

“As olde bookes maken us memorie”: Chaucer and the Clerical Commentary Tradition

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My title quotation, taken from the “Monk’s Prologue,” points to Chaucer’s interest in how best to appropriate classical works for the purpose of enhancing the cultural memory of his contemporaries. The Monk offers a version of this quandary as he contemplates which of the source texts in his cloister to adapt for the tale-telling contest:

I wol yow seyn the lyf of Seint Edward;
Or ellis, first, tragedies wol I telle,
Of whiche I have an hundred in my celle.
Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie,
As olde bookes maken us memorie,
Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee,
And is yfallen out of heigh degree
Into myserie, and endeth wrecchedly.¹

With tales ranging from hagiography to classical tragedy at his disposal, the Monk indecisively ponders which one to select from his “olde bookes,” opting to compress his collection into “mini-narratives”² rather than limit himself to one of these tales

1 Chaucer, “The Monk’s Prologue,” VII.1970-77. All quotations from the *Canterbury Tales* are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*; hereafter, line references are provided parenthetically in the text above.

2 Cooper’s useful term “mini-narratives” underscores the Monk’s conciseness; Cooper, “Responding to the Monk,” 431.

of falls from prosperity. Long neglected by modern critics³ and scorned by his fellow pilgrims,⁴ the tale presents a seemingly directionless litany of pseudo-historical accounts of misfortune that fail to accord with either modern or medieval tastes for narration.

The “Monk’s Tale” and its strategies for adapting biblical and mythological stories without narrative detail or characterization may be tedious, but they offer insight into a clerical culture predicated on such literary practices. The rhetorical methods that the Monk exploits were originally developed by clerics who wanted to clarify the structure and meaning of Latin works for inexperienced medieval readers — especially texts like Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. This clerical exegesis became increasingly important in fourteenth-century England as the number of readers multiplied and the educational system expanded.

The Monk’s narration represents one of the by-products of changing clerical commentary traditions⁵ that had to take into account both larger lay audiences and educational institutions now frequently independent of monasteries, as well as the traditional teaching problems produced by the incompatibility of Latin and English grammar and syntax. To elucidate the structure and meaning of classical and biblical narratives for these diverse audiences, commentators often condensed and synthesized their sources in a manner similar to that of the “Monk’s Tale,” paraphrasing and reframing them according to the writer’s exegetical agenda. Beginning with an overview of the clerical production and circulation of such sources, this article will discuss the commentary tradition from which the Monk and several of Chaucer’s other characters draw their story-telling strategies.

In a manner similar to that of many contemporaneous clerical commentaries, the Monk truncates and reshapes Judaeo-Christian and pagan sources, as do some of Chaucer’s characters. As representatives of the augmented and diversified audiences for late medieval clerical commentaries, the Monk, the Wife, her husband Jankyn, the Summoner, and the Summoner’s friar are indicative of a broad cultural shift in literary tastes that extended beyond the confines of monastic scholarship and into

3 Scholars tend to assume that the rudimentary form of the “Monk’s Tale” indicates either that the tale was one of Chaucer’s early works or that it is a satirical piece criticizing monks for pursuing more secular than clerical activities; see, for example, Knight, “My Lord, the Monk,” 385; Knight, “‘Toward the fen,’” 41; Seymour, “Chaucer’s Early Poem,” 164; and Woolf, “Chaucer as Satirist,” 78-81.

4 The Knight interrupts the Monk, asking him to end his miserable tale; Chaucer, “The Nun’s Priest’s Prologue,” VII.2767-79.

5 Commentaries, or aids for reading and studying authors, explicate difficult grammar, rhetoric, and ethics, though some also provide original scholarship; see Hexter, *Ovid and Medieval Schooling*, 5-6.

secular tale-telling. Thus, while the Monk's monotonous reports of fallen men (and one woman) imply a narrator cloistered from the humour of secular life and isolated from the poignancy of martyrdom, they also underscore the cultural process of literary production that often originated from commentaries such as those accumulating within the Monk's claustral walls. Chaucer adapts and comments on such hermeneutics, using the Monk, the Wife, and the Summoner to offer insights into a clerical milieu that provided Chaucer with the patterns of reading and textual analysis that inspired the composition of his own frame narrative of the *Canterbury Tales*.⁶

The Literary Inheritance of English Clerics

Chaucer's approach to "olde bookes" grows out of the culture through which he accessed them, a culture that made clerical criticism increasingly visible to literary consumers. Materials originally intended for regular clerics began to be disseminated outside of monasteries because of a proliferation of "free-standing" educational institutions⁷ and because of the increase in lay audiences.⁸ With England's educational system expanding and with clerical works reaching broader audiences than before, regular and secular clerics along with members of the laity were exposed to Latin texts and their critical apparatuses.⁹ As James G. Clark argues, monasteries in particular played a prominent role in the production of such works, reviving a vigorous manuscript-copying culture that allowed individual monks to amass personal libraries (such as the Monk's hundred tragedies) and to renew relationships with textual communities outside of the cloister.¹⁰ Chaucer was one such outside beneficiary. Although there are no extant records of his attendance at any school, his multiple references to Latin school texts evince his familiarity with the Latin

6 Neuse regards the "Monk's Tale" as a series of tales mirroring the entire *Canterbury Tales*'s narrative style of collecting distinct yet interrelated stories; Neuse, "They Had Their World," 422-23. Neuse also suggests that the "Monk's Tale" follows a medieval chronicle style with "hortatory *exempla*"; Neuse, "The Monk's *De casibus*," 259. The "Monk's Tale" is undoubtedly connected to chronicles, precisely because clerical exegesis contributed to this tradition, but this article will demonstrate that the "Monk's Tale" also belongs to a more general clerical hermeneutical practice.

7 Orme, "Schools and Schoolmasters," 424.

8 More diverse audiences were exposed to classical literature than earlier in the Middle Ages because of preaching, monastic public readings, and independent study by both regular and secular scholars; Clark, "Ovid in the Monasteries," 79-80, 126.

9 For a description of medieval curricula in England, see Orme, "Schools and School-Books," 452-56.

10 Clark, "Monastic Manuscripts," 338-39.

curriculum of his day, and his seven clerical pilgrim characters¹¹ suggest an equal fascination with this culture.¹² Chaucer repeatedly refers to grammar school texts, such as the Distichs of Cato, Pseustis, the *Eclogues* of Theodolus, Ovid's *Remedia amoris*, and the *Facetus*, and he even depicts the classroom and its pupils in the "Prioress's Tale."¹³ Chaucer also exhibits an interest in commentaries on classical and scriptural works, as reflected in the Wife's discussion of her husband Jankyn's clerical text, the so-called *Book of Wicked Wives*.¹⁴

However, this commentary tradition is certainly not uniform. As Christopher Cannon discovered, fourteenth-century English schoolbooks are inconsistent, providing a variety of texts and interpretive strategies;¹⁵ furthermore, without records of Chaucer's education, it is impossible to reconstruct the exact commentaries to which he had access. He probably attended St Paul's almonry school in London, as Edith Rickert claimed long ago,¹⁶ and he may have had some knowledge of Oxford curricula because his son Lewis studied there.¹⁷ As a student at St Paul's, Chaucer would have had access to an extensive collection of books which had been bequeathed to the school in 1329 and 1358 and which contributed to its "inventory [of] eighty-two texts in forty-one volumes [whose] topics ranged from songs to grammar and poetry, both classical and medieval."¹⁸ Yet even if Chaucer attended St Paul's, he might not have had access to its exceptionally rich collection of literary texts because lending practices were strict — with loans reserved for advanced students, and only after they had provided surety that they would return the books.¹⁹ Despite the growth of such libraries, they could not accommodate all of the needs of expanding reading

11 This does not include the Prioress and the Second Nun, who belong to a different educational culture.

12 For an overview of Chaucer's interest in clerks, see Orme, "Chaucer and Education," 41-45, 47-54.

13 For details concerning Chaucer's inclusion of grammar school curricula, see Orme, "Chaucer and Education."

14 Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 118-28.

15 Cannon, "The Middle English Writer's Schoolroom," 25.

16 Rickert, "Chaucer at School."

17 Orme, "Chaucer and Education," 50.

18 Orme believes that students infrequently accessed classical works, preferring Christian texts written after 1300; Orme, *Medieval Schools*, 154. However, Chaucer's frequent allusions to diverse classical texts indicates that he took advantage of having these volumes at his disposal, reading well beyond the basic grammar school curriculum; see for example, Hanna and Lawler, "The Wife of Bath's Prologue," 351-55.

19 Orme, "Schools and Schoolmasters," 426-27.

audiences. In other words, any attempt to reconstruct Chaucer's educational history is thwarted by the multiplicity of available texts and the uncertainty concerning his access to them.

Nonetheless, the various commentaries which may have been available to Chaucer share a common purpose: to facilitate the transmission of diverse Latin works and to explain the linguistic and conceptual complexities of these texts. Chaucer dramatizes the necessity for such explications in the "Summoner's Tale," in which the friar character claims to be toiling and praying for Thomas's salvation:

I have to day been at youre chirche at messe,
 And seyde a sermon after my symple wit —
 Nat al after the text of hooly writ,
 For it is hard to yow, as I suppose,
 And therefore wol I teche yow al the glose.
 Glosynge is a glorious thyng, certeyn,
 For lettre sleeth, so as we clerkes seyn —
 There have I taught hem to be charitable,
 And spende hir good ther it is resonable.

("Summoner's Tale," III.1788-96)

The Summoner's friar praises glosses as a "glorious thyng" capable of simplifying "hooly writ" for his own "symple wit" and for the even simpler wit of Thomas. The gloss becomes a teaching tool predicated on revision and lucidity, ameliorating the dangers of complex letters by making them "charitable" and "spende hir good ther it is resonable." Although ironic in its assumption that the modernized text could emend and purify Scripture, this passage also illustrates how clerics employed commentaries to facilitate the comprehension of Latin texts by audiences both clerical (like the friar) and lay (like Thomas) and to promote the dissemination of such texts among these readers.

Simplified interpretive methodologies were essential for lay and clerical audiences as well as for imitators of their rhetoric,²⁰ all of whom required commentators to parse the original Latin works, which they did by means of *abbreviatio*, or paraphrasing. Chaucer's Monk's account of Peter, King of Cyprus, illustrates this technique:

²⁰ Woods claims such simplifications responded to the preponderance of students without permanent writing materials and to the need for efficient textbooks. Furthermore, she notes that most extant medieval student compositions use abbreviation; Woods, *Classroom Commentaries*, 66-67, 254.

O worthy Petro, kyng of Cipre, also,
 That Alisandre wan by heigh maistrie,
 Ful many an hethen wroghtestow ful wo,
 Of which thyne owene liges hadde envie,
 And for no thyng but for thy chivalrie
 They in thy bed han slayn thee by the morwe.
 Thus kan Fortune hir wheel governe and gye,
 And out of joye brynge men to sorwe.
 (“Monk’s Tale,” VII.2391-98)

These eight lines comprise the whole of the Monk’s story of Peter of Cyprus, about whom we learn only that he slew “Ful many an hethen” and was himself slain in bed. Abbreviation is here taken to the extreme, with the result that the general structure of Fortune’s wheel absorbs the rest of the stanza, converting Peter’s story into one of several examples of men who fell from prosperity.

Concise and simplified narratives such as those told by the Monk and the Summoner’s friar were efficacious in transmitting the literary knowledge that schoolmasters proffered. As Ralph Hanna explains, a schoolmaster was expected to “divide” texts for students, beginning with a “summary of the sense” and then showing how source texts built arguments.²¹ *Abbreviatio* focused on the “sense” of the text and assisted students who often lacked permanent writing materials, a growing problem as school attendance increased and diversified.²² In fact, current scholarship proposes that fourteenth-century classroom exercises were predominantly oral, with schoolmasters reading texts aloud and with students composing orally.²³ Since *abbreviatio* facilitated memorization and recitation, it was an ideal grammar school exercise, appearing in popular school texts such as Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s *Poetria nova*,²⁴ which

21 Hanna, “Literacy, Schooling, Universities,” 179.

22 Woods, *Classroom Commentaries*, 66-67.

23 See, for example, Camargo, “Medieval Rhetoric Delivers”; Cannon, “The Middle English Writer’s Schoolroom,” 19; and Woods, “Rhetoric, Gender, and the Literary Arts,” 125.

24 In an abbreviated 47-line chapter discussing *abbreviatio*, which follows an amplified 689-line section describing *amplificatio*, Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s *Poetria nova* exemplifies his lesson with a four-line story: “Her husband abroad, improving his fortunes, an adulterous wife bears a child. On his return after long delay, she pretends it begotten of snow. Deceit is mutual. Slyly he waits. He whisks off, sells, and — reporting to the mother a like ridiculous tale — pretends the child melted by sun” (*Poetria nova*, III. 713-16). Geoffrey abbreviates this story twice within this brief chapter, using the narrative to show how to prune away the previously discussed elaborations.

included simplified versions of classical rhetoric to help students imitate it in written or oral compositions.²⁵ Additionally, these shortened forms of works prepared for more extended commentaries, focusing on the basic elements of the text before subjecting the work to allegorization or other interpretive methods. Schoolmasters as well as regular and secular clergy therefore employed *abbreviatio* extensively.

However, medieval clerical exegesis was not limited to *abbreviatio* but also appropriated interpretive methodologies from classical commentators, such as Servius on Virgil, and imposed them on other texts, especially Ovid's.²⁶ In fact, Ovidian commentators employed exegetical strategies that were found in many medieval commentaries on classical texts, but unlike other classical works studied in medieval schools, the Ovidian corpus lacked a commentary tradition from the classical period.²⁷ The absence of classical commentaries on Ovid allowed medieval scholars to generate their own critical apparatuses (though based on other classical sources) according to their own tastes and literary requirements. Ralph Hexter argues that for this reason the creation of the Ovidian commentary tradition during the Middle Ages offers greater insight into the ways in which medieval audiences read his works than how they read any other classical text.²⁸ While the exegetical strategies discussed below vividly illustrate broader trends in medieval commentaries, the prose paraphrases of Ovid's text demonstrate specifically the methods which this clerical tradition taught students to imitate, and thus these paraphrases offer a particularly useful entry point for an examination of the techniques which Chaucer appropriates

According to Geoffrey, the purpose of such conciseness is to "let *emphasis* be spokesman, saying much in few words. [. . .] This form of expression is preferable for a factual account, in order not to enshroud facts discretely in mist" (*Poetria nova*, III. 693-94, 703-704). For more about Geoffrey's *abbreviatio* practices, see Woods, *Classroom Commentaries*, 66-67, 72-73.

25 Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation*, 23-24.

26 Hexter, *Ovid and Medieval Schooling*, 7.

27 Tarrant, "Ovid," 276-77. Tarrant argues elsewhere that Ovidian texts may have been recopied during the twelfth century because earlier copies became worn out through overuse; Tarrant, "The *Narrationes* of 'Lactantius,'" 84. For updated lists of Ovidian manuscripts, see Coulson, "Addenda and Corrigenda to *Incipitarium Ovidianum*," "Addenda and Corrigenda to *Incipitarium Ovidianum* II," "An Update to Munari's Catalogue," "Newly Discovered Manuscripts of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in the Libraries of Florence and Milan," "New Manuscripts of the Medieval Interpretations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*," and Coulson and Roy, *Incipitarium Ovidianum*.

28 Hexter, *Ovid and Medieval Schooling*, 5-9.

from this tradition and then applies both in his frame narrative and in his treatment of Ovid's tale of Hercules.²⁹

During the second half of the fourteenth century in England, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* underwent a dramatic rise in popularity that was initiated by monastic *scriptoria* and furthered by vernacular appropriations such as the *Canterbury Tales*.³⁰ The fourteenth-century monastic copyists inspiring this literary trend were preoccupied with mythography and could conveniently harvest it from Ovid's vast collection in the *Metamorphoses*. According to Clark, mythographic reading became so central to studying the *Metamorphoses* that it supplanted all other patterns of interpretation and of studying the poem.³¹ Furthermore, Clark notes that mythographic readings, such as those found in Thomas Walsingham's *Archana deorum*, inspired audiences both inside and outside of English claustral walls to produce many imitations.³²

The floruit of these mythographic works has sometimes been overlooked by Chaucerians in favour of moralizations,³³ which gained pre-eminence on the Continent. Modern scholarship has especially focused on the fourteenth-century *Ovide moralisé*,³⁴ which fabricates supposedly hidden relationships between the *Metamorphoses* and the Judaeo-Christian Bible,³⁵ using details from myths to represent contemporary

29 Furthermore, Kelly classifies the "Monk's Tale" and the *Metamorphoses* as tragedies, and since no copy of Ovid's *Medea* survives from antiquity, he suggests that Chaucer assumed that Ovid was referring to the *Metamorphoses* when mentioning, in the *Tristia*, a previously written tragedy; Kelly, *Chaucerian Tragedy*, 61-62.

30 McKinley, "Manuscripts of Ovid."

31 Clark, *A Monastic Renaissance at St Albans*, 204 and 208.

32 Clark, *A Monastic Renaissance at St Albans*, 208. For example, Clark discusses the adoption of some of Walsingham's mythographic schemes by John Wylde, canon of Waltham, and by the anonymous author of the *Libellus deorum* (preserved in BL, Cotton Titus D. xx); Clark, "Ovid in the Monasteries," 193-94.

33 For further discussion, see Allen, *The Ethical Poetic*, 7-9; Dronke, "Metamorphoses"; Levine, "Exploiting Ovid"; Minnis, "A Note on Chaucer"; and Wheatley, "The Mantic's Tale," 749-50.

34 Written between 1300 and 1330 by an anonymous Franciscan cleric from near Burgundy, the *Ovide moralisé* is a 72,000-line commentary in octosyllabic French couplets (six times as long as the *Metamorphoses*) that paraphrases Ovid's myths before moralizing, allegorizing, and pseudo-historicizing each of them. See Cormier, "*Ovide moralisé*," 18; Jung, "*L'Ovide moralisé*," 113; Pairet, "Recasting the *Metamorphoses*," 83-84; and Possamaï-Perez, "Troie dans l'*Ovide moralisé*."

35 As early as 1918, Lowes traced Chaucer's Ovidian roots back to moralizing critical apparatuses. Alastair J. Minnis, Sheila Delany, and Peter Dronke demonstrated how moralization, especially allegorization, permitted medieval writers to disseminate Ovid's pagan mythology throughout Christendom without fear of repercussions. See Lowes, "Chaucer and the *Ovide moralisé*"; and Delany, "Chaucer's *House of Fame*"; Dronke, "Metamorphoses"; Minnis, "A Note on Chaucer"; and Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, 205-208.

ethical values.³⁶ However, such scholarship reached an impasse, struggling to reconcile Chaucer's details from the *Ovide moralisé* with his lack of overt allegorizations.³⁷ The resulting debates about Chaucer's relationship to the *Ovide moralisé* (which are futile because no extant copy of the text predates the second half of the fifteenth century in England)³⁸ ignore the English commentary tradition that supplied Chaucer with materials for the "Monk's Tale" and the "Summoner's Tale," both of which emphasize simplification and elucidation rather than allegorization.

The most popular type of commentary in England was the prose paraphrase,³⁹ which, like the "Monk's Tale," reduces narratives to their basic plot elements, ignoring grammatical, syntactical, and theological explication. This commentary format developed in England during the twelfth century along with anthologies,⁴⁰ which explains the existence of the same prose paraphrase of the *Metamorphoses* in the following collections: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B 214, Oxford, Merton College, MS 299, Cambridge, University Library, MS Mm.2.18, Cambridge, St John's College, MS 97, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 571, and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Hatton 92.⁴¹ Despite being late copies of the prose paraphrase, these fifteenth-century manuscripts attest to the continued importance of this commentary.

36 For example, the commentator interprets the battle between Hercules and Achelous for the right to marry Deianira as an allegorical representation of man's fight against the flesh, the world, and the devil, and of the birth of Christ and his death to rid humanity of sin; *Ovide moralisé*, 9.1, ed. C. de Boer.

37 See, for example, Calabrese, *Chaucer's Ovidian Arts of Love*, 27; Cooper, "Chaucer and Ovid," 75-81; Fumo, "Thinking upon the Crow," 365; and Wheatley, "The Mangle's Tale."

38 Although Pierre Bersuire's *Ovidius moralizatus* enjoyed immediate popularity in English monasteries during the fourteenth century, the French vernacular commentary, the *Ovide moralisé*, is extant only in London, BL, Cotton MS Julius F. vii, fols 6r-13v, which dates from the second half of the fifteenth century; Clark, "Ovid in the Monasteries," 187-88 and 188 n.71.

39 For overviews about the popularity of prose paraphrases, see Clark, *A Monastic Renaissance at St Albans*, 182, 204.

40 In England, paraphrases actually developed from ancient commentaries; for a description of the ancient tradition, see Roberts, *Biblical Epic and Rhetorical Paraphrase*, 37-60.

41 Clark argues that these paraphrases derive from the same source text because they all use the incipit "Cum Saturnus regnaret." Merton 299, fols 240r-273r; CUL Mm.2.18, fols 168r-218r; St John's 97, fols 281v-303v; Bodley 571, fols 237r-256v; and Hatton 92, fols 40r-70r. See Clark, *A Monastic Renaissance at St Albans*, 182 n. 79. Clark argues that Rawlinson B 214 contains a different prose paraphrase because it does not have the same incipit, but closer inspection reveals that despite spelling and word order variations, its exposition is virtually identical to that of Merton 299. For a full bibliography of paraphrases, see Coulson and Roy, *Incipitarius Ovidianum*; Coulson, "Addenda and Corrigenda to *Incipitarius Ovidianum*" and "Addenda and Corrigenda to *Incipitarius Ovidianum* II."

In fact, the Merton 299 compiler places this paraphrase alongside the works of other Ovidian authorities, such as Pierre Bersuire⁴² and John of Garland.⁴³ With the Merton 299 citation and the five other copies of this particular paraphrase having been identified (probably more exist, considering that Ovidian paraphrases from England have not yet been edited or carefully studied), this commentary is the closest scholars have to an authoritative example of this clerical tradition. Clark even suggests that Thomas Walsingham may have referred to a copy of it when writing his *Archana deorum*.⁴⁴ The multiple copies and widespread use of this commentary indicate that it was extant long before the fifteenth-century copies. The following readings focus especially on Rawlinson B 214 with variants from Merton 299 because these two texts offer the fewest orthographic errors and the clearest readings of the paraphrase, thereby providing insight into the textual resources that are more likely to have been available to Chaucer than the allegorical *Ovide moralisé*.

The format of these commentaries appears primitive. They all duplicate the sequence of the narratives from the *Metamorphoses*, summarizing all of the major tales without using marginal notes — although some provide brief chapter headings and the occasional interlinear identification of characters; in Merton 299, these were added by a later, sixteenth-century hand. In general, paraphrases tend to follow this model, providing minimal marginal and interlinear comments. Rawlinson B 214, produced at Waltham Abbey in Essex by John Wylde sometime after 1469, is typical in its simplicity;⁴⁵ along with the other copies of this paraphrase, it resembles the “Monk’s Tale” in its abbreviations of myths and its preservation of the frame-narrative structure. Like the “Monk’s Tale,” this paraphrase perpetuates the repetitive plot cycle in which mythological figures fall from positions of wealth and privilege.

42 Pierre Bersuire wrote the *Ovidius moralizatus*, an allegorized commentary on the *Metamorphoses*, as a compendium of *exempla* primarily for preachers. The text has two redactions, one written between 1337 and 1340 at Avignon, and the second revised before 1362 at Paris to incorporate portions of the *Ovide moralisé*. The text enjoyed almost two centuries of popularity; see Coulson, “Failed Chastity and Ovid,” 19; and McKinley, “The Medieval Commentary Tradition,” 118.

43 John of Garland composed the *Integumenta Ovidii* in elegaic couplets c.1234 in Paris. The text, extant in twenty-two manuscripts, allegorizes what he considers the most important portions of Ovid’s work; see Coulson, “Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in the School Tradition of France,” 59-65.

44 Clark, *A Monastic Renaissance at St Albans*, 182.

45 Although produced after 1469, Rawlinson B 214 was probably copied from the same source text as another monastic anthology written before 1367; see Rigg, “Medieval Latin Poetic Anthologies (I),” 285.

For example, the anonymous commentator compresses Ovid's elaborate description of Deianira's unwittingly sending Hercules a poisoned shirt, believing that it will induce him to love her again. Ovid's version emphasizes that the poisoned shirt burns Hercules's flesh until the pain becomes unbearable and he commits suicide. The paraphrase of this story, however, omits most of the descriptive details:

Multis diebus post euolutis, quod Hercules Yolen amasset et ad aures Deyanire peruenit que nimium desolata cuidam de seruis suis nomine Lycam [sic] tradidit Herculi camisiā deferendam. Veniensque ad Herculem pronus, et ex parte Deyanire eum salutans camisiā ei tradidit, quam cum accepisset induit se illa et statim totus accendebatur conversusque ad camisiē latores eum in flumen praecipitavit, qui in scopulum est mutatus. Hercules vero in celum translatus est qui antequam obiit virtutes quas fecerat, et quam diversas terras peragrasset narrat Boecius *De Consolatione Philosophie*.

[Several days later, Deianira discovered that Hercules had fallen in love with Iole, and, being deserted, she handed over to one of her servants, Lichas, a shirt to carry to Hercules. And coming on his knees to Hercules, and greeting him on behalf of Deianira, Lichas delivered the shirt, which Hercules put on when he had accepted it, and he was at once completely engulfed in flames. And Hercules, turning to the bearer of the shirt, hurled him [Lichas] into the river, [where he] was transformed into a rock. Hercules was truly transported to the heavens, and what great feats and how many lands he travelled over before he died, Boethius narrates in his *De Consolatione philosophiae*.]⁴⁶

The commentator reduces Hercules's death and apotheosis to a few lines, presenting only the basic narrative events, though retaining the point that it was Lichas who delivered the shirt (and thus clarifying why Hercules immediately attacks him). Removing the gruesome details from the Ovidian original, the expositor proves uninterested in narrative flourishes. Such an abridgement of Ovid's plot and simplification of his language assisted readers with the *materia* of the *Metamorphoses*, but at times it also replaced the *originalia*. Paraphrases such as this one duplicated the order and content of the *Metamorphoses* to satisfy audiences who, in the

46 Lycam] Lichas pronus] servus Deyanire] Deiamire [sic] fecerat] fecerant [sic]
Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B 214, fol. 217v. With variants from Merton 299.

fourteenth century, increasingly wished for classical reading matter but whose demands surpassed the copying capacities of *scriptoria*.⁴⁷ Catering to this growing audience's desire for *originalia*, this passage streamlines its sources to market itself as a presentation of verifiable events, even adding a final appeal to the authority of Boethius. Boethius's *De Consolatione philosophiae* functions as a secondary authority to align Hercules with Boethian *exempla* illustrating Fortune's fickleness, in support of the narrative's claim to present historical fact in depicting the fallen hero as one of many victims of Fortune.

Chaucer's Monk employs the same type of condensed, pseudo-historical commentary, even reproducing the connection between Hercules and Fortune's fallen in the conclusion of his own version of the story in the "Monk's Tale":

Thus starf this worthy, myghty Hercules.
Lo, who may truste on Fortune any throwe?
For hym that folweth al this world of prees
Er he be war is ofte yleyd ful lowe.
Ful wys is he that kan hymselfen knowe!
Beth war, for whan that Fortune list to glouse,
Thanne wayteth she her man to overthrowe
By swich a wey as he wolde leest suppose.

("Monk's Tale," VII.2135-42)

The Monk, much like the paraphrasing expositor in Rawlinson B 214 and Merton 299, notices the connection between the demise of Hercules and the danger in trusting Fortune.⁴⁸ In the concluding advice to his audience always to beware of fickle Fortune, who can overthrow even the "worthy, myghty Hercules," the Monk offers a partial exposition of Boethian philosophy concerning Fortune and thus explains the allusion of the prose paraphrase, but he further condenses the Boethian argument by mentioning only the nature of falls from fortune and not the consolation, which involves patience and fortitude in the face of adversity. Thus, the exposition of Hercules's *vita* in the Ovidian prose paraphrase and Chaucer's version of it both develop a type of shorthand to narrate and to reframe their *exempla* by attributing Boethian significance to them while also circumventing Ovidian *originalia* by truncating their exposition.

⁴⁷ Clark, "Monastic Manuscripts," 337-38.

⁴⁸ Morse claims that Boethius inspired Chaucer's notion of tragedy; Morse, "Absolute Tragedy," 3-7. Phillips argues that the "Knight's Tale" also appeals to Boethius as a strategy to avoid Christian doctrines; Phillips, "The Matter of Chaucer," 73.

Unlike the English prose paraphrase above, the paraphrases in *narratio fabularum*, which viewed the *Metamorphoses* as a series of fables, avoided connecting its stories to works such as the *De Consolatione philosophiae*. For example, the group of commentaries based on the pseudo-Lactantian *Narrationes* or *Argumenta* (possibly written as early as the sixth century and copied continuously throughout the Middle Ages)⁴⁹ merely includes titles and prose summaries of Ovid's tales, sometimes even omitting any narration.⁵⁰ With medieval scholars primarily copying the *Narrationes* in the margins of Ovid's poem, no independent circulation for the commentary developed until the early modern period.⁵¹ The early printed book of the late antique *Fabularum Ovidii abbreviatio* housed in the Huntington Library offers one such variant reading of the *Narrationes*, which has long been regarded as an influential exemplar for the *narratio fabularum* tradition. San Marino, Huntington Library RB 100616, a small book without any other texts — unlike the earlier prose paraphrases from England that were produced in literary anthologies — condenses Hercules's torment and transformation even more than the prose paraphrase:

Deianira audito animo viri a se remoto tunicham Lyche famulo dedit marito Iovi sacrificanti perferendam, qua ille indutus cum ad aram accessisset prosecans exta, vestis flamma et lerneo veneno contacta hesit visceribus. Itaque maximo in cruciatu cum a corpore eius evelli [sic] nequiret, Lycham acerbissimi muneris reum, proiectum, Euboeo mari immersit, sed ut culpe innoxium deorum voluntas illum transformavit in scopulum sui nominis. Tandem Hercules pyre sue prestructo rogo ac sagittis traditis Philotete, Peantis filio, qui ei pyram construxerat flammis exustus est, ita ut mortale corpora eius a Iove reciperet.⁵²

[Deianira, having heard that her husband's love had been removed from her, gave to her attendant Lichas a shirt to take home to her husband, who was making a sacrifice to Jove. Hercules put it on as he came near the altar, having cut up the entrails. The garment, having consumed him with a flame and with Lernean poison, remained fixed to his flesh. And thus in the greatest torment, when it could not be torn from his body, he threw

49 Otis, "The *Argumenta*," 140. Cameron, however, believes that the *Narrationes* was probably written before 200; Cameron, *Greek Mythography*, 23.

50 See Magnus, *Metamorphoseon libri XV*; and Slater, *Towards a Text of the Metamorphosis of Ovid*.

51 Tarrant, "Ovid," 276-82; and Tarrant, "The *Narrationes* of 'Lactantius'," 85.

52 San Marino, Huntington Library RB 100616, 24b; my translation.

Lichas, who was responsible for the most bitter service, into the Euboean sea and drowned him. But because Lichas was blameless, the will of the gods transformed him into a cliff with his name. In the end, Hercules, having already prepared a funeral pyre and having offered arrows for Philoctetes, son of Poeas (who built his funeral pyre), was burnt up by the flames, so that his mortal body was received by Jove.]

This *narratio fabularum*, like the prose paraphrase, condenses the narrative and explains its events. Yet this commentary emphasizes the mundane aspects of the Ovidian tale even more than does the paraphrase, as it is most interested in explaining how Hercules found a fire into which he could throw himself. This type of explication emphasizes the sequence of events rather than uncover an interpretive framework to apply to the text.

The *Narrationes* commentator and the English expositor in the Latin paraphrase use different paradigms for their interpretations of the text. Unlike the *Narrationes*, the prose paraphrase identifies general principles that guide interpretation for a group of stories, such as the Boethian paradigm at the end of the Hercules narrative. This paraphrasing expositor further directs his exegetical approach to the *Metamorphoses* by adducing Ovid's intentions for writing. The same framework appears in almost all medieval commentaries on the *Metamorphoses* (except in the pseudo-Lactantian scholarship), using an *accessus*, or academic introduction to a text. *Accessus* define the important points that audiences should understand before reading, often addressing the historical context in which the work was created and explaining how that context differs from medieval readings and significations.⁵³ This meta-narrative of Ovid's *vita* became a means for uncovering the significance of his works.⁵⁴ Concocting a portrait of Ovid worthy of Chaucer's General Prologue, the Rawlinson B 214 expositor attests that the Roman poet came from a corrupt historical and political environment. The *accessus*⁵⁵ to the paraphrase defines the pagan author's intentions for writing by using the biographies from the commentaries of Arnulf of Orléans's *Allegorie* and William of Orléans's *Bursarii Ovidii* for corroboration.⁵⁶ Revising

53 Gillespie, "The Study of Classical Authors," 146-49.

54 Calabrese argues that Chaucer uses Ovid's biography as a meta-narrative for his Ovidian adaptations; Calabrese, *Chaucer's Ovidian Arts of Love*, 11.

55 While Rawlinson B 214 calls its introduction to the *Metamorphoses* a "prologus," it provides academic information rather than a narrative opening.

56 Coulson points out that the Rawlinson B 214 *accessus* is based on Arnulf of Orléans's seminal *vita Ovidii*, dating from 1175, which introduces both his philological and moralizing commentaries. See

Arnulf's sentences in the same manner in which he abridges the *Metamorphoses*, the Rawlinson B 214 commentator (like Chaucer and his Monk narrator) excises Arnulf's ethical interpretations, replacing them with information about Ovid's life derived from William's commentary.⁵⁷ William's *Bursarii* and the prose paraphrase discuss the Roman's birthplace and add details concerning his father and brother to construct an interpretive frame for Ovid's narrative. Using quotations from Ovid's biographical poem *Tristia* (especially 4.10), William and the anonymous expositor address the poet's dismay at being exiled from his beloved Rome.⁵⁸ The description of Ovid's origins, notable accomplishments, involvement in political intrigue, and ultimate fall from fortune typify him as one of the mythological figures whom he depicts and whom the Monk later appropriates.

Rawlinson B 214, like William's *Bursarii*, discusses all of Ovid's poems as reflections of his relationship with Augustus.⁵⁹ The Rawlinson B 214 and *Orléanais* commentators thereby reveal not only the ways in which the narratives relate to each

Coulson, "Failed Chastity and Ovid," 13; Coulson, "Hitherto Unedited Medieval and Renaissance Lives of Ovid (I)" and "Hitherto Unedited Medieval and Renaissance Lives of Ovid (II)"; and Coulson, "Two Newly Identified *Accessus*," 122. For further discussion of the *accessus* tradition, see Ghisalberti, "Mediaeval Biographies of Ovid"; Hexter, *Ovid and Medieval Schooling*, 5; and Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 6.

57 William's commentary, a philological treatise written c.1200, primarily focuses on explaining the sections that he considers most difficult for students to understand, providing mythological information and grammar explications to clarify Ovid's references and language. William also offers rhetorical information, noticing connections between Ovid's narratives; Coulson, "Failed Chastity and Ovid," 13, 15-16.

58 William of Orléans, *Bursarii super Ovidios*, Prologus, 1-38.

59 Interestingly, the Rawlinson B 214 expositor suggests additional possibilities for Ovid's exile:

Rediens ergo ad poesim rogatu Maximi et vt famam perpetuaret, librum Heroidum primo conposuit, secundo Ouidium Amorem, tercio Artem amandi per quem Romanorum et Augusti Cesaris inimicicias incurrit, adeo vt exularetur. Alie traduntur cause sui exilii esse: incensio vxoris Augusti quam ficto nomine in Amoribus Corinnam appellauit. [. . .] Alii dicunt quod missus est in exilium quia vidit Cesarem abutentem puero.

[Therefore, returning to poetry at the request of Maximus so that he might also cause his fame to continue, he composed first the book of *Heroides*, Ovid's *Amores* second, *Ars amatoria* third — through which he incurred the hostility of the Romans and of Caesar Augustus, to the extent that he was exiled. There were some other things recounted to be causes of his exile: the angering of Augustus's wife whom he called Corinna — under an assumed name in the *Amores*. [. . .] Others say he was sent into exile because he saw Caesar abusing a boy.] Rawlinson B 214, fols 200v-201r, *accessus*, lines 25-31, 33-34; my translation.

other but also how art and life reflect one another. The *accessus* for the paraphrase suggests this relationship:

Vel intencio sua est multa genera mutacionum enumerare, ut per tot mutacionum genera que videntur impossibilia mutacionem Iulii Cesaris in stellam vel deificacionem esse veram ostenderet, et ita benevolenciam Augusti caperet.

[Or his [Ovid's] intention is to enumerate the many types of transformations so that, through so many transformations that seem impossible, he might show the transformation of Julius Caesar into a star or his deification to be real. And thus he attempts to gain Augustus's benevolence.]⁶⁰

Ovid is thus said to use his poem to plead with Augustus that he revoke the sentence of exile. The expositor admits that this interpretation requires a typological understanding of all the poem's mythological transformations, with each metamorphosis prefiguring Julius Caesar's apotheosis and, by extension, Augustus's. Mimicking Arnulf's similar speculation about the relationships between Ovid's personal context and his literary corpus, the Rawlinson B 214 *accessus* proposes that an author's life determines the significance of all he writes. With his typological understanding of narrative, the expositor envisions all of his abbreviated narratives as repetitions of both the depicted subjects and the historical author. These literary and historical correlations lead audiences to interpret narratives comparatively, abbreviating but also concatenating myths within the text and within the Ovidian corpus instead of treating the *Metamorphoses* as a disjointed encyclopaedia of pagan mythology as in the *Narrationes* and *Ovide moralisé*.⁶¹

Chaucer's Clerical Exegesis

Abbreviatio, typological concatenation, and authorial intentions all help to explain the peculiar tendencies that Chaucer's characters exhibit when adapting clerical sources. Beginning with an unorthodox *exemplum*, the Monk's compilation of narratives introduces his audience to Fortune's unwitting victims by paraphrasing Lucifer's fall from Heaven:

60 Rawlinson B 214, fol. 201v, *accessus*, lines 86-90; my translation.

61 In her study of the structure and genre of *The Canterbury Tales*, Cooper points out that medieval readers were "in the habit of reading intertextually"; Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales*, 3.

For though Fortune may noon angel dere,
 From heigh degree yet fel he for his synne
 Doun into helle, where he yet is inne.
 O Lucifer, brightest of angels alle,
 Now artow Sathanas, that mayst nat twynne
 Out of miserie, in which that thou art falle.

(“Monk’s Tale,” VII.2001-2006)

Neither a man nor the subject of inexplicable misfortune, Lucifer supplies an inauspicious case study for the beginning of a tale that bemoans human suffering. Even emphasizing his unimaginable descent from heaven to worse than mortal misery cannot justify his presence as an *exemplum* of tragedy, considering that his inclusion in a text about mortal falls demands the conspicuous removal of all his well-known attributes and motivations, notably his pride, as well as God’s role in his fall. In fact, the Monk excises all of the distinguishing characteristics of Satan’s fall, converting him into a generic tragic figure.⁶² In a sense, the Satan narrative hardly qualifies as a complete story; it represents a reduced plot cycle in which a generically characterized being begins in a position of power only to fall from fortune. As discussed below, Chaucer purposefully employs such blatant tampering with his source texts to illustrate the Monk’s exegetical methods.

These methods of manipulation become all the more apparent as a result of the contrast between the Satan narrative and the tale’s other accounts. As the paraphrase tradition teaches readers, narratives are to be read comparatively as a group. As such, the second mini-narrative about Adam also problematizes the genre of the “Monk’s Tale” while incorporating some of the details excised from the story of Satan. The Monk portrays Adam’s demise as the result of disobedience to God:

Loo Adam, in the feeld of Damyssene
 With Goddes owene fynger wroght was he,
 And nat bigeten of mannes sperme unclene,
 And welte al paradys savyngge o tree.
 Hadde nevere worldly man so heigh degree
 As Adam, til he for mysgovernaunce
 Was dryven out of hys hye prosperitee
 To labour, and to helle, and to meschaunce.

(“Monk’s Tale,” VII.2007-14)

62 For more about the Monk’s version of tragedy, see Kelly, “The Evolution of *The Monk’s Tale*.”

In these accounts, Lucifer and Adam are virtually indistinguishable from one another in that both suffer the same fall from heavenly favour to misery and misfortune. The Monk ignores plot variations and nuances of characterization to focus on collective moral states instead of individual ones; using the same story arc for different characters, he establishes the relationship between all of his narratives as interchangeable spokes in the historical wheel of Fortune, thus duplicating the interpretive framework of the paraphrase tradition.

Yet the virtual sameness in the treatment of the mythological figures' fortunes draws attention to the differences between them. Lucifer and Adam's connection underscores the Monk's alterations to their significations. The Monk encourages readers to interpret narratives according to context and interrelatedness, just as the prose paraphrase proposes. Each of the Monk's stories incorporates slightly new information to guide his audience's understanding of the rest. For example, while the Monk exclaims about Lucifer's original position as the brightest of angels, he glorifies Adam's original state explicitly *as God's creation*; God produced both beings, but the Monk identifies God only in the description of Adam, not in that of Satan. Conversely, the Monk removes the idea that Lucifer is responsible for his own fall but retains the notion that Adam is accountable for his disobedience and its consequences. Taken as unrelated segments, the two narratives depict Satan as a more sympathetic and tragic character than Adam, in a departure from a long tradition of exonerating Adam as an unwitting victim of villainous Satan's temptation. Even Chaucer's supposed source for the tale, Giovanni Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium*, absolves Adam, who narrates his own fall and claims to be the victim of the serpent's deceit. Boccaccio also enhances the reader's sympathy for Adam by presenting him as a weak, suffering old man rather than the youthful, prelapsarian figure of the Judaeo-Christian Bible.⁶³ Reversing the roles of Satan and Adam in the *De casibus* and other medieval versions of their falls, the Monk draws attention to his own variations. Beginning the "Monk's Tale" with what were during the Middle Ages arguably the two most famous narratives and then switching the roles of their protagonists, Chaucer introduces his audience to the rhetorical manipulation inherent in displacing *originalia*. He reveals how the paraphrasing process not merely rewords and condenses but reframes the source text according to the commentator's perspective, resulting in a revision of the work's intended meaning.

63 In the *De casibus*, Adam speaks as an old man to Boccaccio the narrator, blaming the deceit of the serpent for his fall; Boccaccio, *De casibus virorum illustrium*, chap. 1.

The Monk's alterations become even more pronounced when the Adam narrative, from which Eve has been conspicuously excised, transitions into a tale about Samsom and his "lemman" Delilah. Chaucer adapts both of these accounts from Boccaccio, which were deemed antifeminist soon after he wrote them.⁶⁴ Although the Monk seems to bypass Boccaccio's antifeminism by removing Eve from the story of Adam's fall, he remains within this discourse tradition when he preserves Boccaccio's condemnation of Delilah and emphasizes her feminine weakness:

O noble, almyghty Sampsoun, lief and deere,
 Had thou nat toold to wommen thy secree,
 In al this world ne hadde been thy peere!
 ("Monk's Tale," VII.2052-54)

Introducing Samson by way of his wife's role in his fall highlights the absence of Adam's wife in the preceding narrative.⁶⁵ When read typologically, that is, in the manner favoured by medieval readers, each narrative correlates with the other episodes in the "Monk's Tale." Thus, although the Monk does not mention Eve in the paraphrase of the narrative concerning Adam, he implicitly involves her by juxtaposing her absence with Delilah's presence in the story of Samson. Unlike Boccaccio, who organizes his text according to geographical region and religion, the Monk exploits the clerical commentary tradition's typological exegesis. For example, the Samson story ends with Samson's killing his enemies along with himself, from which the Monk concludes that no man should trust his wife completely ("Monk's Tale," VII.2079-94). Next, the Monk classifies Hercules's demise in the same terms as Samson's, condemning a woman for causing an indomitable man to take his own life ("Monk's Tale," VII.2119-26). He introduces Hercules as a powerful character who is accustomed to being victorious:

Of Hercules, the sovereyn conquerour,
 Syngen his werkes laude and heigh renoun;
 For in his tyme of strengthe he was the flour.

64 Christine de Pizan, for example, objected to Boccaccio's antifeminist critiques in her *Livre de la cité des dames* in 1405. For more about this literary conversation, see Slerca, "Dante, Boccace, et le Livre," 221-30.

65 The fact that the Monk is the only pilgrim to mention Adam without Eve makes her absence even more conspicuous. The Merchant, the Wife of Bath, the Pardoner, Chaucer the pilgrim in the "Tale of Melibee," the Nun's Priest, and the Parson all mention Eve and the extent to which one should blame her for Adam's fall.

He slow and rafte the skyn of the leoun;
 He of Centauros leyde the boost adoun;
 He Arpies slow, the cruuel bryddes felle;
 He golden apples rafte of the dragoun;
 He drow out Cerberus, the hound of helle.

(“Monk’s Tale,” VII.2095-2102)

Hercules’s glory results from feats like slaying Harpies, skinning a lion, and besting both a dragon and Cerberus. The reference to the lion recalls the Monk’s depiction of Samson killing a lion and a thousand men using nothing but an ass’s jawbone (“Monk’s Tale,” VII.2037-38). The resulting emphasis on Samson’s and Hercules’s strength underscores the Monk’s secular interests in addition to his clerical ones.⁶⁶

Chaucer seems to have had a particular clerical framework in mind at multiple points in the *Canterbury Tales*, including the “Wife of Bath’s Prologue,” which proffers sentiments similar to the Monk’s when recounting the stories that Jankyn read to her from his clerical schoolbook every night. Alcuin Blamires points out that the Wife appropriates arguments from the clerical debate about virginity and remarriage;⁶⁷ Carolyn Dinshaw, Richard Firth Green, and Edwin D. Craun similarly discuss the Wife and Jankyn’s *Book of Wicked Wives* as a reflection of clerical antifeminist discourse,⁶⁸ drawing attention to the relationship between the Wife’s Prologue and the content of a variety of clerical treatises; however, they focus on the Wife’s arguments without noting the clerical exegesis used to present and connect the narratives inserted into these arguments.

To begin with, Jankyn’s clerical text, like the Monk’s, draws a parallel between the fates of Samson and Hercules, both men of extraordinary physical prowess but, in the Monk’s rendition, ultimately powerless against the wiles of women. When describing

66 For a discussion of the Monk’s aristocratic tendencies, see Knight, “My Lord, the Monk,” 382.

67 Blamires, “Love, Marriage, Sex, Gender,” 17-18; and Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, 6:383, 23:276.

68 Dinshaw mentions antifeminist sentiments in Jankyn’s *Book of Wicked Wives* pertaining to the defective female body; Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, 20, 119. Green traces the Wife’s rebuttals to contemporaneous moralists, such as John Bromyard’s comments in support of fornication, noticing that both the Wife and Bromyard support their arguments with numerous indirect quotations from their sources; Green, “Allas, allas! That evere love was synne,” 299, citing Bromyard, *Summa predicantium*, L.7. Craun connects Alice of Bath’s arguments about sex to a male-discourse community, claiming that although she challenges masculine dominance in her confessional rhetoric, she ventriloquizes it in her astrological discourse; Craun, “Allas, allas! That evere love was synne,” 47-49.

what she calls marital bliss, but qualifies as marital abuse, the Wife recollects details from Jankyn's *Book of Wicked Wives*. According to the Wife, the book contains nothing but accounts of female turpitude from Judaeo-Christian and pagan history:

Of Eva first, that for hir wikkednesse
 Was al mankynde broght to wrecchednesse,
 For which that Jhesu Crist hymself was slayn,
 That boghte us with his herte blood agayn.
 Lo, heere expres of womman may ye fynde
 That womman was the los of al mankynde.
 Tho redde he me how Sampson loste his heres:
 Slepynge, his lemman kitte it with hir sheres;
 Thurgh which treson loste he bothe his yen.
 Tho redde he me, if that I shal nat lyen,
 Of Hercules and of his Dianyre,
 That caused hym to sette hymself afyre.
 (“Wife of Bath’s Prologue,” III.715-26)

A veritable archive of antifeminist sentiments, Jankyn's *Book of Wicked Wives* begins with an account of Eve that castigates her for causing not only the suffering of all humanity but also the passion of Christ. Applying the same rhetorical strategy as the Monk used in removing Eve from his Adam narrative, Jankyn's book similarly excises Adam and delivers a decontextualized and generalized condemnation of women. However, the Wife of Bath appears to manipulate this discourse tradition from within by highlighting the liberally applied logic that connects Eve's sin to Christ's passion and juxtaposing it with Deianira's role in Hercules's death, which similarly and generally condemns a woman for causing a man to “sette hymself afyre” without providing any details to support such a reading. This revised and abbreviated account of the myth thus presents Deianira's reputation as incommensurable with the absence, in this text, of any active involvement on her part. Recasting these antifeminist narratives to place the men in the subject positions — the first line states that “Sampson loste his heres,” omitting Delilah's agency — the Wife attempts to condense and frame the narratives to reconstruct meaning, just as Jankyn and the Monk would have learned to do in school.⁶⁹ The Wife here uses clerical exegesis

69 Caie finds that this manipulation of her sources shows that Chaucer “is more interested in her rhetorical techniques, namely, her deliberative textual harassment, than her unorthodoxy”; Caie, “Chaucer and the Bible,” 32.

against its own writers, making husbands as “interchangeable” as Jankyn’s clerical works make wives.⁷⁰

The overlapping content and hermeneutics of Jankyn’s book and the “Monk’s Tale” suggest derivation from the same commentary. The fact that the Monk duplicates the order and theme from the *Book of Wicked Wives* in his own frame narrative implies his involvement in the dissemination of this particular type of clerical material. English monasteries like the Monk’s were generating texts reminiscent of Jankyn’s book. Clerical compilations like Rawlinson B 214 contain antifeminist ideas similar to those in Jankyn’s *Book of Wicked Wives*,⁷¹ collecting antifeminist works such as *De coniuge non ducenda* (*Concerning not getting married*) and *De mulieribus* (*Concerning women*) alongside Ovidian expositions. As a result, this compendium represents a literary culture resembling the fictional Jankyn’s book. Yet the Wife, owing to her marital agenda and lack of formal education, approaches this text from a different framing perspective. In her Prologue, she alludes to an Aesopic fable about a man conquering a lion and then painting a picture of it. About this painting, she asks, “Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?” (III.692), contending that men unjustly control the representation of reality.⁷² Graham D. Caie, for example, mentions that the Wife, like many of Chaucer’s other characters, manipulates sources to prove her points.⁷³ Whether or not one regards the Wife as a proto-feminist or her arguments as original, her reframing of a clerical narrative sequence reveals her awareness that personal agendas dictate interpretations and even one’s perception of reality. Furthermore, she underscores the ways in which the literate elite writes history by simplifying and distorting it. Thus, the “Wife of Bath’s Prologue,” like the “Monk’s Tale” and the “Summoner’s Tale,” represents a general clerical trend of abridging works for the masses to facilitate recollection — but thereby also promoting exegetical manipulation.

70 Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, 114.

71 Rigg, *A History of Anglo-Latin Literature*, 312.

72 This line from the “Wife of Bath’s Prologue” has given rise to numerous assessments of her views regarding gender inequalities; see Passmore, “Painting Lions”; Minnis, “Repainting the Lion”; Malvern, “Who peyntede the leon”; and Hagen, “The Wife of Bath, the Lion.”

73 Caie, “Chaucer and the Bible,” 32.

Conclusion

The Monk's repetition of the Adam, Samson, and Hercules grouping thus shows him adopting this clerical convention of manipulating inherited narratives such as the ones he recalls for his tale. Continuing in the tradition to which Jankyn's *Book of Wicked Wives* belongs, Chaucer establishes the Monk's place among the clerically educated — as one who has learned to reduce narratives to plot elements that can then be exegetically reframed to suit the expositor's rhetorical purposes. Like Jankyn and the Summoner's friar, the Monk demonstrates how he can alter inherited narratives, even biblical material, by using his rhetorical skills and his scholarship to create new records. However, by abbreviating narratives to their basic components, the Monk and his clerical cohort make narratives not only malleable but also obscure. Adam, Lucifer, Samson, Hercules, and the rest become iterations of the same tragic character type, and only concatenation and an interpretive framework (such as Boethius's philosophy) re-infuse them with meaning. Yet even with the addition of Boethian premises about fortune, the Monk's narration lacks a philosophical perspective because he strips away details, making many of the falls seem arbitrary and unpredictable. Condensing Boethian ideas just as he condenses his narratives, the Monk ends before offering the consolation of the Boethian paradigm, thus depriving the stories of falls of their extensive explications.

As an entry in the story-telling contest of Chaucer's pilgrimage, the "Monk's Tale" is a failure because it demonstrates neither the "sentence," or edifying meaning, nor the "solaas," or entertainment, that the Host demands when he establishes the rules for the contest (General Prologue, l.798). Offering no riveting tale, the Monk consults the literary sources that a monk would know best — the ones being studied and produced in monasteries. He re-tells tales that were condensed to facilitate recollection and attract a general readership, allowing clerics to focus on collecting *exempla* with which to practise exegetical methodologies. The Monk remains focused on his memory exercises without attempting to re-invigorate his diminished tales with allegorical or even philosophical interpretations. Perhaps Chaucer has him paraphrase rather than allegorize his sources to indicate the Monk's inferior scholastic training.⁷⁴ Whatever the reason, the resulting tale proves to be a competent, although rudimentary, attestation to a clerical education, rooted in a classical tradition that

74 Knight considers the "Monk's Tale" an illustration of the Monk's "dull learning"; Knight, "'Toward the fen,'" 43.

employs *abbreviatio* and typology. Such simplified storytelling by clerical narrators underscores a disjunction between the rhetorical practices being espoused by schools and the engaging literature being produced outside of them.

Adept at transmogrifying established genres, as he proves by refashioning romances in the “Knight’s Tale” and the “Wife of Bath’s Tale,” Chaucer reinvents the clerical paradigm for the Ovidian frame narrative in the “Monk’s Tale.” However, Chaucer refashions this commentary tradition in order to illustrate its deficiencies. As someone who would have encountered similar memory exercises as a student and through similar abridgements as a lay reader, he underscores what each narrative loses in these reduced forms. The juxtaposition of the Monk’s abbreviated frame narrative with the extended frame narrative of the *Canterbury Tales* underscores Chaucer’s development as a writer and rhetorician who has moved far beyond the exegetical methodology that mechanically imposes the same interpretive frame on a compilation of reduced narrative cycles; the contrast between the “Monk’s Tale” and the *Canterbury Tales* demonstrates how the pilgrims’ personalized tale-telling elsewhere in the *Canterbury Tales* restores the human and individualized elements that the clerical tradition stripped away. The Monk’s initial indecisiveness about which tale to select from his memory suggests that the ensuing tale derives from raw clerical materials rather than fully actualized narratives. The resulting tale proves to be a product of a clerical methodology for practising oration and composition. Chaucer’s abbreviations in the “Monk’s Tale,” the “Wife of Bath’s Tale,” and the “Summoner’s Tale” reveal the nature of all medieval composition: the process begins with narratives that have been condensed to be imprinted in one’s memory, which allows a writer to recall and revivify the tale at a later date. Regardless of modern readers’ distaste for Chaucer’s version of clerical exegesis in the “Monk’s Tale,” such practices also inspired Chaucerian exegesis in the *Canterbury Tales*. The “Monk’s Tale” thus offers a glimpse into both the clerical commentary tradition responsible for disseminating “olde bookes” and Chaucer’s own training in the art of resuscitating narratives imprinted in his memory.

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