll. 2346–48). The description of her appearance is not mediated through Emelye’s senses. The goddess is visible to her young worshipper, the companions with whom she entered the oratory, and, by extension, to Chaucer’s audience. The unmediated communication of the goddess is matched by the straightforward nature of her message. Emelye’s petition, she reveals, cannot be granted. In a heavenly negotiation resembling that of a king and his barons planning a key marital alliance, the gods have already decided that she shall be married to one of the young knights, as Diana informs her:

Among the goddes hye it is affermed,  
And by eterne word writen and confermed,  
Thou shalt ben wedded unto oon of tho  
That han for thee so muchel care and wo,  
But unto which of hem I may nat telle.

(*KnT*, ll. 2349–53)

Emelye cannot mistake the message of the goddess. Unlike the signs received by Palamon and Arcite, Diana’s denial of her worshipper’s request leaves no opportunity for personal interpretation; the Amazonian does not know to whom she will be wed, knowing only that she must be wed. The single cryptic sign which she receives is that of the burning, bleeding and snuffed brand signifying Arcite’s death. Emelye, having received an unambiguous answer, shows no interest in interpreting this sign. Chaucer uses this distinction between observable signs and subjective interpretation to illuminate characters’ perceptions of limits to their agency. Turning to the heavenly conflict caused by their prayers, we see that Chaucer presents the gods, too, as mistakenly discounting human agency.

The prayers of the three supplicants are heard; the gods respond. As we have seen in the previous chapter, a divine response does not necessarily correspond to the object of a petition. In *The Knight’s Tale*, supplicants must not only interpret the response of the gods,

opening a space for the further expression of their desires, they must act on this interpretation also. Emelye submits to the will of the gods. Palamon and Arcite submit to the will of Theseus. Yet the will of the gods and the will of Theseus act in tandem, for the decisions of the gods acknowledge the rules of the tournament. The two Theban knights have correctly interpreted the signs received in the oratories: Venus and Mars intend to grant each man his heart's desire. Venus understands Palamon's desire for Emelye to necessitate the winning of the tournament and Mars understands that Arcite's desire to win the tournament encompasses the winning of Emelye. For a moment, Theseus's authority appears to extend to the heavens as the seeming impossibility of both gods fulfilling their intentions becomes clear. The subsequent resolution provided by Saturn proves simply, but chillingly, elegant as he chooses to grant each knight precisely the gift he has explicitly requested.

Although Theseus's decree appears to reign on earth, his ability to impose his will reaches its limit after provoking celestial strife. Temporal order cannot constrain the workings of the divine. Saturn's methods in disentangling the competing interests of Venus and Mars prove to be both brutal and entirely inhuman. Intervening in the squabble, the god reminds his granddaughter of his destructive power, declaring:

Myn is the drenchyng in the see so wan;  
 Myn is the prison in the derke cote;  
 Myn is the stranglyng and hangyng by the throte,  
 The murmure and the cherles rebellyng.  
 The groynynge, and the pryvee empoysonyng;  
 I do vengeance and pleyn correccioun,  
 Whil I dwelle in the signe of the leoun.  
 Myn is the ruyne of the hye halles,  
 The fallynge of the toures and of the walles  
 Upon the mynour or the carpenter.

(*KnT*, ll. 2456–65)

Misfortune and tragedy flow from Saturn's hand.<sup>39</sup> His works represent the unpredictability of nature, which can drown people at sea, infect them with sickness or spread pestilence. He also wields the forces of chaos released by human activity: Saturn claims responsibility for poisoning, rebellion, imprisonment, hanging, and mishap. Saturnine disasters spring both from the human and the non-human sides of nature.<sup>40</sup>

The conflict between Venus and Mars implies an acknowledgement of the constraints imposed by the decree of Theseus. This divine acquiescence is swept away by Chaucer's presentation of Saturn as a force of destruction far beyond the rule of human law. Earthly order cannot bind a god who works by violence, treachery, secrecy, and subtle deeds. Yet the neatness with which Saturn resolves the contradictory promises given by Venus and Mars reveals a legalistic approach which belies the chaos of his methods. By contrast, the powerlessness of the other gods humanises them; their worldly qualities extend to the ability to comprehend both the explicit desires expressed by the prayers of their devotees as well as the deeper desires implicit in their supplications. Saturn embodies a rationality inhuman in its precision; by addressing the outwardly expressed desires given voice in prayer, he reconciles the seemingly irreconcilable.<sup>41</sup> Choosing to grant Arcite's stated desire for victory

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<sup>39</sup> Although H. Marshall Leicester, Jr. argues that the tone of this speech is comically melodramatic, a view in tune with his ironic interpretation of Chaucer's use of the pagan gods, his statement on the relation of this passage to evil is worth noting here: 'For the Knight the reality of evil is felt in inverse proportion to the extent to which the evil is personified'. Leicester argues that the tale encourages its audience to control those elements of the human psyche traditionally projected onto the gods. See H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 320. In noting that this speech is one of Chaucer's additions to his sources, Brantley L. Bryant writes that 'Saturn demands our attention because he is a quintessentially Chaucerian invention'. See Brantley L. Bryant et al, 'Saturn's Darkness', in *Dark Chaucer: An Assortment*, ed. by Seaman, Joy, and Masciandaro, pp. 13–27 (p. 15).

<sup>40</sup> As mentioned in Chapter Two, this list of Saturn's actions in the world is notably similar to Mirk's list of demonic activity in his Rogationtide sermon, which names such natural phenomena as winds, tempests, shipwrecks and drownings alongside human activity such as wars, disagreements, manslaughter and suicide. Besides an emphasis on death and drowning, the two passages also share a focus on falling: here the falling of towers and walls, and, in the sermon, the falling of trees, houses, and steeples. See p. 95.

<sup>41</sup> One surprising consequence of this divine reconciliation accomplished through Saturnine methods is the earthly reunion between the two seemingly irreconcilable cousins which takes place on Arcite's deathbed.

and Palamon's for Emily, he releases each man's inner conflict into the arena of the natural world, shown in his boast to be a theatre of disaster.

Chaucer's portrayal of the workings of Saturn recalls the prayer of Boethius's despairing narrator in the first book of the *Consolatio*. In his dismay that a God who shows himself to be almighty elsewhere in the celestial spheres refuses to control the actions of humankind, the narrator compares the violent unpredictability of man with that of his temporal environment:

O thou, what so evere thou be that knytest alle boondes of thynges, loke on thise wrecchide erthes. We men, that ben noght a foul partie, but a fair partie of so greet a werk, we ben tormented in this see of fortune. Thow governour, withdraughe and restreyne the ravysschyng flodes, and fasten and ferme thise erthes stable with thilke boond by whiche thou governest the hevene that is so large.

(*Bo*, I, m.5, ll.49–58)

In this passage, Fortune, encompassing the unpredictable nature of life as far as humankind is both actor and acted upon, causer of effects as well as their unwitting recipient, becomes analogous with the sea. The 'ravysschyng flodes' speak of the devastation left in the wake of unpredictable events, both those with a natural and those with a human cause.

That this instability is reflected in the souls of humankind is apparent in the lines with which the narrator precedes this plea, lamenting the suffering of the innocent and the triumph of the wicked:

And folk of wikkide maneres sitten in heie chayeres; and anoyinge folk treden and that unrightfully, on the nekkes of holi men; and vertu, cleer and schynyng naturely, is hidde in derke derknesses; and the rightful man bereth the blame and the peyne of the feloun; ne the forsweryng ne the fraude covered and kembd with a false colour, ne anoieth nat to schrewes?

(*Bo*, I, m.5, ll. 37–46)

In *The Knight's Tale*, Saturn, too, shows himself to comprehend all that is unpredictable and violent; the interventions in human affairs for which he claims responsibility range from drownings to murder. Yet of the twelve types of disaster he ascribes to his own action, only one, drowning, has 'natural' causes. Each of the other named disasters certainly depends on

humanity's taste for violence, while drowning might on occasion be attributed to human error or violent action. Indeed, as Brantley Bryant argues, the list of Saturn's works includes 'the most closely grouped oblique historical references in *The Canterbury Tales*'.<sup>42</sup> While the 1380s provided numerous instances of violence, pestilence, and other disasters, the list need not refer to particular historical events in order to be effective. The god's list also resembles those purveyors of wickedness bemoaned by Boethius's narrator. In reality, Saturn's boastful monologue points to human culpability. Neither Arcite nor Palamon appears to consider any human responsibility for their predicament. Placing their trust in the divine conversely allows the human participants in Theseus's pageant to avoid recognising the very human causes of their suffering and disappointment. In elevating human conflict to the heavenly spheres, Chaucer draws ever greater attention to human culpability in violence. Arcite's and Palamon's prayers, rather than being helpless pleas from those lacking agency, both spring from and embody their violent enmity.

Chaucer reveals how the animosity at the heart of the prayers is magnified by the attempt of human authority to direct and contain the resultant violence. To recognise the consequences of Theseus's tournament as deriving not merely from the response of the gods to the petitions of the two Theban cousins, but from the interplay of legal sentence and the forces of nature associated with Saturn is to recognise the responsibility that Theseus must also bear for Arcite's death. Although the narrator attributes the victor's startled horse to an infernal Fury sent by Pluto at Saturn's request, the method by which Arcite meets his downfall bears little resemblance to the actions Saturn earlier claims as his own interventions in human affairs. In its suddenness, its unexpectedness, and its non-human origin, the foundering of the horse bears a slight similarity to the drowning listed in the litany of

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<sup>42</sup> Bryant et al, 'Saturn's Darkness', p. 23. Brown and Butcher point to multiple, ongoing cases of rebellion, 'disastrous foreign policies', and the pervasiveness of pestilence during the late fourteenth century. As they write, 'Saturn's speech has the potential to activate the general and the particular'. See Brown and Butcher, *The Age of Saturn*, pp. 224–26.

disasters ascribable to the god. As with the natural causes of drowning, Arcite's fatal wounding arises through physical cause and effect: a startled horse, a momentary loss of balance, and an unpredictably lethal pommel. Chaucer's changes to the event as presented in the *Teseida* diminish the role of divine intervention as a cause of the rearing of the horse; Boccaccio writes that Venus accompanies the Fury, who stands before Arcites's horse in terrifying aspect, while Chaucer's gods remain at a distance.<sup>43</sup> Narratorial interpolation insists that the event represents a miracle (*KnT*, l. 2675).<sup>44</sup> Yet, as Barbara Nolan remarks, the Knight also dismisses the fall as typical 'aventure'.<sup>45</sup> Whether the fall results from mishap or divine intervention, earthly power has placed Arcite in the way of death.<sup>46</sup>

Although Saturn's intervention is instrumental in the event, Arcite's death does not occur solely at the hands of the gods. Theseus's intervention in the grove leads directly to Arcite's finding himself in a position where he is especially vulnerable to the violent forces of nature. In effect, it is Theseus's insistence on settling the dispute between the cousins with the pageantry of a tournament which brings about Arcite's mishap in the lists. The Duke fails to recognise the limits to his power.<sup>47</sup> He might bestow Emelye's hand in marriage, but is unable to compel her to love accordingly; he might declare the winner of a tournament worthy of marriage and take every measure to prevent loss of life in the lists, but be

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<sup>43</sup> Boccaccio, *Teseida*, IX. 7.

<sup>44</sup> The *MED* gives several late fourteenth-century examples of the use of the word 'miracle' to describe a marvellous act performed by those other than saints and the Christian God: these others include pagan gods, fiends, and Mohammed. See 'miracle', sense 1b, in the *MED* <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>> [accessed 05.09.16].

<sup>45</sup> Nolan argues that the instinctive acceptance among both students and critics that the incident has a divine cause is misguided. See Nolan, *Chaucer and the Tradition*, p. 257.

<sup>46</sup> Jill Mann argues that Venus, Mars, and Saturn act as planetary forces in the tale, rather than agents, concluding that human actors cannot perceive the consequences their actions will release as a result of 'unseen and incalculable forces' at play in the cosmos. See Jill Mann, 'The Planetary Gods in Chaucer and Henryson', in *Chaucer Traditions: Studies in Honour of Derek Brewer*, ed. by Ruth Morse and Barry Windeatt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 91–106 (pp. 93–4). The hidden desires expressed through the characters' prayers to these gods, however, emphasise the connection between human acts and their foreseeable consequences.

<sup>47</sup> Epstein argues that Theseus's creation of the lists in the form of the universe, with his own place being that of Jupiter, is designed to display the magnitude of his power. He suggests, however, that Theseus might more reasonably occupy the place of Saturn. See Epstein, 'With many a floryn', p. 59.



powerless to achieve his aim. Crampton argues that Arcite's accident forces Theseus to face the limits to human agency: 'he must realize that of no human, not even the duke of Athens, can it be said that what he wills he does.'<sup>48</sup> While this analysis takes account of the duke's inability to preserve Arcite's life, it fails to acknowledge the cumulative effect of his actions prior to the tournament. By destroying and ransacking the city of Thebes, then drawing the cousins Arcite and Palamon from the wreckage only in order to imprison them without ransom, Theseus sets in motion the chain of events which leads eventually to Arcite's death. For the people of Athens it might be preferable to blame the gods for Arcite's fate, rather than the lord they believe to be 'so good | He wilneth no destruccion of blood' (*KnT*, ll. 2563–64). Instead of human error and misdeeds, the Athenian view maintains that it is the cruelty of the gods, as Palamon earlier declares, which is ultimately to blame for human woe.

Both Thebans choose to attribute their sorrows and ill fortune to malign supernatural forces rather than to the deeds of humanity. Long before committing their supplications to divine hearing, both Arcite and Palamon lament the unhappy state of the world and the seeming lack of concern, if not outright malice, on the part of the gods. Finding himself condemned to solitary imprisonment after Theseus's banishment of Arcite, Palamon blames the gods:

O crueel goddes that governe  
This world with byndyng of youre word eterne,  
And writen in the table of atthamaunt  
Youre parlement and youre eterne graunt,  
What is mankynde moore unto you holde  
Than is the sheep that rouketh in the folde?

(*KnT*, ll. 1303–8)

This Boethian lament centres not only on a perception of the overwhelming power of the gods, whose activities are those of worldly rulers transformed onto a grand, and eternal, scale,

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<sup>48</sup> Crampton, *The Condition of Creatures*, p. 74.

but also on their apparent lack of compassion for their human subjects.<sup>49</sup> Remote and Other, these gods nonetheless set eternal, binding sentences upon a tormented humanity. Palamon's lament briefly enumerates some of the many methods of suffering: humankind can be slain, imprisoned, arrested, suffer illness and adversity, and, most unfairly of all, those so afflicted are often the innocent (*KnT*, ll. 1309–12).<sup>50</sup> Palamon lacks the insight of Lady Philosophy to counter his argument. His woe has no consolation.<sup>51</sup> Seemingly blind to the role of human agency in his list of unjust suffering, unlike the Boethian narrator he does not ask why humanity is allowed to commit evil deeds (*Bo*, I, m.5, ll. 31–3). Palamon reproaches the gods for his innocent suffering; in his view Juno and Saturn, in particular, share responsibility for the destruction of Thebes, the original cause of his imprisonment. Additional blame falls on Venus for contributing to his complaints by causing his love-sickness. The gods are guilty of government by indifference and, further, of deliberately causing pain: as Palamon argues, their providence 'gileteles tormenteth innocence' (*KnT*, l. 1314). By blaming the gods for his suffering, Palamon not only evades any personal responsibility for events, but also avoids naming the very human actors behind the war between Thebes and Athens which has resulted in his imprisonment.

We have seen in the dream visions considered in the previous chapter that by layering Christian and pagan referents over one another, Chaucer subjects aspects of Christian practice to examination. In *The Knight's Tale*, we see a similar process. Unexpectedly Christian references appear in Palamon's lament, adding another layer to the text's presentation of the

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<sup>49</sup> Jefferson identifies this passage as deriving from the *Consolatio*, I, m.5, writing that the Boethian lament 'may well have made a deep impression on Chaucer's mind.' See Jefferson, *Chaucer and the Consolation of Philosophy*, p. 70.

<sup>50</sup> Minnis views Palamon's comparison of men to sheep as implying that the gods 'lead mankind like sheep to the slaughter'. Yet this interpretation is not unambiguously supported by the passage quoted; instead Palamon's comparison refers to humanity's weakness and lack of agency and the gods' indifference to human suffering. That humankind causes its own misery is clear in the list enumerated in the lines following his comparison of mankind to sheep. See Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*, pp. 134–35.

<sup>51</sup> Phillips discusses the 'inadequacy' of Theseus's later consolation, noting that the tale ends without reference to Christian doctrine, unlike *Troilus and Criseyde*. See Phillips, 'The Matter of Chaucer', p. 73.

relationship of evil and innocence to human suffering. Palamon refers anachronistically to his ‘penaunce’, which his duty to the gods can only increase, and, more tellingly, to the potential for pain and sorrow after death (*KnT*, l. 1315). Unlike beasts who can live freely and for whom death is a final end, humanity bears a difficult fate:

And whan a beest is deed he hath no peyne;  
But man after his deeth moot wepe and pleyne,  
Though in this world he have care and wo.  
Withouten doute it may stonden so.

(*KnT*, ll. 1319–22)

Earthly life is full of pain and sorrow; death promises nothing better, even for the innocent. Palamon envisions a continued hellish or purgatorial existence for humanity without any possibility of paradise. Despite his suspicion of being of no more concern to the gods than an animal, he submits to the greater knowledge of the ‘dyvynys’, subsequently entrusting himself to Venus (*KnT*, l. 1323). These Christian references to penance and to purgatory point outside the pagan world of the tale to the context shared by its fictional pilgrim audience and by Chaucer’s own contemporaries. The bitter fight between cousins in ancient Athens spills out into an unstable fourteenth-century context in which those who ought to be brothers in faith might easily find themselves on opposing sides in battle. *The Knight’s Tale* is set in pagan Athens, but the practice of praying for victory in battle was familiar to Chaucer’s fourteenth-century audience.

Like his cousin, Arcite has an ambivalent view of the gods and their interactions with humanity, but he also trusts his own ability to act. His understanding of the relationship between human and divine cause is more complex than Palamon’s. Arcite, too, blames Juno for the downfall of Thebes. Both men avoid the implications which would follow an acknowledgement of human responsibility for the great city’s destruction. Unlike Palamon, however, Arcite acts on the belief that human will might affect events; this belief is apparent when he considers his own agency, as when he offers Mars the glory for his own deeds:

‘Myn be the travaille, and thyn be the glorie!’ (*KnT*, l. 2406). His lament avoids censuring Theseus or the Theban king, Creon, for the war and consequent imprisonment which have brought him personal misery. Instead Arcite begins by asking the goddess how long she will make war on Thebes before also addressing Mars, accusing the god of war of causing the misery of the royal line of Thebans (*KnT*, ll. 1542–62). For him, one of the most unjust outcomes of Juno’s war with the Thebans is his banishment from his heritage: he has been forced to abandon his own worthy name in order to remain in Athens, taking that of a lowly, unknown squire. His lament hinges upon a sense of inherent worthiness as a descendent of noble blood, a possessor of a proud name and lineage. Arcite does not submit to the will of the gods easily, never losing sight of his prowess and his own ability to achieve his desire. In the context of his pride, an element of his animosity towards the gods is directed at Emelye, who challenges this sense of autonomy.

Emelye becomes entangled in Arcite’s prayer with the gods against whom he complains so bitterly. The second half of his lament moves from considering his worthy nature to the obstacles he faces in the exercise of his free will. Juno is a hindrance to his goals. The sight of Emelye, however, destroys his sense of agency:

And over al this, to sleen me outrely  
 Love hath his firy dart so brennyngly  
 Ystriked thurgh my trewe, careful herte  
 That shapen was my deeth erst than my sherte.  
 Ye sleen me with youre eyen, Emelye!  
 Ye been the cause wherfore that I dye.

(*KnT*, ll. 1563–68)

Arcite’s prayer of lament commingles ‘Love’, the divine force, with the Amazonian object of his desire. Both love and woman strike and slay him. The lament, a prayer addressed at its beginning to Venus, moves seamlessly into addressing Emelye by its end. Arcite addresses Juno familiarly as ‘thou’ in his question ‘how longe [...] woltow werreyen Thebes’ (*KnT*, ll. 1543–44). Mars, too, he addresses as ‘thou felle Mars’ (*KnT*, l. 1559). By the end of the

prayer, he directly addresses Emelye, bringing her into the realm of the divine, although employing the formal ‘ye’.<sup>52</sup> Like Palamon, who had earlier mistaken Emelye for a manifestation of Venus, Arcite addresses her as if she were also a goddess. His later complaint that this divine being will not care whether he lives or dies echoes the anger and rebelliousness of his attitude toward the gods. The two men’s ambivalence towards the gods, their prayers, and their reluctance to place blame on earthly rulers or to accept their own responsibility for their desires leads them to abdicate responsibility for their conflict, placing the blame instead on the gods.

Despite their differing understandings of the relationship between divine and human action, both knights are alike in ultimately submitting to the will of the gods. Their prayers of lament, however, display a degree of self-absorption which colours their perception of divine injustice and shapes the petition for which each later pleads. Arcite remains convinced that he alone could achieve his will were he not hindered by the malice of Juno. Palamon places himself among the unjustly punished innocent. This supposition, in particular, might have raised a medieval Christian eyebrow. Fourteenth-century penitential manuals would have left no doubt that no one capable of moral choice could be ‘innocent’.<sup>53</sup> As the Parson reminds the pilgrims: ‘men fallen in venial sins after hir baptism fro day to day’ (*ParsT*, l. 100). The desired outcome of each of the Theban knights’ petitions also reveals their self-preoccupation. Each man prays for his own gain. Arcite wishes for victory, an achievement he believes he can accomplish by his own skill and strength even while promising the glory

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<sup>52</sup> Late-medieval prayers frequently address more than one person. *Dampne dieu roy omnipotent*, for example addresses first God the son, then Mary, then the Apostles, then Jesus. See Scott-Stokes, *Women’s Books of Hours*, pp. 128–31. Being addressed as ‘ye’ rather than the familiar ‘thou’ places Emelye in the position more commonly occupied by a saint in late-medieval Christian prayers. See, for example, the prayer to John the Baptist, *Horae Eboracenses*, p. 163.

<sup>53</sup> Confession would often involve careful consideration of each of the deadly sins in its many permutations in addition to working through the Decalogue to identify sinful behaviours. See for example John Mirk, *Instructions for Parish Priests, edited from Cotton MS Claudius A. II*, ed. by Edward Peacock, EETS, O.S. 31 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1868), pp. 22–30. Also see the form of confession, ‘I knowleche me guilti’, in *Yorkshire Writers*, ed. by Horstmann, pp. 340–45.

to Mars. Upon first consideration, Palamon's prayer appears less self-centred than Arcite's. He, after all, prays for love, which, by definition, involves one other than himself. He also refuses all other goods such as victory, praise or glory, placing himself entirely at Venus's mercy. His, however, is a prayer of possession, not devotion, as he requests, 'I wolde have fully possessioun | Of Emelye' (*KnT*, ll. 2242–43).<sup>54</sup> While the two knights fully express their devotion to the gods, the aims of their prayers, with their requests for victory and possession, raise questions concerning their motives, and therefore, the exercise of agency. Prayers in *The Knight's Tale*, as this chapter has demonstrated thus far, transplant conflict from the earthly to the divine realm, drawing in divine champions in what amounts to a weaponisation of prayer. This use of prayer is far beyond mere plot device. Instead it touches upon a similar process by which prayers were converted to weapons in Chaucer's fourteenth-century context as warring Christians prayed against one another.

*The militarisation of Christian prayer*

Palamon and Arcite use prayers as weapons, each calling upon a divine champion. Blaming the gods for their woes allows the two men to ignore the role their own actions have played in bringing disaster. Amongst these actions is the swearing of an ill-chosen oath which proves impossible to fulfil:

But that thou sholdest trewely forthren me  
In every cas, as I shal forthren thee —  
This was thyn ooth, and myn also, certeyn;  
I woot right wel, thou darst it nat withseyn.

(*KnT*, ll. 1137–40)

Both men cannot further each other's cause in every case, although of the two, only Palamon seems not to realise the implications of their sworn words. Contrary to the intentions framed

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<sup>54</sup> The *MED* gives as the third sense of 'possessioun' to 'be husband or lover to (a woman)', citing this line from *The Knight's Tale*. Yet each of the instances cited refers to male possession of a woman, leaving the metaphor of ownership intact. See the *MED* <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>> [accessed 05.09.16].

in their well-meaning oath, each of these two cousins chooses to pray for a personal gain that will result in defeat and loss for the other. Their petitions are distinct not only from that of Emelye, who longs that no one be harmed on her behalf, but also from the prayers for protection from enemies such as those discussed in Chapter One which were prevalent in fourteenth-century books of hours. Many of these prayers sought protection for the individual and the wider community, as in this example of a prayer from the York Hours, to be said immediately upon arising from bed:

Per signum sancta crucis de inimicis nostris libera nos, Deus noster.

[By the sign of the holy cross, deliver us from our enemies, our God.]<sup>55</sup>

While the prayer continues by recognising that the supplicant has passed the night safely and by asking for individual blessings in the form of virtues, it also acknowledges itself to be a petition for communal protection by the use of the plural ‘nos/noster/nostris’. Crucially, the enemies, whether vague and spiritual, or particular and physical, offer a threat from which both the individual and the community need protecting. Such late-medieval examples of protective prayers are defensive. Everyday enemies are not destroyed, but ordered to flee, as in the following prayer, included in the York Hours with a rubric directing it to be said before leaving the house: ‘fugite partes adverse’.<sup>56</sup>

Such communal, all-encompassing prayers for protection were not the only way in which medieval Christianity prayed against enemies. The following rubric promises that daily recitation of the prayer to which it is attached will result in a multitude of beneficial effects:

Ki que ceste oreison chascun jur dirra, | remissiu[n] de ses pecchies avera, | ne ja de male mort ne murra, | mes bon fin avera. | Si alcun chemin aler volez, | cest oreisun le jour dirrez. | e ja en veie disturbé ne serrez, | mes pes en cheminant averez. | Si vus estes en mere travaillé de tempeste, pernez un hanape plein de ewe de la mer, e

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<sup>55</sup> *Auxiliatrix sis michi Trinitas*, in *Horae Eboracenses*, p. 34–5 (p. 34).

<sup>56</sup> *Crux triumphalis Domini*, in *Horae Eboracenses*, p. 35.

dites cestes oreisun ultre le ewe. E pus le gettez en la mer. E la tempeste cessera. K[i] k'en bataille voldrait aler die cest oreisun ultre sa ceint(ure) de se espee. E puis [s]e seintez de ço: e bien li avendra ne jamés ne serra plaie ne oscis tant cum il averat entur lui. Dites cest oreisun ultre ewe curant, e donez a beivere a ceus que su(n)t enfantesmé. E eus devendru(n)t sai(n)s e saufs.

[Whoever says this prayer each day will have remission of his sins; he will not die a bad death, but will make a good end. If you intend to travel on a high road, say this prayer on the day, and you will never have any troubles en route, but will journey in peace. If you are in a stormy sea, take a cup full of sea-water, and say this prayer over the water, and then throw it into the sea; and the storm will cease. Whoever would go into battle should say this prayer over his sword-belt, and then gird it on: and he will be well, and will never be wounded or slain as long as he wears it around his waist. Say this prayer over running water, and give it to drink to those who are not right in the head, and they will be cured and become healthy.]<sup>57</sup>

Mingling assurances of physical safety with those of spiritual deliverance, this rubric addresses the concerns of anyone inhabiting an uncertain world. Many of these dangers from which daily recitation of the prayer would protect the supplicant resemble those claimed in *The Knight's Tale* as Saturn's own handiwork, and represented realistic possibilities for a late-medieval audience. No family could believe itself to be entirely immune to disaster, and the fear of death in battle, the sudden onset of mental illness, or dangerous and unpredictable travelling conditions would have been difficult to avoid. Being able to take simple evasive or preventative action by praying over an object associated with the danger, as a sword-belt is associated with the perils of battle, would have appealed to many. Yet this particular action, along with the unequivocal promise of the rubric, hints at more than protection. The sword itself, implied without being named, does not preserve life merely through its powers of defence, but through its primary purpose as a weapon, as a taker of life rather than as a shield against death.

A tale which revolves around prayers used as weapons is highly appropriate, then, to the pilgrim Knight, who is an experienced veteran of multiple military campaigns and crusades. His battles range geographically from Russia to Morocco to Syria. Many of the

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<sup>57</sup> 'Ki que ceste oreison chascun jur dirra', DuBois Hours, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS M.700, fols 145<sup>r</sup>–145<sup>v</sup>, trans. by Smith in *Art, Identity and Devotion*, p. 254.



historic expeditions in which he is supposed to have taken part were fought against ‘pagans’ and amongst those fighting would certainly have been men who prayed for victory before battles.<sup>58</sup> Those on the opposing side would also have prayed to their own god, or gods, for protection. The Knight, however, was familiar with victory, rather than defeat: ‘At mortal batailles hadde he been fiftene, | And foughten for oure feith at Tramysse | In lystes thries, and ay slayn his foo’ (*GP*, ll. 61–3). His pagan foes were doomed to pray unsuccessfully. His son the Squire, however, fought in Christian lands, against Christian enemies in Picardy and Flanders (*GP*, ll. 85–87). As Schildgen argues, the military exploits of the Knight and his son ‘point ironically to the descent from “true” Crusades against non-Christians, an ideal of earlier times in which all Christians united, to the corrupt present time when Christians are fighting Christians’.<sup>59</sup> The Squire’s opponents, who prayed to the same God, would have had an equal claim to having their own prayers answered. Being present on Edward III’s campaigns in France, Chaucer, too, saw warfare between those who ought to be brothers in faith.<sup>60</sup> Butterfield argues that this experience, specifically the sight of the devastation wreaked on the French by Edward’s men, would have left a lasting impression of carnage and

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<sup>58</sup> Thomas J. Hatton argues that Chaucer was pro-Crusade: ‘The message of the Knight’s portrait is difficult to miss; through his perfect Knight Chaucer suggests that true worthiness and true wisdom are best demonstrated in crusading’. See Thomas J. Hatton, ‘Crusading Knight, a Slanted Ideal’, *ChR*, 3 (1968), 81–84 (p. 82). Although Hatton distinguishes between ‘crusades’, against non-Christians, and inter-Christian wars, arguing that Chaucer would have been in agreement with Phillipe de Mézières’s attempt to unite Christian knights in an order of European chivalry, he does not address the contentious issue of the Despenser Crusade of 1382–3, ordered against the Flemish. Gerald Morgan also suggests that Chaucer shared a positive attitude towards the Crusades with many of his contemporaries, although he does not offer evidence of this approval. See Gerald Morgan, ‘Experience and the judgement of poetry: a reconsideration of the *Franklin’s Tale*’, *Medium Ævum*, 70 (2001), 204–25 (p. 205). For a contrasting view, including the argument that the Knight is intended to be a member of the Teutonic Order and to have fought as a mercenary for Muslims, see Terry Jones, *Chaucer’s Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), pp. 49–73.

<sup>59</sup> Schildgen, *Pagans, Tartars, Moslems, and Jews*, pp. 24–5. Schildgen refers to the campaign in Prussia as an inter-Christian crusade, while Vincent J. DiMarco discusses each of the Knight’s European campaigns as being against either pagans or schismatics. See his ‘Explanatory Notes’ to *The Knight’s Tale* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 801.

<sup>60</sup> Butterfield, *The Familiar Enemy*, pp. 173–74.

that its influence is perceptible in the depictions of violent destruction inside Mars's oratory.<sup>61</sup>

Chaucer's time spent serving John of Gaunt in France must also have raised questions over the likelihood of prayers for protection from enemies being answered when both sides prayed to the same God. Edward III ordered bishops on several occasions to mobilise their dioceses in prayer for a successful outcome to his wars in France.<sup>62</sup> Such orders could be framed as prayers for protection, as the bishop of Exeter did in 1355 by asking his diocese to pray 'that God would preserve the prince [of Wales], direct his progress and enable him to return in health.'<sup>63</sup> Prayers could also more explicitly request victory, as did those ordered by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1359.<sup>64</sup> Justifying a battle against religious brethren first required positioning political opponents as the primary aggressors. Only a few decades before Edward III's campaigns, his grandfather Edward I had used this tactic during his wars both with Scotland and with France, ordering prayers to be said in every parish throughout England for his protection and for victory against the enemy.<sup>65</sup> These requests for prayers typically paint the Scots, for example, as enemies not only of the English crown, but also of the church. In 1298, directing the organisation of prayers and processions for the war, Archbishop Robert Winchelsey of Canterbury also informed his clergy of the misdeeds allegedly committed by the Scottish against the church, as David Bachrach writes:

The Scots and their supporters are characterized as having violently invaded the churches and other ecclesiastical sites in England, stealing church property in their

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<sup>61</sup> Butterfield, *The Familiar Enemy*, pp. 183–74. Butterfield also links the aftermath of the tournament, culminating in Arcite's funeral, to the shocking event of Jean II's death in 1364, which occurred while Edward III was awaiting the payment of ransom. See Butterfield, *The Familiar Enemy*, pp. 184–85.

<sup>62</sup> H. J. Hewitt notes instances from 1338, 1339, 1340, 1342, 1345, 1346, 1348, and 1350 in which royal requests were made for such prayers. See H. J. Hewitt, *Organization of War Under Edward III: 1338–62* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), p. 161.

<sup>63</sup> Hewitt, p. 162.

<sup>64</sup> *The Register of John de Grandisson, Bishop of Exeter 1327–1369*, ed. by F. C. Hingeston-Randolf, 3 vols (London: George Bell & Sons, 1892–99), II, pp. 1201–2.

<sup>65</sup> David S. Bachrach, 'The Ecclesia Anglicana Goes to War: Prayers, Propaganda, and Conquest During the Reign of Edward I of England, 1272–1307', *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 36 (2004), 393–406 (pp. 396–99).

‘sacrilegious audacity’ and presuming to violate the peace of the kingdom and of the church.<sup>66</sup>

Excommunicating one’s enemies became the final step which severed the fraternal link, allowing Christians to pray for the defeat of those who had once been their fellows. This step was publically taken by Archbishop Winchelsey before ordering prayers to be said for victory against the Scots.<sup>67</sup>

Casting political enemies into the role of violent and sacrilegious opponents of the church who were the first to initiate violence encouraged the militarisation of prayer itself. In his chronicle relating the 1138 Battle of the Standard, *Relatio de standardo*, Aelred of Rievaulx reports Walter Espec’s reassurance to the English soldiers of effective, temporal divine aid. St Peter, Espec is reported as saying, would fight on behalf of the English, the holy martyrs would go with the army, the prayers of virgins would fight on their behalf, and Christ himself would take up arms against their enemies.<sup>68</sup> Battle prayers were far removed from the prayers for protection used by the laity. Christian enemies were reframed as monstrous villains: to oppose them was a defensive act. Justifying a military campaign against spiritual neighbours obliged kings and bishops to perform such manoeuvres. Replacing spiritual enmity with the human could even give the supplicant free rein to ask for divine retribution, as in this example from an anonymous early fourteenth-century sermon preached before the French king, Philippe le Bel, waged war on the Flemish:

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<sup>66</sup> Bachrach, ‘The Ecclesia Anglicana Goes to War’, pp. 397–98. The Scottish had earned a reputation for sacrilegious behaviour by this point, at least where wars between England and Scotland required justification. Over a century earlier, Aelred of Rievaulx had reported Walter Espec’s contention that, amongst many other terrible deeds against the English, their priests, and their altars, the invading Scots had been converting churches into brothels. See Aelred of Rievaulx, *Relatio de standardo*, pp. 188–89.

<sup>67</sup> Bachrach, ‘The Ecclesia Anglicana Goes to War’, p. 398.

<sup>68</sup> ‘Petrus cum Apostolis pugnabit pro nobis, quorum basilicas nunc in stabulum, nunc ini prostibulum converterunt. Sancti martyres nostra praecedent agmina, quorum incenderunt memorias, quorum atria caedibus impleverunt. Virgines sanctae licet pugnare dubitent interesse, pro nobis tamen oratione pugnabunt. Amplius dico, ipse Christus apprehendet arma et scutum, et exurget in adiutorium nobis.’ [Peter will fight for us with the Apostles, whose churches they converted at one time into stables, at another into brothels. The holy martyrs, to whose shrines they set fire, whose halls they filled with the slain, will go before our army. The holy virgins hesitate to participate in battle; however, they will fight for us with prayer. Furthermore, Christ himself will take up arms and shield and rise up to our aid.] Aelred of Rievaulx, *Relatio de standardo*, pp. 188–89.

Victory in war depends not on the size of the host, but [on] fortitude from Heaven. These people have come against us to ruin us, our wives and our children, and to despoil us. In truth, we shall be fighting both for our souls and for our laws, and God Himself will consume them before our eyes.<sup>69</sup>

Although he frames them as the attacking enemy, the anonymous French preacher shows little restraint in his wish for their shared God so thoroughly to destroy the Flemish that it is as if they have been consumed. His prayer has become a curse.<sup>70</sup>

What these prayers demonstrate is that the setting of pagan Athens is not all that far from fourteenth-century Christian England in its practice of enlisting divine power against enemies. In *The Knight's Tale*, Chaucer ruthlessly exposes the violence which prompts the prayers of the two cousins, whose petitions, like those sanctioned by late-medieval bishops for use in times of war, are offensive in their intentions. Prior to, and therefore unaware of, Theseus's decree that no one should die during the tournament, Arcite desires military victory at any cost, including his cousin's loss of hope, and not excluding the possibility of his death. Palamon's one desire is to gain Emelye, although that most certainly must mean Arcite's defeat, and perhaps death, in the lists. The love which prompted the cousins' oath becomes twisted by desire for personal gain. This rivalry and enmity between the two cousins leads directly to the accident in the lists. They, as much as Theseus, bear responsibility. Their supplications to the gods are transformed into weapons to use against one another. The intentions of the prayers are earthly, their physical nature realised in the outcome of the tournament. Most notable, among the physical injuries of the battlefield, is the visceral nature of Arcite's wound and his suffering. The number of lines devoted to dwelling on the progress of Arcite's physical decay has been noted by a number of critics, including Fradenburg, who argues that the lingering description has an effect of immediacy, demanding

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<sup>69</sup> 'Un sermon prononcé pendant la guerre de Flandre sous Philippe le Bel', ed. by J. Leclerc, *Revue du moyen âge latin*, I (1945), 165–72 (168–72), quoted in *Documents on the Later Crusades, 1274–1580*, ed. and trans. by Norman Housley (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 31–5.

<sup>70</sup> For a discussion on Wyclif's prohibition on Christian violence, even in self-defence, see Rory Cox, *John Wyclif on War and Peace* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2014), pp. 148–52.

that the audience become intimately involved with Arcite's suffering.<sup>71</sup> The audience's identification with his unrelieved pain is also implied by Crampton, who notes the loneliness of his death:

Chaucer conveys through Arcite something simple and stark, irreducible, mournful—every human being's isolated vulnerability at birth and death. Arcite's solitude is that of the human situation.<sup>72</sup>

Arcite bears in his body the physical result of his and Palamon's petitionary prayers and the earthly desires which they express. Although victorious in the lists, his petition granted, he has become yet another witness to the human cost of competing desires. The apotheosised conflict of the two cousins ends in the dark earthiness of Arcite's corrupted and 'clothered' blood (*KnT*, ll. 2745–46).

In *The Knight's Tale*, Chaucer allows the desires on both sides of the battle to be heard. Triumphalist accounts such as *Relatio de standardo* leave unsaid and unacknowledged the prayers which must have been devoutly raised to heaven by the opposing side. Casting political enemies as sacrilegious and as having fallen outside the bounds of the Church leaves unnecessary any mention of their ability to call on divine aid. When each side focusses purely on its own religious preparations for war, its own need for divine aid, its own choice of saints' banners under which to march, the avoidance of mentioning such preparations on an opponent's part has an eloquent silence. Butterfield argues that *The Knight's Tale* betrays the deep unease felt by opponents on either side of the English Channel during the Hundred Years' War as they were ordered into battle against one another, especially where deep bonds of friendship or fraternal oaths existed.<sup>73</sup> How much more obliquely, then, should questions of divine intervention in favour of one side over

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<sup>71</sup> Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, p. 167. Butterfield views the extended death scene as allowing Arcite time to convert 'bitter mutual rivalry into a single legacy of love'. See Butterfield, *The Familiar Enemy*, p. 184.

<sup>72</sup> Crampton, *The Condition of Creatures*, p. 97.

<sup>73</sup> Butterfield, *The Familiar Enemy*, pp. 185–87.

another be approached? What happens when political power harnesses fraternal envy as fodder for grand military ambition? Set in its safely distant classical and pagan world, *The Knight's Tale* questions such notions of divine interference in favour of worshippers, even where the gods themselves are divided, emphasising the crucial role and responsibility played by human agency. The tale portrays gods who are not responsible for the disasters which befall man, despite their claims to the contrary. Instead, Saturn thrives on the chaos and disaster which reigns in the human heart: this is the form of worship most pleasing to him. It is not his doing, however. The cry of 'Mine is...' as he gleefully claims his human sacrifice should more accurately be acknowledged by Theseus. In the next section we see an alternate model of prayer as presented by Emelye, one which is notable for the humility of her own response to the gods' denial.

*Emelye's faithful response to the gods: towards the prayers of the saints*

*The Knight's Tale* comments on contemporary Christian practices in its exploration of the ethics of using prayers as weapons, but references to Christian beliefs in the tale are not confined to negative *exempla* such as those presented by the Theban knights. Emelye, both in her approach to prayer and in her response to its denial, presents an alternative to weaponised prayer. Her address to the goddess Diana subtly echoes Christian prayer, speaking, like Palamon's lament, to Christian beliefs outside the pagan world of the tale. Her singular devotion has already been noted. In contrast with its corresponding prayer in the *Teseida*, Emelye's petition demonstrates little ambiguity in its devotion to the goddess of chastity. Emilia's plea in the *Teseida* is hesitant and fearful. She softens many of her petitions with a conditional 'if': 'Hear my words, if I am worthy'; 'If it does not displease you, contrive to render them perfect'; 'if ever your chaste heart was pierced by pity'.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Boccaccio, *Teseida*, VII. 80.

Continuing in this vein, Emilia exposes a hidden thought. She does not wish to see either of the young knights suffer on her behalf, but if she must marry, she asks: ‘that the one who loves me more, the one who desires me with greater constancy may come to my arms’.<sup>75</sup>

Dwelling upon physically welcoming the victor of the day’s tournament makes Emilia appear less a devotee of Diana than an aspiring worshipper of Venus. Her ‘ifs’ are brought into sharp focus by the preceding petitions:

And if the Fates have decreed that I be subjected to the law of Juno, you must certainly forgive me for it. Do not reject my prayers on that account. See that I am subjected to another, and that it behoves me to do what pleases him. Help me, therefore, and hear my prayers this time, goddess, if I am worthy of it.<sup>76</sup>

Emilia’s concern not to displease Diana comes to the fore here. Rather than being a willing worshipper, she is one constrained by a prior allegiance. Her fear is further highlighted by her reference in the opening address of her prayer to Actaeon, the unwary recipient of Diana’s wrath. Emilia’s hesitancy shows her wish to appease the known wrathfulness of the goddess, while her preparedness to ally her heart to one of the two knights reinforces the impression that she has begun to turn towards a new deity.<sup>77</sup> In Chaucer’s text, Emelye makes a confident and seemingly straightforward promise to serve Diana: ‘And whil I lyve, a mayde I wol thee serve’ (*KnT*, l. 2330). The meaning of the final line of her petition hinges upon the editorial decision reflected in the placement of a single comma, however. If this comma were to follow the word ‘mayde’, as it does in Kolve’s and Olson’s edition of the tale, her response would better resemble Emilia’s.<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, and despite the ambiguity regarding the length of service she promises to the goddess, Emelye expresses perfect trust by

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<sup>75</sup> Boccaccio, *Teseida*, VII. 85.

<sup>76</sup> Boccaccio, *Teseida*, VII. 83.

<sup>77</sup> Before receiving Diana’s answer, Emilia concludes her prayer with an acceptance of her new status as a lover: ‘My will, which is now divided, will ally itself to one side, and knowing what must come, it will know how to fly from the other with a more resolute spirit.’ Boccaccio, *Teseida*, VII. 87.

<sup>78</sup> See Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Knight’s Tale*, in *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteen Tales and the General Prologue*, ed. by V. A. Kolve and Glending Olson (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), pp. 23–71.

asking ‘Now help me, lady, sith ye may and kan’ (*KnT*, l. 2312). That this petition is denied has been discussed above as a victory for violence in the tale, but her own faithful response to the gods’ decree points outside the tale’s pagan context, allying the Amazonian woman to the saintly protagonists of Chaucer’s hagiographic tales to which we turn in the next chapter.

Emelye is the only supplicant to view a visible manifestation of the deity she serves; she is also the one whose petition is denied. Yet the most interesting aspect of this episode is her response to Diana’s rejection. Her final words in the tale, which continues for another seven hundred lines, seem to reproach the goddess: ‘What amounteth this, allas? | I putte me in thy proteccioun, | Dyane, and in thy disposicioun’ (*KnT*, ll. 2362–64). Karl Steel, for example, refers to Emelye’s response in being forsaken by the goddess as bitter, describing her words as ‘strident’ and ‘protracted’ protests.<sup>79</sup> His description seems to overstate the case in an effort to portray Chaucer’s Emelye as more Amazonian than Boccaccio’s Emilia. Emelye’s speech of fifteen words would represent a single protest, not plural protests, but despite hints of bitterness, its tone is more sorrowful than ‘strident’. Minnis, on the other hand, understands Emelye’s words as an example of ‘perfect faith’, although he interprets her subsequent actions as indicative of pagan fatalism rather than as representative of any positive decisiveness on her part.<sup>80</sup> The impression of faithfulness in her response to the goddess is strengthened by considering the verb ‘putte’ not to be in the past tense, but in the present. Emelye’s words take on a new meaning if considered as an expression of her resolve in the moment rather than an accusatory assertion of her past trust in the goddess; after her brief exclamation of dismay, she evinces a change of heart and a willingness to entrust herself to Diana. Her words recall those of Mary, ‘let it be to me according to your word.’<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Steel, ‘Kill Me, Save Me’, p. 157.

<sup>80</sup> Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*, p. 133.

<sup>81</sup> ‘Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum’ (Luke 1:38).



The language with which Emelye expresses her genuine desire to submit herself to the gods in trust points beyond the classical confines of her story. While she does not entirely fulfil the role of the patient, suffering martyrs modelled in Chaucer's hagiographic tales, she provides a faint, pagan foreshadowing of these figures which take full shape in Christian contexts. Her narrator, the Knight, commits her to earthly, rather than heavenly, bliss:

Now is Palamon in alle wele,  
 Lyvyng in blisse, in riches, and in heele,  
 And Emelye hym loveth so tendrely,  
 And he hire serveth so gentilly,  
 That nevere was ther no word hem bitwene  
 Of jalousie or any oother teene'

(*KnT*, ll. 3101–6)<sup>82</sup>

Because Emelye's voice is not heard after her avowal of trust in the goddess, perhaps the most indicative action she takes is to choose to live after the death of Arcite, unlike such examples of pagan women as those criticised by the dreamer in *The Book of the Duchess* (*BD*, ll 721–41). The narrator considers her refusal to expire noteworthy. Shrieking and swooning after her new husband's death, her fate would appear to be certain:

What helpeth it to tarien forth the day  
 To tellen how she weep bothe eve and morwe?  
 For in swich cas women have swich sorwe,  
 Whan that hir housbondes ben from hem ago,  
 That for the moore part they sorwen so,  
 Or ellis fallen in swich maladye  
 That at the laste certainly they dye.

(*KnT*, ll. 2821–26)

Emelye, however, lives. While her future bliss is assured by the decree of her narrator, and believed by his audience, who receive the tale as happily concluded, Emelye is not granted any words to express her opinion on the arrangements made on her behalf between the gods

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<sup>82</sup> Steel suggests that Emelye's silence extends beyond the conclusion of the text: 'All that suggests Emelye's continued resistance is the enjambment at l. 3105–3106, where Palamon serves her so nobly "that nevere was ther no word hem bitwene | Of jalousi or any oother teene."' No word hem bitwene: for a moment, Chaucer allows a hint of the deadly silence of a match crafted not for love but for statecraft, concocted by a ruler unconcerned with canon law's insistence on the importance of consent in validating a marriage.' See Steel, 'Kill Me, Save Me, Let Me Go', p. 158.

and men. Her quiet determination to accept her changed circumstances honours her expression of submission to the will of the gods.

As we have seen, while prayers in *The Knight's Tale* certainly function to bring about the events of the tale, Chaucer uses the answers to these prayers to redirect attention to the violent desires responsible both for the petitions and for their outcome. Rather than showing Arcite to have been careless in his choice of words, or both men to have been foolish to entrust themselves to the capriciousness of the gods, Chaucer instead shows that Mars and Venus both understand the true desires of the two men, but that those men do not truly acknowledge their own desires. In involving the gods, neither Arcite nor Palamon admit that victory is worth the utter vanquishing of the other, whatever unintended consequences occur. The denial of Emelye's prayer for peace shows the extent to which prayers themselves become weapons in the tale.

#### *The primacy of human agency in The Franklin's Tale*

The acknowledgement of human agency is a key theme in *The Franklin's Tale*, the second of Chaucer's romances to feature conflicting prayers. The remainder of this chapter will explore the alternate vision pursued by Chaucer in which divine intervention is absent and human agency comes to the fore in resolving conflict. Although incompatible prayers play a key role in *The Franklin's Tale*, answers to those prayers are, if not non-existent, at the very least irrelevant. In this later romance, Chaucer again presents two characters whose deepest desires conflict with one another and find expression in their prayers. Dorigen's greatest desire, and the focus of her petition, is for her husband to return safely. Aurelius's wish, and the impetus to his petition, is to become Dorigen's lover. The intersection of their disparate desires is located in the rocks lining the coast of Brittany, which threaten to prevent the safe return of Arveragus and for whose disappearance Aurelius prays to Apollo in order to meet the impossible condition Dorigen sets for the granting of her mercy. These conflicting

prayers, like those of Palamon and Arcite, have the potential to cause personal disaster, if granted. Yet Chaucer resolves the conflict between Dorigen and Aurelius through complexities of personal choices dependent on individual sacrifices rather than through divine intervention.

As in *The Knight's Tale*, each character chooses a different deity to supplicate. Aurelius asks Apollo to intervene with his sister Diana to change the moon's course in such a way that it would be full for two years, the 'miracle' causing an unnaturally prolonged spring tide to cover the rocks.<sup>83</sup> Dorigen prays to a god she addresses as the creator of the world, although this god is not designated as Christian. Chaucer's Brittany is a-historically pagan. The text is usually described as being set in a 'pre-Christian' or 'semi-pagan' Brittany, but shows little divergence from the pagan world of Athens depicted in *The Knight's Tale*.<sup>84</sup> Apparently Christian references derive not from the setting, but from Chaucer's assigning Boethian passages to Dorigen, as to Theseus in the earlier tale. Where Theseus talks of the 'Firste Moevere', Dorigen prays to a creator god. No specifically Christian language is used, although her position as a 'good' pagan and her Boethian speech marks the text as another in which Chaucer layers Christian referents over a pagan world. Rather than questioning contemporary Christian practices or problematising prayer, however, here Chaucer separates each element in the tale so that the conflict takes place and is resolved without recourse to divine intervention. Unlike the three supplicants of *The Knight's Tale*, whose prayers are occasioned by the impending tournament, Dorigen and Aurelius pray on separate occasions

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<sup>83</sup> Aurelius refers to the desired event twice as a 'miracle': see lines 1056 and 1065.

<sup>84</sup> Discussions of the tale's setting frequently address the tension between Christian expectations and the freedom offered by a non-Christian setting. J. Allan Mitchell argues that the pagan setting allows the tale to take place in a time without 'assurance of providential rule, reason, or justice'. See J. Allan Mitchell, 'In the Event of the *Franklin's Tale*', in *Dark Chaucer: An Assortment*, ed. by Seaman, Joy, and Masciandaro, pp. 91–102 (p. 92). Michael J. White argues that the pagan setting allows the 'natural human' to be examined. See Michael J. White, 'Isolation and Individuality in the *Franklin's Tale*', *Studia Neophilologica*, 70 (1998), 180–86 (p. 182). Phillips argues that the gap between pagan and Christian allows a space in which to explore sexual desire and the problem of evil in the context of a loving God. See Phillips, 'The Matter of Chaucer', p. 68. For Morgan, the tale is 'informed by Christian values' such as the sanctity of marriage vows and a 'repugnance of suicide'. See Morgan, 'Experience and the Judgement of Poetry', p. 214.

with entirely separate purposes. No gods respond with signs and a gap of time separates the prayers from later events. One prayer is unanswered; another might, arguably, be answered, but, if so, the importance of that answer is minimised and it has no apparent effect on the outcome of their conflict. Petitionary prayer no longer serves as a ‘narrative-engendering’ device, having no impact on narrative movement. Instead prayer is, narratively, a dead end, yet it redirects focus to both the human causes of conflict and to the human ability to solve conflict.

This relegation of the prayers in terms of achieving the desires of the protagonists is, paradoxically, their point. Aurelius, like Arcite, Alcyone, and the narrator of *The Book of the Duchess*, is specific in informing his chosen deity of the precise mechanism by which he wishes his prayer to be answered. He unapologetically requests that Apollo adhere to his plan:

Lo, lord! My lady hath my deeth ysworn  
 Withoute gilt, but thy benignytee  
 Upon my dedly herte have som pitee.  
 For wel I woot, lord Phebus, if yow lest,  
 Ye may me helpen, save my lady, best.  
 Now voucheth sauf that I may yow devyse  
 How that I may been holpen and in what wyse.

(*FranT*, ll. 1038–44)

His language displays none of the humility which might be expected of one seeking divine intervention. Chaucer frames this prayer as one in which Aurelius, in the guise of service and in need of ‘pitee’, not only makes plain the expected behaviour of the one whose pity is sought, but also elevates the human Dorigen over the divine Apollo. The god is clearly second choice, as Aurelius informs him: ‘Ye may me helpen, save my lady, best’. While the prayer certainly presents Aurelius as arrogant, it also contributes to the text’s relegation of divine intervention as plot device and provider of resolution. Unsurprisingly, Aurelius’s

appeal to Apollo is ineffective.<sup>85</sup> Its utterly ineffectual nature is discussed by Jamie Fumo, who writes:

Aurelius's prayer to Apollo is thought to be virtually without parallel in the sources and analogues of the *Franklin's Tale*, and it is also, interestingly, all but irrelevant to the action of the tale itself: Apollo does not grant the prayer, and the obscure astrological grounding of the clerk's later fulfillment of Aurelius' wish, which occurs in winter (when Apollo is at his weakest), seems to have little to do with the summertime scenario Aurelius imagines in his prayer.<sup>86</sup>

While Fumo sees the ineffectuality of the prayer as a sign that its composition and intertextuality demand attention, it would seem that the very point of the prayer is, in fact, its irrelevance. Chaucer underlines the irrelevance of Aurelius's petitionary prayer in terms of effecting his desire by dissociating the actions taken to create the illusion that the rocks have disappeared from any possibility that Apollo has granted the prayer.<sup>87</sup> The desperate request and the creation of the illusion which might finally enable Aurelius to achieve his desire are separated by a significant passage of time; the fulfilling of Dorigen's condition takes place through human action.

Chaucer makes the apparent success of the single petition in Dorigen's long lament similarly irrelevant. Although she asks many questions of the 'parfit wys God' in her Boethian lament, Dorigen makes a single, rather indirect petition, requesting merely her husband's safe-keeping (*FranT*, ll. 888–89).<sup>88</sup> The greater part of her prayer is a lament

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<sup>85</sup> Steele Nowlin views the denial of Aurelius's prayer as a denial of the power of the pagan world. This argument would be more persuasive if pagan prayers were generally denied in Chaucer's texts. See Steele Nowlin, 'Precedent and Possibility: Liminality, Historicity, and Narrative in Chaucer's "The Franklin's Tale"', *Studies in Philology*, 103 (2006), 47–67 (pp. 60–1).

<sup>86</sup> Jamie C. Fumo, 'Aurelius' Prayer, *Franklin's Tale* 1031–79: Sources and Analogues', *Neophilologus*, 88 (2004), 623–35 (p. 624).

<sup>87</sup> Fumo views the prayers of Dorigen and Aurelius as deriving from the same passage of Boethius, arguing for an ironic reading of the correspondence: 'Most striking, however, is the fact that Boethius' metrum (which I quote from Chaucer's *Boece*) concludes on a note precisely the opposite of that of Aurelius' complaint: "Thow governour, *withdraughe and restreyne the ravysschyng flodes*, and fastne and ferme thise erthes stable with thilke boond by which thou governest the hevene that is so large" (I, m.5, 54–58; emphasis added). Whereas Boethius implores God to *restrain* the "flodes," Aurelius begs Apollo to help *produce* a "flood" (*FranT*, l. 1059) five fathoms deep'. See Fumo, 'Aurelius' Prayer', p. 626.

<sup>88</sup> Jefferson identifies the *Consolatio*, Books I, m.5, and IV, pr.1 as sources for Dorigen's lament. See his *Chaucer and the Consolation of Philosophy*, p. 148. For his discussion of Palamon's and Dorigen's shared questioning of the place of evil in a created world, see pp. 69–71.

which questions the goodness of creation and the divine purpose for the several obstacles in the way of her husband's return journey, figured both literally and metaphorically as the 'grisly feendly rokkes blake':

Eterne God, that thurgh thy purveiaunce  
 Ledest the world by certain governaunce,  
 In ydel, as men seyn, ye no thyng make,  
 But, Lord, thise grisly feendly rokkes blake,  
 That semen rather a foul confusion  
 Of werk than any fair creacion  
 Of swich a parfit wys God and a stable,  
 Why han ye wroght this werk unresonable?  
 For by this werk, south, north, ne west, ne eest,  
 Ther nys yfostred man, ne bryd, ne beest;  
 It dooth no good, to my wit, but anoyeth.  
 Se ye nat, Lord, how mankynde it destroyeth?  
 An hundred thousand bodyes of mankynde  
 Han rokkes slayn, al be they nat in mynde.

(*FranT*, ll. 865–78)

These rocks, she later suggests, might be removed by divine intervention for the sake of her husband. Crucially, her desire for such an unnatural event is not expressed as a petition, but almost as an afterthought following her prayer, which is primarily concerned with the fundamental problem posed by the existence of the rocks. For Dorigen, these represent the evil and unjust suffering which threatens all created beings, not merely her husband. Alcuin Blamires argues that Dorigen both fails to meet the Stoic ideal modelled by her husband, by succumbing to despair, and also, by questioning God, commits the sin of pride:

Dorigen's is a kind of sin of the tongue chiding God, a 'grucchyng' typical of misgovernance that is linked to wrath – a protest against God in tribulation, that makes the protester sound (as one moralist inventively puts it) like a screeching cartwheel not greased with grace.<sup>89</sup>

But Dorigen's lament is both angry and pleading. In this, she follows the traditional language of lament found in the Psalms, such as these verses from Psalm 43:

Quoniam propter te mortificati sumus tota die  
 reputati sumus ut grex occisionis

<sup>89</sup> Alcuin Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 163.

consurge quare dormitas Domine  
 evigila quare proicis nos in sempiternum  
 quare faciem tuam abscondis  
 oblivisceris afflictiones et angustias nostras  
 quoniaum humiliata est in pulvere anima nostra  
 conglutinator est in terra venter noster  
 exsurge adiuva nos  
 et redime nos propter nomen tuum.

[Because for thy sake we are killed all the day long: we are counted as sheep for the slaughter. Arise, why sleepest thou, O Lord? Arise, and cast us not off to the end. Why turnest thou thy face away and forgettest our want and our trouble? For our soul is humbled down to the dust: our belly cleaveth to the earth. Arise, O Lord, help us: and redeem us for thy name's sake.]<sup>90</sup>

Like the psalmist who follows these lines with an expression of trust, Dorigen ends her lament in hope, rather than despair, asking that God will keep her husband safe.

Arveragus does return safely home; that this desired outcome eventually transpires might imply that Dorigen's prayer has been answered. Blamires comments on the way in which Arveragus's return draws little attention to itself: 'the groundlessness of Dorigen's fears is also quietly suggested by the fact of Arveragus's easy return home'.<sup>91</sup> The fact that any dangers Arveragus might have faced on the return journey are not mentioned, he argues, implies that Dorigen's fears have been misplaced. But this is not to say that the dangers Dorigen fears are groundless. The existence of the rocks represents the threat of sudden catastrophe such as those we have seen in Saturn's litany. What Blamires's comment highlights is the relegation of Arveragus's return as a successful outcome to the petition. The return itself, whether aided by divine intervention or not, occurs almost off-stage, in a matter of three lines: 'Arveragus, with heele and greet honour, | As he that was of chivalrie the flour, | Is comen hoom, and othere worthy men' (*FranT*, ll. 1087–89). The attention of the audience is swiftly diverted to Aurelius's sufferings and the eventual creation of the illusion that the rocks lining the shoreline have disappeared. If Dorigen's prayer is granted, the fact

<sup>90</sup> Psalm 43:22–26. English translation taken from the *Douay-Rheims Version*.

<sup>91</sup> Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender*, p. 165.

of it is never noticed, either by the narrator or by the suppliant herself. The quiet nature of Arveragus's return fits a larger pattern in the text, however, one in which the desired outcome of each prayer is separated textually, spatially, and temporally, from the prayer itself. Divine intervention is thereby removed, working neither as narrative device, nor as a means of illuminating characters' desires. The underlying conflict between Dorigen and Aurelius, as well as between husband and wife amidst their differing understandings of the power dynamics of their marriage, plays itself out in the absence of divine intervention. Chaucer brings to the fore the responsibility for resolving conflict which Palamon and Arcite were eager to escape in the earlier tale.

As is well known, Dorigen fails to check the veracity of Aurelius's report of the disappeared rocks, and so the reader never discovers whether the clerk of Orleans has been successful in his illusions.<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, it is significant that Aurelius turns to human ingenuity to arrange the outcome he so desperately desires. Critical treatment of the tale frequently focusses on the role of agency, especially Dorigen's own ability to direct her choices: Bonnie Wheeler presents Dorigen as free to act as she pleases; Chance argues that the rocks are psychological representations and that Dorigen must recognise her own power over them; while Gerald Morgan discusses the agency of both partners in marriage.<sup>93</sup> The necessity of negotiation is crucial in marriage, Morgan writes, and especially essential in an unpredictable world, where 'at least its unpredictability can be assured, and some

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<sup>92</sup> Cooper argues that whether the magic works is not the point: 'It is of no consequence at all whether they are really still there or not; nobody in the tale apparently goes to look. The question at issue is not whether the magic has worked or not, but how this will make everybody behave. [...] The vanishing of the rocks constitutes a trial, a moral *épreuve*, through which each of the characters must pass; and each of them wins through.' See Helen Cooper, 'Magic that Does Not Work', *Medievalia et Humanistica*, 7 (1977), 131–46, (p. 141).

<sup>93</sup> Bonnie Wheeler, 'Trouthe without Consequences: Rhetoric and Gender in Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*', in *Representations of the Feminine in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Bonnie Wheeler (Dallas: Academia, 1993), pp. 91–116 (p. 101); Chance, *Mythographic Chaucer*, pp. 256–59; and Morgan, 'Experience and the Judgement of Poetry', pp. 208–9.



unpredictable things will be for the worse; not for the better'.<sup>94</sup> Such negotiation is undermined where divine intervention decides the outcome of debate.

As this brief discussion shows, the relegation of the role of prayer in *The Franklin's Tale* can be read as a response to its prominence in bringing about the terrible events of *The Knight's Tale*. Rather than answered prayer calling forth a resolution of Aurelius's and Dorigen's competing desires, the dramatic conflict is played out and its logical consequences explored through the remainder of the narrative. It is especially noteworthy that the return of Arveragus does not promise everlasting bliss, instead precipitating the very conflict at the heart of the tale and plunging the three characters into multiple confrontations in which each must deny a deep desire in order to make peace once again. If Emelye's 'no' had been heard and accepted by the warring Theban cousins, the ending of *The Knight's Tale* might resemble that of *The Franklin's Tale*. This focus on human agency redirects attention to the importance of accepting the consequences of actions, rather than perceiving them as fate, as well as to the compromises and difficulty inherent to the process of forgiveness.

This next chapter takes leave of the pagan settings of this and the previous chapter as we turn now to Chaucer's hagiographic tales. Whereas petitionary prayer expresses the conflicting desires of the protagonists of the romances, offering opportunities to critique contemporary Christian practice and to explore the possibilities of human agency, the saint-like protagonists of the hagiographic tales, with the exception of Griselda, share a unified approach to prayer. Like Emelye, they align their wills to the divine will. Unlike Emelye, their prayers are successful, although they are more likely to result in heavenly bliss, rather than earthly well-being.

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<sup>94</sup> Morgan, 'Experience and the Judgement of Poetry', pp. 208–9.

– Four –

## Lessons from the Saints: Divergent Discourses of Prayer in the Hagiographic Tales

The previous chapter demonstrated that Chaucer uses answers to prayer in *The Knight's Tale* to distinguish between the explicit and implicit desires expressed in petitions, exposing the manner in which prayers reflect the will of the supplicant and showing that their outcomes, too, cannot be separated from human agency while blaming the consequent destruction on the gods. We also saw how Chaucer moves from the literary use of the answered prayer as a narrative device to making divine intervention irrelevant through the unanswered prayer and relegated answer in *The Franklin's Tale*, showing conflict instead to be solved by human action. In addition, the chapter considered Emelye as a model of faithful acceptance of the will of the gods in a faint echo of the alignment of the human with the divine will exhibited by the saints. As we saw in the first chapter, fourteenth-century English Christians shared no one monolithic understanding of petitionary prayer, how to practise it, and what to expect as an answer to it. This multiplicity of understandings becomes most apparent in Chaucer's hagiographic tales, his only tales in which Christian characters pray and have their prayers answered. The diverse views on effective prayer create a sense of multiple voices in these texts, in which narratorial interpretations of characters' prayers diverge within and between tales.

This chapter examines these divergent discourses of prayer in Chaucer's hagiographic tales. Prayers are answered in each of these tales, but their narrators use these answers in accord with differing didactic purposes. Here we see Chaucer designing narratorial *personae* who interfere to a greater or lesser extent in the narrative, often by interpreting the prayers for the audience. Development over time within this genre shows a change from the least

obtrusive narrator, the voice assigned to the Second Nun, to the manipulative Prioress, the obtrusive narrator of *The Man of Law's Tale*, and the subtly exegetical Clerk.<sup>1</sup> The treatment of petitionary prayer in these texts is complex, requiring analysis of the prayers and their effectiveness as presented in the texts, but also of narratorial strategies as each hagiographic text is shaped to a specific purpose. The effectiveness of a prayer from the point of view of a hagiographic subject does not always correspond to the narratorial view promoted to the audience. The praying voice and the narrating voice at times diverge strikingly from one another.

The prayers of the saints and the saintly, those portrayed by their narrators as if they were saints, are the most likely to be answered in Chaucer's works; their petitionary success is not a reward for deserving worshippers, however, but rather a sign that these are the people most able to align their wills to that of God. With the exception of Griselda, who will be

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<sup>1</sup> *The Second Nun's Tale* is the earliest of the texts with which this chapter is concerned. Its date is dependent upon its mention as one of Chaucer's works in the F Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*, meaning that a version of the 'lyf [...] of Seynt Cecile' is likely to predate 1378 (LGW, l. 426 (F)). The date of *The Prioress's Tale* is unclear. It is not mentioned elsewhere in Chaucer's lists of works and has no other identifying details. Dating depends instead on its Prologue, which links it to Chaucer's 'Italian period'. The Prologue is likely to have been composed after the Prologue to *The Second Nun's Tale*, since, as Florence H. Ridley notes, the former borrows from the latter. See her 'Explanatory Notes' to the text in *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 913. A date of 1387 for *The Prioress's Tale* has, however, been argued by Sumner Ferris, who proposes that Chaucer wrote the tale to be read to the King in Lincoln, linking the tale's references to Lincoln, the visit to Lincoln in 1387 by Richard II and Queen Anne, their known Marian piety and Chaucer's improved fortunes between 1386 and 1389. See Sumner Ferris, 'Chaucer at Lincoln (1387): The Prioress's Tale as Political Poem', *ChR*, 15 (1981), 295–321. The date for *The Man of Law's Tale* relies in part upon Chaucer's use of sources; his use of Gower's *Confessio Amantis* provides evidence for a date certainly after 1386, when Gower began writing the *Confessio* and perhaps after 1390, when it was completed. For Gower's dates, see Peck's 'Introduction', in Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, pp. 1–63 (pp. 59–62). Robert E. Lewis proposes a date around 1390 based on Chaucer's use in its Prologue of lines translated from Pope Innocent III's *De miseria condicionis humane*, a translation mentioned as one of his works in the G Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*. See Robert E. Lewis, 'Introduction', in Lotario Dei Segni (Pope Innocent III), *De Miseria Condicionis Humane* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1978), pp. 1–90 (p. 31). The dating of *The Clerk's Tale* is also unclear, although Chaucer's use of Petrarch's translation of the Griselda story in his *Epistolae seniles* gives a *terminus a quo* of 1374. See J. Burke Severs, *The Literary Relationships of Chaucer's Clerk's Tale* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1972), pp. 102–22. Warren S. Ginsberg, in his 'Explanatory Notes', assigns the text generally to the 'Canterbury period' (see *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 881), while Larry Benson assigns the text, along with the rest of the 'Marriage Group' to 1392–5 (see *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. xxv). The Prioress's, the Man of Law's, and the Clerk's tales demonstrate more than the majority of the other texts considered in this thesis Lynch's wry observation on dating Chaucer's texts: 'Chaucer's death constitutes the only *terminus ad quem*.' See Kathryn L. Lynch, 'Dating Chaucer', *ChR*, 42 (2007), 1–22 (p. 2). Nevertheless, with this qualification on the uncertainties involved in dating the texts in mind, the order of the 'hagiographic tales' in this chapter follows *The Riverside Chaucer* in placing *The Man of Law's Tale* before *The Clerk's Tale*.

discussed at the end of chapter, the hagiographic subject knows both how to pray and what to pray for. By examining the prayers in comparison to the meta-narrative provided by the various narratorial *personae*, we can observe a movement from the purity of prayer and response evinced by St Cecilia and the little ‘clergeon’ to the contradictory narratives in *The Man of Law’s Tale*, in which the saintly Custance is at odds with her own narrator, who plays the role of a rubric asserting miraculous divine responses of a material nature to Custance’s spiritual, celestially focussed petitions. The chapter ends with an analysis of *The Clerk’s Tale*, in which Griselda’s failures in prayer offer a key to interpreting the moral with which the tale concludes.

In a memorable turn of phrase, Derek Pearsall describes the typical modern critical response to these tales as one of ‘repugnance’.<sup>2</sup> Designating these texts as the core of Chaucer’s ‘religious’ genre, he argues that the tales are linked by a shared history of reception amongst critics, as well as by their rhyme royal form.<sup>3</sup> In her analysis of these same four tales, Nolan refines Pearsall’s terminology by renaming the genre as ‘spiritual’.<sup>4</sup> This chapter considers the tales collectively and more specifically as hagiographical. *The Second Nun’s Tale* is unquestionably hagiographical, while each of the other three tales has been defined as such, either in isolation or in combination with one or two of the others. Laurel Broughton considers the tales of the Second Nun, the Prioress, and the Man of Law to be saints’ legends.<sup>5</sup> That *The Man of Law’s Tale* is hagiographic has long been widely

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<sup>2</sup> Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985) p. 286.

<sup>3</sup> Pearsall defines the genre of ‘religious’ tales as ‘predicated upon the assumption that the significance of human life is in the transcending of its secular limitation through Christian faith’. See Derek Pearsall, ‘Chaucer’s Religious Tales: a Question of Genre’, in *Chaucer’s Religious Tales*, ed. by C. David Benson and Elizabeth Robertson (Cambridge: Brewer, 1990), pp. 11–9 (p. 16).

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Nolan, ‘Chaucer’s Tales of Transcendence: Rhyme Royal and Christian Prayer in the *Canterbury Tales*’, in *Chaucer’s Religious Tales*, ed. by Benson and Robertson, pp. 21–38 (p. 21).

<sup>5</sup> Laurel Broughton, ‘Chaucer and the Saints’, in *Chaucer and Religion*, ed. by Phillips, pp. 111–31 (pp. 117–18). Elsewhere she discusses similarities between *The Prioress’s Tale* and saints’ lives. See Laurel Broughton, ‘The Prioress’s Prologue and Tale’, in *Sources and Analogues*, ed. by Correale and Hamel, II, pp. 583–647 (pp. 591–92).

accepted.<sup>6</sup> *The Clerk's Tale* is not traditionally considered to be hagiographic, although Sherry Reames categorises both *The Man of Law's Tale* and *The Clerk's Tale* as 'quasi-hagiographical' and Elizabeth Salter writes that *The Clerk's Tale* is 'comparable' to a saint's life.<sup>7</sup> This chapter analyses *The Clerk's Tale* as belonging to the same hagiographic genre as the other tales, although Griselda does not fulfil the saintly role which she is assigned.

Each of these four texts is shaped by an explicitly didactic purpose, a technique designed to evoke a powerful reaction in a way that is, as Benson argues, unappealing to modern readers.<sup>8</sup> These four didactic tales demonstrate the variety of purposes which hagiography could serve, ranging from the moral and religious exemplum of *The Clerk's Tale*, the nationalism of *The Man of Law's Tale*, and the promotion of a saint's cult in *The Prioress's Tale*, to the spiritually focused, unadorned hagiography of *The Second Nun's Tale*. In these tales prayers play an important role and petitionary prayers receive clear answers. These answers, however, are not always encouraging or comfortable. While each of the narrators demonstrates that petitionary prayers are effective in the physical, temporal world, as might be expected of the prayers of saints and the saint-like, the responses to the prayers are deeply problematic. Saints enter heavenly bliss through the pain and suffering of earthly life, knowing and desiring no other answer to their prayers. The hagiographic tales which

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<sup>6</sup> Michael R. Paull compares the tale's structure to a series of dramatic frames explicitly modelled on the saint's legend. These frames, he writes, are linked together through the use of rhetorical devices such as *apostrophe*, *occupatio*, *comparatio*, and prayer. See Michael R. Paull, 'The Influence of the Saint's Legend Genre in the *Man of Law's Tale*', *ChR*, 5 (1971), 179–94 (pp. 184–86). Phillips labels the tale as a 'lay' hagiography, see her *An Introduction to the Canterbury Tales: Reading, Fiction, Context* (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 76–7. Winthrop Wetherbee places the tale of Custance in the hagiographic romance genre. See Winthrop Wetherbee, 'Constance and the World in Chaucer and Gower', in *John Gower: Recent Readings*, ed. by R. F. Yeager (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1989), pp. 65–93 (p. 69). Geraldine Heng accepts the categorisation of *The Man of Law's Tale* as 'hagiographic romance' while arguing that the genre merely uses religious referents as an 'authorising fiction', or a 'signature'. See Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 183. For a dissenting view, see Paul Strohm, 'Passioun, Lyf, Miracle, Legende: Some Generic Terms in Middle English Hagiographical Narrative', Part II, *ChR*, 10 (1976), pp. 154–71 (pp. 167–69).

<sup>7</sup> Sherry Reames, 'Mary, Sanctity and Prayers to Saints: Chaucer and Late-Medieval Piety', in *Chaucer and Religion*, ed. by Phillips, pp. 81–96 (p. 96); Salter, *Chaucer: The Knight's Tale and The Clerk's Tale*, p. 40.

<sup>8</sup> 'Ours is an age largely indifferent to the complexities and challenges of the orthodox spirituality that [...] operate[s] in Chaucer's religious tales.' C. David Benson, 'Introduction', in *Chaucer's Religious Tales*, ed. by Benson and Robertson, pp. 1–7 (p. 5).

follow the ideal set by *The Second Nun's Tale* are related through narratorial voices which correspond to those of hagiographers or homilists; Chaucer distinguishes these voices as different from his own when he shows characters to be resistant to overt narratorial interpretation.

David Lawton refers to the narratorial voices in *The Man of Law's Tale*, *The Prioress's Tale*, and *The Clerk's Tale* as similar, each an expression of high style, although he detects less complexity in the latter two.<sup>9</sup> *The Second's Nun's Tale*, he writes, is composed with a 'vestigial narratorial voice [...] unmatched to the teller'. The next section will consider this near absence of narratorial voice in the text as an element of its ideal hagiographic form. Analysing the distinct narratorial styles of the remaining three tales, however, demonstrates alternate didactic purposes rather than the varying levels of complexity proposed by Lawton. In his discussion of the multiple techniques for encoding narratorial subjectivity in medieval texts, Spearing exposes the inconsistencies of arguments which rely upon distinguishing lines to be attributed to the narrator from those attributed to Chaucer, writing that those who see an 'inadequate narrator' must make their criteria for selection clear.<sup>10</sup> In this chapter 'voice' is used not to imply any aspect of oral performance, but to distinguish from one another the differing narratorial techniques which Chaucer uses in these tales and which are discussed here in relation to discourses of prayer which vary across the texts. For convenience, these narratorial voices will be named after the Canterbury pilgrims to whom they are assigned, not as a means of characterising the pilgrim narrator but as a means of identifying the voice and clarifying which narrator is meant. As this chapter will demonstrate, these voices diverge sharply from one another as well as from those of the characters. Likewise, 'persona' is not used here to imply a separate character, but rather the

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<sup>9</sup> Lawton, *Chaucer's Narrators*, p. 94.

<sup>10</sup> A. C. Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity: the Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 121.

perspective Chaucer noticeably adopts, especially where the narratorial voice becomes intrusive in shaping the hagiographic elements of the text. The first task therefore is to examine the effect of narratorial non-intervention on the presentation of prayers in *The Second Nun's Tale*.

*Unremarkable answers to the prayers of a martyr in The Second Nun's Tale*

Chaucer's *Second's Nun's Tale* represents the ideal relationship between a suppliant, her prayer, and the response her prayer receives. This perfected relationship requires no narratorial comment, presenting a standard from which the narrators of the later hagiographic tales deviate to an increasingly greater extent. The tale Chaucer assigns to the 'second nun' is an example of hagiography in its purest form, in the words of Eileen S. Jankowski, 'a saint's life stripped to essentials'.<sup>11</sup> Prayer operates in this tale as an outpouring of Cecile's desire to be one with God through the preservation of her status as his servant. Her desires are in alignment with divine will, which takes precedence over her father's and her husband's wishes, manifesting in her drive to evangelise and to bring others into the bliss of heaven. Answers to the saint's prayers are presented with little additional emphasis and correspond perfectly to her holy desires.

St Cecilia's life was well-known: her *vita* is included in *The South English Legendary* and in the *Legenda Aurea*, and her feast day was long-established by the fourteenth century; the Second Nun describes her task as that of translation, implying faithfulness to the legend (*SNT*, ll. 24–5).<sup>12</sup> As Sherry Reames and Joseph Grossi demonstrate, Chaucer's version of

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<sup>11</sup> Eileen S. Jankowski, 'Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale* and the Apocalyptic Imagination', *ChR*, 36 (2001), 128–48 (p. 131). Katherine C. Little argues that Chaucer presents the life of St Cecilia as pure truth: 'Short of renarrating a Gospel story, Chaucer comes closest here to guaranteeing truth in a narrative form (I set aside the *Parson's Tale* because it is not a narrative): St Cecilia not only bears the "gospel in hir mynde" (123), she leads an exemplary life in accordance with that text, preaching and converting'. See Katherine C. Little, 'Images, Texts, and Exegetics in Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale*', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 36 (2006), 103–33 (p. 125).

<sup>12</sup> The legend of Saint Cecilia is found in several of the manuscripts which contain *The South English Legendary*, including MS Ashmole 43, c. 1310; MS Stowe 669, c. 1340; and MS Vernon, c. 1380; and was

the *vita* closely follows his sources, although each of these scholars argues for a greater or lesser degree of significance to be ascribed to the minor details Chaucer adds, changes or emphasises.<sup>13</sup> Writing on the evangelising power of the voice in Chaucer's saints' lives, including *The Second Nun's Tale*, Broughton argues that one of Chaucer's overlooked alterations to his sources is his depiction of St Cecile as a woman engaged in preaching.<sup>14</sup> This homiletic role is implicitly undertaken by the nun who relates the tale: the narrator of the 'lyf of Seinte Cecile' embodies the virtues and activity of her subject. Like the beatified heroine of her tale, the nun takes on the role of a preacher, using her opportunity for speaking publically to her congregation of pilgrims to relate an idealised *vita*.<sup>15</sup> While the circumstances of the frame narrative combine with the subject matter to place the nun as a homilist, the tale bears little trace of narratorial presence. The didactic elements of this text are less overt than in Chaucer's later hagiographic tales, those of the Prioress, the Man of Law, and the Clerk, which will be discussed below. The narratorial style Chaucer employs in *The Second Nun's Tale*, this exemplar of ideal hagiographic form, provides a model with

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added in a later hand to the late thirteenth-century MS Laud 108. It also appears in several later MSS. See *The Early South English Legendary*, xiii–xix; pp. 490–96. The legend was also included in Jacob de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea*. See Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings from the Saints*, trans. by William Granger Ryan (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 704–9.

<sup>13</sup> Reames rejects 'the traditional idea of the tale as an early and innocuous exercise in translation on Chaucer's part', suggesting instead that Chaucer intensified the legend's theme of the challenge to authority presented by the relatively powerless. See Reames, 'Mary, Sanctity and Prayers to Saints', p. 95. Grossi refers to Chaucer's 'slight emendations' to his source texts, regarding these as significant in enhancing the nun's vision of piety as well as highlighting its lack in the hierarchy of the Church. See Joseph L. Grossi, 'The Unhidden Piety of Chaucer's "Saint Cecile"', *ChR*, 36 (2002), 298–309 (p. 298).

<sup>14</sup> Broughton, 'Chaucer and the Saints', pp. 116–17. Catherine Sanok points out the incongruity between the late-medieval use of St Cecilia's legend as encouragement to private female devotion and the exemplum of public preaching set by the saint. For a discussion of the Wycliffite use of St Cecilia to promote women as preachers, see Catherine Sanok, 'Performing Feminine Sanctity in Late Medieval England: Parish Guilds, Saints' Plays, and the *Second Nun's Tale*', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 32 (2002), 269–303 (pp. 285–86). On late-medieval lay identification with 'aggressive, sharp-tongued' martyrs, including St. Cecilia, see Karen A. Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 100–5.

<sup>15</sup> The majority of the sermons in *The Northern Homily Cycle* and many in Mirk's *Festial* relate an exemplum taken from a saint's life. See *The Northern Homily Cycle*, ed. by Anne B. Thompson (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008) <<http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/thompson-the-northern-homily-cycle>> [accessed 06.08.16]. Also see the conclusions to Mirk's sermons, each marked as 'narratio' in the older EETS edition.



which to compare these later texts. The most striking differences hinge upon the place of prayer in the tales. Narratorial emphasis on the subjects' prayers bears an inverse relationship to the tale's resemblance of the ideal represented by the *vita* of St Cecile. The further the tale is from this ideal, the more insistent the narrator becomes.

In order to establish how such an idealised hagiographical narrator might be realised, we shall first examine the explicit stance taken towards the subject matter of *The Second Nun's Tale*. That the majority of the text is written in direct discourse leads to a strong sense of narratorial absence which is further amplified by Chaucer's presentation of prayer in the tale. Cecile's petitions are few and unostentatious; her speech focusses instead on the vital business of evangelisation. That her prayers are answered is not drawn to the attention of her audience.<sup>16</sup> Although we are told that she prays continuously, Chaucer's version of the legend reports only two petitions, which is one more than the martyr can claim in *The South English Legendary*.<sup>17</sup> These two petitions, both of which are granted, bookend Cecile's 'lyf', marking first her unwanted marriage and then her death. Chaucer presents the first of these two as the saint's subversive, interior rejection of exultant nuptial celebrations. While the organ triumphantly proclaims the beginning of her married life, she takes the first step to virgin martyrdom by praying, 'O Lord, my soule and eek my body gye | Unwemmed, lest that I confounded be' (SNT, ll. 136–37). The prayer is a conventional one for personal and spiritual protection; it asks God to keep the supplicant's body and soul unharmed. By 'unwemmed', Cecile is conventionally taken to be referring specifically to her virginity, an

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<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Robertson notes that the term 'miracle' occurs only twice in the tale and receives similarly low-key treatment. See Elizabeth Robertson, 'Apprehending the Divine and Choosing to Believe: Voluntarist Free Will in Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale*', *ChR*, 46 (2012), 111–30 (p. 124).

<sup>17</sup> Cecilia's single prayer in *The Early South English Legendary* is her voiced 'verse of þe psalter': 'Lat, louerd, myn herte wiþout wem be, þat it confundet be naut!' See 'Vita & passio sancta Cecilie virginis & martiris', *The Early South English Legendary*, pp. 490–96, ll. 11–2.

interpretation confirmed by the warning she gives to her husband on their wedding night.<sup>18</sup>

Chaucer presents this prayer as intrinsic to a wider devotion on the part of the aspiring saint, rather than as a reflexive response to immediate threat. Cecile's virginity is preserved through this prayer, but also through her intervention with her husband, his insistence on proof of her angelic protector, and finally through the miraculous proof provided after Valerian's baptism.

While the narrator does not explicitly link the miracle to Cecile's earlier prayer, advice on how to pray is more forthcoming. Cecile prays ceaselessly: 'She never cessed, as I writen fynde, | Of her preyere' (*SNT*, ll. 124–25). She prays inwardly, 'to God allone in herte' (*SNT*, l. 135). When Valerian makes a petition of his own, asking that his brother might also know the truth, the angel approves of it because it is in line with the will of God, saying, 'God liketh thy requeste!' (*SNT*, l. 239). Answers to prayers are addressed in the most general sense in noting the grace granted to Tiburce, whose every prayer 'was sped ful soone' (*SNT*, l. 357). The nun, as narrator, focusses on the outcomes of prayer not as miraculous rewards, but as efficacious in furthering an evangelising mission. The immediate result of the granting of Cecile's prayer is that she remains alive for three days with her throat cut. It is the result of this granted prayer, the miracle represented by her three days of preaching, that is itself efficacious: she leaves a church behind, both as physical structure and the people who fill it in worship.<sup>19</sup>

Whereas Chaucer makes the narrators of each of the other hagiographic tales noticeably present, as we shall see, the narrator of *The Second Nun's Tale* remains

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<sup>18</sup> The *MED*, however, refers to the primary sense of the word as 'undamaged', 'unharméd', or 'intact'. A secondary sense plays metaphorically on the first, and it is this sense which can include virginity. See both senses of 'unwemmed' in the *MED* <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med>> [accessed 06.08.16].

<sup>19</sup> Sanok points out the incongruity between the late-medieval use of St Cecelia's legend as encouragement to private female devotion and the exemplum of public preaching set by the saint. For a discussion of the Wycliffite use of St Cecilia to promote women as preachers, see Sanok, 'Performing Feminine Sanctity', pp. 285–86.

unobtrusive. Answers to prayer are not presented as evidence in support of an overarching narratorial design. For example, although it is later revealed to have received a miraculous response, Cecile's second prayer is a private affair in its execution. Chaucer structures the narrative so that the fact of the prayer is only revealed at the end of the tale as Cecile explains her wishes to Urban. Her miraculous survival of the tortures to which she is submitted by Almachius, culminating in his unsuccessful attempt to end her life by beheading her, transpires to have been the direct result of a prior petition. Urban receives news retrospectively that Cecile had prayed explicitly for the miraculous three days of preaching. Just prior to her death Cecile reports that she had requested the time from God for the purpose of evangelisation:

I axed this of hevene kyng,  
To han respit thre dayes and namo  
To recomende to yow, er that I go,  
Thise soules, lo, and that I myghte do werche  
Heere of myn hous perpetuelly a cherche.

(SNT, ll. 542–46)

Cecile makes clear the complete alignment of her desires with the will of God by her petition for the three days which become part of her *imitatio Christi*.<sup>20</sup> Her identification with the divine will is entire, as Katherine Zieman writes:

Insofar as [she] has agency, she uses it to make her will adhere to God's *entente*, matching intent and expression, inner and outer, thereby creating verbal performances that signify without communicating self-interest.<sup>21</sup>

The saint is unified, corresponding in her entirety to the divine will. In this context, narratorial insistence on the success of her prayer would be redundant. By reserving until the

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<sup>20</sup> Cecile's three days between execution and death represent the harrowing of hell narrative in which the crucified Jesus rescues the damned in the three days between crucifixion and resurrection. Compare the poem 'Hou iesu crist herowede helle' in the late thirteenth-century common-place book, Oxford Bodleian MS Digby 86: *Facsimile of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 86*, with an introduction by Judith Tschann and M. B. Parkes, EETS, S.S. 16 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), fols 119<sup>r</sup>–120<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> Katherine Zieman, *Singing the New Song: Literacy and Liturgy in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), p. 203.

tale's ending the revelation that Cecile's miraculous preaching and evangelisation was granted in response to her petition, the narrative structure highlights the link between Cecile's miraculously delayed death and her accustomed missionary activity, deemphasising the efficacy of petitionary prayer. The effect is not to detract from the miraculous granting of the saint's prayer, but rather to display its nature as a facet of Christian life which does not require a heavy-handed didactic approach.

The nun's narratorial stance is set out in her *Prologue*, where she addresses both her audience and her blessed subject in addition to praying to Mary.<sup>22</sup> The audience are to be encouraged in action: the *Prologue* opens with a reference to *Le Roman de la Rose* and its depiction of Idleness, who, she explains, 'porter of the gate is of delices' (*SNT*, l. 3).<sup>23</sup> The reference also introduces one of the key themes of *The Second Nun's Tale*, which is business, or busy-ness. True to this theme, the heroine of her story is an active one: she prays without ceasing, but she also acts vigorously in the world, converting others while challenging worldly authority. Taking Cecile as her model in the world, the nun directly addresses her subject:

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

(*SNT*, ll. 22–8)

The nun's address to the saint is unusual. It reads as a justification for the tale that follows, simultaneously addressed to the audience which is to hear the tale and also to the saint whose

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<sup>22</sup> For an extended comparison of the Marian prayers in 'The Retraction', the *Prologue to The Second Nun's Tale*, and the Prioress's *Prologue*, see Reames, 'Mary, Sanctity and Prayers to Saints', pp. 85–93. Reames writes of the narrator of the *Prologue* as either male or female, arguing that the text shows little evidence of having been revised to fit into schema of *The Canterbury Tales* ('Mary, Sanctity and Prayers to Saints', p. 85n).

<sup>23</sup> Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*, ll. 590–618.

life is its subject. The goal of the tale is to induce ‘us’, the audience, along with the narrator, to turn away from idleness, avoiding thereby ‘greet confusioun’.<sup>24</sup> Saint Cecile is informed that the narrator has performed her task faithfully. Insofar as narratorial intent is encoded in the first of Chaucer’s hagiographic tales, this purpose is located in its prologue, rather than in its narratorial style.

In the idealised hagiographical form of *The Second Nun’s Tale*, Chaucer aligns the prayers of Cecile, Pope Urban, and the narrator to whom the tale is assigned. Each prayer reinforces the others. The virtue of a life of faithful work becomes the theme of Urban’s prayer of thanksgiving when Cecile’s newly converted husband seeks baptism at his hands. Joyfully raising his hands to heaven, he speaks of Valerian as a fruit of Cecile’s life:

‘Almyghty Lord, O Jhesu Crist,’ quod he,  
 ‘Sower of chaast conseil, hierde of us alle,  
 The fruyt of thilke seed of chastitee  
 That thou hast sowe in Cecile, taak to thee!’

(SNT, ll. 191–94)

The interplay between human agency and divine intervention is delicately woven. The relationship Urban sees between the fruitful soil of Cecile’s soul and the divine sower emphasises the responsibility which humans bear for worldly outcomes. God plants the seed of virtue in Cecile, but in Urban’s horticultural metaphor, its growth depends on good soil. Cecile, the nun who preaches her life as exemplum, and the pilgrims to whom she preaches, have been called to bear fruit by their ‘bisynesse’. Prayers play a role in this work, and the saint’s ‘lyf’ shows these prayers to be effective, but they are not made to serve a didactic function in the tale. Instead they form the context for Cecile’s life, beginning and ending her tale, spilling out as naturally as her joy and her desire to evangelise. As the earliest of

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<sup>24</sup> The reference to ‘confusioun’ foreshadows Cecile’s later prayer to be protected from being ‘confounded’. Both of these words have a stark sense in Middle English that is less apparent in their modern forms, including implications of defeat, death, destruction, and damnation, rather than of merely being muddled. See the first sense of ‘confusioun’ and the first given for ‘confounden’ in the *MED* <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med>> [accessed 06.08.16].

Chaucer's hagiographic tales, and that which best corresponds to the genre, *The Second Nun's Tale* provides an ideal from which the later texts deviate. As we shall see in the Prioress's and the Man of Law's tales, the hagiographic form offers scope for significant narratorial intervention in the text in order to interpret for the audience the purpose of divine intervention in the lives of their subjects.

### *Prayer and affect in The Prioress's Tale*

Turning from the idealised hagiographic form of *The Second Nun's Tale* to the Prioress's tale of the murdered clergeon, we see a striking difference in narratorial style. Chaucer assigns the Prioress a type of miracle story popular in the fourteenth century, using an intrusive narratorial persona which manipulates the audience, telling them how to understand and respond to the tale.<sup>25</sup> *The Prioress's Tale* shares many of its key features with *The Second Nun's Tale*: both are set in distant places where Christianity is marginal, both relate a religious martyrdom, both are introduced by a prologue which invokes Mary's help, and both include the prayers of their devout subjects sparingly. Unlike the 'lyf of Seinte Cecile', however, the Prioress's tale is not an established *vita*. The subject of the tale is not yet a recognised saint, although the story of his life and death takes on the attributes of a saint's legend.<sup>26</sup> The explicit purpose of the tale is hagiographic, encouraging the audience to see the child as one of the blessed martyrs; the clergeon is sent at the end of the tale directly into God's presence, where the narrator presumes the audience to be eager to join the martyred

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<sup>25</sup> Many versions of the Christian-child-murdered-by-Jews tales had been circulating England since the thirteenth century. Several of these specifically linked the singing of Marian hymns, including *Alma redemptoris mater*, to the murdered child. For known analogues and a discussion of the texts, see Broughton, 'The Prioress's Prologue and Tale', pp. 583–647. For an account of Thomas of Monmouth's use of extant hagiography in the construction of the first known legend of a Christian child purportedly murdered by Jews, see Miri Rubin, 'Introduction', in Thomas of Monmouth, *The Life and Passion of William of Norwich*, ed. and trans. by Miri Rubin (London: Penguin, 2014), pp. vii–l (pp. xxix–xxx). For a discussion of the prevalence across Europe of such depictions of Jews as the Prioress's, see Anthony Bale, "'A maner Latyn corrupt': Chaucer and the Absent Religions," in *Chaucer and Religion*, ed. by Phillips, pp. 52–64 (pp. 56–7).

<sup>26</sup> One unusual characteristic of this *vita* is that, unlike the saints who appear in legends, and unlike Hugh of Lincoln, mentioned by the Prioress at line 684, the child remains nameless.

child.<sup>27</sup> By emphasising the affective elements of the tale, Chaucer draws attention to the potentially manipulative uses of hagiography.<sup>28</sup> This narratorial intervention nevertheless retains the relationship between prayers and their answers established in *The Second Nun's Tale*; prayers in the tale emphasise faith, the alignment of the human with the divine will, and trust at the moment of death.

The narrator of *The Prioress's Tale* does not allow its events to speak for themselves, instead intervening through frequent invitations to the audience to adopt the appropriate affective response to the death of the little clergeon. One of the most obvious ways in which narratorial style aims to influence the audience's reception of the tale is in its appeal to shared prejudice; the tale's anti-Semitism and its reliance on corresponding attitudes amongst its audience has received much critical attention.<sup>29</sup> Carolyn Collette, for example, refers to the anti-Semitism present in the tale as 'egregious and casual'.<sup>30</sup> Jessica Fenn describes the communal nature of the tale's anti-Semitism as a wider phenomenon shared between character and author, arguing that the tropes which appear in the tale represent 'repeated and

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<sup>27</sup> 'And in a tombe of marbul stones cleere | Enclosen they his litel body sweete. | Ther he is now, God leve us for to meete!' (*PrT*, ll. 681–83). Although the phrasing almost implies a meeting at the child's tomb, the Prioress clearly intends an imagined future meeting in heavenly bliss, thus placing the child amongst the company of saints. A similar thought is expressed in prayer at the end of St Cecilia's *vita*: 'Nou bidde we oure swete louerd, for hire martirdom, | To bringe vs to þat ioye þat hire soule to com.' See 'Vita & passio sancta Cecilie virginis & martiris', in *The Early South English Legendary*, ll. 259–60.

<sup>28</sup> For a comparison of the tale's devotional poetics to liturgical practice, as well as to the writings of Richard Rolle, and the consequent creation of 'affective intensity', see Helen Barr, 'Religious Practice in Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale*: Rabbit and/or Duck?', *SAC*, 32 (2010), 39–65 (pp. 46–7). For a discussion of the methods through which the Prioress, as narrator, sanctifies her subject through his unlearned qualities and innocent motives, see Zieman, *Singing the New Song*, pp. 189–90.

<sup>29</sup> Faced with the anti-Semitism of *The Prioress's Tale*, many critics have shown a tendency to attempt to exculpate Chaucer of anti-Semitic views by assigning these solely to his creation, the Prioress, while recasting the tale merely as a parody of her unsophisticated racism. This view in turn has invited the opposing view that Chaucer was no more immune to the anti-Semitism of his fourteenth-century English environment than his less-eminent contemporaries. Lawrence Besserman describes these two approaches as 'hard' or 'soft': 'hard' readings view Chaucer as partaking to a greater or lesser extent in the anti-Semitism of his surrounding culture, whereas 'soft' readings divorce Chaucer from the anti-Semitism of his tale, arguing instead for a parodic characterisation of the Prioress. See Lawrence Besserman, 'Ideology, Anti-Semitism, and Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale*', *ChR*, 36 (2001), 48–72 (p. 57). For a thorough summary of critical positions on the attribution of anti-Semitism in the tale to either the Prioress as narrator or to Chaucer as author, in addition to those discussed in this chapter, see Jessica Fenn, 'Apostrophe, Devotion and Anti-Semitism: Rhetorical Community in the *Prioress's Prologue and Tale*', *Studies in Philology*, 110 (2013), 432–58 (pp. 433n–34n).

<sup>30</sup> Carolyn Collette, 'Critical Approaches to the *Prioress's Tale* and the *Second Nun's Tale*', in *Chaucer's Religious Tales*, ed. by Benson and Robertson, pp. 95–107 (p. 96).

repetitive vehicles of anti-Semitic attitudes and relations'.<sup>31</sup> Schildgen refers to the Prioress as unquestionably anti-Semitic, although she rejects suggestions that the tale represents a parody of her character.<sup>32</sup> Anthony Bale argues that all such attempts to blame or to exculpate Chaucer are flawed and are not in any case applied to other of his morally questionable texts.<sup>33</sup> The purpose here is neither to accuse nor absolve Chaucer of anti-Semitic views, but to examine the construction of a narratorial voice which certainly expresses such views in its appeal to affect. Through comparison with *The Second's Nun's Tale*, Chaucer's use in *The Prioress's Tale* of a dominant narratorial voice shaping and inviting a specific audience response becomes clear.

Another way in which the narrator aims to shape audience response is in the emotive presentation of petitionary prayer. The granting of the clergeon's and his mother's prayers is unremarkable in itself; their faith and devotion, like Cecile's, lead to successful prayer. Yet the prayers lead directly to the suffering from which the Prioress draws lessons for the audience. The text includes two petitionary prayers, neither of which is written as direct discourse. The clergeon's prayer is the hymn *Alma redemptoris mater*, which he sings twice daily, and the audience's knowledge of this prayer is assumed, for its words are not recorded. The second prayer, his mother's, is not given in detail, but is an anguished cry to Mary:

She gooth, as she were half out of hir mynde,  
To every place where she hath supposed  
By liklihede hir litel child to fynde;  
And evere on Cristes mooder meeke and kynde  
She cride.

(*PrT*, ll. 594–98)

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<sup>31</sup> Fenn, 'Apostrophe, Devotion and Anti-Semitism', p. 434.

<sup>32</sup> Schildgen argues that the theory of providential history is itself 'put on trial' both in the tale and in Fragment VII. See Schildgen, *Pagans, Tartars, Moslems, and Jews*, p. 102. A reluctance to engage with the unpleasant nature of the tale leads at times to an apparent critical distance, for example in Nolan's analysis of the text as one of Chaucer's 'tales of transcendence', where she introduces the tale with a resigned, 'But we must now turn to the *Prioress's Tale* of the "little clergeon"'. See Nolan, 'Chaucer's Tales of Transcendence', p. 36.

<sup>33</sup> Bale, 'A maner Latyn corrupt', pp. 57–8.



Her unrecorded prayer achieves two distinct and dramatic answers. The first of these responses is the inspiration to call for her son near to where his body lay:

but Jhesu of his grace  
Yaf in hir thocht inwith a litel space  
That in that place after hir sone she cryde,  
Where he was casten in a pit bisyde.

(PrT, ll. 603–6)

This second cry is answered when her child begins once more to sing the *Alma redemptoris mater*; his body is born in procession through the streets, his mother inconsolable. The use of prayer to arouse the audience's emotions with the tale of the little clergeon demonstrates an ultimately pious aim, however, a reminder that the mother's cries bring her the promise of her child's salvation.

Although the prayers of the mother and the son are both answered, showing petitionary prayer to be effective, neither of the prayers receives a response which leads to earthly comfort.<sup>34</sup> The mother's prayer, as we have seen, leads her to her son's corpse. The most prominent petitionary prayer in the text, the clergeon's singing of the hymn, *Alma redemptoris mater*, ultimately leads to his untimely death.<sup>35</sup> In both its late-medieval use as a hymn to be sung at the end of Compline and its original appearance as a hymn to be sung at the end of processions on Marian feasts, *Alma redemptoris mater* is associated with marking conclusions.<sup>36</sup> The prayer appeals to Mary, invoking her in such liminal terms as 'gate of heaven' and 'star of the sea':

Alma redemptoris mater, quae pervia caeli  
porta manes, et stella maris, succurre cadenti,

<sup>34</sup> Taking an alternate approach to the question of effectiveness, Zieman argues that the clergeon's performance of the *Alma redemptoris mater* is effective in its impact on his audience, both within the tale and on the Prioress's group of pilgrims, and that the boy is able to 'grant meaning to his story for others'. See Zieman, *Singing the New Song*, pp. 194–95.

<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of the function of the *Alma redemptoris mater* antiphon in contrast to that signalled by the inclusion of *Gaude Maria virgo* in 'Miracle of the Boy Singer' texts, see Anthony Bale, *The Jew in the Medieval Book: English Antisemitisms, 1350–1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 67–72.

<sup>36</sup> For the origins and liturgical use of the hymn, see Rebecca A. Baltzer, 'The Geography of the Liturgy at Notre Dame of Paris', in *Plainsong in the Age of Polyphony*, ed. by Thomas Forrest Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 45–64 (pp. 57–9).

surgere qui curat populo; tu quae genuisti,  
 natura mirante, tuum sanctum genitorem:  
 virgo prius ac posterius, Gabrielis ab ore  
 sumens illud ave, peccatorum miserere.

[Kind mother of the Redeemer, thou who art  
 the open door of heaven and star of the sea,  
 help thy fallen people, striving to rise again;  
 thou who gavest birth to thine own sacred creator  
 while Nature marvelled; thou who yet was virgin  
 before and afterwards, receiving that 'Hail'  
 from the lips of Gabriel, have mercy on sinners.]<sup>37</sup>

Both the mother's and the son's prayers lead to the *porta caeli*, which is only entered at the end of life itself. The child's repeated prayer has prepared him not for the temporary oblivion of sleep, but for the long sleep of death. Mary's protection of the clergeon operates in the metaphysical realm, rather than the physical, while the mother's consolation comes through knowledge of her son's redemptive martyrdom. Despite the differences in style between the Prioress's and Second Nun's tales, neither offers worldly or especially comfortable answers to prayers. Effective petitions in these tales lead to heavenly bliss, but only by passing through death and suffering.

Narratorial interpolations in *The Prioress's Tale* focus instead on the meaning of the events which follow these prayers. The answer to the mother's cry to Jesus, the irrepressible singing of the murdered clergeon, is presented as miraculous. After his requiem mass, the temporarily revived child explains to the Christians who had gathered at the pit that Mary wished him to continue his song, laying a 'greyn' upon his tongue (*PrT*, ll. 556–62). As if in awe at the marvel presented by the story, the narrator interrupts her own narrative with a prayer of praise to God for the continued witness of the young martyr who sings *Alma redemptoris mater* after death as he did in life. She speaks to God, addressing him in the familiar second person and commanding him to observe the evidence of his own power: 'O

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<sup>37</sup> *Alma redemptoris mater*, ed. and trans. by John Harper, *The Forms and Orders of Western Liturgy from the Tenth to the Eighteenth Century: A Historical Introduction and Guide for Students and Musicians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 274–75.

grete God, that parfournest thy laude | By mouth of innocentz, lo, heere thy myght!’ (*PrT*, ll. 607–8). The use of the term ‘parfournest’ is revealing.<sup>38</sup> The narrator presents a God who causes human beings to act. The child’s lack of understanding, which is allied to the Prioress’s own weak ‘konnyng’, represents a diminished form of agency.<sup>39</sup> In a tale ultimately concerned with affect, it is desire alone which aligns with the will of God; successful prayer relies upon an inner orientation, rather than active will.

The Prioress’s disavowal in the *Prologue* of the skill to relate her tale invites the reader to pay close attention to the narratorial techniques Chaucer employs in this hagiographic text, especially the strategies employed to elicit an appropriate affective response, as well as the presentation of miraculous responses to prayers.<sup>40</sup> Consonant with the Prioress’s avowal of simplicity and lack of narrative skill, Chaucer’s shaping of the tale focusses on heightening its affective power, especially by the use of adjectives to characterise those who are on the side of good from those on the side of evil. Thus the clergeon’s primary attribute is his innocent youth, which evokes a sense of vulnerability. The narrator describes him repeatedly as ‘littel’ and associates him with all that is likewise small and seemingly inconsequential, using the word ‘littel’ several times in quick succession to characterise the boy, his book, and his school: ‘This litel child, his litel book lernynge, | As he sat at the scole at his prymer’ (*PrT*, ll. 516–17). The school is itself small and vulnerable; it is portrayed a few lines earlier as ‘a litel scole of Cristen folk’ (*PrT*, l. 495). In the simplified, black and white setting given the tale, the *dramatis personae* include the ‘Hebrayk peple’, whose

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<sup>38</sup> For a discussion of the *Alma redemptoris* as a ‘performative utterance’, see William Orth, ‘The Problem of the Performative in Chaucer’s Prioress Sequence’, *ChR*, 42 (2007), 196–210 (pp. 201–3). Helen Barr discusses the use of the word ‘parfour’ in the tale’s *Prologue* in the context of the Prioress’s self-identification with the innocently performing child. See Barr, ‘Religious Practice’, pp. 60–4.

<sup>39</sup> For a discussion of the Prioress’s appeal to innocence as a challenge to institutionalised knowledge, see Zieman, *Singing the New Song*, pp. 187–98.

<sup>40</sup> Murton argues that the Prioress presents language itself as ‘fallen’ and inadequate for prayer, and that Chaucer counters this perception of inadequacy by expressing the ineffable through the Prioress’s own prayer in her *Prologue* (‘Chaucer’s Poetics of Prayer’, pp. 54–61).

portrayal is equally monolithic.<sup>41</sup> The Jewish inhabitants, known only as a collective noun, are represented on a single occasion, by a single individual, the hired murderer – although his own religious identification is not made clear – and are associated as a group with all that is foul, villainous, and hateful, as the narrator sets her scene: ‘For foule usure and lucre of vileynye, | Hateful to Crist and to his compaignye’ (*PrT*, ll. 491–92).

On its surface, the narratorial depiction of prayer’s effectiveness is consonant with this simple division into good and evil. The mother’s cries do not lead to worldly comfort, but do achieve her need to find her child. Yet the literal purpose of prayer does not always align with the expectations of the suppliant in this tale. Form and function in prayer are separated, as the several discourses surrounding the use of the *Alma redemptoris mater* demonstrate. This separation has been noted in part by William Orth, who analyses the prayer as a performative utterance, arguing that the clergeon fails in his speech act due to his youthful ignorance of the importance of the two separate functions which the hymn *Alma redemptoris mater* is meant to serve: the first being to praise Mary and the second being to ask for her help.<sup>42</sup> Orth argues that the clergeon focusses single-mindedly on singing the hymn in Mary’s praise, neglecting the prayer’s purpose in asking for Mary’s help; his performative speech thus fails to be effective.<sup>43</sup> The child’s performance cannot be perfected until the two functions of the prayer are aligned after his death, in Orth’s view. This analysis privileges the child’s intention over his action. As Orth writes, the child’s desire to learn the hymn well enough to sing by Christmas stems entirely from a wish to reverence Mary (*PrT*, ll. 537–40). Yet in singing the hymn twice every day, he is both praising Mary as he intends,

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<sup>41</sup> The tale’s simple divisions are also based on affect: hard-hearted Jews are set in opposition to tender-hearted Christians. The Jewish residents deny the tearful mother’s desperate pleas to learn the whereabouts of her child, whose pleas to ‘every Jew that dwelte in thilke place’ go unanswered (*PrT*, l. 601). Schildgen notes Chaucer’s use of a medieval trope presenting Jews as fundamentally in opposition to Mary. See Schildgen, *Pagans, Tartars, Moslems, and Jews*, p. 102.

<sup>42</sup> Orth, ‘The Problem of the Performative’, p. 203.

<sup>43</sup> Orth writes that the *Alma redemptoris* is both assertive and directive, but that the child only understands its assertive meaning. See Orth, ‘The Problem of the Performative’, p. 204.

and petitioning her aid for a failing, sinful humanity: ‘succurre cadenti, | surgere qui curat populo.’ The clergeon’s words accomplish more than he knows: his wish to praise Mary effectively calls upon her intervention.

The same passage contains another mismatch between the prayer and its purported function. Attracted to the hymn as he overhears its singing, the clergeon makes a request of a fellow scholar: ‘On a day his felawe gan he preye | T’expounden hym this song in his langage, | Or telle hym why this song was in usage’ (*PrT*, ll. 525–27). He divides his request into two parts: the first, to have the hymn explained to him; the second, to be told the hymn’s purpose, the reason for its use. The older boy’s answer is illuminating, for he is unable to explain the meaning of the hymn, knowing ‘but smal grammeere’ (*PrT*, l. 336). He is, however, able to answer the second part of the younger boy’s question, explaining that the hymn is sung to Mary’s honour and ‘eek hire for to preye | To been oure help and socour whan we deye’ (*PrT*, ll. 533–34). His answer provides for the prayer an oral rubric which exists apart from the meaning of the words of the prayer. As we have seen in Chapter One, late-medieval prayers frequently held meanings associated with usage and these alternate understandings were often transmitted through rubrics which differed to some extent from the prayer’s written content.

While fourteenth-century Christians would have seen Mary’s help as extending beyond physical life, the *Alma redemptoris mater* is concerned with help in overcoming sin, a battle undertaken as a continual process throughout temporal life. The explanation offered by the older choir boy would suit a medieval prayer such as *O Maria piissima*, a twelfth-century prayer which asks in dramatic language for help at the hour of death:

O Maria piissima. stella maris clarissima. mater misericordie. & aula pudicitie. ora pro me ad dominum deum tuum & filium. ut me a malis [s]eruat. bonis gaudere faciat. a uitiis euacuit. uirtutibus corroboret. tranq[ui]llitatem tribuat. & in pace custodiat. cum finis uite uenerit meis te prebe oculis. ut terrorem sathane p[er] te queam euadere. conductricem te habeam. redeundo ad patriam. ne callidus diabolus me p[er]turbet aditus. O regina angelorum. mitis hera gentium. porta celi. mater

d[e]i. flos & gemma virginu[m]. funde preces apud tuum q[uem] lactaris filium: ut celeste nob[is] regnum tribuat post obitum AMEN.

[O most holy Mary, brightest star of the sea, mother of mercy, and Hall of purity. Pray for me to the lord, your god and son, that he keep me from all evil, make me to rejoice in all good things, release me from all vices, confirm me in all virtues, give me tranquillity and watch over me in peace. When the end of life has come present yourself to my eyes. So that I may, through you, evade the terror of Satan; that I may, through you, have safe conduct in returning home, that the cunning devil may not trouble me on my approach. O queen of angels, gentle lady of nations, gate of heaven, mother of god, flower and jewel of virgins. Pour out your prayers in the presence of the son whom you suckled: So that the heavenly kingdom might be obtained by us after death. AMEN.]<sup>44</sup>

Although the *Alma redemptoris mater* requests help for those sinners who, in falling, strive to rise, the youthful scholar understands the prayer instead to be asking for Mary's help at the hour of death, similarly to the *Ave Maria* or *O Maria piissima*. Rather than requesting help with living well, the prayer, he believes, concerns itself with a good death. The events which follow the clergeon's death prove the oral rubric to have been accurate; the words alter the effective power of the prayer.

Another effect of the Prioress's disavowal of rhetorical skill, in combination with the tender age of her hagiographic subject, is to give the impression that words can be effective whether or not they are understood by the one who utters them. This effectiveness would seem to apply equally to narrators and to devout supplicants. The Prioress claims for herself a lack of narratorial skill when she invokes Mary's aid before beginning the tale:

My konnyng is so wayk, O blisful Queene,  
For to declare thy grete worthynesse  
That I ne may the weighte nat susteene;  
But as a child of twelf month oold, or lesse,  
That kan unnethes any word expresse,  
Right so fare I, and therfore I yow preye,  
Gydeþ my song that I shal of yow seye.

(*PrT*, ll. 481–87)

<sup>44</sup> *O Maria piissima*, London, British Library, MS Cotton Nero C IV, fols 135<sup>r</sup>–135<sup>v</sup>. As discussed in Chapter One, a rubric attached to a later version of this prayer in the early-fifteenth-century Malling Abbey Hours promised that the supplicant would see Mary 'without doubt' before death. For the rubric, see Scott-Stokes, *Women's Books of Hours*, p. 104.

By employing an exaggerated medieval humility trope, the Prioress makes an ingenuous attempt to deny any artistic claim for the words which follow. Too simple and unknowing to relate such weighty matters to others, she implicitly attributes her words to Mary, assuming in her petition that Mary will grant her request by guiding her ‘song’. Thus the Prioress, as narrator, claims to speak with even less comprehension than the little clergeon who sings the words of a prayer he cannot understand. If her prayer to Mary is to be viewed as having been successful, the tale she has been assigned stands as an answer to that prayer.

*The Prioress’s Tale* evinces gaps between the narrative representation of prayer, including liturgical prayer, the presentation of its effectiveness, and the narratorial keys to interpretation as conveyed to the audience. By connecting the *Alma redemptoris mater* to a young martyr and showing him to have received extraordinary, miraculous help from Mary at the time of his death, the narrator participates in the process by which prayers are assigned functions that extend, or, at times, alter beyond recognition, the original meaning of their words. The Prioress, however, remains conservative in her exegetical activities, repeating what were likely to have been conventional understandings of the use of this prayer, which was already associated in legend with murdered child-martyrs.<sup>45</sup> Like the Second Nun, whose legend varies little from its accepted use as exemplum, the Prioress, for all her narratorial intervention, repeats, rather than invents, the various pious aspects of her tale. The tale conflates Marian prayers, promising aid at the moment of death as a response to a prayer for mercy to sinners. In acting as a rubric to Custance’s prayers, as we shall see in the next section, the narrator of *The Man of Law’s Tale* progresses further, substituting outcomes entirely unrelated to his heroine’s petitions.

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<sup>45</sup> Broughton, ‘The Prioress’s Prologue and Tale’, pp. 587–98.

*Narratorial prayer rubrics in The Man of Law's Tale*

*The Man of Law's Tale* is one of Empire, of the irresistible spread of the influence of Rome and, more specifically, its Christian religion through the sufferings of its devotees and the might of its military forces. Missionary, and imperial, zeal extends eastward from Rome to Syria and westward to far-flung Northumberland. The text presents the conversion of Muslims and pagans, whether willingly embraced or resisted, as the work of God's chosen vessel, Custance, accomplished through her passive and obedient voyages. The narratorial persona demonstrates a strong insistence on the hagiographic features of the tale, highlighting Custance's utmost dedication to God, which encompasses her complete subjugation to his will; asserting God's role in directing her so that her journeys become part of a divine plan to Christianise the pagan and Muslim margins of the Roman Empire; and relating a multitude of mishaps, misfortunes, and, above all, evil intentions, which are significant primarily to demonstrate their powerlessness in overcoming God's servant.<sup>46</sup> The dominant narratorial voice elides the spiritual achievement of salvific Christianity with the imperial and temporal ambitions of the Roman Empire. The vehicle for this task is hagiographic in form, yet its essential elements undermine the narrator's imperial project. These elements, specifically those constituting a focus on suffering which leads to celestial triumph rather than earthly victory, are apparent in Custance's religious outlook and in the mysterious figures of the isolated Britons of Northumberland. Custance's petitionary prayers are an essential component to the narrator's positioning of the tale as both an imperial and nationalistic hagiography.<sup>47</sup> Structurally, however, these prayers form two separate discourses:

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<sup>46</sup> Paull discusses the Sultaness, Donegild and the false knight as representatives of evil in 'The Influence of the Saint's Legend Genre', p. 185.

<sup>47</sup> The tale's nationalistic bent features in a number of critical treatments. Kathy Lavezzo argues that the narrator's nation-building is an exercise in *translatio imperii*. See Kathy Lavezzo, *Angels on the Edge of the World: Geography, Literature, and English Community, 1000–1534* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp. 93–7. Bale describes the rhetoric of the tale as supporting an 'explicit proto-nationalism'. See Bale, 'A maner Latyn corrupt', p. 61. Susan Nakley argues that the tale is primarily concerned with nation, both in its legendary founding and in its fourteenth-century anxieties over England's place in the world. See Susan



Custance's words, as addressed to God, Jesus, and Mary, and the narrator's consequent interpretation of those words and of their effectiveness.<sup>48</sup> Prayer represents the site in which the two voices oppose one another most strongly.

The voice of the narrator dominates this tale; his tone, at turns sentimental, moralising, and triumphal, draws attention to itself so forcefully that his characters, their actions and the events which befall them are often relegated to the background.<sup>49</sup> This relegation extends to Custance's dominant experience of exile, which she suffers on multiple occasions: the first when her father ships her to Syria to form an imperial alliance; the second when her new mother-in-law has her husband, her counsellors, and all converted Syrian Christians killed, sparing Custance's life only for the lingering torture offered by being set adrift in a rudderless boat; and the third when her second, pagan and Anglo-Saxon, mother-in-law orders her back to sea in the same boat in which she arrived in Northumberland. Her identity as an exile is of no interest to her narrator, however, beyond the use he can make of this identity to portray his otherwise friendless heroine as one under divine protection.<sup>50</sup> Framing the tale as hagiography, in which each event becomes a stage necessary to God's purpose in spreading Christianity, requires the narrator to present each of these episodes of exile alongside an interpretation of its significance. And because the spread of Christianity is

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Nakley, 'Sovereignty Matters: Anachronism, Chaucer's Britain, and England's Future's Past', *ChR*, 44 (2010), 368–396 (p. 369). For a discussion of the orientalism of the tale and its focus on conversion, see Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), pp. 230–36, and Susan Schibanoff, 'Worlds Apart: Orientalism, Antifeminism, and Heresy in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*,' *Exemplaria*, 8 (1996), pp. 59–96 (p. 82).

<sup>48</sup> Ann W. Astell suggests that divergent critical views of the tale derive from a perception of two different voices, that of the narrator and in opposition that of Custance. See Ann W. Astell, 'Apostrophe, Prayer, and the Structure of Satire in *The Man of Law's Tale*,' *SAC*, 13 (1991), 81–97, (p. 81).

<sup>49</sup> Benson refers to an 'insistent narrative voice' in *The Man of Law's Tale*. See C. David Benson, 'The Aesthetic of Chaucer's Religious Tales in Rhyme Royal', in *Religion in Poetry and Drama*, ed. by Boitani and Torti, pp. 101–17 (p. 107).

<sup>50</sup> Custance's experiences of exile are instrumental to her nation-building evangelisation. For her to choose her voyages would contravene the passive, receptive role the narrator has designed for her.

coterminous with the spread of the Roman Empire, his hagiographic subject, Custance, must fulfil the role of an imperial missionary.<sup>51</sup>

Through the use of a powerful and interventionist narrative voice, Chaucer shows a more radical shaping of the hagiographic subject than we have seen in *The Prioress's Tale*. The narrator moulds his heroine through emphasising her passivity and the subordination of her own desires to divine will. Although he reports Custance's words and actions, he leaves his audience with his own dominant interpretation, systematically contradicting reported events, attempting to excise actions from existence, and re-framing Custance's speech in order that it might conform to his narrative.<sup>52</sup> The power of saints, and especially female saints, rarely lies in the wielding of physical might. The narrator, in fact, recognises this essential feature in his multiple attempts to weaken Custance, deny her agency, and create an illusion of inactivity. An example of her enforced passivity occurs where she struggles with a potential rapist who has boarded her ship:

Wo was this wrecched womman tho bigon;  
 Hir child cride, and she cride pitously.  
 But blisful Marie heelp hire right anon;  
 For with hir struglyng wel and myghtily  
 The thief fil over bord al sodeynly,  
 And in the see he dreynthe for vengeance;  
 And thus hath Crist unwemmed kept Custance.

(*MLT*, ll. 918–24)

At the heart of this stanza lies Custance's successful physical struggle with the steward who had renounced Christianity. The narrator's discomfort with her action leads him to minimise

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<sup>51</sup> Imperial evangelisation is a feature of the 'Constance Group', as discussed by Heng. See Heng, *Empire of Magic*, pp. 188–89.

<sup>52</sup> The narrator's suppression of Custance's agency is noted by Wetherbee, who writes of the narrator's diminishment of Custance's role: 'Here as so often rhetorical elaboration seems intended as much to dwarf Custance and her powers as to celebrate the power of God'. See Wetherbee, 'Constance and the World', pp. 73–4. Astell offers St Cecilia's trial in *The Second Nun's Tale* as a contrast to Custance, emphasising that Cecilia's vocal opposition is directed against Almachius, whereas Custance's voice conflicts with that of her narrator. St Cecilia follows a model *vita* in the focus of her speech. See Astell, 'Apostrophe, Prayer and the Structure of Satire', p. 95.

her role despite his factual account of the event. Custance is replaced as subject by the thief, who actively falls overboard with a suddenness which hints at unknown causes. These causes, the narrator takes care to show, are Mary's aid to the young woman, and Christ's, whose direct intervention is presumed by the narrator's recognition at the end of the stanza.

Although the narrator draws a parallel with Judith, by, paradoxically, questioning the biblical exemplar's physical capabilities, the model for his saint is not the warrior, but the martyr (*MLT*, ll. 939–42). The strength of a martyr often lies in confronting tyrannical political or gendered power, and in the ability to convert and change minds. The narrator demonstrates awareness of this key aspect to hagiography by emphasising the conversion of Alla's Northumbrian court after a display of divine might. The spiritual power of saints often correlates to their ability faithfully to withstand extremes of physical suffering, including dismemberment or torture such as that experienced by Cecile. The secular, nationalist focus of *The Man of Law's Tale* insists that Custance survive her hardships in order to ensure her son's accession to the Roman throne as Emperor. Her suffering takes the particular form of exile, to which she is repeatedly subjected.<sup>53</sup> The narrator appears to have missed the spiritual purpose behind the suffering described in *vitae*. His triumphalist narrative is at odds with the usual hagiographic focus on the otherworldly; his saint displaced from a celestial role into the imperial role necessary for this secular purpose. The sanctified forms of suffering and exile upon which his tale depends, however, challenge and undermine the entire purpose of the narrator, resisting his strident voice throughout the tale.

As the previous section demonstrated, Chaucer contrasts the voice of the hagiographic subject and other characters with that of the narrative persona in order to reveal divergent discourses of prayer, especially evident where the content and the purpose of the prayer are

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<sup>53</sup> St Mary the Egyptian, invoked by the narrator in his explanation for Custance's miraculous survival at sea, offers an exemplum of long exile, although hers is self-imposed in penance. See 'Vita sancte Marie Egyptiace', in *The Early South English Legendary*, pp. 260–71.

not in agreement. In *The Man of Law's Tale*, the narrator controls and diminishes Custance's activity as he guides her around the Mediterranean and eventually through the English Channel, but his attempts to restrict and reframe Custance's prayers are more transparent and less successful. His insistence on portraying divine intervention, demonstrated in the episode in which she successfully resists the rapist, is repeated throughout, even where his claim to divine intervention on Custance's behalf bears no relationship to a petition uttered in her voice. Unlike the *vitae* upon which the tale is modelled, and in which the voices of the hagiographer and subject converge and reinforce one another, the expressed views of this narrator and his saintly heroine diverge strikingly. Custance's speech is primarily delivered through prayer or evangelical exhortation; in this, she differs little from Cecile, although the balance in Custance's case tilts towards prayer, while Cecile's tends towards exhortation. Her words, however, consistently stand in opposition to those of her narrator, who must reframe and reinterpret her spiritual outpourings to reinforce his imperial narrative.

The two divergent voices of the narrative are most clearly evident in relation to Custance's prayers and their apparent answers. Through these prayers, Custance resists the narrator's attempts to reduce the divine response to her petitions to narrowly concrete, worldly outcomes. With the single exception of her prayer for immediate physical safety when accused of Hermengyld's murder, Custance's petitions are requests for spiritual protection couched in such formulae popular with fourteenth-century laity as we have seen in Chapter One. Her prayer when cast adrift from Syria after the massacre at her wedding feast is exemplary. Rather than asking for an obvious, temporal blessing such as guidance or a safe return to Rome, Custance focusses on the likelihood of death and the spiritual protection required in consequence:

O cleere, o welful auter, hooly croys,  
 Reed of the Lambes blood ful of pitee,  
 That wessh the world fro the olde iniquitee,

Me fro the feend and fro his clawes kepe,  
That day that I shal drenchen in the depe.

Victorious tree, proteccioun of trewe,  
That oonly worthy were for to bere  
The Kyng of Hevene with his woundes newe,  
The white Lamb, that hurt was with a spere,  
Flemere of feendes out of hym and here  
On which thy lymes feithfully extenden,  
Me kepe, and yif me myght my lyf t'amenden.

(*MLT*, ll. 451–62)

As befits a saint, the safety of her mortal body is of little concern; instead the state of her soul holds her attention.<sup>54</sup> Evading the claws of the fiend will call for spiritual protection on *that* day when she '*shal drenchen in the depe*' (italics added). Her concluding petition asks one temporal blessing, the power to amend her life, but only because this blessing will strengthen her case in the post-mortem battle over her soul. In the shadow of the massacre at her wedding feast, sent out on a voyage without any known destination, Custance draws on images of powerlessness such as the pierced lamb, the mute tree, and the wounded king, allying these with victory and the power to banish evil. None of her three petitions addressed to the cross asks for a material benefit for herself, nor for her physical safety.

Custance's petition is entirely typical of late-medieval prayers for protection from unshriven death whose popularity in the fourteenth century is evinced by the frequency with which such prayers appear in books of hours and other devotional compilations. Custance asks only for the time and power of repentance, as does the anonymous author of a late-fourteenth-century prayer requesting three petitions, the final of which is this:

Myn op[er] bone & my askyng.  
Þ[a]t I þe biseche heuene kyng.  
                    Pat I mot haue grace.  
Pat I mot my synnus leeten.

<sup>54</sup> Morgan notes that Custance's spiritual focus at this moment demonstrates 'strength of mind', rather than passivity. See his 'Chaucer's Man of Law and the Argument for Providence', *Review of English Studies*, n.s., 61 (2009), 1–33 (p. 13).

Er dep̃ and I to ged[er] meeten.  
 Lord sende me myȝt and space.<sup>55</sup>

This prayer represents a typical model upon which a prayer such as Custance's would be based. The prayer, like Custance's, is focussed on the celestial realm, and the supplicant author's devout wish is only whatever might most quickly advance his soul there. Crucial to this otherworldly goal is the ability to confess sins before death and therefore to avoid a lengthy stay in purgatory. Rather than recognise its spiritual goal, Custance's narrator offers a divine answer which contradicts the substance of her petition. Given that Custance's prayers have been added by Chaucer to his sources, Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, and Nicholas Trevet's 'De la noble femme Constance' in *Les Cronicles*, the clear disconnection between her words and those of her narrator become a legitimate site of enquiry.<sup>56</sup>

The narrator uncouples act from meaning. Custance's words and actions require his reinterpretation and presentation to his audience. As if he were not listening to his own subject, the substance of Custance's words means less to him than the act of prayer itself. In each instance of prayer, he ignores its content in his determination to explain her physical survival as a miracle (*MLT*, l. 477). God, he declares, saved Custance just as he saved Daniel from the lion, kept Jonah safe in the belly of the whale, brought the Israelites dry-shod through the Red Sea, and fed Mary the Egyptian in the desert.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, her life has been

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<sup>55</sup> British Library, MS Additional 37787, fol. 142<sup>v</sup>. The same manuscript, a Cistercian prayer book c. 1400, also contains a number of highly typical rubrics concerned with the possibility of dying unshriven. One rubric promises that remembering to pray a given prayer to the angels will prevent unshriven death: 'That day þ[at] ȝe neomyth þes angels namys ȝe schal not dye w[i]t[h]ouȝte co[n]fessyon' (fol. 170<sup>v</sup>). The sought-after promise is not that the supplicant will not die, of course, but that death will not come without an opportunity – i.e. time and space – in which to repent.

<sup>56</sup> On Chaucer's addition of the prayers to his sources, see Astell, 'Apostrophe, Prayer, and the Structure of Satire', p. 82.

<sup>57</sup> Charles Muscatine describes this passage as a low point in Chaucer's poetic career, suggesting that the tale is itself an embarrassment and might have been produced at the wish of another. See his 'Chaucer's Religion and the Chaucer Religion', in *Chaucer Traditions*, ed. by Morse and Windeatt, pp. 249–62 (p. 255). As this chapter demonstrates, the narrator's presentation of Custance's prayers differs strikingly from the content of those prayers; the lines which Muscatine views as the 'one of the lowest points in [Chaucer's] entire *oeuvre*' are assigned to the narratorial voice as a reinterpretation of the answers to her petitions.

sustained for a purpose, her wanderings transformed by the narrator into a journey directed towards a clear goal:

Yeres and dayes fleet this creature  
Thurghout the See of Grece unto the Strayte  
Of Marrok, as it was hire aventure.  
On many a sory meel now may she bayte;  
After hir deeth ful often may she wayte,  
Er that the wilde wawes wol hire dryve  
Unto the place ther she shal arrayve.

(*MLT*, ll. 463–69)

The long hardships of his heroine are of little interest to the narrator as he gathers the lawless waves into a force which will drive Custance to her predetermined destination in Anglo-Saxon Northumberland. In his vision, the exiled, widowed wanderer in her rudderless boat arrives in the style of a conqueror; as her long wanderings come to a sudden halt on the Northumbrian sands, the narrator declares her journey a triumph, stating that: ‘She dryveth forth into oure occian’ (*MLT*, l. 505). For him, the product of tide and current are indicative of the will of God: the boat’s resistance to the tide indicates that Custance is meant to stay in Northumberland. Brushing aside the wreckage of her boat, he confidently proclaims: ‘The wyl of Crist was that she sholde abyde’ (*MLT*, l. 511). In selectively viewing accident as God’s plan and following Custance’s prayer with such firm proclamations of divine intent, the narrator substitutes certainty for uncertainty and aligns the *status quo* with the will of God.

Such reshaping occurs at each key moment in Custance’s tale. In consistently disregarding the spiritual content of his heroine’s prayers in his desire to sanctify her as a divine implement, or passive extension of God’s will, the narrator’s interpolations resemble some late-medieval rubrics found in books of hours. One example is the rubric often attached to the prayer, *Deus propicius esto*. This popular petition asks the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob for spiritual aid and protection, praying:

Mitte in adiutorium meum Michaellem archangelum tuum, qui me custodiat,  
protegat et defendat ab omnibus inimicis meis visibilibus et inuisibilibus.

[Send to my aid Michael your archangel, who keeps, protects, and defends me from  
all my enemies, visible and invisible.]<sup>58</sup>

Invoking protection against all temporal and spiritual ill, the prayer begins by acknowledging the sins of the supplicant and ends by calling, as Custance does, upon the cross. Yet late-medieval rubrics attached to this prayer eschewed any hint of spiritual trust by promising very worldly benefits to anyone using it, prefixing the text with a guarantee that the supplicant would not perish in water, fire, battle, judgement, or by poisoning on the day that the prayer was said, heard or carried upon the body.<sup>59</sup> In the same way that such rubrics promised the surety of temporal physical benefits while the prayers to which they were attached remained open to the unknowing and uncertainty of faith, the narrator's words make claims for outcomes which entirely disregard the substance of Custance's prayers.

Often these prayers for protection against enemies make reference to the biblical triad Susannah, Jonah, and Daniel, in the supplicant's hopes of receiving the same almighty help which these figures received in their great need. The practice of calling these exemplary figures to mind, as well as to God's notice, is evident in this example, *Deus qui liberasti Susannam*, from the thirteenth-century Beatrice Hours:

God, who liberated Susannah from false accusations, and Jonah from the belly of a whale, and Daniel from the lion's pit, and the three youths from the fiery furnace, and who stretched out your hand to Peter sinking in the water, deign to liberate me from this tribulation and distress, and from the power of all my enemies, and from all their confederates; because I do not know where to turn, except to you; because there is no other God who will help me except you alone, who live and reign in perfect trinity, God for ever, world without end. Amen.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>58</sup> *Deus propicius esto*, in *Horae Eboracenses*, p. 125.

<sup>59</sup> See Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, p. 272.

<sup>60</sup> *Deus qui liberasti Susannam*, from the Beatrice Hours, c. 13th C; British Library, MS Additional 33385, fol. 198<sup>r</sup>, trans. by Scott-Stokes in *Women's Books of Hours*, pp. 131–32. For another prayer of protection from enemies which calls upon God's protection of Susannah, Daniel, St Peter, and the three kings, see *[B]eau sire deus si verayement cum vus preistes char*, De Reydon Hours, Cambridge University Library, MS Dd.4.17, fols 76<sup>r</sup>–76<sup>v</sup>, in the same volume (pp. 61–2).



This prayer for protection offers a significant contrast to Custance's prayer to the cross, in which she calls upon images of divine weakness.<sup>61</sup> *Deus qui liberasti Susannam* focusses on God's manifestation of power in the earthly realm. By calling to mind and presenting to God evidence of his past interventions in the lives of the falsely accused Susannah, the faithful Daniel, and the rebellious Jonah, the suppliant who uses this prayer attempts to align herself with these figures and to present herself as a worthy recipient of earthly deliverance. Each of these exemplary figures was saved visibly and physically from death and restored to life. The narrator's invocation of God's protection of Daniel and Jonah gestures towards such prayers for physical protection, implying answers to a prayer which Custance never uttered.

Alternate discourses are also present in the most dramatically answered prayer in the text, one in which Custance prays for immediate physical protection, rather than for spiritual blessings, such as time to repent of her sins. Here, as we shall see, Chaucer removes all tangible connections between human activity and divine intervention on Custance's behalf, allowing the narrator to heighten the impression of celestial blessing on the mission of his imperial saint. Faint reminders of the abandoned links between the prayer and its answer are present in the figures of the three Britons still inhabiting pagan, Anglo-Saxon Northumberland. They too are the sources of narratorial discomfort and attempts at control, as the narrator seeks to reduce them to instruments serving Custance's conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity. Although he overrides and disregards the speech, actions, and experiences of his heroine with zeal, the narrator cannot deny her physical presence. To fit his hagiographic focus, Custance must embody early-medieval Christianity's fervour for conversion as she travels around the coasts of Western Europe and the Mediterranean, drawing disparate regions into the embrace of Rome through her attractive example as well as

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<sup>61</sup> Kolve notes the explicit link between this prayer and Custance's prayer while on trial, writing that it 'carries liturgical echoes attending the soul as it begins its death journey, the journey to eternal life'. See Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*, pp. 346–47.

her marital alliances. Set against such narratorial investment are the marginalised Britons. Exiled and yet nearby, these Britons inhabit the text as precariously as they inhabit the kingdom of Northumberland. The Britons, whose own prayers for protection from Anglo-Saxon invaders might seem to have been unsuccessful, prove instrumental in the success of Custance's prayer for protection when falsely accused of murder.

In the same way that the content of Custance's prayers is almost ignored by the narrator who reports that content, the presence of these Britons is simultaneously asserted and denied by the narrator. Describing the land where he insists God wills Custance to stay, he sets their contradictory presence-in-absence before his audience:

In al that lond no Cristen dorste route;  
 Alle Cristen folk been fled fro that contree  
 Thurgh payens, that conquereden al aboute  
 The plages of the north, by land and see.  
 To Walys fledde the Cristyanytee  
 Of olde Britons dwellynge in this ile;  
 Ther was hir refut for the meene while.

But yet nere Cristene Britons so exiled  
 That ther nere somme that in hir privetee  
 Honoured Crist and hethen folk bigiled,  
 And ny the castel swiche ther dwelten three.

(MLT, ll. 540–50)

The narrator reports that all Christian people fled the conquering Anglo-Saxons to seek refuge in Wales. So thorough, so severe, was the conquest that their religion also deserted the land. Despite the firmness of his thrice-repeated 'all' (al that lond, alle Cristen folk, al aboute), it immediately transpires that some Christian Britons have remained in this Northumbrian kingdom. These three Britons inhabit a contradictory state of being; they are exiles not through leaving but through having been left behind. They live in a land no longer their own, but in 'this ile', bounded by 'oure see'. Their marginalisation is reinforced through Chaucer's removal of any possible continuing connection with other Britons. In Trevelyan's *Cronicles*, the British community in Northumberland maintains links with Wales

and is able to call upon a Welsh bishop at need.<sup>62</sup> This link is also present in Gower's version of the tale, where the Bishop of Bangor conducts a baptism and wedding.<sup>63</sup> *The Man of Law's Tale*, by contrast, isolates the three figures, allowing them to remain, but exiling them from compatriots, from home and from refuge. Their isolation and exile, heightened by Chaucer's alterations to his sources, link them firmly to Custance, and they receive similar treatment from the narrator.

The Britons' effect on the discourse of prayer in the text far exceeds the textual space occupied, which is a mere four stanzas. Only one of these figures speaks, and, even then, his speech occupies a single line addressed to Hermengyld, in which he asks her in the name of Christ for the miraculous restoration of his sight. Upon first consideration, his purpose in the tale would seem functional. Prompted by his inner, spiritual sight to recognise a fellow Christian in Hermengyld, rather than Custance, he identifies her by her new religion, endangering her, but also provoking a crisis which leads to the conversion of her husband, the Constable of the castle. This second conversion in the text of an Anglo-Saxon to Christianity is often credited to Custance's encouragement of Hermengyld to follow God's will, the miracle through which this is achieved confirming the hagiographic pattern.<sup>64</sup> Yet the tale is not the 'life of Hermengyld', who will in any case be murdered shortly after she performs this miracle, although not on account of her new faith; the Britons will not reappear in the text; and the conversion of Alla and his subjects will derive from the actions of Custance rather than the missionary zeal of the Constable. Narratively and hagiographically, the appearance of the Britons leads nowhere.

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<sup>62</sup> Nicholas Trevet, 'De la noble femme Constance', in *Les Cronicles*, trans. by R. M. Correale, in *Sources and Analogues*, ed. by Correale and Hamel, II, pp. 296–329, ll. 192–202.

<sup>63</sup> Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, II. 904–9.

<sup>64</sup> His function is perceived purely through the lens of spiritual conversion, specifically that of Hermengyld's husband, the constable. See Elizabeth Robertson, 'Nonviolent Christianity and the Strangeness of Female Power in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*', in *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Sharon Farmer and Carol Braun Pasternack (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. 322–51 (p. 341). Also see Schibanoff, 'Worlds Apart', p. 82.

Custance's prayer for protection when accused of murder results in the single instance of visible divine intervention in response to a Christian prayer in Chaucer's works. By introducing the Britons who are responsible for the book which prompts this divine intervention on Custance's behalf while systematically removing their links to that book, Chaucer slyly invites their presence into the courtroom. These exiled Britons intrude upon the trial scene which follows Hermengyld's murder. Although the three particular figures do not reappear during Custance's trial, a British presence invades the courtroom, joining Custance's voice in subtly undermining the dominant narrative's focus on the triumphal power of the Church. Each of the necessary elements is in place in this episode for the narrator's hagiographic purposes. His heroine is endangered: confronted with hostile unbelievers, she prays and divine intervention provides a miracle. This moment marks the point at which the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants of Northumberland turn from their pagan beliefs at the display of overwhelming divine force. The hand which materialises in order to break the neck of Custance's false accuser is accompanied by a voice:

A voys was herd in general audience,  
And seyde, 'Thou hast desclaundred, giltelees,  
The doghter of hooly chirche in heigh presence;  
Thus hastou doon, and yet holde I my pees!'

(*MLT*, ll. 673–76)<sup>65</sup>

This disembodied voice appears to be that of God himself, defending Custance's innocence. The unsuspecting pagan crowd learns that it stands in the divine presence. An instance of such unquestionable divine intervention ought to suit the nationalistic purpose of the tale, and yet Chaucer undermines the moment.

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<sup>65</sup> By contrast, at Belshazzar's feast, the hand which appears and writes on the wall maintains an imposing silence: 'In eadem hora apparuerunt digiti quasi manus hominis scribentis contra candelabrum in superficie parietis aulae regiae et rex aspiciebat articulos manus scribentis tunc regis facies commutata est et cogitationes eius perturbabant eum.' [In the same hour there appeared fingers, as it were of the hand of a man, writing over against the candlestick, upon the surface of the wall of the king's palace: and the king beheld the joints of the hand that wrote. Then was the king's countenance changed, and his thoughts troubled him.] Daniel 5:5–6. English translation taken from the *Douay-Rheims Version*.

For another, human, voice makes itself heard as well. Custance is claimed by the voice to be, not the daughter of God, but the daughter of his church; the auditory apparition is mysteriously present within the crowd, the ‘general audience’.<sup>66</sup> Most tellingly, the voice of God speaks in a remarkably colloquial manner. Almost as at a realisation of having spoken out of turn, the voice shifts from magisterial condemnation to an acknowledgement of interrupted court proceedings, finally trailing off with an apologetic ‘and yet holde I my pees!’ These words are in striking contrast to those in Trevet’s version:

Adversus filiam matris ecclesie ponebas scandalum; hoc fecisti et non tacui.

[You were placing a stumbling block against the daughter of mother Church; this you have done and I have not remained silent].<sup>67</sup>

Unlike the authoritative voice of the Latin proclamation in his vernacular French source, Chaucer has a remarkably ungodlike entity recognise the ‘doghter of hooly chirche’ before humbly promising to keep quiet. Just as the blind Briton spiritually recognised a fellow Christian in the Anglo-Saxon *Hermengyld*, so this voice calls upon the familial relationship which Custance holds in the church, an unrecognised entity in pagan Northumberland. A confusion of voices surrounds this moment, with those of God, the narrator, the saintly Custance, the conquered religion of the Britons, and the pagan Northumbrians converging.

The unexpectedly humble divine voice, recognising Custance’s membership of a family which transcends geographical space, appears not only in response to her prayer but also in conjunction with another British presence, the book which receives the oath of the knight who accuses her of murder. Uniting the disembodied hand and voice, Custance and

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<sup>66</sup> For biblical accounts of the direct pronouncements of God which might provide a basis for the episode in the tale, although none of which resemble the words spoken in general audience in Alla’s court, see Matthew 3:17, Mark 1:11, and Luke 3:22.

<sup>67</sup> Trevet, ‘De la noble femme Constance’, ll. 251–52, translation Correale’s. Trevet’s divine voice also proclaims itself not to be silent, whereas Chaucer’s almost apologetically promises to keep peace. The manuscripts of Trevet’s *Cronicles* which Correale identifies as most likely to have been closest to Chaucer’s source text employ the phrase ‘non tacui’, although two manuscripts differ, both offering a non-negated ‘tacui’. See Correale, ‘The Man of Law’s Prologue and Tale’, in *Sources and Analogues*, ed. by Correale and Hamel, II, pp. 277–350 (pp. 290–91, 310n).

the exiled Britons, is a book of gospels, hastily fetched for court proceedings. The ‘Britoun book written with Evaungiles’ upon which the knight so carelessly swears is itself an embodiment of the words upon which the faith of the exiled Christians rests (*MLT*, l. 666). This book is a relic; like the community which gave it value, it has been uncoupled by Chaucer from its origin. In Trevet’s *Cronicles*, the presence of the book in Hermengyld’s chamber is explicable; it has been loaned by the Bishop of Bangor for Custance and Hermengyld to read together.<sup>68</sup> For Gower, the fact of the book is enough and its contents unremarkable; he merely states that it ‘happeth that ther lay a bok’.<sup>69</sup> Its incongruity has been noted by Elizabeth Robertson, who asks rhetorically where, in fact, the book has come from, speculating that it is an ““underground” Bible’.<sup>70</sup> As an artefact belonging to a conquered and exiled people, the clandestine nature of the Britoun Book would remain intact, even were the book claimed by the Bishop of Bangor. Instead, while its mysterious origin highlights the miraculous nature of Custance’s deliverance, it also makes present those exiled Britons otherwise dismissed after playing their role in the Constable’s conversion.

The disjunction between Custance’s example and her narrator’s attempt to shape her life to his purpose continues even in the face of an inarguably physical, divine intervention on her behalf. When Custance’s prayer for protection results in the appearance of a vengeful

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<sup>68</sup> Trevet, ‘De la noble femme Constance’, ll. 241–46. Trevet explains that the book belongs to Lucius, Bishop of Bangor; the ‘felon’ knight has also been baptised, and swears by his baptism. Gower mentions Lucius as Bishop of Bangor, although he does not connect the book to the bishop. See Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, II. 904–5.

<sup>69</sup> Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, II. 868. The existence of a book of gospels in pagan, Anglo-Saxon Northumberland drew the attention of Skeat and later, Andrew Breeze, although both concern themselves with linguistic and other details of the book rather than with its provenance. Skeat presumes that the Gospels are written in Welsh, and following him, Breeze proposes that Chaucer might have seen a book of (Latin) Gospels such as the eighth-century Book of St. Chad, which also contains the oldest recorded Welsh prose. See Walter W. Skeat, *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899), V, pp. 157–58; and Andrew Breeze, ‘The Celtic Gospels in Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*’, *ChR*, 32 (1998), 335–38 (pp. 336–37). Neither Skeat nor Breeze remarks on the incongruity of the book appearing in Alla’s court once the link to the Bishop of Bangor has been removed.

<sup>70</sup> Robertson, ‘Nonviolent Christianity’, p. 337. Robertson links the text to Lollardy, suggesting that it might be written in the vernacular. It seems, however, more likely that its ‘underground’ status is connected rather to the marginal nature of the banished religion and its adherents, since the narratorial voice expresses the belief that Custance’s corrupt Latin could be understood by the pagan Northumbrians.

hand and voice from heaven, the narrator downplays the miraculous nature of the event in pursuing his imperial conversion narrative. He does not dwell on the book. The response of the courtly, human audience to the ‘merveille’ becomes of more interest to him than the divine response to Custance’s prayer (*MLT*, l. 677).<sup>71</sup> For him, it serves as a catalyst for divine intervention and thus a justification of Custance and a sanctification of her missionary role. As before, the incidents following Custance’s prayer are rapidly swept along by the driving narrative. The summary execution of the false knight, which takes place in the space of two lines, allows the narrator to hasten forward to reach his heroine’s great triumph: ‘And thus hath Crist ymaad Custance a queene’ (*MLT*, l. 693). He presents his heroine as a blank figure – a pale face in a crowd – whose fulfilment of divine purpose will be found in the forging of imperial alliance and in the founding of an English church. Marriage, of course, is not the outcome for which the falsely accused woman had prayed. Instead, she prayed for immediate physical safety:

Immortal God, that savedest Susanne  
 Fro false blame, and thou, merciful mayde,  
 Marie I meene, doghter to Seint Anne,  
 Bifore whos child angeles synge Osanne,  
 If I be giltlees of this felonye,  
 My socour be, for ellis shal I dye!

(*MLT*, ll. 639–44)

Invoking God’s prior intervention in saving Susannah, another falsely-accused woman, Custance hopes to receive similar protection from the violent consequences of blame. Mary, envisaged in a celestial family grouping which evokes a royalty expressed through love, not through power, is also implored for her aid. Custance’s acknowledgement of need and of

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<sup>71</sup> The narrator first refers to the appearance of the hand and the voice as a marvel and a few lines later as a miracle. The conflation of the two terms is at odds with Gervase of Tilbury’s careful distinctions: ‘Now we generally call those things miracles which, being preternatural, we ascribe to divine power, as when a virgin gives birth, when Lazarus is raised from the dead, or when diseased limbs are made whole again; while we call those things marvels which are beyond our comprehension, even though they are natural; in fact the inability to explain why a thing is so constitutes a marvel.’ See Gervase of Tilbury, *Otia Imperialia: Recreation for an Emperor*, ed. and trans. by S. E. Banks and J. W. Binns (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002) p. 559.

weakness become transformed into a request for earthly power by the narrator's declaration of her divinely ordained accession. Her prayer for protection from false accusation as she is brought before the king differs little from her subsequent prayer when banished to sea once more in her rudderless boat as queen. Despite the narrator's triumphal portrayal of her marriage as the divine reward for her faithfulness, Custance's status as queen fails to ensure her physical safety.

Earthly victory is the concern of the narrator, rather than of his saintly subject. Custance's suffering is only of interest to him insofar as he can use it to hammer home God's providential action in the conversion and safe-keeping of England. The driving force of his narrative attempts to incorporate the disparate elements and far-flung reaches of the empire, dismissing them when no longer conducive to his purposes and leaving them on the margins of text and experience. His tools, however, betray him. A hagiographic form concerned with the spiritual triumph of Christianity over its powerful pagan oppressors cannot be so easily converted to one which promotes worldly might. Prayers designed to face the certainty of death, therefore focussing on the need for repentance and preparation for that death, require drastic reinterpretations and commentary in order to be presented as responsible for miraculous divine intervention into earthly affairs. Weak, disabled, defeated Christians who are the remnant of a Christian land are inconvenient reminders of the physical, earthly discomforts of providential history.

Once introduced, however, these marginal figures cannot be banished. Where the narrator's words convey the almighty power of God, capable of using the weakest instrument in order to fulfil his purpose, he shows instead the power of those words to reinterpret even the most unlikely and unhappy events as evidence of God's blessing. In demonstrating the inevitable spread of Christian Empire, he simultaneously shows his audience a defeated, exiled Christian people driven to subterfuge in order to keep their faith. The gaps between



the episodes and words the narrator relates and the interpretations he offers exposes a rift in Christian self-understanding. With its acknowledged birth in the powerlessness of persecution and the experience of victimhood, preserved and promoted by saints' *vitae*, Imperial Christianity harbours its own contradictions. Answers to Custance's prayers evoke contested interpretations; her experience, as presented, and that of the exiled Britons, as implied, resist narratorial pronouncements on the efficacious nature of prayer. The final section of this chapter turns to *The Clerk's Tale*, in which the hagiographic subject does not resist her narrator through offering an inconvenient model of Christian weakness, but fails to exemplify the very virtues her tale is intended to promote.

*The perversity of Griselda's prayers*

*The Clerk's Tale* is an uneasy text. Its subject matter, the presumption of infanticide and a tortuously-slow ratcheting-up of emotional abuse, seems drawn from the darkest reaches of the human imagination, a misjudged game of hypotheticals pursued beyond the limits of reason. As Helen Cooper writes, 'no one can remain neutral about *The Clerk's Tale*'.<sup>72</sup> Analysing the text alongside Chaucer's hagiographic tales makes evident the grotesque discordances between Griselda's exemplum and the purported didactic aims expressed at the close of the tale. As in *The Man of Law's Tale*, the divergent discourses of narrator and character are most noticeable when considering the prayers. The reader attuned to Chaucer's precise use of prayer in the texts considered in this thesis, and especially in the hagiographic tales of this chapter, will more easily note inconsistencies and failures in Griselda's prayers. The uneasiness of *The Clerk's Tale* is magnified by the fact that each of her petitions is shown by the narrator to be granted. As we have seen in the other hagiographic texts, the role of the narrator, and in particular, his or her framing of petitionary prayer and its effectiveness

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<sup>72</sup> Helen Cooper, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 193.

offers a key to understanding. The Clerk's pointed reference to the skill of clerics to 'wel endite', if they wish, hints broadly at the tale's self-conscious narratorial style (*CIT*, l. 933). Such an acknowledgement warns the audience to be wary, especially when faced with the moral sentence offered at the end of the text. Forcing an extended exemplum with its own unsustainable attempt to reconcile the intolerable into a simply stated, and oft-taught, homiletic teaching, that God scourges the faithful for the good of their souls, the Clerk's exegesis draws attention to the potential for homilists to mis-use, or mis-apply, *exempla*. Crucially, it is through understanding the perverse nature of Griselda's prayers that we can clearly see the manner in which Chaucer undermines the moral sentence offered at the tale's end, making explicit what is only implicit in his Petrarchan source.

Although Griselda does not in the end fulfil the role of a saint, as we shall see, the hagiographic features of the Clerk's retelling of the trials she faces fit with the other texts considered in this chapter. The tale bears many similarities to *The Man of Law's Tale* in form, its treatment of its heroine, and also in its generic hybridity, exhibiting elements of hagiography, folklore, and romance. Unlike the narrator of *The Man of Law's Tale*, who interrupts his story multiple times in order to draw out the moral, the Clerk's explanation arrives at the end of the tale, where Chaucer assigns him a lengthy moral sentence. This structure, along with the tale's hagiographic nature, lends itself to comparison with the use of *exempla* in sermons.

Providing the subject matter of homiletic *exempla* is one of the ways in which hagiography could be employed in order to influence an audience. Consequently sermons display the types of narratorial interpretation of the hagiographic subject which we have seen in this chapter.<sup>73</sup> That *The Clerk's Tale* is an exemplum is one rare area of general agreement amongst critics, although views on its precise nature differ. After hearing the tale of

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<sup>73</sup> See especially the *exempla* at the conclusions of Mirk's sermons.

Griselda's life of suffering, which the Clerk reports having learned directly from Petrarch, Harry Bailly immediately identifies it as a 'legende' (*CIT*, l. 1215). He has no difficulty recognising that the tale belongs firmly within the hagiographic genre and instinctively applies its lesson to his own wife. The view of Griselda as a model of wifely patience and obedience to her husband was popular in the tale's early reception and still appears in critical discussion.<sup>74</sup> This interpretation struggles to contain the monstrosity of a mother who agrees to the murder of her children in order to keep an oath of obedience to her husband. If the tale is an exemplum, as agreed, and belongs in the hagiographic genre, as argued here, any explanation must account for the disruptive relationship between its moral and the behaviour of its subject. The remainder of this chapter will consider whether Griselda's example of patient suffering and prayer befits a saint, and if not, how the Clerk's concluding sentence might be understood.

Critical uneasiness with the categorisation of the tale has often centred on deciding to what extent the tale can be designated as Christian or religious. Charlotte Morse, in her essay included in *Chaucer's Religious Tales*, argues against its categorisation as 'religious', describing it as a tale of 'passion, where passion means suffering', a sense not encompassed by modern conceptions of 'religious'.<sup>75</sup> Petrarch's concluding moral, which Chaucer translates at the tale's end, is responsible for its inclusion in the category of 'religious tales', she writes.<sup>76</sup> David Aers argues that Griselda is emphatically not a Christian exemplum, basing his analysis on the evidence of several key omissions in the tale: Griselda is not shown making her confession, attending mass, calling upon a priest or protesting her dubious

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<sup>74</sup> Miller writes that Chaucer's alterations to his sources were designed to create a sense of 'moral unease', arguing against the view that such unease is an anachronistic response. See his *Philosophical Chaucer*, p. 216. Cooper singles out the Host's response to the tale as representative of its predictably chauvanistic reception in her *The Canterbury Tales*, pp. 199–200.

<sup>75</sup> Charlotte Morse, 'Critical Approaches to the *Clerk's Tale*', in *Chaucer's Religious Tales*, ed. by Benson and Robertson, pp. 71–84 (p. 71).

<sup>76</sup> Morse, 'Critical Approaches to the *Clerk's Tale*', p. 71.

divorce from Walter.<sup>77</sup> Instead, he concludes, Griselda best exemplifies Stoicism in her patience and tolerance of Walter's tyranny.<sup>78</sup> Lynn Shutter argues that the suffering woman offers an exemplum of pagan virtue, drawing a parallel with Chaucer's inclusion of Medea in the *Legend of Good Women*.<sup>79</sup> The tale, Shutter argues, questions the promotion of Christian martyrdom, critiquing the elevation and sanctification of suffering for its own sake.<sup>80</sup> To challenge a facet of Christian practice through pagan subject matter in this manner would be in line with Chaucer's similar challenge in *The Knight's Tale*, as discussed in Chapter Three, but a closer examination of the text shows Chaucer's critique to be open rather than disguised.

Distancing *The Clerk's Tale* from its fully Christian setting fails to account, however, for the significance of Griselda's explicitly Christian practices, such as signing her child with the cross, and her references to Christ's crucifixion and to salvation. And although she is not depicted confessing or hearing mass, Griselda does pray. Moreover, she employs a Christian register which intensifies the perversity present in the tale and in its narrator's reported intentions. For Chaucer does not remove the Christian elements from his *vita* of patient Griselda, but instead uses them to shine a light upon the consequences of creating *exempla* out of unlikely and inappropriate matter. He juxtaposes Christian language against gaping holes in the text where corresponding elements would typically belong. The parallel to Medea's presence in the *Legend of Good Women* suggested by Shutter cannot create a

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<sup>77</sup> David Aers, *Faith, Ethics and Church: Writing in England, 1360–1409* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2000), pp. 30–6.

<sup>78</sup> Aers, *Faith, Ethics and Church*, p. 55.

<sup>79</sup> Lynn Shutter, 'Griselda's Pagan Virtue', *ChR*, 44 (2009), 61–83 (p. 69). Shutter suggests that Griselda exemplifies Chaucer's interest in the virtues exhibited by pagan women and his interest in using such exemplars as a forum for exploring the 'complexities of wifely virtue'; see p. 67.

<sup>80</sup> Shutter argues that Chaucer's use, for example in *The Physician's Tale*, of ambiguous pagan virtues exists to shed light on, question, or draw attention to tensions inherent in the Christian setting and admiration for such virtues. Writing on Virginia's willingness to die in order to preserve her virginity, Shutter argues that Chaucer questions the value of the same drive to martyrdom in a Christian context: 'the tale renders ambiguous the degree to which such practices in any context, pagan or Christian, are wholly desirable.' See Shutter, 'Griselda's Pagan Virtue', p. 69.

‘virtuous pagan’ out of Griselda, for, whereas Medea’s murder of her own children is omitted from mention in the *Legend*, Griselda’s willingness to sacrifice the lives of her own children is at the forefront of *The Clerk’s Tale*.<sup>81</sup> Shutters describes this joining of pagan virtues to Christian models of womanhood as resulting in ‘ragged seams’ in the text.<sup>82</sup> Griselda’s action in blessing her child before abandoning her to presumed murder leaves little room for ambiguity and does not suggest insufficient skill or attention on Chaucer’s part, however. The sign of the cross and Griselda’s recall in prayer of the redemption made on that cross bear witness to a Christianity which is more than cultural verisimilitude. Instead, Griselda’s faith expresses itself in a perverse and idolatrous manner that suggests a complete absence of theological understanding, a lack which is ignored by the narrator as he forces the tale into an exemplary mode. For the moral at the end of the tale makes clear that Griselda’s life of suffering is intended to be taken as a model of patience for all Christians. The narrator explicitly positions Griselda as an exemplum, following in the hagiographic tradition. Yet Griselda’s perverse prayers diverge shockingly from those expected of a saint and thus she cannot support the moral sentence for which the Clerk intends her tale.<sup>83</sup>

In order to understand how such a secular model might become a religious exemplum, it is necessary first to glance briefly at the tradition of using such literary *exempla* in homilies. After considering the context for using a tale such as Griselda’s as an exemplum, the chapter will question how well her exemplum fits its purpose by analysing the extent to which she exhibits the expected features of a saint, including through her prayers, before returning to examine the Clerk’s moral sentence in the light of Chaucer’s key changes to his

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<sup>81</sup> Shutters, ‘Griselda’s Pagan Virtue’, p. 73.

<sup>82</sup> Shutters, ‘Griselda’s Pagan Virtue’, p. 77.

<sup>83</sup> For a discussion of the Clerk as a nominalist whose tale highlights the voluntarist views of Petrarch, see Rodney Delasanta, ‘Nominalism and the Clerk’s Tale Revisited’, *ChR*, 31 (1997), 209–31. Delasanta presents Griselda’s obedience as that of the faithful Christian whose will submits to God’s unbounded freedom; he does not, however, note the discrepancies between her exemplum and the language of prayer she uses in undertaking her obedient actions.

source text in Petrarch. If Griselda is a saint, she will align her will with God and her prayers will model those of the saints.

The secular – and fictional – source of Griselda's story would not have been a bar to its use as a sermon exemplum. Homilists drew their *exempla* from a multitude of sources, many of which were not intended for the purpose.<sup>84</sup> While theological texts and collections of saints' legends figure prominently, *exempla* were also, as Wenzel discusses, frequently borrowed from secular sources such as romance and the writings of Pliny, Ovid, Seneca, and others.<sup>85</sup> One popular exemplum relates a tale from the *Gesta Romanorum* of a knight championing the cause of a maiden who had been disinherited by a tyrant.<sup>86</sup> Before battle, and mindful of the possibility of death, he first extracts the maiden's promise to display his bloody armour forevermore in remembrance of his love.<sup>87</sup> An anonymous late-fourteenth or early-fifteenth-century English homilist uses this exemplum in a sermon, offering this spiritual interpretation:

Goosteliche for to speke, ryght þus fareþ oure Lorde Ihesu Criste be mans soule, þat for þe helthe of mans soule and saluacioun, to brynge it to þe herytage of þe blisse of heven, of wiche herytage mans soule was falseliche forbarred þorowe envye of þe wicked tyraunte þe fende of hell, þerfore he wolde dye on þe Rode Tre and suffer grette peynes and strong, for þe wiche peynes he ne askeþe none oþur rewarde of vs, but only þat we loue hyme, and ofte tymes to haue hym in mynde, and þe grette loue þat he shewed to vs in ys dyinge.<sup>88</sup>

Borrowing from the Christian moral given in the *Gesta Romanorum*, the homilist takes care to link each point in the exemplum with the corresponding spiritual message, adding his own

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<sup>84</sup> On the use of 'worldly' sources for homiletic *exempla*, see H. Leith Spencer, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 78–88. For a discussion of the use of human relationships to teach about the human/divine relationship in devotional writings, see Salter, *Chaucer: The Knight's Tale and The Clerk's Tale*, pp. 38–9.

<sup>85</sup> Wenzel, *Latin Sermon Collections*, p. 246.

<sup>86</sup> Wenzel uses the tale of Christ the Lover Knight as an example of a popular exemplum. See Wenzel, *Latin Sermon Collections*, p. 243.

<sup>87</sup> 'The Bloody Shirt, of a Knight Who Restored a Princess to her Kingdom, and of Her Gratitude to Him', in *Early English versions of the Gesta Romanorum*, ed. by Sidney J. H. Herrtage (London: N. Trübner, 1879), pp. 23–6 (p. 24).

<sup>88</sup> 'Ambulate', in *Middle English Sermons edited from British Museum MS. Royal 18 B. xxiii*, ed. by Woodburn O. Ross, EETS, O. S. 209 (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), pp. 72–83 (p. 78).

emphasis on the suffering and pain of the Crucifixion. Like the young maiden who would remember the great love of the knight by gazing upon his bloodied armour, those listening to this sermon might remember God's love by considering the suffering Jesus on the Cross.

References to suffering appear frequently in homiletic *exempla*. These are not always confined to appeals to affective piety; very often the suffering is endured not by Christ, but by humankind. The saints provide models of suffering as an unavoidable aspect of martyrdom. Cecile, for example, continues to preach at the centre of a bustle of people attempting to collect her martyr's blood and Custance's great suffering is taken by her narrator to be a sign of her sanctity. Rather than encouraging the empathetic spiritual pain of affective piety, however, some *exempla* evoke fear through imagining future pain, especially where the homilist encourages temporal penance in order to prevent purgatorial, or even eternal, suffering. Self-inflicted penance features on occasion, bypassing the provocation of violent authority modelled by Cecile and other martyrs. In his sermon for Septuagesima, Mirk, for example, describes the long penance of Adam and Eve, condemning themselves to 930 years of standing in cold water, not only for their initial fall, but also for remaining prey to temptation.<sup>89</sup> His sermon for Corpus Christi promotes the miraculous benefits of self-inflicted suffering, as he relates a miracle instigated by the self-flagellation of a Devonshire priest.<sup>90</sup> Demons also feature as a source of pain, physically beating lusty priests or otherwise punishing the wicked.<sup>91</sup> By positioning his hagiographic subject as one who suffers, the Clerk is able to offer his moral sentence encouraging faithful Christians to emulate Griselda.

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<sup>89</sup> Mirk, 'Dominica in Septuagesima sermo', in *John Mirk's Festial*, I, pp. 60–6 (p. 65).

<sup>90</sup> The priest miraculously locates a lost consecrated Host and also discovers a demon in his presence. Mirk, 'De festo corporis Cristi sermo', in *John Mirk's Festial*, I, pp. 154–59.

<sup>91</sup> See Mirk's life of Nero and the sermon for the Conversion of St Paul.

Sheer suffering, then, might fit Griselda to serve as an exemplum for the patience expected of Christians. In identifying Griselda as ‘Christ-like’, Cooper and Carolyn Van Dyke recognise in her the *imitatio Christi* of the saint.<sup>92</sup> And Griselda certainly endures a living martyrdom as she is stripped of her beloved children, her clothing, her husband, her home, and her dignity. Yet unlike early Christian martyrs whose *vitae* tell of similar humiliation and suffering at the hands of the earthly rulers they have defied, Griselda suffers through her vow of perfect obedience to her husband, the marquis Walter.<sup>93</sup> Absolute and given prospectively, this vow represents an abdication of agency which eventually leads to Griselda’s monstrous consent to the murder of her own children at her husband’s command. Even if expressive of love and unqualified trust (Walter, of course, does not have his children murdered), such obedience given to a human being is excessive and idolatrous; and as J. Allan Mitchell notes in his discussion of Griselda’s exemplarity, excessive love of human creatures is one of the many sins explicitly condemned by Chaucer’s Parson.<sup>94</sup> If Griselda suffers for unacceptable reasons, her prayers serve as further markers to her non-sanctified status, as an analysis of these prayers will demonstrate.

While having meekly handed her children over to death would seem to instantly disqualify Griselda from the ranks of the saints, it is worth pausing to consider a passage which has been taken as evidence of her religious devotion.<sup>95</sup> As she surrenders her daughter she blesses her with the sign of a cross:

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<sup>92</sup> Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, p. 190; Van Dyke, *Chaucer’s Agents*, p. 159. Benson suggest that Griselda represents Christ in her obedience and that her love of Walter represents God’s patience with humankind. See Benson, ‘The Aesthetic of Chaucer’s Religious Tales’, pp. 116–17. Although this view is appealing, it places the eternal God under obedience to humankind and does not address Griselda’s willingness for her children to die for the sake of her oath to Walter.

<sup>93</sup> On the hagiographic representation of the saints’ challenging of authority, see Claire M. Waters, ‘Power and Authority’ in *A Companion to Middle English Hagiography*, ed. by Sarah Salih (Cambridge: Brewer, 2006), pp. 70–86 (pp. 72–9).

<sup>94</sup> J. Allan Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2004), pp. 127–28.

<sup>95</sup> Cooper sees a connection between Griselda’s speech and Passion lyrics in which Mary laments her infant son’s future death on the cross. For Griselda to model Mary in this manner, knowing that her child is also her Saviour, the analogy must position the child’s father, Walter, as God, a position Cooper rejects. See Cooper,



Fareweel my child! I shal thee nevere see.  
 But sith I thee have marked with the croys  
 Of thilke Fader – blessed moote he be! –  
 That for us deyde upon a croys of tree,  
 Thy soule, litel child, I hym bitake,  
 For this nyght shaltow dyen for my sake.

(*CIT*, ll. 555–60)

Significantly, Chaucer invents Griselda's speech, which is not found in Petrarch, the French *Le Livre Griseldis*, or in Boccaccio's *Decameron*.<sup>96</sup> Outward signs of Christianity are evident in her use of the cross to mark her child, the reference to God the Father, and, most specifically, her calling upon the one who died 'for us' upon the tree. Yet, she uses the example of Christ dying for her salvation as a model not for herself to follow, but for her child. The child must die for her mother's sake, in order that Griselda might fulfil her oath of unquestioning obedience. This passage speaks eloquently by its absences. Although it takes a similar form, and uses almost identical language, it is not like the prayers we have seen in the rest of this chapter. Griselda address her child, rather than God.

Unlike the saints, or the saint-like, in Chaucer's other hagiographic tales, Griselda is not reported as speaking directly to God or his saints. Instead, each of her prayers is indirect, invoking God while addressing another, usually Walter. Her focus is always turned toward her husband. At times, God and her husband come near to merging together, as when she assures Walter that she was never worthy of honour: 'That thonke I God and yow, to whom I preye | Foryelde it yow' (*CIT*, ll. 830–31). Griselda's one outburst, uttered at the moment when Walter declares that she must walk back to her father's house naked, briefly addresses God before returning to her husband: 'O goode God! How gentil and how kynde | Ye semed by youre speche and youre visage | The day that maked oure mariage!' (*CIT*, ll. 852–54).

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*Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*, pp. 190–95. For a similar comparison to Marian lyrics, see Salter, *Chaucer: The Knight's Tale and The Clerk's Tale*, pp. 51–3. For a contrasting view, see Miller, who argues that Griselda does not display Mary's emotional response in the scene's figuration of the Pietà: *Philosophical Chaucer*, pp. 231–32.

<sup>96</sup> Petrarch and *Le Livre Griseldis* include the blessing with a cross without the corresponding speech.

This moment, which Eileen Joy describes as a ‘crack’ in Griselda’s patience, is one of near fragmentation in which the line between Walter and God is blurred almost completely.<sup>97</sup> The structure of her address, with its apostrophic beginning, intermingles Walter and God in a manner verging on the idolatrous, so that ‘goode God’ almost appears to address Walter.

Griselda’s prayers are thus distinct from the prayers for protection seen elsewhere in the hagiographic tales. Potentially the most perverse aspect to the prayers of this text is that they are shown to be effective nevertheless. Despite the darkness of the tale and the superhuman faithfulness which Walter requires of his wife, the text presents petitionary prayer as effective: Griselda’s petitions are granted. Twice she asks, in her indirect manner of addressing God through her husband, God’s blessing of prosperity on Walter and his new wife (*CIT*, ll. 841–42, 1034–36). These blessings become her own when, having finally proved her worth to her husband, being reunited with her children constitutes the ‘wele and prosperitee’ for which she prayed. His drive to control and order his family satiated for the moment, Walter, too, perhaps, finds ‘plesance ynogh’, as Griselda wished (*CIT*, l. 1036).<sup>98</sup> The conventionally happy ending implies the prayers to have been effective, as the narrator grants the characters prosperity, stating, ‘Ful many a yeer in heigh prosperitee | Lyven thise two in concord and in reste (*CIT*, ll. 1128–29). Walter, Griselda, and their two children live not only in the earthly joy expressed by ‘prosperitee’, ‘concord’, and ‘reste’, but in the heavenly joy encompassed by the ‘blisful ende’ achieved (*CIT*, l. 1121).<sup>99</sup> Griselda’s prayers

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<sup>97</sup> Eileen Joy, ‘Like Two Autistic Moonbeams Entering the Window of my Asylum: Chaucer’s Griselda and Lars von Trier’s *Bess McNeil*’, *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies*, 2 (2011), 316–28 (p. 325). Griselda’s apostrophe followed by her lament over her changed husband momentarily appears to have a different meaning entirely. Reading the apostrophe as a direct address to God, Griselda would seem to be continuing in a similar vein: ‘How gentil and how kynde | Ye semed...’ Given that prayers to the Christian God in Chaucer’s works always use the familiar second-person pronoun, the ‘ye’ marks the point at which Griselda’s address is clearly intended for Walter, rather than God.

<sup>98</sup> For an analysis of Walter as compulsive, see Angela Florscheutz, ‘“A Mooder He Hath, but Fader Hath He Noon”: Constructions of Genealogy in the *Clerk’s Tale* and the *Man of Law’s Tale*’, *ChR*, 44 (2009), 25–60 (p. 40).

<sup>99</sup> ‘Bliss’ is very commonly used to denote the joy of heaven in late-medieval homilies. See, for example, ‘Homily 1, First Sunday in Advent’, in *The Northern Homily Cycle*, ed. by Thompson, l. 291 <<http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/thompson-the-northern-homily-cycle>> [accessed 06.08.16].

and patience would seem to have been rewarded not only on earth, but also in heaven.

Unlike the prayers of Custance, reinterpreted by narratorial rubric to fit another purpose, the answers to Griselda's prayers are entirely in accord with her words; her willing obedience even to the point of asking her children to die for her sake appears to be rewarded. Where Custance's narrator overrides her prayers with his own interpretation, the Clerk seemingly ignores the implications of Griselda's prayers.

Speaking at the close of his tale, the Clerk makes the moral of the exemplum perfectly clear. Griselda is not to be taken as a model of wifely virtue:

This storie is seyð nat for that wyves sholde  
Folwen Grisilde as in humylitee,  
For it were inportable, though they wolde,  
But for that every wight, in his degree,  
Sholde be constant in adversitee  
As was Grisilde; therfore Petrak writeth  
This storie, which with heigh stile he enditeth.

(*CIT*, ll. 1142–48)

Wives might have the will to follow Griselda's example in patience and humility – and this is, of course, the moral which the Host takes for his own wife – but the Clerk insists that to do so would be intolerable.<sup>100</sup> Instead, Griselda is to be a model for human constancy in the face of adversity. Petrarch himself, Chaucer notes, drew just such a moral from the tale. The Clerk's commentary does not end here, however. He continues:

For sith a womman was so pacient  
Unto a mortal man, wel moore us oghte  
Receyven al in gree that God us sent;  
For greet skile is he preeve that he wroghte.  
But he ne tempteth no man that he boghte  
As seith Seint Jame, if ye his pistel rede;  
He preeveth folk al day, it is no drede,

And suffreth us, as for oure exercise,  
With sharpe scourges of adversitee

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<sup>100</sup> Cooper notes the two senses held by 'inportable': 'impossible to maintain' and 'intolerable'. See Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, p. 190.

Ful ofte to be bete in sondry wise.

(*CIT*, ll. 1149–58)

Griselda's patience, intolerable in the context of marriage, is in fact to be taken as a model for the individual Christian. In drawing out the explicit purpose of the exemplum, Chaucer again follows Petrarch, who likens Griselda's temporal faithfulness to a mortal man to a Christian's duty of faithfulness to the eternal God. Yet Griselda's faithfulness is hardly mortal, being impossible to follow, as Petrarch notes, because of its unchanging, immutable, and therefore inhuman, nature.<sup>101</sup> Having examined Griselda's perverse prayers, we see the extent to which the Clerk must force her exemplum into the moral sentence with which he concludes her tale. Chaucer further highlights the divergence between the narrator and his inappropriate subject with the subtle changes he makes to Petrarch's version.

From the reference to the Epistle of St James onwards, Chaucer's translation of Petrarch's moral begins to diverge from its source. Both texts accurately reflect the teaching in the Epistle of St James that temptation does not derive from God.

Beatus vir qui suffert temptationem quia cum probatus fuerit accipiet coronam vitae  
| quam repromisit Deus diligentibus se | Nemo cum temptatur dicat quoniam a Deo  
temptor | Deus enim intemptator malorum est ipse autem neminem temptat.

[Blessed is the man that endureth temptation; for when he hath been proved, he shall receive the crown of life which God hath promised to them that love him. Let no man, when he is tempted, say that he is tempted by God. For God is not a tempter of evils, and he tempteth no man.]<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Hanc historiam stilo nunc alio retexere visum fuit, non tam ideo, ut matronas nostri temporis ad imitandam huius uxoris pacienciam, que michi vix mutabilis videtur, quam ut legentes ad imitandam saltem femine constanciam excitarem, ut quod hec viro suo prestitit, hoc prestare deo nostro audeant, qui licet Iacobus ait Apostolus intemptator malorum sit, et ipse neminem temptet: probat tamen.

[I thought it fitting to re-tell this story in a different style, not so much to urge the matrons of our time to imitate the patience of this wife (which seems to me almost unchanging) as to arouse readers to imitate her womanly constancy, so that they might dare to undertake for God what she undertook for her husband. God is the appropriate tester of evils, as the Apostle James said; but he tempts no one himself. Nevertheless he tests us.]

Petrarch, *Historia Griseldis*, *Petrarch's Epistolae Seniles XVII.3*, trans. by Thomas J. Farrell, in *Sources and Analogues*, ed. by Correale and Hamel, I, pp. 108–29 (p. 129). Translation Farrell's. Farrell notes the possibility that these lines are a scribal addition.

<sup>102</sup> Epistle of St James 1:12–13. English translation from the *Douay-Rheims Version*.

Both are silent on the corresponding explanation that temptation comes from within, omitting the next verse from the Epistle:

Unusquisque vero temptatur a concupiscentia sua abstractus et inlectus.

[But every man is tempted by his own concupiscence, being drawn away and allured.]<sup>103</sup>

Whereas Petrarch clearly and grammatically signals his step away from the Epistle through his use of the word ‘tamen’, Chaucer, through the voice of his Clerk, structures the gloss on St James in such a manner that it misleadingly elides the paraphrase of St James’s epistle with the lesson to be drawn from the life of Griselda. The accuracy of his paraphrase is emphasised through the Clerk’s invitation to the audience to read the Epistle for themselves, implying that the statement following can also be found in scripture: ‘And suffreth us, as for oure exercise, | With sharpe scourges of adversitee | Ful ofte to be bete in sondry wise’ (*CIT*, ll. 1156–58).<sup>104</sup> Unmarked by any indication that their words are exegesis, rather than scripture, these lines imply St James’s authority for the teaching that God constantly tests, or proves, humanity. By using the little word ‘and’, Chaucer seamlessly links the teaching that God does not tempt his people to an idea not found in St James, of a God who allows the scourging of his people. The phrase ‘suffreth us’ chains together a passively suffering Griselda-like humanity with the passivity of divine acquiescence to that suffering.<sup>105</sup> This misleading gloss completes the Clerk’s explanation of the moral his audience ought to take from the tale of Griselda and it is in this vein that Chaucer omits the concluding phrase with which Petrarch distances himself from the unavoidable implication that Walter’s role in the

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<sup>103</sup> Epistle of St James 1:14. English translation from the *Douay-Rheims Version*.

<sup>104</sup> Laurence Besserman suggests an allusion in these lines to Proverbs 3:11–12, which refer to God’s correction of those he loves. See Laurence Besserman, *Chaucer and the Bible: A Critical Review of Research, Indexes, and Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988), p. 110.

<sup>105</sup> Petrarch’s ‘sinit’ [permits] does not share the connotations of the Middle English ‘suffreth’.

*Historia Griseldis* is to represent God. Chaucer makes manifest the uncomfortable conclusion which Petrarch avoids.

While Chaucer's Clerk is to all appearances a scholar in secular life, his religious exemplum could have far-reaching effects.<sup>106</sup> His exegesis of the life of Griselda draws upon an especially grim – and widespread – idea, that suffering is both purifying and of divine cause. This idea can be seen not only in sermons, such as when Mirk explains that God ordains demons to torment humanity (in life as well as death) for its sins, but also in prayers such as *Stella celi extirpavit*, a petition for protection from pestilence which envisages the disease as caused by an avenging angel.<sup>107</sup> An order from the Bishop of Winchester in 1348 for a penitential procession during the Black Death blames human behaviour for the affliction, but also acknowledges in terms similar to the Clerk's the possibility of a divine cause to suffering: 'Although God often strikes us, to test our patience and justly punish our sins, it is not within the power of man to understand the divine plan.'<sup>108</sup> In his sermon for Sexagesima, Mirk teaches that tribulation and disease are sent by God as penance.<sup>109</sup> After relating a tale from the life of St Dominic in which the world is saved by the intercession of Mary from the three spears Jesus has aimed at it in vengeance, Mirk warns the faithful: because humanity has declined and the world is now so much worse than in times past, God's vengeance will be harsher. He concludes with an admonition to immediately undertake penance: 'Wherefore God smyteth a lytil now and w[o]l aftur wel harder, bot amendes be made þe sonner, *et cetera*.'<sup>110</sup> Other versions of this sermon demonstrate that the 'et cetera'

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<sup>106</sup> For an overview of the various forms of work undertaken by late-medieval clerks, as well as a discussion of the narrating Clerk, see J. Burke Severs, 'Chaucer's Clerks', in *Chaucer and Middle English Studies: in honour of Rossell Hope Robbins*, ed. by Beryl Rowland (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1974), pp. 140–52.

<sup>107</sup> Mirk, 'De conuersione sancti Pauli apostoli', in *John Mirk's Festial*, I, pp. 51–5 (p. 54). *Stella celi extirpavit* pleads with God to stop suffering under his power: 'God of mercy, God of pity, God of forgiveness, you have taken pity on the affliction of your people, and have said to the avenging angel who is striking them down, "It is enough, hold back your hand"' (Scott-Stokes, *Women's Books of Hours*, pp. 105–6).

<sup>108</sup> Edendon, 'Vox in Rama', p. 116.

<sup>109</sup> Mirk, 'Dominica in Sexagesima sermo', in *John Mirk's Festial*, I, pp. 66–70 (p. 66).

<sup>110</sup> Mirk, 'Dominica in Sexagesima sermo', p. 70.

could be interpreted not just as a marker for the closing formula, but also as an invitation to the preacher to extemporise.<sup>111</sup> The temptation to elaborate on this divinely ordained suffering might have been difficult to resist and by concluding the negative exemplum of Griselda with precisely such clerical exposition, Chaucer implicitly questions teachings such as these. Griselda might represent suffering humanity, but her inability to represent a saint stems from her perverse and idolatrous prayers. She aligns her will not with God, but with Walter.

When Morse writes that Chaucer ‘introduces explicit and easily identifiable biblical allusions connecting Griselda typologically with the Virgin and with Christ’, she implies that these recognisable allusions should be accepted unquestioningly.<sup>112</sup> In her allegorical analysis, problems only arise when judging whether Walter represents God or Satan. Elizabeth D. Kirk likewise, while stating categorically that Walter ‘is not a representation of God’, continues by suggesting the similarities:

And certainly it is a fact of life in the world as we know it that living with God and his creation is going to feel like living with Walter, and look like living with Walter, and be as inexplicable as living with Walter. Hence the need to create an image full of extremes, cruelty and dislocation: to defamiliarise this central reality of monotheism in order to render it apprehensible.<sup>113</sup>

These analyses accept the Clerk’s exegetical sleight of hand and thus minimise the significance of Chaucer’s alterations to Petrarch’s *Historia Griseldis*, including those to Griselda’s prayers and her signing of her child with the cross discussed above. Chaucer draws out the implications denied by Petrarch’s moral sentence.<sup>114</sup> His version of Griselda’s

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<sup>111</sup> Another version of this sermon adds an instruction to pray that God will withhold his hand of vengeance: ‘Wherfor ȝe schull pray to God to hold vp his hond of vengeans þat hyt fall not yn our dayes; but þat we may come to amendement and haue þe blysse þat he boȝt vs to’. See Mirk, ‘De dominica in sexagesima’, in *Mirk’s Festial*, pp. 69–74 (p. 74).

<sup>112</sup> Morse, ‘Critical Approaches to the *Clerk’s Tale*’, pp. 75–6.

<sup>113</sup> Elizabeth D. Kirk, ‘Nominalism and the Dynamics of the *Clerk’s Tale*: *Homo Viator* as Woman’, in *Chaucer’s Religious Tales*, ed. by Benson and Robertson, pp. 111–20 (pp. 116–17).

<sup>114</sup> Mann argues that ‘pious’ readings of *The Clerk’s Tale* avoid the invitation to compare Walter with God: ‘Walter’s cruelty is not, as has often been thought, a mistake of judgement which makes the comparison between his role and God’s inappropriate; it is, on the contrary, the sign of a serious confrontation with the idea

life of trial is more austere than the Italian poet's. The narrator explicitly condemns Walter, through phrases such as 'I blame hym thus' inserted into the narration (*CIT*, l. 78).<sup>115</sup>

Whereas Petrarch allows Walter at least the appearance of regretting his wife's single-mindedness in sacrificing her children, Chaucer removes any hint that Walter is disturbed by Griselda's unyielding determination to obey his whims.<sup>116</sup>

These rare variations from Chaucer's Petrarchan source throw into sharp focus the Clerk's final encouragement to view the relationship between Walter and Griselda as analogous to that between God and his faithful. Chaucer has his Clerk take leave of Petrarch in assuring his audience that suffering is for 'oure beste', before beginning a brief meditation on the diminished nature of a humankind of too poor quality to be refined into gold through suffering such as Griselda's (*CIT*, ll. 1160–62). Here he performs another sleight of hand. Having already explicitly denied that his exemplum should be applied only to women, the Clerk suddenly directs his audience to interpret his tale precisely in this way, first praising women as equivalent to Job and, in fact, as more humble and patient than men (*CIT*, ll. 932–38). Rather than dwelling upon Griselda's similarity to Job – with its concomitant suggestion of Walter's divine or diabolical role in her torment – the Clerk dramatically changes tone.<sup>117</sup> Falling into merriment, he shares his antifeminist song about Chichevache, the cow in danger of starvation because it feeds only on patient wives (*CIT*, ll. 1177–1212). In this way, he skilfully distracts his audience from pondering the ramifications of Griselda's model of a good Christian tested in the crucible. Swiftly diverting his audience's attention from his depiction of God as the divine goldsmith who scourges humanity almost beyond endurance,

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that this cruelty might really belong to the God who inflicts suffering and death on his children.' See Jill Mann, 'Chaucer and Atheism', *SAC*, 17 (1995), 5–19 (p. 17).

<sup>115</sup> William T. Rossiter argues that Chaucer 'restores' the Boccaccian subtext inviting outrage at Gualtieri/Walter's behaviour. See William T. Rossiter, *Chaucer and Petrarch* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2010), p. 174.

<sup>116</sup> Petrarch, *Historia Griseldis*, p. 123.

<sup>117</sup> So dramatic is the change of tone that the song is given the scribal title, 'Lenvoy de Chaucer'.



the Clerk takes refuge in a comfortable antifeminist discourse. Only by attending to the subdued voice of Griselda in her prayers can we see that the Clerk's exegesis attempts to shape her into something she is not.

By providing a distinctly immoral tale and having removed the elements in Petrarch which tenuously linked the tale of Patient Griselda to the moral for all Christians, Chaucer teaches a disturbing lesson about the dangerous uses for which skilful men such as his Clerk can employ *exempla*. Walter abuses the love of his faithful subjects, addressing Griselda's father, Janicula, thus, 'Thou lovest me, I woot it wel certeyn, | And art my feithful lige man ybore' (*CIT*, ll. 309–10). When that love is presumed to encompass the abuse of his own daughter, what distinguishes the tyrant Walter from a God who scourges people for their own good? While there are very few prayers in *The Clerk's Tale*, the role which they play in undermining the use of Griselda as an exemplum is crucial. Through examining the use of prayer in this tale, it becomes possible to see the stark difference between the Clerk's explicit moral and the tale from which this moral is drawn. If Griselda is an exemplum for the faithful Christian, then her patient suffering should befit a saint. This interpretation, pushed by the Clerk's exegesis, founders on Griselda's un-Christian prayers, which demonstrate her worship of her husband to be idolatrous, rather than an allegory of the devout love of God.

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By assigning four of his Canterbury pilgrims hagiographic tales, Chaucer indicates a serious interest in the genre. These four tales expose the temptation the genre poses for those who wish to shape such *exempla* and *vitae* to their own purposes. This potential is exploited by Chaucer in designing each of these texts to have a distinct didactic aim, accomplished in part through the representation of prayer. The hagiographic texts display the multiple discourses of prayer present in late-fourteenth-century Christianity as set out in Chapter One, and as especially evident through the use of rubrics to interpret the effectiveness of petitions. Using

strong narratorial voices which reshape and interpret the prayer of their hagiographical subjects, Chaucer presents differing accounts of prayer within and between texts. When the clergeon sings his prayer that Mary will have mercy on sinners, the Prioress's affective portrayal supports the oral rubric promising protection at the hour of death. Where Custance prays for spiritual protection from an unshriven death, the narrator presents a triumphal, physical manifestation of divine intervention; where she prays for, and receives, physical protection, he reports her crowning as a response. By comparing these two tales with the ideal hagiographic form represented by *The Second Nun's Tale* and its unobtrusive narrator, we are able to see Chaucer's shaping of these texts to expose the authorial purposes which such narratives are able to support. The potential to twist and to manipulate audiences is evident in *The Prioress's Tale* but achieved far more subtly in *The Clerk's Tale*, where the cruelty of the moral is laid bare by the unsuitability of the idolatrous hagiographic subject to be anything other than a negative exemplum.

The hagiographic tales contain each instance in Chaucer's works in which an explicitly Christian subject located in a Christian setting prays successfully to the Christian God or his saints. Yet the success of these prayers cannot be seen in worldly terms: these prayers are not for human love, for sleep or visions, nor for earthly victories. The lessons provided by Cecile, the clergeon, and Custance are uncomfortable. Their examples show that alignment with the will of God and the desire to lead a faithful life can end in extraordinary and unjust suffering and that the response to such trials should be hopeful, or even joyful, endurance. This uncomfortable message has the effect of undermining the didactic purposes of their narrators, with the exception of the Second Nun, whose aim, as professed in her *Prologue*, aligns with Cecile's. The Prioress's repetition of the rubric which repositions and misrepresents the purpose and the message of the *Alma redemptoris mater* is counteracted by the faithful subject of her tale, who only wishes to praise Mary, never looking for worldly, or

even heavenly, blessings. The narrator of *The Man of Law's Tale* is challenged, not through Custance's life, but through her words and through those who come to her aid. Each of these resistant voices, is, of course, the work of Chaucer. Those voices which can challenge and disrupt the dominant narrative voice ultimately derive from their author. *The Clerk's Tale* is assigned to a skilled narrator, however, and one, moreover, whose hagiographic subject is praised for her monstrous patience. In this provocative tale resistant voices, if there are to be any, must arise from its audience.

As we have seen in this chapter and in those previous, answered prayers do not lead by necessity to comfort, nor do the answers always correspond to the supplicant's expressed desire. We have also seen that an answer might merely be a divine denial and that diminishing the scope for divine intervention results in greater focus on human agency. Having considered Chaucer's multifaceted use of answered prayer, we turn in the next chapter to the many unanswered and hopeless prayers of *Troilus and Criseyde*. In the tragic poem, Chaucer embeds into the structure of the text responses to the theological and philosophical problems raised by the unanswerable prayers of his two characters, inviting the reader to draw the poem's end together with its centre, in prayer.

– Five –

### Unanswered and Unanswerable Prayers in *Troilus and Criseyde*

Until now this thesis has been occupied primarily with answered prayers in Chaucer's works. We have seen that far from using petitionary prayer mechanistically to indicate and then fulfil a desire with the aim of furthering plot development, Chaucer subverts simplistic expectations, instead using answered prayer in a number of complex ways. In his works, answers to prayers are rarely simple, tending instead to complicate matters, frequently revealing the inner, sometimes conflicting, desires which give rise to prayer. Through his representation of prayer, Chaucer exposes humanity's attempt to flee from agency by shifting responsibility for human conflict to the divine realm. Pagan characters might pray more devoutly than Christians, while both receive unsatisfactory answers. Christians receive answers which ought to satisfy the intellect, but fail to console the emotions. Responses to prayer often bear little relation to the content of a supplicant's petition, and those who deserve success may well not receive it. Above all, an answer does not equal the granting of a prayer, being at times a response to an unexpressed desire, an unwelcome and unwished-for result, or a flat denial. Where a strong narratorial voice is present, multiple discourses of prayer become apparent in the text as narratorial interpretations of the answer to a character's prayer diverge from the meaning and purpose expressed by the prayer's content.

We have seen very few unanswered prayers. Many petitionary prayers in Chaucer's texts have not been discussed in this thesis because they are unanswerable within the confines of the text. These unaddressed prayers include most of the invocations at the beginnings of many tales, prayers of blessing upon the pilgrims of *The Canterbury Tales*, and others whose answers are unknowable, as when the Wife of Bath asks God to keep her fifth husband from hell or the dream narrator of *The Legend of Good Women* prays to God for Alceste, 'that ever

falle hire faire' (WBT, l. 504, LGW, l. 277 (F)).<sup>1</sup> For a prayer to be considered unanswered therefore implies firstly, that an answer would be possible within the confines of the text, and secondly, that Chaucer proposes no conceivable response from the gods. In other words, in face of a clear petition, the gods do not reply and the prayer remains ungranted. We have seen one unanswered prayer in *The Franklin's Tale*, when Aurelius asks Apollo to alter the tides. Dorigen's and Aurelius's prayers are, respectively, relegated and unanswered, allowing their conflict to be settled through human, rather than divine, activity. Both Apollo and the Creator remain hidden. In *The Knight's Tale*, as we have seen, the goddess Diana materialises explicitly to deny Emelye's petition. We now turn to *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer's greatest exploration of ungranted, unanswered, hopeless prayer. Related through genre as well as through a shared source in Boethius's *Consolatio* to the two texts in which we have already seen ungranted prayer, *The Knight's Tale* and *The Franklin's Tale*, *Troilus and Criseyde* is weighted with unanswered prayer.<sup>2</sup> This chapter will first examine the hopeless, unanswered and unanswerable prayers of the lovers. Criseyde prays against the transitory nature of joy, both lovers pray for time to stand still, and Troilus prays against free will, asking God to compel people to love. Their prayers increase the depth of tragedy in the

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<sup>1</sup> In the G Prologue: 'I preye to God that evere falle she fayre' (l. 180).

<sup>2</sup> All three texts also draw upon Boccaccio. The ascent of Arcita in Boccaccio's *Teseida* is absent from *The Knight's Tale*, appearing instead as Troilus's ascension following his death in Book V. See Boccaccio, *Teseida*, Book XI. In *Il Filostrato*, Boccaccio amplifies the tale of the love affair between Troilo and Criseida from its minimal presence in his source, Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Le Roman de Troie*. See Giovanni Boccaccio, *Il Filostrato*, trans. by Robert P. apRoberts and Anna Bruni Benson, in *Troilus and Criseyde with facing-page Il Filostrato*, ed. by Stephen A. Barney (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), pp. 3–428, and Benoît de Sainte-Maure, *Le Roman de Troie*, ed. by Léopold Constans, 6 vols (Paris: Librairie de Firmin-Didot, 1904–12). *Troilus and Criseyde* loosely follows the plot of *Il Filostrato* although Chaucer's addition of Boethian material alters the text significantly, as does his emphasis. On Chaucer's changed emphasis to his source, Windeatt writes, 'All that is most significant, most moving, and most mysterious about Chaucer's *Troilus* distinguishes it from *Il Filostrato*.' See Barry Windeatt, *Troilus and Criseyde* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 50. *Troilus and Criseyde* is usually dated to the period between 1382 and 1385. A *terminus ad quem* of 1388 is provided by Usk's death, due to his references to, and borrowings from, the poem in his *Testament*, or possibly 1387, the year of Ralph Strode's death. Various dates linked to political events, including the Peasants' Revolt, have been suggested but these do not vary greatly, falling within or just outside the accepted range. For a discussion of the dating of the poem, see Stephen A. Barney's 'Explanatory Notes' in *The Riverside Chaucer*, pp. 1020–21. Barney also suggests that Chaucer might have been working simultaneously on *The Knight's Tale*, *Boece*, and *Troilus and Criseyde*.

poem, yet Chaucer does not leave these prayers entirely unanswered. The second half of the chapter analyses the Trinitarian prayer of the poem's conclusion and the prayerful experience of bliss during the consummation scene as Chaucer's answers to these most human of problems, embodied in the very structure of the poem. From using prayer to create structure in his texts in the way we have seen especially in the dream visions, in *Troilus and Criseyde*, as this chapter shall demonstrate, Chaucer develops the literary possibilities of petitionary prayer by using the poem's structure to provide answers to the otherwise unanswerable prayers of his characters.

### *The function of prayer in Troilus and Criseyde*

Prayer is intimately bound to the movement and structure of *Troilus and Criseyde*. The poem opens in invocation, like many of Chaucer's works; it also begins, less typically, with the narrator imploring the intercessions of the audience on behalf of those unfortunate or suffering in love. A Trinitarian prayer brings the final book and the entire poem to a close, with the concluding word being 'Amen'. At its heart is Troilus's great hymn of praise 'O Love, O Charite', which ties together the pagan conception of love presented by the poem with the Christian understanding of divine love (*Tr*, III. 1254).<sup>3</sup> Each of the first four books opens with a proem invoking the deity or deities most appropriate to its subject matter: thus the first of these invocations appeals to the 'goddess' Fury, the second to the muse Cleo, the third to Venus, and the fourth to the three Furies as well as to Mars. These invocations have been discussed elsewhere, as has the absence of a proem in Book V.<sup>4</sup> Books II and III end

<sup>3</sup> On the poem's interwoven pagan and Christian language of love, see McGerr, *Chaucer's Open Books*, pp. 98–101.

<sup>4</sup> C. David Benson discusses the invocation of Venus in the proem to Book III as presenting a 'jumble of all kinds of love'. See C. David Benson, *Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), pp. 124–29. For Benson's discussion of the proem to Book IV and its representation of Fortune, see pp. 155–56. Windeatt, in discussing the symmetry of the poem's structure, accounts for the absence of a proem in Book V as compensation for the inclusion of an extended epilogue at its close (Windeatt, *Troilus*, pp. 185–86). Spearing suggests the absence of a proem to Book V results from Chaucer's expectation to complete the poem in four books: see A. C. Spearing, 'Time in *Troilus and Criseyde*', in *Traditions and Innovations in the Study of*

with prayers: in the first of these two, the narrator asks rhetorically what Troilus will say once face to face with Criseyde; in the other, the narrator thanks Venus for the guidance received in response to his request for aid in conveying the joy of love's service at the beginning of the same book. Prayer thus signals the themes of the poem through narratorial invocation in addition to creating its overall structure by opening, closing, and eliding episodes, and drawing the climactic Book III and the poem as a whole into a self-contained concentricity.

As well as creating structure, prayer also creates or augments much of the poem's narrative movement; the frequency of the prayers of both the narrator and the characters reaches a peak in the centre of the poem, before tailing off in the penultimate book only to reclaim prominence in Book V.<sup>5</sup> Prayers also progress from the less serious and the parodic to the more solemn; from the meaningless peppering of 'God wot' throughout conversation to heartfelt pleas; from the mingling of thanksgivings, blessings, and supplications to the predominance of petition.<sup>6</sup> As the mood of the poem darkens, problematic aspects of petitionary prayer grow ever more evident. Many of the supplications to the gods tend towards ill, by, for example, addressing unpleasant qualities of the gods, or by actively praying for harmful results. Curses and prayers for death dominate human communication with the divine in the latter two books. In addition to these negative characteristics, the majority of supplications are unheard or ungranted by the gods. The weight of unfulfilled human expectations expressed in these misdirected petitions deepens the tragedy of the text,

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*Medieval English Literature: The Influence of Derek Brewer*, ed. by Charlotte Brewer and Barry Windeatt (Cambridge: Brewer, 2013), pp. 60–72 (pp. 67–8).

<sup>5</sup> Discussing Chaucer's adaptation of his source in Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*, including the addition of prayers, Windeatt describes Chaucer's characters as possessing 'an instinctive prayerfulness'. See Barry Windeatt, 'Chaucer and the *Filostrato*', in *Chaucer and the Italian Trecento*, ed. by Boitani, pp. 163–83 (p. 177).

<sup>6</sup> McGerr argues that the proliferation of such references creates a sense that they are meaningless: 'At times, one could very well believe the poem suggests that conventional expressions such as *for Goddes love*, *by God*, *God forbade*, *holy God*, and *as help me God* are meaningless, both for the pagan characters and for the audience (medieval or later).' See McGerr, *Chaucer's Open Books*, p. 98.

but also highlights the prayers with which the text begins, ends, and centres itself. At two crucial points of the text, the end and the centre, and in response to the tragic outcomes of the love affair and the many unanswered prayers, Chaucer sets prayers which serve as reminders of the divine love which encircles creation and of the celestial and eternal joy which can be tasted by incarnate beings, even if only momentarily.

Amongst this multitude of prayers, very few can conceivably be considered as granted. Of these few, the majority are effective through human action, as when Troilus asks ‘blisful God’ and ‘Minerva, the white’ for help as he writes his letter to Criseyde, before receiving the advice of Pandarus (*Tr*, II. 1060–63).<sup>7</sup> Pandarus thus ‘answers’ Troilus’s prayer. Another petition from Troilus to Almighty Jove asks for death:

Thanne seyde he thus: ‘Almyghty Jove in trone,  
That woost of al thys thyng the sothfastnesse,  
Rewe on my sorwe: or do me deyen sone,  
Or bryng Criseyde and me fro this destresse!’

(*Tr*, IV. 1079–82)<sup>8</sup>

Although from the point of view of Troilus’s subsequent death this petition might appear effective, it is notable that the successful petition is located between two far preferable outcomes, both denied. Another potentially successful petition, Troilus’s plea for the kindness of the God of Love, discussed below, is linked only tenuously, if at all, to divine action. That Chaucer includes so many prayers and only, possibly, allows a very few to be granted in a poem of over 8000 lines which concerns itself with fate, fortune, predestination,

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<sup>7</sup> For another instance of prayer ‘answered’ by Pandarus, see pp. 228–31 of this chapter. Similarly, the narrator’s prayer for Janus to guide Pandarus to Criseyde’s home in Book II, line 77, is both unnecessary and ‘answered’ by the poet himself, who presents Pandarus’s successful plotting on Troilus’s behalf as well as his safely traversing the well-worn path to his niece’s door. This prayer is discussed briefly on p. 59 of this thesis.

<sup>8</sup> Marenbon notes that the prayer follows Troilus’s long Boethian speech on free will and providence, arguing that the conclusions Troilus draws from his speech make this prayer to Jove pointless. See Marenbon, *Pagans and Philosophers*, pp. 230–31. Megan Murton makes the same point: ‘Troilus seems not to consider how logical it is, in light of his philosophical conclusion, to ask the deity for mercy, liberation, or death’. See Megan Murton, ‘Praying with Boethius in *Troilus and Criseyde*’, *ChR*, 49 (2015), 294–319 (p. 299). On Troilus’s incomplete conclusions concerning providence and free will, and the illogical nature of the following prayer, see also Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*, pp. 97–8.



and tragedy throughout, is highly significant. The slender hope of divine favour expressed in these only-potentially-effective supplications further emphasises the nature of the multitude of unanswered prayers in the text. In addition to the unheard, unanswered prayers, are those which cannot be answered because they ask the impossible. Unanswerable prayers concerned with the meaning of human agency and the transitory nature of joy take centre stage. These receive no answer from the gods – being unanswerable – but are offered an oblique response through the narratorial prayer at the poem's end and through the text's engagement with the Boethian conception of time. Narrative movement in the poem is towards hopelessness and tragedy, but these are structurally encircled by divine love. Hope and hopelessness are each effected through prayer.

The gods of *Troilus and Criseyde* are notable for their absence. Whereas in *The Knight's Tale*, similarly set in the classical, pagan world, Chaucer shows the gods definitively responding to their devotees and intervening in human affairs, the gods in *Troilus and Criseyde* make no noticeable interventions in the lives of the lovers. This divine absence is maintained throughout the poem despite the well-known involvement of the gods in the fate of Troy.<sup>9</sup> Where *The Knight's Tale* demonstrates the disastrous and unpredictable consequences of combative prayer through divine responsiveness to a faithful humanity, *Troilus and Criseyde* presents gods who are seemingly deaf to entreaty. This lack of divine response places a greater focus on human agency, the constraints to such agency when in conflict or when confronted by the unexpected, and the consequences of choices made.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Chaucer introduces the plot through remarking that the story is well-known: 'Yt is wel wist how that the Grekes stronge | In armes with a thousand shippes wente | To Troiwardes' (*Tr*, I. 57–9). The god Phoebus Apollo warns Calkas of the city's destruction (*Tr*, I. 66–70). The tale of the 'Judgement of Paris' presents Juno, Athena, and Venus as responsible for the events leading to the abduction of Helen and thus the war through their request for Paris to judge which goddess was the most beautiful; Paris's choice of Venus causes Athena to support the Greeks in the ensuing war. See Ovid, *Heroides*, in *Heroides and Amores*, ed. and trans. by Grant Showerman (London: Heinemann, 1914), pp. 1–311, XVI. 57–88.

<sup>10</sup> On Chaucer's use of Boethius's argument on the co-existence of free will and divine providence, see Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*, pp. 93–9. On the doubled use of Fortune in both literary and philosophical terms and its relation to divine providence in the poem, see Benson, *Chaucer's Troilus*, pp. 150–61.

If the gods of Troy pay little attention to humankind, their worshippers also do not always approach the divine with much reverence. Troilus's dismissive perusal of the women he sees as he progresses through the crowded temple in the opening scene of the poem shows that his mind is elsewhere than on the feast of Pallas Athena devoutly observed by other Trojans (*Tr*, I. 160–61, 183–89). Criseyde's response to his gaze shows that she, too, has attention to spare from the ceremonies (*Tr*, I. 290–92). Despite the dozens of prayers in the text, Chaucer presents his audience with characters who are at the beginning almost indifferent to the gods. These are not the earnest devotees of the gods seen in *The Knight's Tale*. Their petitionary prayers, which are infrequent in the first and second books, are often confined to a single line and express generic good wishes such as Pandarus's 'God spede us bothe' spoken to Troilus at the end of Book I (*Tr*, I. 1041). Most of the petitionary prayers in *Troilus and Criseyde* are brief in nature and leave little scope for divine intervention. As the poem deepens first into joy and then into tragedy, petitionary prayer becomes more searching while the gods remain elusive.

*To make the sun stand still: praying for the impossible in face of the transitory*

The movement of the poem first upwards into joy before the turn of Fortune's wheel shifts the mood to sorrow is one in which hope punctuated by despair gradually gives way to despair punctuated by hope. The petitionary prayers of the text do not follow the pattern of this emotional shift, instead remaining resolutely unanswered. By expecting no response, by asking the impossible, and by expressing her deep awareness of the transitory nature of joy, Criseyde embodies the hopelessness and futility of petitionary prayer in the text. The majority of her prayers and invocations of the divine expect no answer. Her most frequent references to God are apostrophic uses designed either to emphasise her words or to increase the appearance of sincerity when she speaks to Pandarus, who also liberally punctuates his speech with the name of God. A typical example of both uses occurs when she rejects

Pandarus's call for her to remove her widow's veil: "'I! God forbede!'" quod she. "Be ye mad? | Is that a widewes lif, so God yow save? | By God, ye maken me ryght soore adrad!" (Tr, II. 113–15).<sup>11</sup> Her triple reference to God in these lines bears little relation to a prayer since she is addressing herself directly to Pandarus rather than to any deity. Her use of 'God yow save' is not a genuine request for the protection of her uncle, but rather serves as a challenge to his suggestion that she remove her widow's veil and dance.

Before the point in the text when she embarks on her affair with Troilus, Criseyde's language in reference to the divine is rarely characterised by sincerity. One exception occurs in Book II, when she responds to her uncle's praise of Troilus and Hector with a brief wish for their continued well-being:

'In good feith, em,' quod she, 'that liketh me  
Thei faren well; God save hem bothe two!  
For trewelich I holde it gret deynte  
A kynges sone in armes wel to do.'

(Tr, II. 162–65)

This intercession on behalf of the defenders of the city will be unsuccessful, as both Chaucer and his audience know well. Expressed as an aside subordinate to her dialogue with Pandarus, Criseyde's petition appears almost as reflexive and thoughtless as her frequent apostrophes. Nevertheless, this parenthetical request for protection is the closest Criseyde comes to prayerful supplication in Books I and II. Despite its apparent lack of gravity, her throwaway petition sounds another note of gloom in a tale which from its beginning can only lead to death, disappointment, and loss. As anyone familiar with the fate of Troy knows, both

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<sup>11</sup> Apostrophic references to God by Criseyde number over twenty in Book II alone. See Book II, ll. 113, 114, 115, 123, 127, 133, 183, 213, 225, 243, 246, 276, 309, 590, 759, 885, 1131, 1138, 1212 (twice), 1213, 1230, 1476. This frequency is halved in Book III. See Book III, ll. 120, 123, 162, 761, 807, 849, 869, 941, 1501, 1503, 1566. Such apostrophic references by Criseyde cease altogether in Books IV and V. Benson lists many of the instances when God is named, although he does not specify who uses God's name, nor note the marked decrease of both Pandarus's and Criseyde's apostrophic naming of God after the first two books. He presents the frequency of use in itself as a marker of religious seriousness. See Benson, *Chaucer's Troilus*, pp. 181–82.

Troilus and Hector will die at the hands of Achilles.<sup>12</sup> Chaucer widens the divide between human and divine through Criseyde's hopelessness and lack of expectation.

Criseyde does not remain in this irreligious position, instead developing through the experience of love into a more devout and prayerful person. Her prayers evince a movement from these frequent reflexive, seemingly thoughtless references to God in the earlier books to her more sincere petitions in the final two books. Paradoxically, her deeper devotion develops in the face of her full awareness of the transitory nature of joy, expressed through her Boethian lament in Book III. The inevitability of loss which Criseyde confronts in Book IV, not only loss of love, but also of home and friends, elicits in this essentially pragmatic character a greater, more desperate sense of dependence on the divine rather than on humanity for help. Here she submits five petitions to the gods, overtaking Troilus in her devotion. She asks God, whom she addresses variously as Almighty God, Jove or Jupiter, for peace, mercy, guidance, protection, grace, and, at a moment of despair, death.<sup>13</sup> These gifts remain definitively ungranted. She and Troilus both suffer indecision and misfortune; peace never arrives for the Trojans; and Criseyde is denied the death for which she asks. Given the outcomes of her later, most sincere prayers, Criseyde's lament on love and loss in Book III becomes all the more poignant. Overcoming her reluctance to commit to the affair with Troilus, to exchange her stable existence for the highs and lows of love, represents for Criseyde a shift into a state which is both more precarious and more inclined towards religious devotion.

Our perspective, outside the text but in full knowledge of its tragic end, leads to the discomfort of observing prayers known in advance to be ineffective. For one aspect which

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<sup>12</sup> The tale of the fall of Troy was the subject of one of the great epic romances, *Le Roman de Troie*, in which Troilus's death occurs during the 'dix-neuvième bataille'. Benoît de Sainte-Maure, *Le Roman de Troie*, III, ll. 21290–450.

<sup>13</sup> For Criseyde's five petitions of Book IV, see ll. 693, 738–39, 1149–50, 1561 and 1683–86.

remains constant during Criseyde's spiritual development is the hopelessness of her petitions: even where this hopelessness is not yet recognised by Criseyde, it is known to both the audience and the narrator. Her lament to God, uttered after she has mentally consented to love Troilus but before the affair is consummated makes plain her acute awareness of the inevitability of loss. Criseyde, unlike Troilus, understands the transitory nature of love only too well. As a widow, she has already experienced at least one significant loss.<sup>14</sup>

Relinquishing her predictable and stable state as a widow will involve submitting her happiness to the shifting fortunes which accompany love and so her lament in Book III bewails the intermingling of joy and sorrow that this experience will with certainty bring. Addressing God, she muses upon the instability of life, its mutability. She begins by referring, in language drawn directly from Boethius's *Consolatio*, to the teachings of clerks on false felicity and on the bitterness which mars happiness, acknowledging in this lament the impossibility of clinging on to joy: 'For either joies comen nought yfeere, | Or elles no wight hath hem alwey here' (*Tr*, III. 818–19).<sup>15</sup> Joys arrive and depart unexpectedly; a joy might be grasped for a moment, but cannot be held forever. Chaucer shows Criseyde's clear understanding of loss and the consequent cost of acquiescing to love.

That Chaucer makes this widow's lament into a prayer is significant. Criseyde's prayers are clear-sighted and empty of expectations. Her reflections on the transitory nature of joy show her later experience of bliss to be freely chosen in this knowledge. In Criseyde's estimation, humanity divides itself into two categories: those who are fully aware of the world's mutability and those who are unaware. The person who fails to recognise the fleeting

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<sup>14</sup> The happiness, or otherwise, of her first marriage is not communicated by Chaucer. Criseyde's acknowledgement of the loss of freedom consequent to involvement with a lover implies that regrets accompany marriage in one form or another.

<sup>15</sup> See corresponding lines in Chaucer's translation of the *Consolatio*: *Bo*, II, pr.4, ll. 75–78. Jefferson argues that Criseyde refers to 'worldly prosperity' in her use of the term 'fals felicitee'. The context of her lament – believing herself to have lost Troilus's regard – however implies that by 'worldly selynesse', she refers to something other than wealth. See Jefferson, *Chaucer and the Consolation*, p. 82.

nature of joy is no happier than one who knows it to be transient. Ignorance leads to a state which cannot be termed genuine happiness, while knowledge leads to a fear of loss:

Now if he woot that joie is transitorie,  
 As every joye of worldly thyng mot flee,  
 Than every tyme he that hath in memorie,  
 The drede of lesyng maketh hym that he  
 May in no perfit selynesse be;  
 And if to lese his joie he sette a myte,  
 Than semeth it that joie is worth ful lite.

(*Tr*, III. 827–33)

Neither the ignorant nor the wise can truly be happy, Criseyde decides. Her Boethian reflection leads her to question the worth of joy, an experience fleeting in essence, its very insubstantiality emphasised by terms of near-weightlessness, ‘myte’ and ‘lite’. Accepting joy without fearing its loss means, in Criseyde’s view, that one has not recognised its full value. The immediate context for this outpouring of lament to God is Pandarus’s false report of Troilus’s jealousy. And it is to this jealousy that Criseyde turns, leaving her prayer unfinished, a lament which does not lead into a petition.<sup>16</sup> She abandons the prayer with a dismissive ‘Trewely, for aught I kan espie, | Ther is no verray weele in this world heere’ (*Tr*, III. 835–36). Although uttered in the face of a potentially immediate loss of love and joy, Criseyde’s words demonstrate both her clear-sighted understanding of transience as well as the lack of expectation with which she approaches the divine.

Criseyde’s lament is unanswerable not only because the prayer loses its focus and fails to end with a petition, but also because what she wishes for, eternal joy, cannot exist in time. The lament is soon followed by other unanswerable prayers as the awareness of loss and the transitory nature of joy leads both Troilus and Criseyde to pray for the impossible, for God to stop time itself. The frequency with which both Criseyde and Troilus pray reaches its zenith in Book III of the poem, with supplication as the dominant mode of prayer. Both

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<sup>16</sup> Compare, for example, with Dorigen’s similarly Boethian lament. See p. 152 of this thesis.

praise and thanksgiving feature at the centre point of the book, but these are soon overtaken by curses and petitions for impossibilities as the couple's gratitude for the love they have found in one another swiftly shifts to a heightened awareness of loss as they acknowledge the coming of day and their first separation. Their complaints against the dawn playfully indulge in a literary tradition transmitted through both Boccaccio and Petrarch and dating back at least to Ovid, yet Chaucer transforms this light-heartedness into darkness as the petitions veer into curses against nature and the making of impossible requests of God.<sup>17</sup> Hyperbolically and myopically insisting that he and Criseyde have no need of daylight, Troilus asks God to quench the light of the sun, explicitly describing the dawn as accursed (*Tr*, III. 1450–56). Key to his request is not the manner in which it would flirt with blasphemy, were it spoken by a Christian lover, but its placing of the pair of lovers at the centre of the universe. The sun ought in Troilus's imagination to revolve around these two Trojans hidden at the heart of their city, just as Chaucer ensures that the text and the reader's attention revolves upon this central moment. The sun, source of light and life to the world, is compared by Troilus to an unwanted merchant attempting to flog useless wares: 'What profrestow thi light here for to selle? | Go selle it hem that smale selys grave; | We wol the nought; us nedeth no day have' (*Tr*, III. 1461–63). The lovers' rejection of light draws attention to the delicate balance between playfulness and darkness in this passage.

Criseyde, too, curses the source of life, although more obliquely than Troilus. Complaining against the hastiness of the night in its journey to the Earth's other hemisphere, she asks God to keep the night permanently present on her own side of the world. That this petition is both impossible and undesirable needs no emphasis and Criseyde's petition is as

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<sup>17</sup> For complaints against the coming of the day, see Francesco Petrarca, *A qualunque animale alberga in terra*, trans. by Anna Maria Armì in *Sonnets & Songs* (New York: AMS Press, 1978), pp. 22–5. Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato* contains a brief complaint in the equivalent passage: Boccaccio, *Il Filostrato*, III. 44–5. Also see Ovid, *Amores*, in *Heroides and Amores*, ed. and trans. by Showerman, pp. 313–508, I. 13. None of these examples involve prayers asking for the coming of day to be delayed.

unlikely to be serious as is Troilus's. Their extravagant metaphor is yet another way for the pair of lovers to express their joy in the present and a corresponding reluctance to let the moment pass. In praying for the transitory to become eternal, the lovers knowingly ask for the impossible. Criseyde's lament over the transitory nature of joy and the inevitable losses time brings and the requests both lovers make for God to stop time are not prayers which can be answered in the ways with which we are familiar from Chaucer's other texts. While these unanswered and unanswerable prayers create a sense of hopelessness conducive to the poem's genre as tragedy, Chaucer does not leave the prayers entirely unanswered. As we shall see in the final section of this chapter, he offers instead a Boethian response to these prayers against the transitory. First, however, we turn to another example of praying for the impossible, examining the prayers which reveal Troilus's flawed and limited view of love.

*A love which binds: praying against free will*

Troilus's prayer for the impossibility of stopping time is self-conscious and playful. His petitionary prayer uttered in his hymn to Love after the love affair has become well-established, is similarly impossible to grant, but far from playful. Voicing key elements of Boethius's debate on the possibility of free will coexisting with divine foreknowledge in Book III, he demonstrates both a preoccupation with, and a profound misunderstanding of, human agency.<sup>18</sup> His lack of understanding colours the aims of many of his petitionary prayers, causing him to ask God to control and to constrain human will. The tone of his prayers, offered throughout his pursuit, gain, and loss of Criseyde, is wildly inconsistent, closely following the emotional upheavals he experiences as a lover who achieves the heights of ecstasy and plumbs the depths of despair. In love, he praises Venus, in despair, he curses

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<sup>18</sup> Troilus reproduces much of the debate from Book V, pr. 2 and pr. 3, of the *Consolatio* on the coexistence of free will and divine omniscience, failing to conclude with Lady Philosophy's response to the narrator. See Jefferson, *Chaucer and the Consolation*, pp. 71–80, 139.



Jove, Apollo, and other gods, full of hope once more, he asks God that he might return home to find Criseyde waiting (*Tr*, II. 972–73, V. 207–10, V. 502–4). The most consistent aspect of his petitions is the absence of divine response each evokes. Troilus's many supplications, like those of the other characters in the poem, appear not to be heard. The single exception to the overwhelmingly unanswered status of his many petitions, as mentioned above, is his supplication to the god of Love, uttered as part of his first *canticus*, in which he thanks the god for being brought into his service. In this prayer, Troilus asks the god's blessing: 'Lord, if my service or I | May liken yow, so beth to me benigne' (*Tr*, I. 430–31). It is noteworthy that this petition is unspecific; beyond the good favour of the god, he does not ask to be granted any particular outcome. Although the unspecific nature of its request springs from Troilus's general naivety in matters of love, this characteristic also makes the petition capable of being perceived as one which is granted: to judge by later events, the god of Love has shown good will to Troilus, or has, at least, not shown ill will. The prince's vague request for divine benignity is seemingly fulfilled when his desire for Criseyde reaches fruition.

In striking contrast to the interaction between the human and the divine in resolving matters of desire evident in *The Knight's Tale*, Chaucer here omits what could otherwise be an opportunity to claim divine responsibility for the love affair. Instead, Troilus's success bears no clear sign of having resulted from divine action and is not claimed as such by the narrator. Moreover, Chaucer painstakingly demonstrates the crucial role which the very human Pandarus plays in bringing the lovers together. Without the activities of his friend, Troilus seems likely to have languished until the fall of Troy in a state of hopeless and unfulfilled desire. Each step towards fulfilment is first introduced as a suggestion by Pandarus before being augmented by more or less forceful advice on its execution. A striking reminder of the human activity necessary to bring about a successful conclusion to his

wooing of Criseyde occurs during one of Troilus's prayers to Venus.<sup>19</sup> Uttered moments before the expected consummation of the love affair, his petition for the goddess's grace is pointedly interrupted by his friend. Pandarus's own deliberate and carefully planned actions will fulfil the promise he gives in response to his young friend's request to Venus when he remarks, 'Ne drede the nevere a deel, | For it shal be right as thow wolt desire; | So thryve I, this nyght shal I make it weel' (*Tr*, III. 708–10). Although Troilus continues his supplications to the gods despite these assurances, Pandarus's point is made: human action will bring about all that Troilus desires. Even where the activities of the gods might be shown to be responsible for events in direct response to supplication, Chaucer diverts attention instead to human involvement in answering Troilus's prayers.

Chaucer's redirection to the role of human agency is set in opposition to the tenor of the petition thus interrupted by Pandarus. In his dealings with Criseyde, Troilus frequently displays a reluctance to recognise or to accept human agency; this denial of agency is at the heart of the extraordinary and disquieting language which he uses in his continuation of the petition to Venus. These prayers occur immediately prior to his entrance into Pandarus's bedchamber where Criseyde has been entreated to take refuge from the rain. The gods to whom he appeals for help at this pivotal point, and the episodes in which they have intervened in human lives which he chooses to draw to their attention in hopes of divine favour, illustrate a deeply disturbing undercurrent to the narrative. Here, in Troilus's many supplications, the reader is starkly reminded of the inequality between the two lovers, an inequality which subverts Troilus's rhetoric of service, derived as it is from the ideals of *fīn'amor*. Although he continues his petition to Venus by asking for her favourable intercession with Jupiter on his behalf, he moves swiftly to addressing other deities:

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<sup>19</sup> In mimicry of the *Ave Maria*, Troilus's invocation to Venus addresses her as 'Venus ful of mirthe' (*Tr*, III. 715).

O Jove ek, for the love of faire Europe,  
 The which in forme of bole away thow fette,  
 Now help! O Mars, thow with thi bloody cope,  
 For love of Cipris, thow me nought ne lette!  
 O Phebus, thynk whan Dane hireselven shette  
 Under the bark, and laurer wax for drede;  
 Yet for hire love, O help now at this nede!

Mercurie, for the love of Hierse eke,  
 For which Pallas was with Aglawros wroth,  
 Now help!

(*Tr*, III. 722–31)

None of these four episodes presents an appealing model of mutual love.<sup>20</sup> The affair of Mars and Cipris/Venus, although mutual, was famously adulterous and ended in humiliation at the hands of Vulcan.<sup>21</sup> The other three represent disastrous encounters in which female agency is overruled by amorous gods. Mercury's love for the human Herse brings misery and death to her sister Aglauros.<sup>22</sup> Jove and Apollo both force their will upon the unwelcoming objects of their attention.<sup>23</sup> Troilus's words betray his view that the rape of Europa and the attempted rape of Daphne are unequivocal evidence of love. In asking such gods for help as he prepares to meet with Criseyde, he identifies his own feelings towards his beloved with those of the gods who have denied agency to the female objects of their desire.<sup>24</sup> For Troilus, the process of seeking Criseyde's consent to the affair exists to fulfil the requirements of *fin'amor*. As Windeatt writes of Troilus's service to his lady, 'While such service may be accepted as an endless, open-ended commitment, there is also a sense

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<sup>20</sup> Also notable for increasing the overall effect of this petition is Troilus's appeal to Venus's love of Adonis, 'that with the boor was slawe' (*Tr*, III. 721). This appeal, which precedes the section of the prayer quoted above, echoes that of Palamon, which is considered elsewhere in this thesis.

<sup>21</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, I, IV. 165–89.

<sup>22</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, I, II. 805–35.

<sup>23</sup> For the myth of Apollo and Daphne, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, I, I. 452–567. For the rape of Europa, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, I, II. 843–75.

<sup>24</sup> The rape of Europa was not necessarily viewed by all as an act of violence. *L'Ovide Moralisé* presents the episode as a Christian motif representing the salvific effect of the Incarnation, an allegorical reading which implies a benign reception of Ovid's tale. See *L'Ovide Moralisé: Poème du commencement du quatorzième siècle*, ed. by C. de Boer, 5 vols (Amsterdam: Johannes Müller, 1915–38) I, II. 5103–38.

that to serve is to deserve, and to lead on to fulfilment.<sup>25</sup> While Criseyde will make her consent clear, for Troilus the awareness that his long-awaited goal is within his grasp leads him to portray his lady as prey and he as the hunter, as he informs her triumphantly once she is in his arms: ‘Now be ye kaught’ (*Tr*, III. 1207). Chaucer shows that the beliefs expressed in Troilus’s prayers draw from his surrounding culture. The besieged city of Troy demonstrates a tolerance for coercive behaviour; Troilus’s own partaking in this culture informs his petition to God in Book III’s hymn of praise to Love.

Spearing discusses Chaucer’s approach to writing his epic poem as one in which traces of the poet’s changing priorities are evident as the poem progresses while being at all times constrained by the inevitable end of the protagonists’ love affair.<sup>26</sup> His approach presents Chaucer as operating within tightly confined boundaries, rather appropriately for a poem concerned with agency, and moreover as one who is struck with an awareness of Criseyde’s own limited choices. He argues that Chaucer surpasses Boccaccio and his earlier sources in his understanding of ‘the pressures Criseyde was under – a woman in a besieged city, the daughter of a traitor, without the support of husband, father or kinsfolk and now the unwilling object of an exchange of prisoners.’<sup>27</sup> This observation touches upon a crucial aspect of Criseyde’s experience which throws Troilus’s prayer in the ‘stewe’ into sharp relief. For the potential for rape is never far from the surface throughout *Troilus and Criseyde*.<sup>28</sup> It is the fate to which Criseyde is implicitly abandoned when forced to leave the city of Troy for the Greek encampment and is present in a Trojan disregard for female consent.<sup>29</sup> Troilus

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<sup>25</sup> Windeatt, *Troilus*, p. 230.

<sup>26</sup> Spearing, ‘Time in *Troilus and Criseyde*’, pp. 66–72.

<sup>27</sup> Spearing, ‘Time in *Troilus and Criseyde*’, p. 68.

<sup>28</sup> For a useful discussion of the imagery of rape in the poem, as well as Criseyde’s consent and military *jouissance* in Troy, see Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, pp. 214–30. For a discussion of the prayer’s imagery of rape as ‘Ovidian freight’, see Chance, *The Mythographic Chaucer*, pp. 136–39.

<sup>29</sup> The Trojan parliament does not seek Criseyde’s consent when exchanging her for Antenor as requested by the Greeks (*Tr*, IV. 211–17). While this episode evinces a disregard for the consent of the individual, elsewhere, as noted above, female consent is notably absent from consideration.

implicates himself in this culture by blithely promising to reward his friend Pandarus with any of his sisters, even Helen, paying no regard to any wishes the women might have in the matter (*Tr*, III. 407–13). Yet, without negating his acceptance of a culture which tacitly permits the overruling of female consent, the prayer which Troilus utters before encountering Criseyde also arises from his own sexual naivety and anxiety. He too has been manipulated as Pandarus instructs him in each move he must make in order to gain his beloved.<sup>30</sup> This manipulation reaches a farcical literality when Pandarus must physically lift Troilus into bed with Criseyde (*Tr*, III. 1096–97). At the moment of his prayer he is hidden away in the ‘stewe’ and overcome with fear. In this situation Troilus resembles less the one in pursuit than the one pursued, being in this state less like Apollo than Daphne as she takes refuge in the form of a laurel tree finally to escape the god’s unwanted attention. The theme of coercion and a denial of agency will both recur in Troilus’s great Boethian hymn to love at the end of Book III.

As the previous chapter demonstrated, Chaucer often engages in multiple layers of discourse through the use of prayer. Here the voice of Pandarus questions the motivation behind the petition, drawing out Troilus’s fear to act. Pandarus quite rightly surmises that Troilus’s prayer spills out of his fear when he mockingly interrupts the petition to ask if Troilus believes Criseyde will bite (*Tr*, III. 736–37). Although the culture of besieged Troy encourages him to appeal at this moment to gods who besiege, abduct, and force themselves upon the objects of their affection, Troilus does not require the help of divine rapists. Pandarus and Criseyde give him the assistance and reassurance he needs. Human intervention, rather than divine, results in a successful conclusion to his wooing. And

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<sup>30</sup> Johnathan M. Newman argues that Pandarus represents an Ovidian *praeceptor amoris* as he instructs Troilus in the art of seduction. See Jonathan M. Newman, ‘Dictators of Venus: Clerical Love Letters and Female Subjugation in *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Rota Veneris*’, *SAC*, 36 (2014), 103–38 (p. 127). On the visibility of Pandarus’s machinations and Chaucer’s presentation of agency in the undertaking of the love affair, see Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*, pp. 71–3.

although Troilus will thank the gods to whom he prayed, the mockery of Pandarus reminds the lover exactly whose intentions and actions have brought about the situation in which he finds himself on the threshold of the bedchamber. Pandarus's interruption of Troilus's prayer demonstrates his awareness of his own role and his rejection of divine intervention.

Petitionary prayers, as we have seen, expose the deep-seated beliefs and desires of those who utter them. Troilus's petitions demonstrate a partial, and flawed, view of love. Crucially, he envisages love as contest, battle, and game, in which one participant succeeds in subduing the other. His view accords with those expressed by the narrator. Continuing a discourse which denies female agency, Chaucer presents Criseyde as captured prey, placing her in a grammatically passive position:

Criseyde, which that felte hire thus itake,  
As writen clerkes in hire bokes olde,  
Right as an aspes leef she gan to quake,  
Whan she hym felte hire in his armes folde.

(*Tr*, III. 1198–1201)

Criseyde, who has been actively reassuring and kissing Troilus, laying her own arm upon him a few lines before this passage, becomes in this inversion a trembling leaf, a mere lark caught by a predator designated with the name of another unfortunate bird: 'What myghte or may the sely larke seye, | When that the sperhawk hath it in his foot?' (*Tr*, III. 1191–92). Despite this depiction of her as passive and lacking the scope to act in any meaningful sense, Criseyde's explicit consent to her physical union with Troilus is given in increasingly strong terms. Accepting the hunting metaphor which has continued into Troilus's triumphant proclamation that he has caught her, Criseyde emphasises her own ability to act decisively, remarking: 'Ne hadde I er now, my swete herte deere, | Ben yolde, ywis, I were now nought heere!' (*Tr*, III. 1210–11).<sup>31</sup> Her full consent is soon afterwards voiced in this unequivocal

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<sup>31</sup> Mann argues that this is the moment in which Criseyde realises that she has already yielded to Troilus. Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2002), p. 23.

statement: ‘Welcome, my knight, my pees, my suffisaunce!’ (*Tr*, III. 1309). Troilus’s initial inability to perceive the evidence that his lover had freely chosen him has deep-rooted causes, however, stemming not only from his culture’s disregard for female consent, but also from his own difficulties in accepting the notion of agency. These difficulties give rise to another surprising and problematic petition contained in the *Canticus Troili*, which we shall next analyse in detail.

Troilus’s hymn of praise to Love, a hymn he voices as a successful lover, rather than as one who aspires to love, proves at least as problematic as his petition for help from divine rapists. Chaucer diverges from his Boethian source for the hymn, changing the order of sentiments expressed as well as heightening the emphasis on love’s binding qualities in order to imbue Troilus’s prayer with images of coercion.<sup>32</sup> The hymn begins as a paean to Love:

Love, that of erthe and se hath governaunce,  
 Love, that his hestes hath in hevene hye,  
 Love, that with an holsom alliaunce  
 Halt peples joyned, as hym lest hem gye.

(*Tr*, III. 1744–47)

In this hymn of praise, Troilus calls to mind the binding properties of generative, sexual love.<sup>33</sup> While the passage is borrowed from Boethius, the order of the enumerated qualities of love is inverted by Troilus. Lady Philosophy begins with the balance sustained in creation, a balance which prevents the sea from overflowing the land and holds the day and the night in predictable quotidian variation. The sustaining power capable of binding such opposing forces together she names as love (*Bo*, II, m.8, ll. 1–16). Troilus, by contrast, first praises love before considering its stabilising powers. Chaucer here borrows Boethius’s concept of a love translated in *Boece* as the force which ‘knytteth’ people together: ‘This love halt togidres peples joyned with an holy boond, and knytteth sacrement of mariages of chaste

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<sup>32</sup> Compare the *Consolatio*, Book II, m.8.

<sup>33</sup> This Boethian passage replaces the much longer hymn, ‘O luce eterna’, in *Il Filostrato*, III. 74–89.

loves' (*Bo*, II, m.8, ll. 21–4).<sup>34</sup> After this point, however, the hymn of praise shifts its course, as Troilus begins to focus on the notion of the bond of love, which he recognises as deriving from God.

Further deviation from Boethian concepts make evident the extent to which Troilus's beliefs shape his prayer, as the *canticus* begins to stray into coercive imagery. The hymn develops into an indirect petition as Troilus expresses his desire that this divine force might be used to constrict humanity as earth, sea, and the heavenly bodies are constrained:

So wolde God, that auctour is of kynde,  
That with his bond Love of his vertu liste  
To cerclen hertes alle and faste bynde,  
That from his bond no wight the wey out wiste;  
And hertes colde, hem wolde I that he twiste  
To make hem love, and that hem liste ay rewe  
On hertes sore, and kepe hem that ben trewe!

(*Tr*, III. 1765-71)

The repetition of 'bond', 'cerclen', 'bynde', and another 'bond' leads to Troilus's brutal petition that God would twist the hearts of reluctant lovers, thus compelling them to love. This language is far removed from its Boethian source, with its gentle metaphor of a power which knits people together.<sup>35</sup> The substitution of imagery which emphasises the sudden irresistibility of love echoes Troilus's own experience, as Minnis writes:

The statement that God can twist cold hearts to love and pity comes across, at least in part, as a declaration of the power of heterosexual love to strike where it will, as it did when the cold heart of Troilus was warmed with love for Criseyde.<sup>36</sup>

While Minnis argues that Troilus has here achieved the heights of pagan enlightenment, his use in the quotation above of the qualifying phrase 'at least in part' hints at the unresolved

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<sup>34</sup> Troilus, however, refers to those who live together in virtue, rather than in the 'sacrement of mariages of chaste loves' (*Tr*, III. 1749).

<sup>35</sup> Murton contrasts the language of love's 'binding' in this passage with Troilus's earlier use of the image in Book I, arguing that in the later hymn Troilus uses the word to refer to the harmonious nature of love. See Murton, 'Praying with Boethius', p. 314. While this interpretation fits the consummation scene with which she compares this hymn, it does not account for Troilus's inversions of the Boethian lines to emphasise constraint, as discussed in this section.

<sup>36</sup> Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*, p. 101.



tension between Troilus's experience of love's unexpected advent and his reluctance to acknowledge the agency involved in consenting to love.<sup>37</sup> His petition, evoking his initial shock in the temple rather than any subsequent experiences, demonstrates that very little has changed in his conception of love. Rather than two beings intertwined and enmeshed, the language of this prayer recalls the hunting imagery behind his earlier, wondering question to Criseyde:

O eyen clere,  
It weren ye that wrought me swich wo,  
Ye humble nettes of my lady deere!  
Though ther be mercy writen in youre cheere,  
God woot, the text ful hard is, soth, to fynde!  
How koude ye withouten bond me bynde?

(Tr, III. 1353–58)

Love, in Troilus's view, is entrapment. His final question recognises the puzzle to which he later returns in his hymn of praise, yet he demonstrates little enlightenment or progression in his understanding of love when he requests that God bind others as he has been bound. He continues to draw upon metaphors of coercion.

The petition appended to Troilus's Boethian hymn further crystallises the subversion of love's binding qualities through the use not only of coercive, but increasingly violent imagery. In conjunction with his perception that anyone could be forced to love, a belief in direct opposition to Criseyde's earlier assertion otherwise, Troilus employs a range of violent imagery in this prayer, thus subverting the praise to Love with which he begins his song.<sup>38</sup> The first stanza of the *canticus* had begun with a more gentle metaphor of binding, referring to 'an holsom alliaunce', to 'acord', and to the love 'that knetteth lawe of compaignie' (Tr, III. 1746–50). In the second and third stanzas Troilus considers the condition of stability and

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<sup>37</sup> Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*, p. 100.

<sup>38</sup> Criseyde argues that she, and by extension humankind, cannot be forced to love (Tr, II. 478–79). This assertion is reinforced in her insistent statements of consent to the consummation of the love affair, as noted above.

the binding of discordant elements in nature. Love rules the predictable alternation between day and night; just as the sea is constrained from breaching and flooding the land, so Love's restraint enables love itself to flourish. The transition to the third stanza, however, marks a sudden shift in Troilus's language. During the third stanza, harsh, violent imagery begins to invade the previously gentle tone: the sea is greedy and fierce, eager to drench the land; all that is held together by love would leap asunder given the first opportunity (*Tr*, III. 1758–64). This is a vision of the chaos only held in check by Love's firm grip on the bridle: the sun and the moon, the earth and sea are held together by the same bond of enforced harmony, Troilus supposes, as he and Criseyde are held.

The gentle stability of the second stanza is entirely abandoned in the fourth, when Troilus pleads that God will 'twist' cold hearts in forcing them to love. Rather than being an organic bond which develops with patience and accord, here love becomes a prison, which 'no wight the wey out wiste' (*Tr*, III. 1768). The circling bond as conceived by Troilus begins to resemble an antithesis to the walls of Troy, a trap rather than a shelter. To some extent, his concern reflects the lengths to which he and Pandarus were willing to go in order to persuade Criseyde to accept him as her lover. The harmonic bond is transformed in Troilus's final stanza to an imprisoning grasp, where the person, in the synecdoche of the cold heart, can only be held in love by force. In some sense, this attitude towards love seeps into his perception of Criseyde and his repeated concern that she will be untrue. Her breaking of troth with him results from the form of love for which he prays. Exiled from her city and friends, surrounded by hostile Greeks, unable to count for protection on the father who abandoned her in his flight from Troy, Criseyde is faced with a stark choice when propositioned by Diomedes. Granting him her 'love' in such circumstances is very close to the meek submission to violent coercion suggested by Troilus's petition. Through Troilus's prayers both before and after the consummation of the affair, Chaucer exposes the prince's

deep-seated misunderstanding of free will and the nature of love itself. As asking for the experience of earthly joy to surpass its transitory nature is to ask an impossibility, so too is Troilus's plea that love can be enforced. Their impossibility means that these prayers are not only unanswered, but unanswerable. Yet, as the second half of this chapter aims to show, Chaucer answers the problems presented by these unanswerable, impossible prayers through the very structure of the poem.

*Encircling love: a Trinitarian answer to the Canticus Troili*

Troilus's and Criseyde's petitions cannot and will not be granted: earthly joys must remain transitory and the existence of free will precludes any divine coercion even to love. The prayers are impossible to grant in their own terms and yet they do not remain entirely unanswered. This section examines the prayers of the poem's conclusion, reading the final Trinitarian prayer as an oblique answer offered to Troilus's desire for 'binding' love. The following section will continue the structural emphasis by counterbalancing this analysis of the poem's conclusion with a close reading of its central moment. The oblique answers Chaucer offers through structure are effected by an exposition at these two points of the Trinitarian and Boethian references present throughout the text. Troilus's desire for an encircling love receives its response in the narratorial petitionary prayer with which the poem concludes. The poem's complex closure finishes with a Trinitarian prayer.<sup>39</sup> Here the narrator makes two final requests, having shifted from consideration of matters of love and war under the sway of the pagan gods to the explicitly Christian language of a fourteenth-

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<sup>39</sup> Wheeler argues that the Trinitarian prayer produces a 'genuine resolution [...] which does not repudiate any of the meanings asserted or suggested in the previous sixteen stanzas or by the rest of the poem'. See Bonnie Wheeler, 'Dante, Chaucer, and the Ending of *Troilus and Criseyde*', *Philological Quarterly*, 61 (1982), 105–23 (p. 117). For Wheeler's discussion of Chaucer's use of Dante's Trinitarian prayer, see pp. 117–21. On the importance of the poem's ending to the interpretation of the whole, E. Talbot Donaldson writes: 'While I must admit that the nature of this passage, its curious twists and turns, its occasional air of fecklessness, set it off from what has gone before, it also seems to me to be the head of the whole body of the poem.' See his *Speaking of Chaucer* (London: Athlone Press, 1977), p. 92.

century English audience. One of these petitions asks that the narrator and audience be made worthy of the mercy of Jesus, while the other asks protection from ‘visible and invisible foon’ (*Tr*, V. 1866). The language of this second petition would have been extremely familiar to the poem’s audience, its words appearing in many contemporary prayers for protection included in books of hours.<sup>40</sup> As we have seen in earlier chapters, such prayers often suggested both temporal, physical enmity, such as that faced in war, and spiritual enmity, which might be posed by demons, or, more amorphously, sin. A request for protection from enemies naturally follows an epic poem underpinned by the inescapable knowledge that Troy will fall to its enemies, although in a mythic time outside that of the narrative. To the Trojans, the Greeks were certainly visible, tangible enemies. Late fourteenth-century England was familiar with such foes.<sup>41</sup> Invisible enmity, on the other hand, could be suggested both by the narrator’s condemnation of pagan gods and pagan rites and by his emphasis on the potential for betrayal in love. Because this prayer follows the narrator’s surprisingly sharp condemnation of pagan gods and the matter of ‘olde clerkis speche’, it is tempting to understand the invisible foes as those many ways in which the pagan characters fail to meet Christian standards.

In order to consider the possibility that invisible enmity refers to the forces behind the lovers’ affair, presumably condemned as ‘wrecched worldes appetites’, we should first examine the narrator’s concluding condemnation of paganism in detail:

Lo here, of payens corsed olde rites!  
Lo here, what alle hire goddes may availle!

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<sup>40</sup> Duffy writes that the frequency of protective prayers in books of hours indicates a perception amongst the faithful of being confronted by relentless enmity. See Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, p. 266. For references to enemies visible and invisible, see, for example: ‘Isabel Ruddok’s Prayer’, trans. by Scott-Stokes in *Women’s Books of Hours*, p. 136. See also the popular prayer for protection, *Deus propicius esto*, in *Horae Eboracenses*, p. 125. The formulation ‘omnibus hostibus malis visibilibus et inuisibilibus’ is also present in the protective prayer *Omnipotens Dominus Christus*, in *Horae Eboracenses*, p. 126. Prayers for protection have been discussed in detail in Chapter One of this thesis, while specific examples of such prayers have featured in Chapters Three and Four. See pp. 37–8.

<sup>41</sup> Marenbon suggests that this prayer reminds the audience that such protection from foes will not spare them from sharing in the same difficulties faced by Troilus. See Marenbon, *Pagans and Philosophers*, p. 232.

Lo here, thise wrecched worldes appetites!  
 Lo here, the fyn and guerdoun for travaille  
 Of Jove, Appollo, of Mars, of swich rascaille!  
 Lo here, the forme of olde clerkis speche  
 In poetrie, if ye hire bokes seche.

(*Tr*, V. 1849–55)

The language in this passage blazes as the narrator dismisses the pagan gods and the practices of those who worshipped them. Phillips describes the effect of this unexpected condemnation near the poem's conclusion: 'Its final stanzas are dismissive of emotional consciousness – affect – in terms that seem less than adequate, at one point simply condemning what the poem has presented because of its pagan setting.'<sup>42</sup> Rosemarie McGerr writes of the narratorial betrayal of the reader at this point, arguing that the condemnations attempt to present as closed issues 'on which medieval theologians did not agree'.<sup>43</sup> McCall expresses a typical view of the passage when he writes that these lines express the 'limited' vision of the pagan characters, arguing that the passage passes judgement on the pagan world, which 'failed to offer real hope or freedom'.<sup>44</sup> This judgement he sees as being voiced from 'outside the narrative', implying a seriousness of intent and authorial condemnation.<sup>45</sup> Wheeler, on the other hand, argues that Chaucer's use of *repetitio* and *exclamatio* refuse clarity, leaving the issue open:

The 'Lo here' is just as dramatic, and just as imprecise, as the 'Swich fyn'; each implies condemnation of the world (and of poetry) through forceful repetition, but each reserves final judgement to the audience.<sup>46</sup>

What each of these views shares is an acknowledgement that this stanza and its condemnation of pagan rites and the pagan gods seem out of place and at odds with the rest of the poem.

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<sup>42</sup> Phillips, 'The Matter of Chaucer', p. 78.

<sup>43</sup> McGerr, *Chaucer's Open Books*, pp. 117–18.

<sup>44</sup> McCall, *Chaucer Among the Gods*, p. 41.

<sup>45</sup> McCall, *Chaucer Among the Gods*, pp. 103–4.

<sup>46</sup> Wheeler, 'Dante and Chaucer', p. 116. See Donaldson on the style of both stanzas, in which the concluding couplet 'has undone the work' of the preceding five lines: *Speaking of Chaucer*, pp. 98–9. For a discussion of the critical tendency to understand the poem from the perspective of its ending, see Windeatt, 'Troilus and Criseyde: Love in a Manner of Speaking', in *Writings on Love in the English Middle Ages*, ed. by Helen Clooney (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 81–97 (pp. 81–2).

Yet reading this condemnation in the light of Troilus's prayer in the 'stewe' offers some answers.

Rather than condemning the inhabitants of Troy for their pagan devotions, this sudden, passionate disavowal addresses the city's acceptance of coercion responsible for the lovers' separation and for Criseyde's turn towards Diomedes. The triple rhyme of 'availle', 'travaille', and 'rascaille' heavily implies that the gods are callously responsible for Troilus's loss of Criseyde and his death. Yet the gods named here rarely figure in the prayers of the characters; the reader has observed no pagan rites, despite characters' visits to the temple. The narrator's condemnation of the three named gods, Jove, Apollo, and Mars, recalls instead their invocation in Troilus's prayer for help in Pandarus's house and his appeal to their most malign aspects. His prayer, of course, was neither necessary nor effectual, rather highlighting his confusion, fear, and passivity than representing 'cursed rites'. Indeed, these members of the divine 'rascaille' draw the wrath of Troilus on several occasions, often featuring in his oaths and curses, including his passionate cry to Death after he leaves Criseyde outside the walls of Troy. On this occasion he curses most of the gods, along with himself and every creature 'save his lady' (*Tr*, V. 205–10). Moreover, while these gods have neither been much invoked and nor have they been shown to be involved in the lives of their worshippers, the devotional practices of those same worshippers have received little attention from Chaucer; the narrator's sudden attention to their rites seems misdirected. It seems unlikely, therefore, that the ineffectual pagan gods represent the invisible enemies from whom the narrator asks divine protection. Instead, the passage serves to recall Troilus's moment of fear and misguided appeal to the gods and their coercive methods, which, as we have seen in the previous section, inform Troilus's later prayer for 'binding' love.

By contrast, the poem is greatly concerned with Troilus's, Pandarus's, and Criseyde's travails in pursuit of the 'wrecched worldes appetites'. Such a worldly focus might

legitimately be the target of the narratorial outburst and the consequent prayer for protection. Since all partial goods are transitory, their gain is not adequate reward for the effort required in order to attain them. In Boethius's *Consolatio*, Lady Philosophy is uncompromising on the dead end to which indulging in bodily pleasures will lead:

But what schal I seye of delyces of body, of whiche delices the desirynges ben ful of anguyssch, and the fulfillynges of hem ben ful of penance? How grete seknesses and how grete sowres unsuffrable, ryght as a maner fruyt of wykkidnesse, ben thilke delices wont to bryngen to the bodyes of folk that usen hem! Of which delices I not what joie mai ben had of here moevynge, but this woot I wel, that whosoevere wol remembren hym of hise luxures, he schal wel undirstonden that the issues of delices ben sorweful and sorye. And yif thilke delices mowen maken folk blisful, thanne by the same cause moten thise beestis ben clepid blisful, of whiche beestis al the entencioun hasteth to fulfille here bodily jolyte.

(*Bo*, III, pr.7, ll. 1–16)

Physical pleasure cannot lead to bliss, otherwise beasts would be blissful. Crucially, one of the factors leading to the bitterness left by bodily pleasure is that it is by nature transitory:

Every delit hath this, that it angwisscheth hem with prykkes that usen it. It resembleth to thise flyenge flyes that we clepen ben; that, aftir that the be hath sched hise agreeable honyes, he fleeth away, and styngeth the hertes of hem that ben ysmyte, with bytynge overlonge holdynge.

(*Bo*, III, m.7)

Lady Philosophy's condemnation of physical pleasure as a means to joy is absolute. Through the five successive lines beginning 'such fyn', evoking the sense of waste at Troilus's death, the narrator holds up to his audience's examination the inevitable end of such efforts, encouraging instead the unfailing love of the crucified Christ in the following stanza (*Tr*, V. 1842–48). If so, the joy at the heart of the poem, located in the consummation scene, is deceptive and believing otherwise might represent the dangerous enmity, formless and imperceptible, which seemingly threatens the narrator and his audience and from which he seeks protection.

Situated between the narrator's response to Troilus's death and his condemnation of the pagan gods, is a sudden redirection of the audience's attention. Encouraging young

people especially to lift their eyes to the God in whose image they were made, the narrator recommends they turn their love from fallible earthly recipients to one whose love will not fail:

And loveth hym the which that right for love  
Upon a crois, oure soules for to beye,  
First starf, and roos, and sit in hevene above;  
For he nyl falsen no wight, dar I seye,  
That wol his herte al holly on hym leye.

(Tr, V. 1842–46)

Love should be directed to a lover whose faithfulness has been demonstrated through suffering of a different nature to Troilus's. Some critics have argued that the condemnation of pagans offers a sudden reversal and the clarity to see the lovers as wrong, or even idolatrous, in their actions.<sup>47</sup> Most, however, recognise that to view Troilus and Criseyde's love affair as lacking the greater good of divine love does not entail a denial of any enduring good located in their moment of union. After describing the separate paths taken by the pagan Troilus and the Christian narrator, John Frankis, for example, writes:

By putting this humanist story into the mouth of a Christian narrator, however, Chaucer can quite sincerely assert the triviality and transience of various aspects of human experience, while leaving the reader with an impression of the lasting value of these same things.<sup>48</sup>

By seeking to reconcile the evident joy of the love affair with its transience and with the narratorial condemnation of pagan practices, Frankis draws attention to the relationship between the consummation scene and the narrator's seemingly misdirected broadside against pagan rites. Both the text itself and the critical response to the mingling of Christian and

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<sup>47</sup> Minnis argues that Chaucer distances his narrator from the views and practices of 'noble but limited people'. Chaucer, he writes, is concerned to present the facts historically, however, rather than to condemn Criseyde on moral grounds. See Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*, pp. 66–9. John Frankis argues that these lines display the 'tragedy of paganism' and that in them the Christian narrator 'rediscovers his own religion'. See John Frankis, 'Paganism and Pagan Love in *Troilus and Criseyde*', in *Essays on Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. by Mary Salu (Cambridge: Brewer, 1979), pp. 57–72 (p. 71). In contrast, Wheeler refers to the condemnation of pagans as typical of Chaucer's method of 'taunting' readers into being reductive. See Wheeler, 'Dante and Chaucer', p. 115. Benson describes the lines as 'bluster' (*Chaucer's Troilus*, p. 199).

<sup>48</sup> Frankis, 'Paganism and Pagan Love', p. 72.



pagan referents in its final few stanzas invite the reader to reconsider the poem's central moment in light of its ending.

The prayer which concludes *Troilus and Criseyde* is one of the most explicitly Christian narratorial prayers amongst Chaucer's works. As the narrator emerges by stages from the pagan, classical setting of the poem to a fourteenth-century audience, this concluding prayer begins to seem as if it might be that of the poet himself, addressing his audience directly.<sup>49</sup> This effect creates an impression of sincerity strengthened by the concluding prayer's position following Chaucer's personal dedication and commendation of the book to 'moral Gower' and 'philosophical Strode'.<sup>50</sup> The apparently personal voice in which the prayer is written is emphasised by its three-line address: 'And to that sothfast Crist, that starf on rode, | With al myn herte of mercy evere I preye, | And to the Lord right thus I speke and seye' (*Tr*, V. 1860–62). These three lines signal a transition from addressing the audience, where the third person is used in reference to 'sothfast Crist, that starf', to a prayer which directly addresses the Lord as 'thow'. The heartfelt nature of the lines to follow is stressed through the emotive, the immediate, and the personal. This sincere, present narrator draws upon the emotive through explicitly connecting his heart to the mercy he seeks; indicates immediacy through the phrase 'right thus'; and, finally, links himself firmly

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<sup>49</sup> The prayer resembles the 'Retraction' by seeming to be a rare occasion to hear Chaucer's voice unmediated through a narrator, and both prayers have been discussed in this way. John Tatlock, for example, writes that at the end of *The Parson's Tale*, in the 'Retraction', the 'writer is speaking in his own person'. See John S. P. Tatlock, 'Chaucer's Retractions', *PMLA*, 28 (1913), 521–29 (p. 521). Ann Chalmers Watts makes a similar suggestion about the 'Retraction', comparing it to the concluding prayer in *Troilus*, arguing that in this prayer the narrating voice 'comes close to the author himself'. See Ann Chalmers Watts, 'Chaucerian Selves – Especially Two Serious Ones', *ChR*, 4 (1970), 229–41 (pp. 236–38). Julie Orlemanski discusses a specific instance of a fifteenth-century compiler who clearly wished to view the 'Retraction' as both sincere and moral: 'The refashioned didactic context of the "Retraction" in Cambridge, Magdalene College MS Pepys 2006 lessens the probability of its being read ironically. Accompanied by the instructive prose works *The Tale of Melibee* and *The Parson's Tale* but lacking the company of those "tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne," Chaucer's palinode no longer stands in the same coy proximity to what it disavows as it does in complete manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*.' See Julie Orlemanski, 'Genre', in *A Handbook of Middle English Studies*, ed. by Marion Turner (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), pp. 208–21 (p. 218).

<sup>50</sup> Chaucer highlights the personal nature of these relationships through the emphatic repetition of pronouns in these lines: 'to the and to the' (*Tr*, V. 1857).

and personally to the prayer which follows through the emphatic repetition of the personal pronoun 'I': 'I preye', 'I speke and saye'. Rather than demonstrating the prayer to be a genuine outpouring of Chaucer's own petition, these details create the impression at least of personal sincerity.

One significant impact of this turn towards a more personal narratorial voice is that it represents a distancing from the voice which has narrated the poem until the point at which Book V begins to draw to a close in its 'succession of endings', as Windeatt describes the poem's conclusion.<sup>51</sup> The Christian reframing of a poem which has dealt thus far with pagan characters and pagan gods is complete:

Thow oon, and two, and thre, eterne on lyve,  
That regnest ay in thre, and two, and oon,  
Uncircumscript, and al maist circumscribe,  
Us from visible and invisible foon  
Defende, and to thy mercy, everichon,  
So make us, Jesus, for thi mercy, digne,  
For love of mayde and moder thyn benigne.  
Amen.

(Tr, V. 1863–70)

We have already discussed the visible and invisible enemies from whom the prayer seeks protection. The God to whom this prayer is addressed is the Trinity and the language Chaucer uses in this address is significant. The first three lines of the prayer are taken from Dante's *Paradiso* and offer a celestial vision of an unbounded Trinity which binds all creation together.<sup>52</sup> This is the concept towards which Troilus has grasped in his focus upon the encircling nature of love. Unlike the walls of Troy, which have suffered a long siege, the Trinity encircles all without being itself circumscribed. The use of the words 'circumscript' and 'circumscribe' also echoes earlier mentions of love as capable of engraving hearts and

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<sup>51</sup> Windeatt, *Troilus*, p. 305. Benson describes the poem's conclusion as 'a paradigm of the multiplicity of the poem as a whole'. See Benson, *Chaucer's Troilus*, p. 191.

<sup>52</sup> 'Quello uno e due e tre che sempre vive | e regna sempre in tre e due e uno, | non circoscritto, e tutto circoscrive.' Dante, *Paradiso*, XIV. 28–30.

engraving stone.<sup>53</sup> Such metaphoric inscriptions of the heart involve some pain. The mystery of love embodied in the Trinity is inclusive, however, as indicated by the prefix ‘circum-’, rather than invasive, as the process of engraving. Yet conceiving of human love as marking the heart of another is not different in kind from divine love, but deficient in quality.<sup>54</sup> Human love, as one of Boethius’s partial goods, ultimately derives from the only true good (*Bo*, III, pr.2). Chaucer’s answer to Troilus’s prayer for a love which binds is a love which enfolds all without constraint. Thus his unanswered prayer receives its response.

### *Joy and time*

In the same way that Troilus’s prayer remains unanswerable and yet finds a reply in a Trinitarian conclusion, Criseyde’s lament on transience is counterpoised at the very centre of the text – answered, in effect – by a taste of eternal bliss. Here the structure of the poem, which is both linear in narrative and also concentric in its imagery, models the Boethian conception of time.<sup>55</sup> The linear narrative corresponds to the progression of time experienced on earth. This final section of the chapter argues that Chaucer creates at the heart of the poem the illusion of an eternal moment, a meeting point of celestial and earthly time. Chaucer offers bliss, the joy of heaven, in response to Criseyde’s lament. Book V of the *Consolatio* focusses primarily on explaining how free will can be consistent with divine prescience, an impossibility unless earthly and celestial times are distinguished. Boethius derives his explanation of free will through contrasting the human experience of progressive time with God’s perception of eternity. Divine knowledge, he writes, is outside of time and

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<sup>53</sup> Pandarus refers to the engraving of the heart in his remark to Criseyde: ‘But ye han played tirant neigh to longe, | And hard was it youre herte for to grave.’ (*Tr*, II. 1240–41).

<sup>54</sup> On the ending’s inclusive vision of human love, see Windeatt, *Troilus*, p. 309.

<sup>55</sup> Mark Lambert describes the architectural structure of the poem as a movement inwards towards Criseyde in her uncle’s curtained bed, and outwards again: ‘Criseydan love is contained, secure, unfrightening: the curtained bed in the little room in the walled city whose name rhymes endlessly with joy.’ He argues that the movement of the first half of the poem is ‘centripetal’, while the movement of the second half is ‘centrifugal’. See Mark Lambert, ‘*Troilus*, Books I–III: A Criseydan Reading’, in *Essays on Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. by Salu, pp. 105–25 (pp. 120–21).

therefore able to comprehend simultaneously all of time and every moment contained within it. He distinguishes between perpetuity and eternity:

And for that the presence of swiche litil moment ne mai nat duelle, therefore it ravysschide and took the infynit wey of tyme (*that is to seyn, by successioun*). And by this manere is it idoon for that it sholde continue the lif in goinge, of the whiche lif it ne myght nat enbrace the plente in duellinge. And forthi yif we woollen putten worthi names to thinges and folwen Plato, lat us seyen thanne sothly that God is ‘eterne’, and that the world is ‘perpetuel’.

(*Bo*, V, pr.6, ll. 89–98)

In explaining how the infinite progression of time can be comprehended in eternity, Boethius relies on circular imagery similar to that seen in the concluding Trinitarian prayer of *Troilus and Criseyde*. As John Marenbon explains Book V, *prosa vi* of the *Consolatio*:

The way God exists, Philosophy goes on to explain, is to exist eternally. Divine eternity, she then makes clear, is not a matter of existing during an infinite length of time, as the universe does if it lacks beginning and end. Rather, God’s eternity is ‘the whole, simultaneous and perfect possession of unbounded life’.<sup>56</sup>

Wholeness, unboundedness, and lacking in beginning and end are qualities shared by the circle, perhaps the best image with which time-bound humanity can envisage being able to see simultaneously each distinct, successive point of perpetual time. Explaining the impossibility that a successive moment in time can remain, or dwell, Boethius employs an image implying circularity, the embrace.<sup>57</sup> The Trinitarian prayer with which the text concludes holds the entire poem in its embrace, drawing together its concentric imagery. As the last section showed, the ending also invites a revaluation of its centre and here, too, we find an answer to the unanswerable.

The operation of time in the poem has drawn some critical interest. Windeatt contrasts Chaucer’s emphasis on time with that of his source in Boccaccio’s *Il Filostrato*,

<sup>56</sup> John Marenbon, *Boethius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 135–36.

<sup>57</sup> Chaucer closely follows Boethius in his translation. See the corresponding passage in Boethius, *Philosophiae consolationis*, ed. by Rudolf Peiper, Georg Schepps, and August Engelbrecht (Vienna: Hoelder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1934), V, pr. vi, ll. 14. See further examples of Chaucer’s use of the image at *Bo*, V, pr.6, ll. 34–9 and 99–109.

arguing that *Troilus and Criseyde* evinces a concern ‘with duration and endurance, the survival and measurement of human emotion over time’.<sup>58</sup> In an essay on the *Troilus* as a ‘temporal archive’, Paul Strohm writes that the poem ‘offers us an “impossible present”, a moment that cannot be fully grasped or satisfactorily enjoyed’.<sup>59</sup> The manifestation in the poem of cyclical time is analysed by Henry W. Sams, who perceives a ‘dual time-scheme’ which condenses the love affair into an illusory cycle of seasonal time operating alongside the linear progression of events over a number of years.<sup>60</sup> The seasonal cycle, Sams argues, exists to give the impression of love desired, gained, and lost over the course of a corresponding waxing and waning year. The circular structure of the text achieves another illusion related to time in its Boethian sense, however: while the events of the narrative progress in a linear fashion, at the heart of the text is a moment of such stillness, such focus, that it steps outside of the ‘perpetual’ world and approaches eternity. This moment, viewed from a human perspective bound by time, must be lost, as Criseyde knows when she laments the transitory nature of felicity. If the moment also exists in eternity, however, her prayer, like that of Troilus, receives its response.

The consummation scene is often understood from the perspective of the poem’s end. To read the value of this moment retrospectively, in full possession of later events, evades the linear progression of the poem, thus placing the ending at its centre. Given the awareness of both narrator and audience of the tragic end of the love affair, with Criseyde already condemned, however sorrowfully, as a betrayer, much critical discussion of the consummation scene centres on its ethical status. Many critics seem to agree that the

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<sup>58</sup> Windeatt, ‘Chaucer and the *Filostrato*’, p. 171.

<sup>59</sup> Paul Strohm, *Theory and the Premodern Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 82.

<sup>60</sup> Henry W. Sams, ‘The Dual Time-Scheme in Chaucer’s *Troilus*’, *Modern Language Notes*, 56 (1941), 94–100 (p. 94).

impression of joy is somehow illusory, that the love between the pair is sinful.<sup>61</sup> Melvin Storm, for example, argues that the centre of the text represents the pit of hell and that Troilus's belief that he is about to enter heaven is utter delusion.<sup>62</sup> This view of the consummation scene as infernal leads Storm to interpret Troilus's prayer of thanksgiving to 'O Love, O Charite' as 'heavy with irony.'<sup>63</sup> According to Storm, Troilus does not recognise his downward trajectory and Chaucer draws attention to his deeply mistaken belief that he has found heavenly bliss by giving him the prayer of St Bernard from Dante's *Paradiso*.<sup>64</sup> But, while Storm's mapping of the geography of Troy onto that of *Inferno* is intriguing, his analogy depends heavily on traditional readings of Criseyde as a cipher. She often exists for the critic purely insofar as she provides a focus for Troilus's longing and a lesson for him, and all men, in betrayal.<sup>65</sup> Others focus on the partial, imperfect view of both characters,

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<sup>61</sup> The impression of sinfulness often focusses on Criseyde's actions rather than those of Troilus. Robert P. apRoberts, for example, implies wrong-doing, at least on Criseyde's part, by devoting much space to a discussion of whether Criseyde accepts an invitation to dine at Pandarus's house with the intention of submitting to Troilus, arguing against the prevailing view which he expresses thus: 'that Criseyde went to Pandarus' house *expecting to surrender herself then and there to Troilus*.' His choice of language and his focus on demonstrating that Criseyde's lack of forethought mitigates the immorality of her later actions counters the arguments of earlier critics making such claims while accepting their implicit assumptions. See Robert P. apRoberts, 'The Central Episode in Chaucer's Troilus', *PMLA*, 77 (1962), 373–85 (p. 373, apRoberts's italics). More recent critics tend to adopt the assumption of Criseyde's guilt even as they describe or defend her decision making. See, for example, Mann, who argues that Criseyde's yielding to her own love of Troilus is a slower process than often presumed, thus agreeing with the presumption that sudden changeability, or mutability, is a fault which must be explained (*Feminizing Chaucer*, pp. 22–3). Likewise, Minnis demonstrates the lengths to which Chaucer goes in order to 'protect' Criseyde from condemnation for her 'promiscuity'. See Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*, pp. 88–93.

<sup>62</sup> Storm argues that the poem's structure reflects Dante's *Inferno*: 'Chaucer, in fact, deliberately reflects the larger pattern of the Dantean infernal geography to emphasise the *descensus*-like nature of his protagonist's activities.' See Melvin Storm, 'Troilus and Dante: The Infernal Centre', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 22 (1992), 154–161 (pp. 155–56). By rejecting Pandarus as a diabolical symbol in order to suggest that he plays the role of Virgil in accompanying Troilus into the pit of hell, Storm implies, without addressing the implication, that Criseyde must fulfil the role of Satan (pp. 157–58).

<sup>63</sup> Storm, 'Troilus and Dante', p. 160.

<sup>64</sup> Storm, 'Troilus and Dante', pp. 160–61.

<sup>65</sup> Many critics who defend or offer explanations for Criseyde's acceptance of Diomedes begin from the basis of her guilt. Angela Jane Weisl, for example, writes of critics exculpating Criseyde through transferring blame (which is presumed to be her own) onto other characters or events in the poem. See Angela Jane Weisl, *Conquering the Reign of Femeny: Gender and Genre in Chaucer's Romance* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1995), pp. 46–47n. Mann argues that Criseyde exhibits the same thought-process in accepting Diomedes as she has already exhibited in accepting Troilus. See Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, pp. 22–4. Windeatt depicts the disappointment with which readers might view Criseyde's character at her acceptance of Diomedes, writing, 'There is a sadness in seeing his gambits received by Criseyde with a meek, apparently unsuspecting politeness, which is then to merge with accommodatingness, and eventually with concessions.' See Windeatt, *Troilus*, pp. 297–98.

rather than on Troilus as sole actor and Criseyde as passive lure. Wenzel, for example, although writing of the consummation scene as ‘their heaven’, depicts both characters as falling short morally.<sup>66</sup> He too sees Chaucer’s placement of St Bernard’s prayer at this precise point of the text as parody:

I assume that these lines would evoke in the mind of the educated listener or reader their source: St. Bernard’s prayer to the Virgin to grant the pilgrim grace for the Beatific Vision, in Dante’s *Paradiso* xxxiii 14–15. The situations, in the two poems, in which the same lines are spoken are so similar: The ‘hero’ is at the threshold of the climax of bliss. Yet what a difference in the kinds of bliss.<sup>67</sup>

Parody of course depends on audience recognition for its effectiveness, yet, as Havely has shown, Dante’s *Commedia* was unlikely to have been known by many of Chaucer’s English contemporaries.<sup>68</sup> Chaucerian irony will not suffice as an explanation for Troilus’s voicing of St Bernard’s prayer to be placed at the site of sexual consummation.

Rather than simply accepting Wenzel’s distinction between types of bliss as supporting the view that this scene of consummated human love is a parody of celestial love, we will pause to consider the term ‘bliss’ itself. ‘Bliss’ very often refers to the celestial joy which awaits souls after death, as can be seen in its frequent appearance in homilies which express the desire that all listening will achieve this state in heaven.<sup>69</sup> The word is also used

<sup>66</sup> Siegfried Wenzel, ‘Chaucer’s Troilus of Book IV’, *PMLA*, 79 (1964), 542–47 (p. 546).

<sup>67</sup> Wenzel, ‘Chaucer’s Troilus’, pp. 546–47.

<sup>68</sup> Havely writes that in England, only a few clergy, students, and academics with connections to Italy would have known Dante’s *Commedia* in the late fourteenth century. See Nick Havely, *Dante’s British Public: Readers and Texts from the Fourteenth Century to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 9.

<sup>69</sup> A typical closing formula expressing the desire for the listener to find bliss is found in the fourteenth-century Homily for the First Sunday in Advent in the *Northern Homily Cycle*:

Forthi red I we al pray  
That he be til us quem that day,  
And bring us til his mikel blis,  
That til rihtwis men graithed es.  
Amen, say we al samen,  
Thar bes joy and endles gamen. Amen.

‘Homily 1’, in the *Northern Homily Cycle*, ed. by Thompson, ll. 289–94 <<http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/thompson-northern-homily-cycle>> [accessed 11.9.16]. See also the concluding prayer to the sermon ‘1 Advent’ in *John Mirk’s Festial*, I, pp. 3–7 (p. 7).

to apply to earthly joys, feasting, and merry-making.<sup>70</sup> That a breadth of joys were described with a single word hints at a conception of earthly and heavenly pleasures as in a sense connected. Where qualifiers such as ‘worldly’ are absent, it would seem premature to ascribe sinfulness to an experience of bliss. A typical qualifier to distinguish earthly from heavenly bliss refers to the distinction between the temporal and the eternal. Late-medieval homilies, therefore, frequently speak of everlasting bliss.<sup>71</sup> This phrase does not call the quality of the joy into question, merely its duration. By implication, bliss is a heavenly state in which earthly joys may partake, even if only temporarily. Rather than representing a pit, as Storm argues, the consummation of the love affair marks the pinnacle of the text, where the lovers attain a state of bliss which will not be repeated. The care with which the language of joy is used in the passage, its Boethian undertones, Troilus’s addressing of gratitude to Charity, and the deliberate impression of the slowing of time encourage a sense of sanctity in this passage. Although the lovers cannot stop time, their transitory, momentary joy joins in the perfection of eternal bliss.<sup>72</sup>

Chaucer draws upon a combination of interpolated prayers, the language of temporality, stylistic effects, and the use of increasingly complex sentence structures to create a powerful impression that time almost halts in Book III.<sup>73</sup> By moving from longer digressions, such as the three prayers uttered by the point at which Troilus reaches the bedside, to the more minute and subtle pauses contained within lines, the progression of time

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<sup>70</sup> See ‘blisse, n.’ in the *MED* < <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/> > [accessed 11.9.16].

<sup>71</sup> Many sermons end with a petition for such heavenly bliss: ‘To blis that may haf nan ending | Our Lauerd Jesus thider us bring. Amen’, Homily for the Third Sunday in Advent, ‘Homily 3’, in the *Northern Homily Cycle*, ll. 317–18.

<sup>72</sup> Similarly, in a passage on earthly and celestial time in *The Second Nun’s Tale*, Jankowski discusses the conjunction of *kairos* and *chronos* as an experience in which teleological significance touches the present moment for Valerian and Tiburce. As she writes, ‘Only when past, present, and future fuse “into a point in time filled with significance” does one experience *kairos*, a time charged with meaning precisely because of its intimate relation to and effect on the end’. See Jankowski, ‘Chaucer’s *Second Nun’s Tale*’, p. 137.

<sup>73</sup> The centre of the poem is not the only place where Chaucer employs poetic means to create such temporal illusions. Spearing discusses the slowing of time in Book IV and at the poem’s conclusion. See Spearing, ‘Time in *Troilus and Criseyde*’, pp. 66–72.



gradually decelerates. The sense of time poised is at its most profound following Criseyde's expression of consent: 'And at o word, withouten repentaunce, | Welcome, my knyght, my pees, my suffisaunce!' (*Tr*, III. 1308–9). At this moment the combined forces of language, enjambment, and the narrator's expressive inability fully to describe the lovers' joy reach their full force against irresistible temporal progression:

Of hire delit or joie soon the leeste  
Were impossible to my wit to seye;  
But juggeth ye that han ben at the feste  
Of swich gladnesse, if that hem liste pleye!  
I kan namore, but thus thise ilke tweye  
That nyght, bitwixen drede and sikernesse,  
Felten in love the grete worthynesse.

(*Tr*, III. 1310–16)

Caught in the pull of three lines joined by enjambment, 'that nyght' hinges on its caesura between fear and a place of safety, poised before its inevitable fall. In this stanza, though, the night falls not into tragedy, but into worthiness. The narrator's apophatic expression of the joy experienced in this pause continues from his 'I kan namore' to an ecstatic apostrophe to the blissful moment in the following line: 'O blisful nyght, of hem so longe isought, | How blithe unto hem bothe two thow weere!' (*Tr*, III. 1317–18).

Chaucer draws out the passage after which the sun will rise and the perpetual succession of time must resume. The narrator signals the precariousness of the moment by metaphorically chasing away emotional threats to love, specifically 'daunger' and fear (*Tr*, III. 1321).<sup>74</sup> Time, however, proves more deadly an enemy than emotion, one which will not obey the narrator's request to 'lat hem in this hevene blisse dwelle' (*Tr*, III. 1322). The

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<sup>74</sup> While 'daunger' in the context of Romance refers to a woman's expected resistance to her lover, its meaning in this line aligns more closely with a modern understanding of danger. The Riverside edition offers the definition 'standoffishness' for the use of the word in this line (*The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 1234). Its appearance alongside the negative emotion, fear, suggests that the following definition from the *MED* might be more appropriate to this line: 'Something that threatens to cause difficulty, damage, harm, or destruction; peril, danger, or an instance of it.' Sentiments similar to the narrator's wish to drive away 'daunger' and fear occur in his later prayer against visible and invisible enemies. See 'daunger', sense 5(a) in the *MED*, < <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/> > [accessed 11.9.16].

illusion of time poised holds for a few lines. The night is filled with little sleep and much joy:

But lest this nyght, that was to hem so deere,  
Ne sholde in veyn escape in no manere,  
It was byset in joie and bisynesse  
Of al that souneth into gentillesse.

(*Tr*, III. 1411–14)

The attempt made by the pair to prevent the escape of such a night leads to the sequence of curses, discussed above, in which they bewail the separation which dawn brings.<sup>75</sup> Their complaints against the dawn follow the reassertion of time in the dual forms of sight and sound as the mutable world makes itself felt in the crow of the cock and the rising of the morning star. Time once more accelerates through their multiple *aube* complaints and the repeated attempts to say farewell, punctuated as they are by kisses, embraces, and oaths of faithfulness over a sequence just exceeding one hundred lines.<sup>76</sup> But the moment to which the lovers cling has already passed, its sudden end signalled by the narrator's abandonment of his apophatic depiction of the joys of love when, following the consummation, he resumes linear narration abruptly – and awkwardly – by stating: 'But now to purpos of my rather speche' (*Tr*, III. 1337). Tellingly, although the narration continues through mutual assurances of love and devotion, the next reference to the pure joy attained implies that it too has passed, as the lovers seek to 'recoveren blisse' (*Tr*, III. 1406). The almost immediate desire to attain bliss once again reasserts its fleeting nature, the rapid loss a reminder of the Boethian lament Criseyde voices shortly before being united with Troilus.

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<sup>75</sup> Troilus and Criseyde engage in *aube* complaints more prolonged than those of their counterparts in *Il Filostrato*, where the narrator describes Troilo as 'cursing the day which was coming'. His curse takes the form of a single complaint against the coming of day: 'Alas, why do you come so soon to separate us, O pitiless day? When will you sink low so that I may see you restore us?' *Il Filostrato*, III. 44–5. For a brief description of the aubade tradition and its depiction of the myopia of lovers, see Jenni Nuttall, *Troilus and Criseyde: A Reader's Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 102.

<sup>76</sup> Criseyde informs Troilus that he must leave in line 1425; he starts for home in line 1529.

Although time cannot stop, the impossibility for which the lovers pray, Chaucer identifies this moment as one of ‘bliss’, his English translation for Boethius’s purest joy, only achievable in heaven. Criseyde’s whole-hearted consent to the love affair so soon after her prayer lamenting the transitory nature of joy demonstrates a clear-sighted determination to accept the good in full awareness of its fleeting nature and without dreading its loss. In the prayer of lament she addresses to God prior to the consummation scene, she complains of the unsatisfactory nature of earthly joy: ‘so worldly selynesse, | Which clerkes callen fals felicitee, | Imedled is with many a bitternesse!’ (*Tr*, III. 813–15). The image of mixed joy and bitterness derives from Boethius’s *Consolatio*, where Lady Philosophy teaches the narrator the nature of human happiness:

The swetnesse of mannes welefulnesse is spraynd with many bitteresses; the whiche welefulnesse although it seme swete and joieful to hym that useth it, yit mai it nat ben withholden that it ne goth away whan it wole.

(*Bo*, II, pr.4, ll. 118–23)

The transience of joy and the inability of humanity to cling to happiness cause sorrow to Criseyde as she gives voice to Lady Philosophy’s words in her own lament. The *Consolatio* examines the nature of joy, as Lady Philosophy leads the narrator into a recognition of the impossibility that any feeling named by humanity as happiness is able to represent the state of ‘beatitudinus summam’.<sup>77</sup> The nearest approximation to this term in Middle English is ‘blisfulnesse’. By referring to the night as ‘blissful’, and in contradiction of Lady Philosophy, Chaucer thus uses his own translation for the Boethian term for perfect happiness, or blessedness, to describe the heavenly state of joy achieved by the lovers at the centre of Book III.

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<sup>77</sup> Boethius, *Philosophiae consolacionis*, II, pr.4, l. 16.

This choice is deliberate, given his great care in delineating the gradations of happiness described in the *Consolatio*.<sup>78</sup> In his *Boece*, Chaucer distinguishes between sweetness and bliss; ‘swetnesse’ is the term he uses for the mortal happiness tainted by bitterness. In Boethius’s Latin this form of happiness is ‘dulcedo’, while Chaucer’s ‘welefulnesse’ corresponds to ‘felicitatis’. Humanity experiences gradations of happiness, with the most perfect joy being translated by Chaucer as ‘soverayn blisfulnesse’ (*Bo*, II, pr.4, l. 132). The crucial distinction falls between ‘welefulnesse’, an earthly form of happiness dependent on fortune and lost through death, and ‘blisfulnesse’:

And ek syn it es cleer and certeyn that fortunous welefulnesse endeth by the deth of the body; it mai nat be douted that, yif that deth may take away blisfulnesse, that al the kynde of mortel thyng ne descendeth into wrecchidnesse by the ende of the deth.  
(*Bo*, II, pr.4, ll. 171–76)

True bliss, unlike ‘welefulnesse’, cannot be lost. Chaucer’s translation of Book II, *prosa* 4 demonstrates a keen awareness of the different values held in each term for happiness.<sup>79</sup>

Where Lady Philosophy speaks of an earthly form of bliss, its potential for loss means this joy can only be wretched, a ‘misera beatitudo’.<sup>80</sup> Chaucer’s translation provides the words which he assigns to Criseyde’s lament against transience:

Thanne is it wele seene how wrecchid is the blisfulnesse of mortel thynges, that neyther it dureth perpetuel with hem that every fortune resceyven agreablye or egaly, ne it deliteth nat in al to hem that ben angwyssous.  
(*Bo*, II, pr.4, ll. 123–27)

Wretchedness stems from the workings of time. Bliss can be felt on earth, but can also cause wretchedness, either because it cannot last or because of human consciousness of its

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<sup>78</sup> On the quality of the *Boece* as an ‘academic’ translation, see A. J. Minnis and Tim William Machan, ‘The *Boece* as Late-Medieval Translation’, in *Chaucer’s Boece and the Medieval Tradition of Boethius*, ed. by A. J. Minnis (Woodbridge: Brewer, 1993), pp. 167–88.

<sup>79</sup> Modern translations do not always show such care. Richard H. Green’s translation uses ‘happiness’ for each of the categories distinguished by Boethius. See Ancius Manlius Severinus Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. by Richard H. Green, in *The Consolation of Philosophy: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. by Douglas C. Langston (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), pp. 1–94, II, pr. 4.

<sup>80</sup> Boethius, *Philosophiae consolatio*, II, pr. 4, l. 21.

transience. In the context of his temporal life, Troilus loses his joy, in the Boethian sense of ‘felicitis’, or ‘welefulnesse’. Indeed, Chaucer ensures that his audience is fully aware of the loss from the beginning of the poem, describing how Troilus’s ‘aventures fellen | Fro wo to wele, and after out of joie’ (*Tr*, I. 4–5). At the heart of the poem, however, Chaucer creates the illusion of timelessness, and thus the moment of consummation is not ‘spraynd with many bitteresses’.<sup>81</sup> The bitterness which spoils will come with loss, with the passage of time, with the impossibility of a divine fulfilment of the blessing for which the two lovers pray: to stop the arrival of the dawn. Although the poet might create an illusion of eternity, time itself does not stop.

Jessica Rosenfeld and Megan Murton both address what they see as an insufficient attention to current scholarship on Boethius in critical treatments of Chaucer’s Boethian works.<sup>82</sup> Rosenfeld discusses the role played by compassion and mutuality in Troilus’s and Criseyde’s love affair. She writes,

The happiness of Troilus and Criseyde appears contrary to the happiness defined by Lady Philosophy, not only because it is of this world, but also because their mutual delight highlights the fact that her austere felicity is not an emotion that another can participate in or empathize with.<sup>83</sup>

Chaucer, she argues, through his access to Nicholas Trevet’s commentary on the *Consolatio*, was influenced by the latter’s Aristotelian ‘corrections’ to Boethius’s Platonic ideas.<sup>84</sup> Thus Chaucer’s portrayal of mutuality is in line with Aristotle’s understanding, as she writes:

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<sup>81</sup> Nuttall’s use of the word ‘unalloyed’ to describe the lovers’ night together draws attention to the purity of joy experienced. Nuttall, *Troilus and Criseyde*, p. 99.

<sup>82</sup> See Jessica Rosenfeld, ‘The Doubled Joys of *Troilus and Criseyde*’, in *The Erotics of Consolation: Desire and Distance in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. by Catherine E. Léglu and Stephen J. Milner (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 39–59; and Murton, ‘Praying with Boethius’.

<sup>83</sup> Rosenfeld, ‘Doubled Joys’, p. 45.

<sup>84</sup> See Rosenfeld’s discussion of the influence of translations of Aristotle’s *Ethics*, *Politics*, *De Anima*, and *Metaphysics* on the reception of Boethius’s works (‘Doubled Joys’, pp. 43–9). In their discussion of the commentary tradition and Trevet’s revisions to William of Conches’s commentary on the *Consolatio*, A. J. Minnis and Lodi Nauta argue that Trevet follows Boethius’s own example by aiming to reconcile Platonic and Aristotelian ideas. See A. J. Minnis and Lodi Nauta, ‘*More Platónico loquitur*: What Nicholas Trevet really did to William of Conches’, in *Chaucer’s Boece*, ed. by Minnis, pp. 1–33 (pp. 3, 10).

For although Aristotle, like Lady Philosophy, affirms that happiness cannot be judged on the basis of fortune, Aristotle's ethics of friendship does demand that instability and shared happiness go hand in hand.<sup>85</sup>

This view has important implications for understanding the theme of joy in the poem. Like John Hill, who emphasises the inherent goodness of the sexual love presented in Book III, Rosenfeld places joy, rather than sorrow, at the heart of the text, arguing, 'Rather than a hymn to stability and self-sufficiency, the *Troilus* is better understood as an exploration of happiness in a world of instability and contingency.'<sup>86</sup> Murton argues that Chaucer's engagement with the *Consolatio* is not merely with philosophical propositions: 'Chaucer's writings bear witness to a more complex and expansive interpretation of Boethian thought, one that encompasses a personal conception of the divine and a connection between human and divine love'.<sup>87</sup> Chaucer, she argues, presents human and divine love not as divided, but rather brought together through prayer.<sup>88</sup> As an exploration of his care in using the various terms for joy drawn from his own translation of the *Consolatio* shows, Chaucer also challenges the positioning of earthly love as 'false' felicity.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, he employs Boethius's notion of time in order to create the illusion of an eternal moment in which joy never ends.

As well as providing a still point at the centre of the text, the experience of true bliss by two pagan characters challenges the pagan/Christian dichotomy implied by the poem's ending of the poem. Despite the narrator's encouragement to his audience, especially those who are young, to forego the partial good of temporal love in favour of loving Christ, the

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<sup>85</sup> Rosenfeld, 'Doubled Joys', p. 45.

<sup>86</sup> Rosenfeld, 'Doubled Joys', p. 49. For a discussion of the status of sexual love as a 'great good', see John M. Hill, 'The Countervailing Aesthetic of Joy in *Troilus and Criseyde*', *ChR*, 39 (2005), 280–97 (p. 285).

<sup>87</sup> Murton, 'Praying with Boethius', p. 297.

<sup>88</sup> Murton, 'Praying with Boethius', p. 318.

<sup>89</sup> Miller writes that the *Consolatio* presents desires for lesser goods as diversions which nevertheless share the same final aim of achieving *beatitudo*: 'The ordinary desires that occupy human life are more properly understood then not as *opposed* to the desire for union with the divine, but as *deflections* of it.' See Miller, *Philosophical Chaucer*, p. 117.

unmitigated joy of the eternal moment still remains at the heart of the poem. The contradictions are reflected in critical views of the passage and its relationship to the text as a whole. Henry Ansgar Kelly writes:

The outstanding characteristic of the *Troilus* in terms of Chaucer's definition of tragedy is that the 'prosperite for a tyme' takes such a long time to set forth that the readers are induced to enter into it so fully as to forget about the coming adversity. It is treated as a true and lasting prosperity, and it becomes so for us as well as for Troilus.<sup>90</sup>

While Kelly focusses on the tragic effect created by pulling the audience into the illusion of lasting joy, his comment expresses the paradoxical nature of the eternal moment existing within and encompassed by perpetual time. In the end, the linear narrative is limited, and only able to portray loss. While *Troilus and Criseyde* maintains an illusion of circularity, it may not in actuality embody a circular structure. Only the abstract, mystical, near-apophatic address to the Trinity, all-circumscribing whilst uncircumscribed, can hold together such contradictions. The text's response to Criseyde's lament against the transitory and its response to Troilus's prayer for a love which binds draw together at the end. In joining the ineffable to the incarnate by naming Jesus and Mary, 'mayde and moder thyn', the final line reminds the reader of even greater mysteries and apparent contradictions held together in church doctrine and in faith. The Trinitarian conclusion transforms the linear into the teleological, encompassing the human experience of love at its incarnate heart.<sup>91</sup> The hopeless prayers of the text end in mystery, love, and hope.

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<sup>90</sup> Henry Ansgar Kelly, *Chaucerian Tragedy* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1997), p. 139.

<sup>91</sup> McGerr argues that the 'true "end"' of the poem is a 'recognition of our own dual natures, our own embodiment of contraries like *amor* and *caritas*, with the resulting ambiguities in our words and ends'. See McGerr, *Chaucer's Open Books*, p. 118.

## Conclusion

Rather than employing petitionary prayer as a straightforward producer of narrative, Chaucer presents this mode of prayer as inherently problematic. Petitionary prayer becomes a means by which Chaucer confronts injustice, suffering, and life's precariousness, both challenging aspects of contemporary religious practice and redirecting focus towards human agency. It is therefore no surprise that many of the most contested and troubling passages in his works are connected to petitionary prayer.

In literary usage, an answered petitionary prayer presents an impression of simplicity. A character prays; a divine being grants the request. This transaction is all the more simple when the author directs both fictional character and divine being. Chaucer comprehensively subverts such expectations in his texts by interrogating each individual aspect of petitionary prayer, from the content of the petition, the inner desires, and the deserving or undeserving nature of the supplicant, to the outcome of the petition, its relationship to each of these elements, and the interpretation of these outcomes as they are presented through narrative. Chaucer uses petitionary prayer to create narrative: allowing a shift from one state to another in the dream visions; dramatising the conflict between the irreconcilable desires of the two Theban knights; provoking the murder of a young child; confronting the child's mother with his place of death in the same way that Alcyone is confronted with her husband's drowning; and bringing about the marvellous conversion of the Anglo-Saxons of Northumbria. These answers to prayers are deeply problematic, resulting in greater suffering, the failure of consolation, or the exposure of ugly desires.

Literary prayer in Chaucer's works is not merely decorative, nor beautiful, nor joyous, although each of these attributes applies to many individual prayers. By focussing on the lyrical and the liturgical in Chaucer's prayers, it can be very easy to shield out the dark, the disturbing, the near-hopelessness of many of the prayers. The precariousness of life gives



rise to much petitionary prayer, some of which is indeed lyrical in composition. Yet, as Helen Phillips writes of Chaucer's source for *An ABC*, the ABC from Deguileville's *Pelèrinage de la vie humaine*: 'it is a prayer literally clutched at by a dying or a drowning man'.<sup>1</sup> This quality of desperate need, Phillips argues, is preserved in Chaucer's version. The experience of helplessness, impending disaster or destruction leads to prayer, as for Deguileville's drowning man, but as this thesis demonstrates, Chaucer does not offer easy solutions through answers to these prayers. Indeed, many of his characters find that the answers to their prayers swiftly lead to death or suffering. Prayer in Chaucer's texts encompasses not only the several lyrical prayers of praise to Mary, but also the many Boethian laments and explorations of the injustice of suffering in earthly life. When Phillips refers to the prayer of the drowning man, she identifies not one of the many roles of prayer in one self-contained lyric, but, as this thesis has shown, an aspect displayed by petitionary prayer throughout Chaucer's poetry. Prayer arises from experiences such as fear, desire, or injustice, but will not offer simple solutions or easy resolution to these unavoidable human experiences. As Chaucer's answers to the petitionary prayers of his Christian characters show, resolution can only be achieved outside of the text, outside of life, beyond the threshold of death. He redirects attention instead to the realm of human action, of compromise, of penance and forgiveness. God, unlike Walter, does not ask his worshippers to suffer needlessly without exercising agency, taking action. Chaucer's two prose tales, the *Tale of Melibee* and *The Parson's Tale*, feature no answered prayers, instead focussing on human responsibility for asking and enacting forgiveness.<sup>2</sup> Together the two texts can almost be seen as an embodiment of the single petition from the *Pater noster*, 'forȝyue us oure

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<sup>1</sup> Phillips, 'Chaucer and Deguileville', pp. 1–2.

<sup>2</sup> The only petitionary prayer in *The Parson's Tale* is the Parson's request to Jesus for help in showing the pilgrims the way to the heavenly Jerusalem (*Parson's Tale*, ll. 48–51). Addressing his forgiven enemies, Melibee indirectly prays for God's mercy and forgiveness at the conclusion to *The Tale of Melibee* (*Mel*, ll. 1881–88).

dettis, as & we forȝyuen to oure dettouris'.<sup>3</sup> It is this redirection to human agency which features in many of the texts examined in this thesis and to which the problematically answered prayers often point.

Petitionary prayer in Chaucer's texts both draws upon a rich discourse of lay devotion and also critiques the purposes for which this mode of prayer is employed by his contemporary society. Supplication also extends beyond the text in other ways, inviting divine intervention, speaking directly to the audience at times, praying for and asking the prayers of the reader. Petitionary prayer creates and sustains division: by bringing conflict into the divine realm, by splintering into divergent – and conflicting – discourses, creating multiplicity, rather than singularity of meaning. Using petitionary prayer as a literary device proposes resolution: a lack, need or desire is identified, a character prays, and the reader might expect all to be resolved. Instead, in Chaucer's texts, petitionary prayer delivers irresolution, unsuspected, violent endings and a passage through suffering into death. The representation of prayer in Chaucer's texts is the very opposite of monolithic simplicity. Perhaps it ought to be unsurprising that petitionary prayer, the mode of prayer which is most representative of humanity in the relationship between the human and the divine, reveals itself in Chaucer's texts, as in his fourteenth-century Christian context, to be divided and contradictory. If the human side of the relationship is unavoidably messy, Chaucer offers in answer an apophatic simplicity, with unanswered prayers paradoxically leading to the ineffability of the divine.

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<sup>3</sup> *Pater noster*, in *The Prymer*, p. 5.

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