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## OUR LADY ACCORDING TO GEOFFREY CHAUCER: TRANSLATION AND COLLAGE

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Chaucer addressed some of his best known poetry to the Virgin Mary. Whatever basis such poetry may have had in personal religion, this discussion is interested in the fact that Chaucer's marian writings are in large part the result of translation, adaptation, quotation, and allusion. That observation is not meant to be iconoclastic, for literature of the time did not have the present-day obsession with novelty, and much mediaeval religious poetry is derivative. In writing about the Virgin Mary, Chaucer sometimes layered borrowed passages in a complex of sources themselves borrowed, leaving the reader with echoes — echoes of other great writers such as Bernard of Clairvaux and Dante, as well as of the Bible, the Church's hymnody, and the liturgy.<sup>1</sup> Most of this layering occurs in, or prefaces, folkloric works which are hagiography at least in their origins: the Second Nun's tale of St Cecilia and the Prioress's tale of the schoolboy murdered for singing *Alma redemptoris mater* in a ghetto.<sup>2</sup> Less complex is the short poem known as Chaucer's *ABC*, translated from Guillaume de Deguileville's *Pèlerinage de la vie humaine*.<sup>3</sup> Even less so are the two marian verses uttered by the Man of Law's Constance as she enters her rudderless ship (II. 841-854). These pieces by Chaucer are not uniformly excellent. Some are marian passages in other works not themselves marian.

Besides translation, adaptation, quotation, and allusion, and sometimes related to them, layering in some of these pieces comes from Chaucer's use of collage, the art of adding disparate material to a work in progress. The term collage, as used in art, originated with early twentieth-century experiments in Cézanne's cubism introduced by the painters Braque and Picasso, who added alien material to their paintings by pasting it onto their canvas, with or without further modification using paint. Examples are Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1911–1912), which, among other innovations, presents a piece of imitation chair caning stuck to the canvas, the painting being surrounded by glued-on rope;<sup>4</sup> and Braque's *Le Courrier* (1913), which makes similar use of paper scraps including a tobacco-wrapper.<sup>5</sup> The essential point is that these artists created works by superimposing disparate material onto a painting in progress, thereby creating interesting contrasts and dimensional effects, forming a new work by juxtaposition.

In fact, collage is neither a twentieth-century innovation nor a manner of composition peculiar to the visual arts, for it was used widely in mediaeval literature written in Latin, French, and English, and was by no means new when Chaucer employed it in his marian lyrics. The word *pastiche* has been used by Richard Rex (1986) in discussing the Canterbury portraits,<sup>6</sup> and earlier by F.W. Bateson (1972).<sup>7</sup> That term is avoided here because it has entered common parlance as a pejorative and evaluative word rather than as the neutral name of a process. A more neutral, generic term is *montage*, referring to any art produced by assembling pieces together by adhesion. Collage is here considered a montage technique used in literature through this procedure; it must involve disparate material either superimposed on something or juxtaposed to it, in either case evoking meaning that does not belong to the surface, in the first case, or to either part in the case of juxtaposition.

Nowhere is montage art more evident than in the Church's liturgy, ever present in mediaeval life. The most familiar example is the canon of the Mass, a montage of praises and invocations arranged to frame the quoted words of consecration taken from the gospel account of the Last Supper (Matt. 26:26–28; Luke 22:19–20). In some respects, this montage is itself arranged around the Lord's Prayer. Likewise, montage from a literary standpoint are the services of the canonical hours, such as the Divine Office, the Office of the Dead, and the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary, all being sets of psalms framed by antiphons, responsoria, lessons, collects, and hymns, assembled from tradition and thus collaged rather than written, which is not to deny the creativity of design. Assembled thus, the add-ons

give different meaning to each other from that which they had in other contexts. An outstanding example may be seen in the use of the Song of Solomon antiphonally to the otherwise unrelated Psalm 121 (Vulgate) in the vespers of the Little Office, the psalm beginning *Laetatus sum in his quae dicta sunt mihi: In domum Domini ibimus*. Through collage, mystical overtones are introduced by changing the context. The psalm is prefaced antiphonally by *Nigra sum*, and followed more fully, also antiphonally, by *Nigra sum, sed formosa, filiae Jerusalem; ideo dilexit me Rex, et introduxit me in cubiculum suum*. To achieve this imagery, lines 4 and 3 of Canticles 1, have been transposed, unless they were found thus in the source.<sup>8</sup> The quotations are disparate; cut out and pasted on as a frame for the psalm, the erotic /religious allegorical language of the Song of Solomon produces a work of very different connotation in this antiphonal situation than either item might have otherwise. Perhaps liturgical collage becomes bad art from one point of view, for it alters meaning; from another point of view, it becomes the language of mysticism. The same voice would be heard later on in the writings of John of the Cross, especially the poems.<sup>9</sup>

Another use of literary collage is macaronic verse, which adds words and phrases in another language to the basic text. Often mere artifice, some macaronic verse is nicely done, and a quantity of it is addressed to Mary. A notable example is the mid-thirteenth-century poem quoted here:

Of oon that is so faire and bright,  
*Velud maris stella,*  
 Brighter thanne the dayes light,  
*Parens et puella:*  
 I crie to thee, thou see to me.  
 Lady, preye thy Sone for me,  
*Tam pia,*  
 That I moot come to thee,  
*Maria.*<sup>10</sup>

The Latin lines are tags, clichés of marian hymns, antiphons, and litanies. The point is that, in another language, they are culturally disparate and superimposed. They do not translate the base text, although it cannot be denied that they add dimension to it, perhaps best defined as emotional impact. Although Chaucer was not specifically indebted to any of the texts quoted here, he in fact used collage, along with translation, adaptation, quotation, and allusion, in his marian verse, features that were commonplaces in the fourteenth century poetry of Mary.

The first item to consider is his *ABC*, his only religious lyric that stands

alone in his works as we have them, although, as noted earlier, it is in fact translated from a passage in Deguilleville's lengthy *Pèlerinage de la vie humaine* (1331, rev. 1335).<sup>11</sup> It departs from literality in order to maintain the alphabet device beginning each stanza in the source, although Chaucer has dropped the final stanzas on *et cetera*. Speght's 1602 edition of Chaucer's works says that the poet wrote the piece for the Duchess Blanche, who died in 1368, though Chaucer's use of the eight-line stanza of the *Monk's Tale* and *Bukton* suggests a later date.<sup>12</sup>

Of immediate concern is the fact that the *ABC* is a translation, though one which deals so ruthlessly with its original that it may properly be considered an adaptation. Chaucer freely introduced imagery which Deguilleville had not written. In line 4, Chaucer's version reads, "Glorious virgine, of alle floures flour," introducing the famous *flos flora* image commonplace in Latin poetry. There are no flowers at the beginning of Deguilleville's poem. Again, in line 38, speaking of Judgment Day, the text reads, "So litel fruit shal thanne in me be founde . . .," an image which the Riverside editors attribute to Romans 7:4.<sup>13</sup> Deguilleville had not written this. Thus, while the *ABC* is a translation, it is also an adaptation. Indeed, Chaucer's aggressive attitude toward his source gives the piece its literary distinction.

The second of the four Marian lyrics by Chaucer occurs in the man of Law's tale, as well it might since Margaret Schlauch showed (1927) that the accused queen folktale had one branch which was a miracle of the Virgin.<sup>14</sup> Although the tale of Constance is not offered overtly as a miracle of the Virgin, it is Mary who saves Constance in the end. There are two stanzas (lines II. 841-854) in which Constance, about to board her rudderless ship, addresses the virgin mother in a planctus empathizing with her as the *Mater Dolorosa*, as well as praying for her own child. It assembles familiar epithets of the Virgin Mary from popular religion, and the second stanza resembles a litany of such. Nevertheless, a tender voice appears at the end, which is sincere and probably as close to originality as we shall come in Chaucer's marian poetry. Constance concludes in her grief,

Rewe on my child, that of thy gentillesse,  
Rewest on every reweful in distresse.

The important technique in the piece is quotation.

The Second Nun's tale of St Cecilia would not be of concern here except for the prologue. The prologue opens with a deprecation of idleness, allusive of many representations of idleness as in the *Roman de la Rose*<sup>15</sup> and in Jehan de Vignay's translation of the *Legenda Aurea*,<sup>16</sup> which may have

been Chaucer's source. The "Idleness Prologue" is linked to the rhapsody on Cecilia's name, which Chaucer may have adapted also from Jehan de Vignay, the linkage being in the flower imagery of lines 27-28: "Thou with thy gerland wroght with rose and lilie, — / Thee meene I, mayde and martyr, Seint Cecilie." At this point, however, instead of closing the link he had prepared, Chaucer collaged onto the prologue his *Invocacio ad Mariam* likewise montage consisting of editorial comment by Chaucer, his translation/adaptation of part of the hymn to the Virgin Mary that Dante assigns to Bernard of Clairvaux (Par. xxxiii: 1-21),<sup>17</sup> and allusions to other marian materials, notably the *Salve Regina*, one of the major antiphons of Mary.<sup>18</sup> The collage is in use itself an antiphon, disparate from the prologue but influencing its meaning without being integral to it. Never in other parts of the prologue does the Second Nun refer to the Virgin Mary. Never does Cecilia invoke her in her legend.

Many scholars have believed that the *Invocacio* was written much later and added to the prologue, although the Riverside editors, in this case Florence Ridley, place the entire work in Chaucer's middle period.<sup>19</sup> There appears no reason to doubt their dating. That the other materials are not marian, and that the *Invocacio* is superimposed by collage, would not deny that a theme of virginity exists in both prologue and tale; perhaps this is what persuaded Chaucer to add the *Invocacio*. Its translation is free and once again is ruthless with regard to the sources. The schema of the *Invocacio* is as follows: Stanza 1, Chaucer's introduction; Stanzas 2, 3, 4: Dante, Par. xxxiii: 1-51, quoting Venantius Fortunatus, *Quem terra, pontus, sidera*;<sup>20</sup> Stanza 5, *Salve Regina* (see above) and Matt. 22 ff; Stanza 6, Dante, Par. xxxii: 133-135; Stanza 7, Macrobius, *Somnium Scipionis, passim*;<sup>21</sup> Stanza 8, Chaucer's conclusion. The Poet has produced a marian lyric by translation/adaptation, allusion, and quotation, and collaged it onto the Second Nun's prologue.

The same techniques are used in the Prioress's prologue, which is easier to discuss because the tale is also marian in topic. It adapts a story so commonplace that no immediate source has been identified; Chaucer may have retold it from oral tradition. The details are different from the history of Little Hugh of Lincoln, who died violently in 1255 in a notorious crime for which Jews were blamed;<sup>22</sup> the Prioress's tale is not that of Hugh. The last stanza, collaged onto the tale by the Prioress-narrator, connects a folktale with Lincoln, which had its own child-murder legend. Sumner Ferris believes that Chaucer wrote the piece on the occasion of a royal visit to Lincoln in 1387.<sup>23</sup>

The Prioress's prologue is a marian lyric. It brings together the following materials with substantial overlap:

Rubric: *Domine, dominus noster*. Whether Chaucer wrote any of the rubrics that appear in the manuscripts is a moot question,<sup>24</sup> but this one appears in both of the earliest manuscripts, Hengwrt and Ellesmere, so that his earliest editors understood it as the keynote to what follows. As the opening words of Psalm 8 of the Vulgate, it could have been taken from the Bible directly, from any psalter, from any missal that contained the Mass of Holy Innocents' Day, from any compilation or cuebook for the canonical hours, or from any copy or version of the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The point of the psalm as Chaucer used it is, in the King James translation, "Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings thou hast brought forth praise because of thine enemies." The enemies in the psalm are the enemies of the psalmist's people. Mediaeval interpretation, however, was anti-semitic.

Stanza 1 paraphrases Psalm 8. Stanza 2 is the Prioress's introduction to her marian context, in narrative mode. The liturgy of the canonical hours has similar contrasts, comprising lessons as well as psalms, antiphons, and hymns. Stanza 3 returns to lyric mode. It is a marian antiphon to stanza 2, paraphrasing antiphons of the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This is collage. It changes the meaning of the keynote psalm by framing it with disparate material, an ancient liturgical practice. Stanza 4 is also collage. It superimposes onto his liturgical prologue his own translation/adaptation of Dante's Bernardine hymn, just as it has done in the Second Nun's prologue. Stanza 5 is the point of the entire prologue. The keynote of holy innocence is now merged with the marian context Chaucer sought for his marian tale. Chaucer and his Prioress-narrator thus arrived at the beginning of the story by passing from Psalm 8's praise of holy innocence to an address to the Virgin Mary in which the narrator adopts the Psalmist's concept of innocence in her praise of Mary, an attitude to be maintained in the course of the tale which follows.

Like the other marian lyrics discussed in this paper, the Prioress's prologue is derivative, its chief sources being the liturgy and Dante, though it is the liturgy and not Dante that determines the nature of prologue and tale. Dante's Bernardine hymn is disparate material added on, like the other instances of collage in the pieces to which attention has been called. The use of collage in mediaeval religious poetry was not a technique of Chaucer's invention, but one already familiar, especially in the Church's liturgy. Chaucer's

genius lies in his fine-tuning, which used collage to produce some of the best lyric poetry of the time.

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NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For broad discussion, see Paul G. Ruggiers, gen. ed., *The Variorum Chaucer*, 2, *The Canterbury Tales*, Part 20, *The Prioress's Tale*, ed. Beverly Boyd (Norman, Oklahoma 1987) 4-8.

<sup>2</sup> All references to Chaucer's works, except *The Prioress's Tale*, are to Larry D. Benson, gen. ed., *The Riverside Chaucer* (Boston 1987).

<sup>3</sup> The French text is printed with Chaucer's translation in *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. Walter W. Skeat, 6 vols., 2nd ed., I (Oxford 1899, rpt. 1972) 261-71.

<sup>4</sup> Reproduced by H.W. Janson, *History of Art* (New York 1962) 522.

<sup>5</sup> Reproduced by Janson (at n. 4) 522.

<sup>6</sup> "Pastiche as Irony in the Prioress's Tale," *Studies in Short Fiction* 23 (1986) 1-8.

<sup>7</sup> Rex cites and discusses Bateson's comment (*The Scholar-Critic: An Introduction to Literary Research* [London 1972] 19-20) that pastiche is a literary form *sui generis*. "Technique" might be a better term, for the resulting piece of literature might, in some cases, exist apart from its sources no longer recognized.

<sup>8</sup> For Vulgate texts, see *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Clementinam Nova Editio*, ed. Alberto Colunga and Laurentio Turrado, 4th ed. (Madrid 1965) 564 (Ps. 121), 614-618 (Canticum Canticorum Salomonis). For a modern text of The Little Office, see the edition issued by Benziger (New York 1946). For the use of numerous service books in the performance of mediaeval liturgies of the canonical hours, see Beverly Boyd, *Chaucer and the Liturgy* (Philadelphia 1967).

<sup>9</sup> Ed. and trans. John Frederick Nims (Chicago 1979).

<sup>10</sup> Ed. Robert D. Stevick, *One Hundred Middle English Lyrics* (New York 1964) 15.

<sup>11</sup> Skeat (at n. 3).

<sup>12</sup> For discussion, see Benson (at n. 2) 1076.

<sup>13</sup> Benson (at n. 2) 77.

<sup>14</sup> *Chaucer's Constance and Accused Queens* (New York 1927).

<sup>15</sup> For the translation attributed to Chaucer, see Benson (at n. 2) 685-767.

<sup>16</sup> Printed by F.J. Furnivall, *Originals and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, Part 2, Vol. 10 (Chaucer Society Publications, 2nd ser. [London 1875] 193-205: see esp. 193.

<sup>17</sup> *The Divine Comedy*, ed. and trans. Charles S. Singleton, 3 vols., each in 2 parts (Princeton 1975).

<sup>18</sup> Ed. and trans. Matthew Britt, O.S.B., *Hymns of the Breviary and Missal* rev. ed. (New York 1955) 67.

<sup>19</sup> Benson (at n. 2) 942.

<sup>20</sup> Britt (at n. 18) 349-50.

<sup>21</sup> The passages concerned are printed by W.F. Bryan and G.C. Dempster, *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (New York 1958) 666-67; see also *The Dream of Scipio*, ed. and trans. James A. Kleist (New York 1915).

<sup>22</sup> For discussion and bibliography, see Boyd, *The Prioress's Tale* (at n. 1) 166-67.

<sup>23</sup> "Chaucer at Lincoln (1387), the Prioress's Tale as a Political Poem," *Chaucer Review* 15 (1981) 295-321.

<sup>24</sup> For discussion and bibliography, see Boyd (at n. 1), *The Prioress's Tale* 62-65.