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10. Benjamin N. Nelson, *The Idea of Usury* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1949), p. 7.
11. John T. Noonan, *The Scholastic Analysis of Usury* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1957), pp. 42-43, 47.
12. But I am admittedly adopting scholastic terminology here; see Noonan, pp. 21-28, for a summary of the scholastic view of law.
13. Lines 165-68, in Bevington, p. 491; this despite the later assertion at lines 301-02 that it is unlawful for the priests to put anyone to death, and John 18:31, on which the assertion is based.
14. Hawkins, p. 610, and note 34.
15. Lines 220-23, in Bevington, p. 457.
16. Bevington, p. 53.
17. For which see Ridley, pp. 19-21.
18. Kelly, p. 368.

LAUGHTER IN THE *SECOND NUN'S TALE*: A REDEFINITION OF THE GENRE

by Anne Eggebroten

Is laughter an appropriate response in the *Second Nun's Tale*?

A survey of the criticism, both early and recent, would suggest not. For most readers the label "saint's legend" looms so large and evokes so many pious responses that any impulse toward laughter is repressed as an irreverent, modern mistake. D.W. Robertson, Jr., captures the prevailing tone in his *A Preface to Chaucer*: "Since the tale of the second nun is a saint's legend, the medieval audience would naturally look for its abstract meaning."¹ He further suggests that this tale is a prime illustration of his belief that the *Canterbury Tales* "are significant in an exemplary fashion rather than 'for their own sakes,' or for our emotional participation in them" (p. 272). Early criticism of this tale assumed its total seriousness and performed such tasks as finding sources and analogues for the floral crowns.²

The best recent study of the tale, by Sherry Reames, finds "theological pessimism" on Chaucer's part in this tale; there is a suggestion that "there is no room in God's design for human nature and its works."³ She too uses the logic of "hagiography, therefore serious" to eliminate the possibility of Chaucerian irony. "It appears to be a straightforward retelling of a saint's legend—the only such work by Chaucer that is extant—and therefore it must be taken seriously as reflecting ideas Chaucer actually held, at some point, about what saints' legends—if not saints—were supposed to be like" (p. 56). Donald Howard in *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* notes that the *Second Nun's Tale* has no ironic envoy as did the *Clerk's Tale* and that there is no tension between the tale and an inappropriate teller as in the *Man of Law's Tale*, the *Prioress's Tale*, and the *Monk's Tale*. He concludes that "there is nothing to make us take it less than seriously."⁴ One reader, apologizing for his impulse to snicker at the beginning of the tale, declared, "Once the audience of Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale* learned that the tale is a *lif and passioun*, it knew

where the tale was going and that it should not be amused by episodes like Cecilia's refusal of Valerian on their wedding night."⁵

Thus we find critical responses to the tale ranging from stifled laughter to a total ban on emotional participation. Perhaps at this point it would be well to note that the tale falls into three sections, and one's view of it may depend upon which section one emphasizes. The prologue is decidedly sober and straightforward; next come the conversions, and finally the trial scene with its resultant martyrdom. Reames chooses the conversions ("the more edifying portion of the story") as her focus and follows with a very serious conclusion (p. 39). In an excellent analysis of the trial section, however, Paul Beichner compares Chaucer and his source and shows how Chaucer shifted the high point of the legend from the martyrdom to the trial scene. His view of the tale is less serious. Chaucer "intensified the clash between Almachius and Cecilia, creating for each a personality more Chaucerian than traditional; Cecilia had never before been quite so contentious or belligerent, nor had Almachius been so obtuse or stupid."⁶ In fact, as early as 1939 Howard Patch had described this scene as "Cecilia's slanging the judge."⁷

Beichner and Patch imply but stop just short of saying that this scene is funny. Beichner does note that where the Latin has *surridentis* ("smiling") for the saint's response to one of the judge's commands, Chaucer changed it to "gan for to laughe" (462). He adds that the saint's laughter "makes the audience psychologically ready for a clever or amusing reply" (p. 202). Since St. Cecilia herself is laughing in the trial scene, let us all acknowledge that this verbal battle between the foolish judge and the spirited saint is funny. I will not here rehearse the details of the repartee; Beichner has done it well.

But is the humor confined to this one section of the tale? The bedroom scene between Cecilia and Valerian certainly evokes laughter in the classroom and in most oral readings, if not in the more formal analyses. Chaucer begins by creating tension with the words, "The nyght cam, and to bedde moste she gon / With hire housbonde, as ofte is the manere" (141-42). The understatement of the word "ofte" strikes a humorous note already. The bridal pair *often* go to bed together on the first night? Always, except in the story we are about to hear. Cecilia's whisper that she has a secret to share begins with the excessive endearment of a stereotypical wife about to wheedle a favor: "O sweete and wel biloved spouse deere . . ." (144). The words "wel biloved" are ironic: this husband will be loved in an unusual way, perhaps not to his liking. Valerian's answer shows him to be impulsive and extreme in his protestations of loyalty: "Valerian gan faste unto hire swere / That for no cas, ne

thyng that myghte be, / He sholde nevere mo biwreyen here" (148-50). Chaucer has added to the Latin to show a very human man whose emotions are at a high pitch. She replies, "I have an aungel which that loveth me" (152), and the natural response of the audience is laughter. Unexpected, ridiculous, and potentially bawdy, these words achieve seriousness only by the end of Cecilia's speech. Valerian's answer reproduces the double response of the readers: he suspects that this "angel" is another man and very humanly demands a chance to get his hands on him ("for sothe / Right with this swerd thanne wol I sle yow bothe" [167-68]), but he reserves a corner of his mind for the possibility of a real angel.

Why do readers feel that their impulse to laugh in this scene is an improper response to the genre? Perhaps it is because they are laughing at Cecilia. To identify with Valerian and laugh at the woman who announces an angel lover is indeed the wrong response, growing out of a modern downgrading of the values of chastity and spiritual perfection. But, sensing the incorrectness of that laughter, it is also a modern error to attribute the problem vaguely to a supposed restriction on all levity in the genre of the saint's legend. Laughter is the response the author desires in this passage—if we are laughing *with* the saint *at* Valerian. Chaucer's skillful handling of the scene obliges us to laugh at this husband in his shock, his thwarted desires, and his jealous misinterpretation of the angel, just as we later laugh at the prefect Almachius when the saint saucily rebukes him.

We continue to laugh at Valerian in our next view of him. His encounter with the divine is comically abrupt, and the comedy is underlined by our seeing him through the eyes of Pope Urban: "For thilke spouse that she took but now / Ful lyk a fiers leoun, she sendeth heere, / As meke as evere was any lomb, to yow!" (197-99). This contrast and sudden change must provoke a smile: it echoes the dominant-spouse-laid-low theme of many fabliaux. At this point Valerian has moved from raging bridegroom to obedient inquirer. In the next step of his conversion we find the human and the divine again in exaggerated contrast. St. Paul appears with the Holy Writ, and Valerian "as deed fil doun for drede" (204). After one verse of Scripture, he is asked, "Leevestow this thyng or no? Sey ye or nay," and Valerian makes his confession of faith, asserting not only "I levee al" but adding, "For sother thyng than this, I dar wel say, / Under the hevene no wight thynke may" (212-15). Christening, a view of Cecilia's angel, and a dedication to chastity quickly follow.

I propose that this conversion is not meant to be read as a serious record of a man acquiring understanding and faith, as Reames and

others read it. The tale is a melodrama, with a struggle between clearly good and bad types; the conclusion is known beforehand, and the theology involved is already accepted by everyone in the audience. The only real interest lies in Valerian's ignorance and surprise at what everyone else already knows. This is how Chaucer chooses to play the story. His handling here follows Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea* closely, but he goes further in making the human reaction more human and the divine more abrupt and other-worldly, thus heightening the drama. We enjoy Valerian's impulsiveness, incredulity, and bumbling. First Jacobus and then Chaucer shortened the legend, omitting most of the instruction to the new converts and the description of their growth of understanding. It is true, as Reames has pointed out, that these changes emphasize the role of God and limit the human role in salvation. However, they do not necessarily imply theological pessimism on Chaucer's part. They simply mean that Chaucer felt his fourteenth-century audience was not interested in watching the growth of faith and in being persuaded of the truth of Christianity (perhaps unlike a fourth- or twentieth-century audience). He expected his readers, already persuaded, to view the whole story as a series of skirmishes preceding a familiar conclusion—martyrdom.

The pattern of the bumbling human vs. God and the saints is again presented in the scene with Tiburce. Since Valerian has now joined the winning side, a new clown is needed and Tiburce fills the part well. He enters suddenly, speculating about the smell of roses and lilies at "this tyme of the yeer" (246). His bewilderment amuses the audience, and his response to Valerian's explanation about the two crowns is, "Am I dreaming?" We can see him rubbing his eyes, but a few lines later he stoutly proclaims, "Whoso that troweth nat this, a beest he is"—an ironical reflection on his state a few moments earlier (288). His blithe obedience falters, however, when he hears that his conversion involves visiting a man on the most-wanted list: "Til Urban? brother myn Valerian / . . . woltow me thider lede? / . . . Ne menestow nat Urban . . . / That is so ofte dampned to be deed, / And woneth in halkes alwey to and fro, / And dar nat ones putte forth his heed?" (305–12). Tiburce's cat-and-mouse picture of early Christians is comical, but, again we are laughing, not at the Christians, but at Tiburce. In perfectly delightful ignorance of the outcome of his own story he points out that "Men sholde hym brennen in a fyr so reed / If he were founde, or that men myghte hym spyne, / And we also, to bere hym compaignye" (313–15). Surely these lines are intended to draw a laugh as the audience enjoys this worldly pragmatism in a soon-to-be saint. Tiburce asks a third question

(about the trinity), which Cecilia quickly answers; a conversion ensues, and we hear that Tiburce's questions and God's answers continued ever after at an even quicker pace: ". . . and every maner boone / That he God axed, it was sped ful soone" (356–57). This speedy and simple divine/human interaction is the norm for this tale, and in fact for many later medieval saints' legends.

With Tiburce gone, a third person is needed to carry on the fool's role, and Chaucer brings the prefect Almachius into the picture for the first time with the words, "Whoso wol nat sacrificise, / Swape of his heed" (365–66). These words caricature the obtuseness of a persecuting ruler, and "swape of" underlines the clumsy comedy of the order. Chaucer at this point is rewriting the legend for his own purposes; he has dropped the version of Jacobus, which he had been following closely, and is about to turn to another *Passio S. Caeciliae*, which he greatly abridges.⁸ He omits the dialogue between Tiburce and Valerian and Almachius. His Almachius enters abruptly and issues a command without first seeking information, because Chaucer does not want his audience to see a reasonable judge gradually incensed. Instead, he provides an exaggerated, humorous figure to continue the line of fools who obstruct God's worship.

After the martyrdom of the two brothers, we move into the final part of the tale, the trial scene in which Almachius stupidly reads the straight lines and Cecilia trounces him rhetorically. He plods along warning her about his power and her wrong-doing, while she sharply answers: "Youre myght . . . ful litel is to dreede" (437) and ". . . with a wood sentence / Ye make us gilty . . . ye, that knowen wel oure innocence" (450–52). Then she begins to mock him outright: "Lo, he dissymuleth heere in audience; / He stareth, and woodeth in his advertence!" (466–67). She concludes, "It is a shame that the peple shal / So scorne thee, and laughe at thy folye; / For comunly men woot it wel overal / That myghty God is in his hevenes hye" (505–08). She is laughing, and the audience is laughing. Defying the Christian God is ridiculous in this fourteenth-century framework. Those who do so take on the role of the fool.

Thus in the *Second Nun's Tale* we have a series of three fools who encounter Cecilia and the demands of the divine. Identifying with Cecilia, we laugh at the pragmatic wisdom guiding Valerian and Tiburce until their conversion and Almachius during the trial. Laughter would be inappropriate if it arose because the reader identified with Valerian, Tiburce, or Almachius and mocked the divine wisdom/foolishness of Cecilia and God.

Hilaritas is at the heart of this saint's legend and many others. A taboo on laughter can arise only from a misunderstanding of the

genre and of the dynamics of humor within it, particularly in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century expressions of the genre. A reading of the entire *Legenda Aurea* reveals frequent use of humor. One of the better examples is the life of St. Juliana, who beats a demon until he begs, "Lady Juliana, do not any longer make a laughingstock of me. . . ."⁹ She throws him on a dung-heap, and when he later reappears, a mere blink of her eyes causes him to take to his heels. In the early Middle English *Katherine* Group, Sts. Katherine, Margaret and Juliana all have tales filled with the humorous drama of the "mere woman" conquering the powerful male ruler, and the English authors add to the humor found in their sources.¹⁰ Katherine insults her interrogator even more boldly than Cecilia does, and Margaret stomps with vigor on the neck of a demon who has tempted her. A reading of the *South English Legendary* or the *Northern Homily Cycle* will produce further examples of humor in saints' legends. In fact, the term "comic hagiography" has come into use recently and should become more widely known.¹¹ Although a saint's legend may have a serious theme and a definite didactic purpose, humor can be used to convey the theme. Opposition to God is not only sinful but laughable. The rulers, demons, and devils who make efforts to defy God and defeat the saints will bumble and fail; humans who move toward God may bumble but will soon arrive at the point where no work, suffering, or prayer is in vain.

In the case of the *Second Nun's Tale*, the theme of Cecilia's perfection and fruitfulness through spiritual and physical chastity is heightened by the laughable imperfections of Valerian, Tiburce, and finally Almachius. Chaucer's amplification of the humor he found in this legend is part of an old and honorable tradition, and we are certainly allowed to laugh.

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1. D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1962), p. 367.

2. For example, see John L. Lowes, "The Coronations of the Second Nun's Tale," *PMLA*, 26 (1911), 315-23; Millett Henshaw, "The Preface of St. Ambrose and Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale*," *MP*, 26 (1928-29), 15-16; and Carleton Brown, "Chaucer and the Hours of the Blessed Virgin," *MLN*, 30 (1915), 231-32.

3. Sherry L. Reames, "The Cecilia Legend as Chaucer Inherited It and Retold It: The Disappearance of an Augustinian Ideal," *Speculum*, 55 (1980), 38-57. See pp. 55 and 57.

4. Donald Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1976), p. 290.

5. Paul Strohm, "Medieval English Literary Terminology," in a paper read to the

Division on Middle English Language and Literature, excluding Chaucer, No. 591: "The State of Genre Studies in Middle English Literature," the 1979 MLA meeting. The quotation is taken from a written copy of the paper, which Professor Strohm kindly sent me.

6. Paul E. Beichner, "Confrontation, Contempt of Court, and Chaucer's Cecilia," *ChauR*, 8 (1973-74), 198-204. See p. 204.

7. Beichner, p. 198. Howard Rollin Patch, *On Rereading Chaucer* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1939), p. 173.

8. Reames, p. 39. See also her "The Sources of Chaucer's 'Second Nun's Tale,'" *MP*, 76 (1978-79), 111-35.

9. *The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine*, trans. Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (New York: Longmans, Green, 1941), p. 167.

10. Anne Eggebrotten, "Women in the *Katherine* Group and *Ancrene Riwe*," Diss. Univ. of California at Berkeley, 1979.

11. Theresa Coletti, "The Meeting at the Gate: Comic Hagiography and Symbol in The Shipman's Tale," *Studies in Iconography*, 3 (1971), 47-56.