

The Second Nun's Tale

The *Second Nun's Tale*: Language Politics and Translation

Candace Barrington (BarringtonC@ccsu.edu)

An essay chapter for *The Open Access Companion to the Canterbury Tales* (September 2017)

Introduction

The Second Nun, her prologue, and her tale might be the quietest pilgrim and narrative in the *Canterbury Tales*, yet they rank among the most religiously powerful. Her piety, never questioned or mocked, is learned rather than rote, and her tale begs no more reward than her audience's unconditional Christian faith. In the *General Prologue*, we are told little about the Second Nun. We know she joins the pilgrimage as the Prioress's "chapeleyn" (1.163-64), or private secretary. This bit of information tells us that she would have been literate in Latin as well as vernacular languages and that she would have been responsible for reading manuscripts and exchanging letters for the Prioress. Her ability to perform these duties is confirmed by her prologue and tale, which are primary translations of Latin and Italian sources honoring the Virgin Mary and recounting the life of a third-century Christian martyr, Saint Cecilia of Rome. Her tale, the life of a Roman woman more skilled in rational arguments than her male interlocutors, compares crucially to the tales of the Nun's two traveling companions: the Prioress's story of a boy martyr relies on emotion and sentimentality, and the Nun's Priest's beast fable makes comic nonsense of classical argumentation. And while both the Prioress and her Priest frequently interject themselves into the storytelling process, the Nun presents herself as a transparent vessel—a minor amanuensis—through which the story of St. Cecilia passes, untarnished from one language to another. Now, on the road to Canterbury, she happens to have that translation at hand, ready to edify her fellow travelers.

The *Second Nun's Prologue* opens with a four-stanza apostrophe addressing the saint herself; it establishes the narrator's intention to translate the "lif and passioun" of Saint Cecilia (SNT 24-26) in order to withstand the dangers of idleness (a weakness mentioned six times in the first 28 lines). The Nun continues with an eight-stanza Invocation to the Virgin Mary, which not only lovingly translates lines from the ecstatic prayer of Saint Bernard in the final canto of Dante's *Paradiso* and the Marian antiphon "Salve Regina," but also weaves them with references to the gospels and medieval hymns to the Virgin (Reames 491-92; Dobbs 207). The Prologue then closes with a five-stanza translation of Jacobus de Voragine's etymology of Cecilia's name.

The tale continues to rely on Jacobus de Voragine's immensely popular thirteenth-century hagiography, the prose Latin *Legenda aurea*, when it recounts the story of the noble Roman

maiden determined to remain chaste after marriage to Valerian. On their wedding night, she tells Valerian that an angel who guards her body will kill him if he defiles her chastity. Asked to prove her claim, Cecilia sends her young husband to the catacombs on the Via Appia. There Pope Urban instructs Valerian in the faith and christens him. Thus cleansed of sin, Valerian returns home able to see the angel watching over Cecilia. As a token of their chaste marriage, the angel gives them fragrant, eternally fresh crowns made of roses and lilies. Given a wish, Valerian requests his brother, Tiburce, to be exposed to these Christian truths. Like Valerian, Tiburce hears the message, immediately apprehends its truth, and converts.

At this midway point, without notice, the translation's source text switches from the *Legenda* to an abridged, liturgical version of Cecilia's life, which brings Cecilia's rhetorical skills to the fore (Reames 2002, 494–95). So effective is Cecilia in conveying the Christian message that when a Roman administrator, Almachius, commands everyone to worship Jupiter, she converts the officers who come to arrest her household for disobedience. The only obdurate heart belongs to Almachius, who orders Valerian and Tiburce executed and Cecilia brought before him.

In a carefully crafted debate, Cecilia repeatedly undermines Almachius' efforts to outwit her. Her rhetoric avoids emotional appeals, and their debate clearly distinguishes her cool-headed, spiritual discernment from Almachius's hot-headed, secular literalism. This distinction continues when the furious Almachius commands his men to boil her alive, and she emerges from the ordeal without breaking a sweat. Almachius then orders her beheaded, but that, too, proves ineffective—at least temporarily. Her throat slit by three blows from the executioner, Cecilia remains alive for three days, long enough to continue preaching and to bestow her house and possessions on the Church. Upon her death, she is buried, and her house converted into a church.

Tools

The *Second Nun's Prologue* and *Tale* are distinguished by two features. The first feature is their initial composition and later addition to the Canterbury framework. In a list of works found in the prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* dating from early in his career (1386-1387), Chaucer includes his "lyf of Seynt Cecile" (LGW F426). Years later, when he eventually adds the Canon and his Yeoman to the Canterbury tale-telling contest, he seems to have resurrected this same life of Cecilia as the Second Nun's tale, making both the nun and her tale important foils to the two late arrivals and the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. Thus, this apparently modest "Life of St. Cecilia" can be associated with Chaucer's early and late works. The second feature of the *Second Nun's Prologue* and *Tale* is their declared status as translations. As already noted, the prologue and tale are an amalgamation of several continental sources translated into English for the first time. Together, these two features allow the prologue and tale to provide us a useful entry for considering how translation shaped Chaucer's body of works and his sense of authorship.

As scholars have come to understand, translation was central to both Chaucer's verse and his mode of composition. For many of Chaucer's twenty-first-century readers, this central role of translations seems odd. How could translation—a process dependent on the works of other authors and devoid of creativity—have played an important influence for an author whose work feels so original? One answer to this question is the cultural context of late-fourteenth-century England. English readers were beginning to demand that continental works be translated into

English, and for nearly two hundred years, most writing in English was translation. While many of these translations feel pedestrian, translation was the means through which ambitious English authors sought to engage confidently with the continent's literary tradition. Translation, therefore, provides a way for Chaucer to insert himself and English into the continental literary culture dominated by such Frenchmen as Guillaume de Machaut and Eustache Deschamps and such Italians as Dante Alighieri, Petrarch (Francesco Petrarca), and Giovanni Boccaccio. It therefore not surprising that Deschamps' ballade commending the "Grant translateur [Great translator], noble Geffroy Chaucier" (our earliest record of Chaucer's reception) marks him as a recognized agent of this project to bring European writing across the channel and remake it for English audiences. Early in his career, he recognizes translation's inherent creative potential. For this reason, his entire *oeuvre* can be evaluated as a brilliant expression of an Englishman's engagement with the continent's wide-ranging literary culture.

On the leading edge of this engagement, Chaucer's translations were neither secondary nor derivative; and they were not simply exercises to make non-English texts available to an English audience. They developed out of two paradoxical positions regarding translation. One position, necessitated by Jerome's fourth-century translation of the Christian scriptures from Greek into Latin (and which became the Church's official version known as the Vulgate), required belief in absolutely faithful, transparent translations. That is, it required believing that moving the biblical message across languages—from Hebrew to Greek to Latin—didn't distort the message in any way. The other position, drawn from a long tradition of scholastic exegesis, understood a faithful, unproblematic transportation of meaning from one language to another to be impossible because a language so tightly shapes meaning (Copeland). Chaucer's translations illustrate his awareness of the paradoxes inherent in translating Christian texts; his translations also demonstrate his willingness to exploit the liberties they provide an author. Though he clearly draws inspiration from continental authors, he seems to draw much more from the translation process itself. Translation allows him to explore both the ways English could be bent to convey the continental tradition and the ways these important literary works could be bent to fit English traditions and his own needs. With the supposedly simple translation of a Latin saint's tale by a self-effacing nun, Chaucer demonstrates the impossibility of a perfectly transparent translation.

Text

When we approach the *Second Nun's Prologue* and *Tale* as translations, we see they disrupt notions of transparent translation from the very start. By placing the pre-Canterbury "Life of Cecilia" in the context of the other Canterbury tales (in particular the *Canon's Yeoman's Prologue* and *Tale*), Chaucer creates a new audience asking fresh questions of the narrative. By attributing to a woman a translation done in his youth, Chaucer explores how meaning shifts when the same narrative is told by different narrators, a self-effacing nun rather than a young courtier. By transferring his prose source into rime-royal stanzas, he illustrates how form shapes meaning. By combining the announced source—Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda aurea*—with other, unattributed sources, Chaucer displays how new juxtapositions create new meanings. By translating his Latin and Italian sources into English, he incorporates subtle but potent changes allowed, if not imposed by, English. Despite the Second Nun's apparent devotion to content's ability to move untainted from one language to another, Chaucer exposes the flimsiness of the fantasy undergirding the notion of a faithful translation.

Chaucer's pulling his "lyf of Seint Cecile" out of his satchel and dropping it into the *Canterbury Tales* immediately granted the tale a new interpretive life. Most immediately, the tale provides a host of images and concepts picked up and unraveled by the Canon's Yeoman in his prologue and tale. Images of fire that point to Cecilia's purity and steadfastness contrast with the Canon's Yeoman's images of fire that never produces purity and whose results are always unstable. Beyond the immediate contrast with the Canon's Yeoman's performance, the Nun's idealized portrait of the early Roman Church contrasts with the convoluted Church hierarchy represented by other pilgrims—the Friar, Pardoner, and Summoner—whose recently developed roles reflect the Church's overwhelming concern with acquiring lucre rather than with liberating souls. The Nun's tale, sitting quietly among the tales of ecclesiastical greed, becomes in this context a critique of the late-medieval Church. It seems likely that Chaucer was intrigued by the ability of a simple translation of an orthodox tale to embody such heterodox interpretations.

By attributing this translation to a woman, Chaucer demonstrates how translation provides an effective way for marginalized voices to join mainstream conversations. Because translation carries over more than the message of the source text (it also carries with it the prestige and authority of its sources), the Nun's otherwise hidden erudition gains legitimacy. The tale displays her talents: she is multilingual (English, Latin, and Italian), and she is conversant with a range of learned and sacred texts. The quiet seriousness of the Nun's contribution via translation is echoed in the reception by the other pilgrims. No one interrupts her and, at the end of her tale, the pilgrims ride in silence for five miles before the Canon and his Yeoman burst in on the entourage.

When Chaucer translates his sources into rime-royal stanzas (seven decasyllabic lines rhyming ABABBCC), he demonstrates how form shapes meaning. Chaucer has already attuned his audience to associate the rime-royal stanza with seriousness and innocence under duress. The tribulations of the Man of Law's Constance, the trials of the Clerk's Griselda, and the martyrdom of the Prioress's little clergeon are all encased in these same stanzas. Rime-royal stanzas allow Chaucer to organize the tale's chronology into self-contained, sequential units and to lend a sense of ordered self-restraint to Cecilia's behavior and speech. Nevertheless, because the stanzas impose a meter and require a rhyming structure, they allow the Nun to explore the play of language and to place her stamp on the received texts. Translating from prose to stanzaic verse requires her to balance restraint and play.

When Chaucer combines his translation of Jacobus of Voragine's version of Cecilia's life with other versions of the "Life" as well as with other sacred verses and texts, he displays how new juxtapositions create new meanings. The opening invocation to the Virgin taken from Dante's *Paradiso* 33 is not the first time these lines have appeared on the way to Canterbury. Earlier, in her own prologue, the Prioress's prayer to the Virgin had also translated these lines and positioned her as a weak child needing the holy mother's guidance and protection. The translated invocation given to the Second Nun, however, emphasizes her desire to serve through understanding, making her more akin to St. Cecilia than to the Prioress's boy martyr who dies without knowing the meaning behind the Latin lyrics he sings. When the translation turns to a new source in the tale's second half, it brings out the rhetorical power undergirding Cecilia's faith. Together these multiple sources disrupt any tendency to see either the Second Nun or Cecilia as passive. They are clearly in charge of their material and their lives.

Finally, the translation introduces subtle but potent changes that emphasize both Cecilia and the Nun's active engagement with their faith. For example, when Valerian is asked if he believes the Christian creed, the *Legenda* text has him respond with a passive construction, while the Second Nun places his answer in an active voice: "'I leeve al this thyng,' quod Valerian" (SNT 213) (Dobbs 218). Of these changes, perhaps the most important is found in the first lines, where the Second Nun's prologue begins with an apostrophe to Saint Cecilia. With no known source, this short meditation positing translation as a cure for the vice of "Ydelnesse" establishes translation as a form of work. Unlike mindless idleness, translation is a form of "bisynesse" requiring active engagement with the activity at hand. In this passage, the Nun imagines herself as a worker on par with those who work to prepare food and drink (SNT 20-21). By translating, she saves herself from idleness and contributes to the larger community. The Nun is also allowed to assert her commonality with Cecilia when she ends her opening stanzas with "Thee meene I, mayde and martyr, Seint Cecilie" (SNT 28). There are two possible readings of this line: 'I intend to talk about you, maid and martyr, Saint Cecile' and 'By thee I mean myself, a maid and martyr, Saint Cecilia' (Johnson 142-43). In these ways, Chaucer positions the Second Nun not as a passive vessel but as an active agent who engages with her sources in order to create something new that helps those in her community. She is less like the Virgin Mary from whom she seeks guidance and more like St. Cecilia who embraces death in order to transform—we might even say, translate—it into martyrdom and a foundation for the infant Christian Church.

Translation, therefore, is more than innocently transferring a text from one language to the next. Every aspect of the process creates new meanings for the text and new opportunities for the translator. By taking a translation from his youth and giving it to a studious nun, Chaucer transforms the tale and the Nun.

Transformation

1. Explore the difficulties and possibilities inherent in translation. Choose a *Canterbury Tales* passage—for instance, lines 141-175 from the *Second Nun's Tale*—and translate it into your first language. You'll have many decisions to make. Do you want your translation to be in prose or verse? If verse, what verse form will you use? How will you handle medieval concepts foreign to your twenty-first-century language and culture?
2. Find a translation of *The Canterbury Tales* in your first language. For a good list of these, see globalchaucers.wordpress.com. Compare that translation to your own. Which of your decisions are similar to those of the other translator? Which are different? How does the translation change or enhance your understanding of Chaucer's Middle English text?
3. The Second Nun isn't the only pilgrim given a translation. Others include the *Knight's Tale*, the *Clerk's Tale*, and the *Parson's Tale*. Sometimes the tellers acknowledge their source texts; sometimes they do not. In these other tales, does knowing whether these sources are acknowledged or suppressed seem important to our understanding of the tales and of Chaucer as an English author?
4. Both the Prioress (PT 474-80) and the Second Nun (SNT 50-56) translate the same lines from Dante's *Paradiso* 33:

*La tua benignità non pur soccorre
a chi domanda, ma molte fiate*

*liberamente al dimandar precorre.
In te misericordia, in te pietate,
in te magnificenza, in te s'aduna
quantunque in creatura è di bontate.* (lines 16-21)

[Thy loving-kindness not only succors him that asks, but many times it freely anticipates the asking; in thee is mercy, in thee pity, in thee great bounty, in thee is joined all goodness that is in any creature.]

The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Book III: Paradiso, trans. John D. Sinclair (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939; 1981 reprint).

What are the differences between the translations attributed to the Prioress and to the Second Nun? Similarities? What do the differences and similarities tell us about each of the Canterbury narrators?

5. Cecilia isn't the only example of a preaching female in *The Canterbury Tales*. How does the Second Nun's presentation of a woman preacher support or undermine the Summoner's accusations against the Wife of Bath as a preacher?
6. How does the conception of idleness as a source of spiritual decay and a fruitless existence in the *Second Nun's Prologue* (SNT 17-18) compare to your sense of idleness?

Suggestions for Further Reading:

Blamires, Alcuin. "Women and Preaching in Medieval Orthodoxy, Heresy, and Saints' Lives." *Viator* 26 (1995): 135-152.

Copeland, Rita. *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Dobbs, Elizabeth A. "The Canaanite Woman, the Second Nun, and St. Cecilia." *Christianity and Literature* 62.2 (2013): 203-222.

Johnson, Eleanor. *Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages: Ethics and the Mixed Form in Chaucer, Gower, Usk, and Hoccleve*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Leicester, H. Marshall. "The 'Feminine' Imagination and *Jouissance*." In *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales*, 195-205. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

Reames, Sherry L. "The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale." In *Sources and Analogues of The Canterbury Tales*, edited by Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel, 491-527. Cambridge, U.K.: D. S. Brewer, 2002. Includes source texts and modern English translations.

Sisk, Jennifer. "Religion, Alchemy, and Nostalgic Idealism in Fragment VIII of the *Canterbury Tales*." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 32 (2010): 151-178.

Staley, Lynn, and David Aers. *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).