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# Fortune Personified and the Fall (and Rise) of Women in Chaucer's Monk's Tale and the Autobiographical Writings of Christine de Pizan

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FORTUNE PERSONIFIED AND THE FALL (AND RISE) OF WOMEN IN  
CHAUCER'S "MONK'S TALE" AND THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS OF  
CHRISTINE DE PIZAN

by

Leona C. Fisher

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

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## ABSTRACT

### FORTUNE PERSONIFIED AND THE FALL (AND RISE) OF WOMEN IN CHAUCER'S "MONK'S TALE" AND THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS OF CHRISTINE DE PIZAN

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This thesis will posit that a query of the medieval trope, Fortune, can be read as a query into femininity. Fortune is depicted with many quintessentially medieval feminine traits, and women in texts that discuss Fortune often have Fortune's traits.

While texts that link Fortune and femininity usually do so to censure women, some writers turned the trope to their advantage for just the opposite purpose. Both Chaucer in the "Monk's Tale" and Christine de Pizan personify Fortune to subtly point out the flaws in antifeminist medieval view of women. This thesis explores the ways in which these writers cleverly took advantage of genre and characterization to use Fortune to defend women and womanhood.

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Leona C. Fisher

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Hoc, Fortuna, tibi videtur aequum? –Martial (38-104 AD)  
[“Does this, O Fortune, seem just to you?”]

The medieval depictions of Fortune vary, but all agree on one defining characteristic: she is fickle. As Chaucer’s Monk put it, “Fortune was first freend, and sitthe foo. / No man ne truste upon hire favour longe” (lines 2724-25<sup>1</sup>). Medieval depictions of women are about the same: they are fickle too. “Is it wise to trust feminine constancy or the female sex, which has never been able, through all the ages, to remain constant?” (Colonne 48)

The Monk seems to complete this question at the end of his tale, “For whan men trusteth hire, thanne wol she faille” (2765), though in this case, the “she” is not woman, but Fortune. If we substituted in Guido’s quote above “Fortune’s” for “feminine” and “Fortune” for “the female sex,” then Guido’s question looks very similar to the Monk’s “Lo, who may truste on Fortune any throwe?” (2136) Texts about Fortune attempt to prove what Guido has said about women, that Fortune “has never been able, through all the ages, to remain constant” (Colonne 48).

With Fortune and the female sex described so similarly, Fortune being so quintessentially feminine, this thesis will posit that a query into Fortune can be read as a query of femininity: an attempt to incriminate (or exculpate) women for their fickle nature. I will argue that Fortune as a deity or trope can represent women, and that in some cases, a woman can represent Fortune. In this thesis, I will look at two representations of Fortune that show the shallow hypocrisy of the Fortune who had come to look exactly like the quintessential woman of medieval literature: Fortune in Chaucer’s

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<sup>1</sup> For this thesis I will be using the Fragment VII line numbers for all references to the “Monk’s Tale.”

“Monk’s Tale,” and Fortune in the autobiographical writings of Christine de Pizan. Through these authors’ clever manipulation of genre and use of characterization, Christine and Chaucer each subverted the medieval views of Fortune, and by extension, they may have been pointing out the flaws in the medieval view of fallen women. Through an exploration of Fortune, each author is able to show the flat view that society had of women, and femininity; and by subtly revealing the problems with biased, flat, and simplistic representations of Fortune, each author is able to redeem women to some extent too.

### **Depictions of Fortune**

“Fortune, like a woman, needs to be beaten and dominated.” –Niccolò Machiavelli

Fortune or *Fortuna* as a deific trope dates back to the classical period.

The personification of fortune into the goddess *Fortuna* is at least as old as Roman tradition. *Timaeus* describes Nature (*Natura*), Fortune (*Fortuna*) and Chance (*Casus*) as a kind of subordinate trinity in which Nature and Fortune are personified as feminine, but the masculine Chance, analogous to the Holy Spirit, is not anthropomorphized. (Newman 17)

Newman argues that not only the grammatical femininity of the terms, but also the denotation of the terms themselves meant that “the logic of representation demanded feminine figures” (17).

As early as Martial, authors found that Fortune seemed to be best represented by a feminine personification. Not only is the noun “fortuna” feminine (as most abstract nouns in Latin are), but Newman argues she is a way to fill “the cultural demand for goddesses” (18).

Because Fortune was female, and was often personified as having so many of the traits the Church warned that woman possessed, the Church would have certainly seen no harm in the literary proliferation of a female character that so quintessentially embodied all of the traits the Church decried in women. Since Fortune the goddess was not Christian, nor was she in the purview of the Church, she was also a trope, I will argue, that writers with more benevolent views toward women would use to exculpate women. Precisely because Fortune was in no way but abstractly connected with God and the Trinity, writers with more feminist agendas in the Middle Ages explored Fortune from very different points of view, pointing out the one-sided ridiculousness of the caricature of a Goddess who had come to represent the worst possible kind of woman.

Most medieval depictions of Fortune are drawn from Boethius's depiction of her in the *Consolation of Philosophy*. In the *Consolation*, *Fortuna* is the "alluring but false" villain (Benson 395). Having translated *Boece*, Chaucer drew heavily on the descriptions of *Fortuna* in the *Consolation*. Therein, Fortune is described as "thilke merveyulous monstre Fortune and how sche useth ful flaterynge famylarite with hem that sche enforceth to bygyle, so longe, til that sche confounde with unsuffrable sorwe hem that sche hath left in despeir unpurveied" (*Boece* 407-08).

### **Medieval Woman**

"For woman's always fickle in her ways..." Andreas Capellanus

The description of Fortune by Boethius parallels that Fortune of the Monk that "likerously kiste" (2556-57) her victims and parallels that caution of the Church fathers regarding the deceptive nature of women (Schullenberg 129). There was the prevailing belief throughout literature that Fortune, like women, ought to be subject to man. Church

fathers in earlier centuries had written about the submission required of women to their fathers and husbands: “It is the order of nature among human being that women obey man...because it is justice in these matters that the lesser obey the greater” (Gratian 84).

Unfortunately, neither Fortune nor women could be controlled by men. “For though that he were strong, yet was she strengier” (Mk 2521). Even authors who may have had a more moderate view of women, felt obliged to condemn women for their weakness. Sources, such as the *Ancrene Wisse* from earlier centuries, while condemnatory of women, comparing them to pits for unwitting men to fall into (*Ancrene Wisse* 96), show, according to Petersen, affection for the women to whom they are writing, the genre would have been less credible—indeed could hardly have been considered legitimate at all without reference to the dangers inherent in femininity (172). Thus we have vivid descriptions of woman’s inherent dangers.

This submission required of women coupled with the notion that men were “beasts” likely to fall into the uncovered pit of a woman’s beauty—the beauty it was her responsibility to cover—dictated much of what was written by scholars about women’s fickleness and inconstancy in the High Middle Ages.

Apart from her fickleness, women, like Fortune, are steely and cruel, “And for thee ne weep she never a teere” (Mk 2662). There is a deep anxiety about, sometimes an outright fear of women in the antifeminist writings of the fourteenth century.

Antifeminist literature, which began as merely a way to encourage celibate clerics to abstain from thinking of women, became deeply vehement and institutionalized.

One of the most common complaints against women was that while no one wanted an ugly woman, a beautiful woman was bound to be unfaithful. (Boccaccio 166)

A dimension of the scholarly antifeminist writing of the Middle Ages not present in clerical writing is a paranoid tone pertaining to the discussion of women's alleged lack of fidelity. Scholars of the late Middle Ages compulsively insisted upon woman's infidelity; as Andreas Capellanus put it in the twelfth century, "No woman ever loved her husband, nor can she ever bind herself to a lover with a reciprocal bond of love" (116). According to Boccaccio in the fourteenth century, "No other creature is less clean than woman: the pig, even when he is most wallowed in mud, is not as foul as they" (167). He goes on, "When the women see their possessions settled, they turn all their attention to pimps and lovers. And let it be clear to you that she who seems most chaste and virtuous in this cursed multitude would rather have one eye than be content with just one man" (169).

Apart from women's infidelity, and fickleness in love, her cruelty was emphasized. "Woman is always[...]cruel and shrewish[...]she is such a cruel viper" (Fèvre 182-83). Apart from her cruelty in being unfaithful to her husband, she was depicted as cruel to children, neighbors and friends whenever it suited her.

The prevailing belief among the clergy, which became more and more entrenched as the Middle Ages progressed was that "women were seen as primarily carnal or bodily beings by nature, and therefore in order to lead a spiritual life, they needed to deny or denounce the sexual aspects of their being and transcend their gender" (Schullenberg 127). According to the Church fathers, a woman's body was, in fact, little better than an animal's—and worse in some ways because of its deceptive nature. "You are the gateway of the devil," Tertullian wrote to his female disciples (51). This alluring but deceptive

nature characterized many of the depictions of women in literature throughout the Middle Ages.

Despite the popularity of antifeminist literature, writers such as Geoffrey Chaucer and Christine de Pizan were writing less condemnatory depictions of women. Chaucer, in the Wife of Bath's Tale and elsewhere in the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer emphasizes the importance of woman's choice and decries those who would take her choice from her; Chaucer's "Monk's Tale" is a more subtle way of defending the women. In the second chapter of this thesis, I will demonstrate this claim by showing how Chaucer undermined the ecclesiastical ethos of the Monk starting from the "General Prologue," and continuing throughout the *Canterbury Tales*.

Borrowing heavily from Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, the Monk constructs his series of tragedies that depict a stereotypical womanly Fortune, and in some cases a woman who is like the stereotypical Fortune, "ruining everything" for the sixteen men and one woman whose falls are chronicled by the Monk. In this, my second chapter, I will show the connections between Chaucer's depiction of Fortune, classical depictions of women, and the women in the tale. In order to prove the link between women and Fortune, I will note how the description of Fortune often matches the description of the character who enacts Fortune's will and show how Fortune becomes personified by these characters. Often, like Fortune, these characters are female and like Fortune they have stereotypical feminine flaws.

While the antifeminist theme would be expected to surface in a tale by a Monk, I will also show how the character of the Monk is not at all meant to be trusted for his clerical position. Apart from the references to the Monk's virility and the implications

that he lives a more lavish lifestyle than appropriate to his clerical office (I 175-76, 191-97; VII 1929-1938), the Monk further damages his ethos through the rhetoric of his tale. The Monk incorporates elements common to medieval sermons into the style of his tale, while the tale itself lacks theological grounding. There were many sermons preached about the diabolical nature of women, and the Monk's classical moral (*proverbio*), "Beware of Fortune," is a secular parallel to these sermons Owst described (42). By preaching the ills of this secular Goddess and her female counterparts from the mouth of a Monk, I will argue that Chaucer was implicitly questioning the authority of the Church to make such round (and often uninformed) denunciations of women. The Monk's dubious mixing of secular and religious genres, his virility and his implied neglect of ecclesiastical duties discredit his take on the diabolical nature of Fortune and the women she employed as agents. Yet his misuse of these elements, would further prove his incompetence. I will argue that the Monk's impugning of Fortune, and thereby women, was meant by Chaucer to be laughable, pointing out, as he did in the Wife of Bath's prologue and tale, the hypocrisy of those who unduly censure and criticize women.

In chapter three, I will look at the way in which Christine de Pizan depicted Fortune in her autobiographical writing. Christine begins her biography with a description of her harsh treatment at the hands of Fortune, to whom the more gentle Goddess, Nature, delivered Christine when she married, so that Christine could be "in the service of [Fortune, that] Lady of high birth, who was slightly related to [Nature]" (Pizan, *Mutation* 118). Through her autobiographical poem, *Le Livre de la Mutacion de Fortune*, Christine described how Fortune was a kind mistress during the first ten years of her marriage, but how Fortune turned on her, taking both her father and husband, and

consequently all means of support. Fortune, however, needed a servant who could be useful to her. With both Thomas, Christine's father, and Étienne, her husband, gone, Fortune transforms Christine into a man so that Christine may serve Fortune by "charting the course of her own voyage" (Newman 118). Without any men in her life, Christine was no longer fit to be in Fortune's service: "et Fortune, ayant pitié de son malheur, la [Christine] changea en homme et la rendit capable de mener une nef" (and having the pity of a woman, Fortune changed Christine into a man and makes her capable of steering a ship" (Solente xiv).

In this third chapter I will argue that Christine, like the female characters in the "Monk's Tale" becomes not only an agent of Fortune but a personification of Fortune herself, having a feminine form, but manly characteristics. Through the rest of the poem, Christine depicts herself as Fortune's agent, and though Christine refers to herself in the feminine, she insists that she has become manly as Fortune cannot use agents who are completely feminine. This argument undermines the idea of Fortune's being a stereotypically fallen woman, claiming that many of the traits Fortune values in her are the masculine ones that came as a result of the "mutation of Fortune" which made Christine more manly, to reflect the masculine nature of Fortune herself. Because the text is autobiographical, Christine is able to use her ethos as a devout Catholic widow to provide legitimacy to her text.

Like Chaucer's, Christine's later work also more overtly defended women. One of her most common defenses was that traits that had been called "feminine" were equally masculine, if not more so. I will argue that casting herself as a manly

personification of Fortune was a subtle way to make many of the arguments she would make more overtly later in her career.

The fourth and final chapter of this thesis will be the conclusion and by revisiting the claims made in chapters two and three, will explore the ways in which both Chaucer and Christine used Fortune as an example of the flat feminine character described in so much of the writing of their day. Further, I will show how each criticized that stereotype by personifying the types of Fortune with female characters, thus questioning and critiquing medieval stereotypes of femininity.

The expectations for and perceptions of women espoused by the clergy and scholars of the fourteenth century may well not represent the beliefs of the vast majority of British in the medieval period. Judging from the popularity of Christine's work in defense of women, and works of Chaucer such as the "Wife of Bath's Tale", more favorable views of women were not only tolerated, but enjoyed. Through a query of Fortune and the ways in which she was depicted, both Chaucer and Christine were able to subtly point out the flaws in traditional representations of femininity.



## Chapter 2

### Fortune and Chaucer

The “Monk’s Tale” often gets very little attention as an important work of literature and is widely regarded by literary critics to be one of the lesser of the *Canterbury Tales*. And who can blame them? It is wordy, boring, and depressing and most of us are very happy when the good Knight finally tells the Monk “Namooore of this!” (2767) we never like the Knight better. The Knight’s interruption of the Monk may well be why so many Chaucerians think of the Knight as a decent sort of a fellow. He spares the readers continued “hevynesse” (2769), and we are grateful.

However, when we look more deeply at the “Monk’s Tale,” and the Monk’s treatment of Fortune, I will argue that parallels between scholastic and clerical antifeminism and the Monk’s depiction of Fortune appear. Not only are the parallels apparent, but the Monk couches the antifeminism in elements of sermons. The manipulation of genre by Chaucer further discredits the Monk. With the Monk and the tale itself so subverted, any antifeminist message would also be called into question. In order to explore this possibility, I will first look at the way that the Monk’s depiction of Fortune differed from the canonical depiction of Fortune in Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, a source for the “Monk’s Tale.”

#### **Boethius, Chaucer, and the Monk**

Though the Monk was certainly aware of Boethius (he cribs part of his account of Hercules straight from the *Consolation*), his Fortune and the *Consolation*’s Fortuna differ in significant ways. Where the faults of Fortuna in the *Consolation* are excused as the misperceptions of mortals who fail to comprehend the divine, the faults of Fortune in the

“Monk’s Tale” are not pardoned at all and are made to look like the deliberate and vengeful mistakes of a quintessential woman. Where Book II of the *Consolation of Philosophy* reads as an apologia of the Fortune perceived to be a “merveylous monstre” (Boece 407), the “Monk’s Tale” is merely an enumeration of her monstrosities. Because the Monk differed with the quintessential depiction of Fortune in Boethius, perhaps his goal was not to depict the classical Fortune at all. The Monk may not have been much for study, but he knew Boethius, and the variation between the Monk’s Fortune and *The Consolation’s* Fortuna was not due to ignorance. The Monk was intentionally not allying his Fortune with the divine, as Boethius, but making her quite a bit lower than the angels; the Monk made his Fortune womanly.

While Boethius was unquestionably a source for the Monk’s Fortune, the Monk seems to have ignored Philosophy’s whole purpose in bringing her up. Certainly, Boethius’s description of Fortuna at the very beginning of Book II matches the Monk’s description of her, “thilke merveylous monster Fortune and how sche useth ful flaterynge famylarite with hem that sche enforceth to bygyle, so long that sche confounde with unsuffrable sorwe hem that left in despeer unpurveied” (Boece 407-08). So far, this description of Fortuna compares with the Monk’s depiction of Fortune. But this is where the similarities end. The Monk takes Boethius’s first description of Fortuna and runs with it, neglecting the rest of Book II which is Philosophia’s apologia for Fortuna. Boethius’s Philosophia takes a kinder view of Fortune than the Monk. Philosophia says that, in fact, Fortuna is stable for “Sche hath rather kept, to the-ward hir propre stableness in the chaungye of hirself. Ryght swiche was sche whan she faltereyd the and desseyved the[....]Thou has now knowen[...]

thilke blynde goddesse Fortune” (Boece

408). Fortune, Boethius discovers, is not “thilke merveyulous monster” but rather, “thilke blynde goddesse Fortune,” who comes to represent a kind of justice that “techeth” (*Boece* 420), and is actually better to people when she mistreats them. “But forsothe contraryous Fortune is alwey sothfast[...]*Fortune ledeth ofte folk ayen to sothfast goodes*” (*Boece* 420).

The Monk’s Fortune, however, is never “sothfast” and leads none of her victims to “sothfast goodes.”<sup>2</sup> The Monk’s Fortune is not blind, not good, and never honest. She willfully and deceitfully “ruins everything” for the seventeen lives chronicled by the Monk (Chrysostom 59). Not only is the Fortune of the Monk stereotypically womanly, but the descriptions of Fortune often match the descriptions of the women in the text, allying Fortune even more closely not with deity, as Boethius did, but with fallen women.

### **Undermining the Monk: The Monk as a Derisive Figure**

The Monk is clearly not meant to be trusted as a person of clerical authority. His dubious personal morality—a joke which everyone seems to be in on—and his decadent lifestyle undercut his ability to speak with any authority whatsoever on the subjects of the dangers and evils of women.

The characterization of a monk as a high-living, womanizing secularist “would not be unusual” as a stereotype of the time, and this Monk definitely fits the mold (Mann 25). There is evidence in the “General Prologue” that Chaucer intends us to view the Monk with quite a bit less solemnity than befits a cleric. In the “Prologue,” the Monk is described in terms that leave us in question of his piety. The “Prologue” in calling him a “manly man” (167), who is fond of hunting and one who is inclined to “leet olde thynges pace, / And heeld after the newe world the space” (175-76), surely does not mean for the

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<sup>2</sup> With the possible exception of Nabugodonosor; though the Monk credits his return to God. (2177)

reader to take the Monk seriously as a devout Benedictine. This Monk does not hold much stock in study, and is practically the picture of virility as the host will note in the Monk's Prologue. The host "apostrophizes [the Monk's] manliness, his virility, which puts ordinary married men to shame. To make his reference to the *Shipman's Tale* as pointed as possible, he wonders if the Monk's name is Don John," the shifty, adulterous and dishonest Monk who propositions the wife in the "Shipman's Tale" (Huppé 225-26).

The antifeminism that marks the Monk's description of both Fortune and the women in the tale, while expected of the Monk, should not be read as the Monk's pious devotion to his office. The Monk's denunciation of Fortune, implicitly, I will argue, of women, was not meant by Chaucer to be taken seriously, but rather meant to point out, as the "Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale" did more overtly, the hypocrisy of those who unduly censure women.

In order to better understand the Monk's character and the way in which Chaucer manipulated the tale itself, an understanding of the evolution of the "Monk's Tale" and the character of the Monk is necessary. By the time Chaucer began drafting Fragment VII, the Monk's status as comic relief/clerical satire is fixed; but along the way the tale itself went through interesting and suggestive changes.

### **The Genesis of the Monk's Tale and Chaucer's Genre(s)**

Clearly, as he did with so many other tales, Chaucer frustrated and manipulated genre expectations in his "Monk's Tale." This manipulation is in part evident in the "Monk's Tale's" drafting process. Most scholars agree the "General Prologue" was written "early in the Canterbury period," (Benson 5) and that the drafting of Fragment VII, was probably written well after that (Benson 15). However, the "Monk's Tale"

proves to be an exception, as it was probably started as an experimentation of Chaucer's with the tragic genre before *The Canterbury Tales* was begun (Benson 15). The text that would become the "Monk's Tale," in fact started out as Chaucer's attempt to retell a series of Boccaccian tragedies in English. For whatever reason, Chaucer abandoned these retellings—among the most popular theories is that Chaucer thought that they were less than his best work. Kelly hints that Chaucer may have agreed with his Host that the Monk's anecdotes could be "better told" (413). Kelly infers that "Chaucer had come to see his experiment [in tragedy] in a less solemn light than he presumably began with" (413). In other words, what Chaucer had begun as a serious, literary project, he now thought a little less of; the question became how not to waste the "tragedies" he had already written. So Chaucer came back to them again during the drafting of Fragment VII, in (perhaps) a more farcical mood, as it is the dubious Monk who now is credited with the overwrought tragedies.

What is now the "Monk's Tale" probably went through numerous revisions, until Chaucer found the perfect place for his less-than-perfect tragic retellings; he saddled the Monk with them, writing off his own literary inadequacies as the Monk's ineptness.

### **The Monk, the Pardoner: Their Sermons and their Tales**

In addition to the Monk's (Chaucer's) tragedies lacking literary vivacity, the tales have other problems; the Monk appropriates and misuses elements of the medieval sermon in the stories he himself has labeled "tragedie," further evidence of Chaucer's manipulation of the tragic genre.

In order to understand the ways in which the "Monk's Tale" resembles a sermon, comparing it to a tale like the "Pardoner's Tale," which clearly conforms to the genre will

be helpful. After the similarities and differences between Chaucer's example of an actual sermon and the "Monk's Tale" are established, we will look at the ways in which The Monk's Tale is clearly not a quintessential sermon and what Chaucer's motives might have been for so confusing the tragic and ecclesiastical genres.

The "Pardoner's Tale," according to Caplan, most definitely falls into the medieval category of sermon. "The pardoner himself calls his tale-telling preaching (lines 329, 401, 427) and says, 'I stonde lyk a clerk in my pulpet'" (VI<sup>3</sup> 391). Though he is not delivering his speech from a pulpit, but in an inn, clearly, Chaucer intended for the Pardoner to follow his usual pattern churches to show his credentials. The prologue to the "Monk's Tale" follows a similar pattern. The Monk also informs his audience of his credentials. He tells the pilgrims that he will tell them a tale in "al my diligence, / As fer as sowneth into honestee" (1966-67). He qualifies himself by trying to establish an ethos of propriety, a difficult task considering how the host has just previously undermined the Monk in his own prologue by comparing him to the Shipman's Don John. Next, the Monk outlines his credentials. He could tell them the story of Saint Edward. Referring to Saint Edward is a slip-up, however, if the Monk is trying to show his versatility. Because again, the Monk reveals himself to be a man of few interests as Saint Edward was killed while enjoying one of the Monk's favorite pastimes, hunting.

The sermon in the Middle Ages consisted of at least three, or four parts, all of which the Pardoner followed to the letter. "First, the preacher should pronounce his theme" (Caplan 507); this was often called sermon's *proverbio* (Owst 19) or moral. The Pardoner followed this prescription, "My theme is alwey oon, and evere was"—" (333). He then, introduced his subject, Avarice. "Avarice, twin sister of Pride, or perhaps, the

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<sup>3</sup> All quotes from the "Pardoner's Tale" will be line numbers from Fragment VI.

favorite daughter of her womb, figures under many names in [sermons]” (Owst 315). Preaching against avarice was a practice so common in the Middle Ages that, “it is hard to say whether she and her many-sided activities give more scope to the preachers or to the poets” (Owst 315). Chaucer gets to be both by being a poet putting a sermon on avarice in the mouth of one of his preachers. The Monk, having given evidence, like the Pardoner, that he is competent enough to tell his tale(s), like the Pardoner, next describes the way in which he will ‘preach,’ “I wol biwalle in manere of tragedie / The harm of hem that stode in heigh degree” (1991-92). The Monk continues his tale with an indictment like the Pardoner’s indictment against greed; this is what Caplan calls the pronouncement of the theme.

For certein, whan that Fortune list to flee,  
Ther may no man the cours of hire withholde.  
Lat no man truste on blynd prosperitee;  
Be war thise ensamples trewe and olde. (1995-98)

Though the Monk’s indictment is not as wholly traditional as the Pardoner’s theme, “beware of greed,” the Monk is at least following the form of the genre, as outlined by the Pardoner and his tale. And though Fortune is a classical theme, Chaucer is still able to ally her in many of the Monk’s exempla with a theme that is very common indeed in medieval preaching. Chaucer, as will be discussed later in the chapter, is careful in many cases to ally Fortune with a mortal, female manifestation. Thus, the “Monk’s Tale” retains its form roots in the medieval sermon. Fickle Fortune becomes personified by many of the women in the “Monk’s Tale”: Delilah, Dianara, Eve (by implication), and Judith all become personifications of Fortune. As anyone familiar with the sermon as a

genre would do, the Monk does end with an indictment, frequently stated throughout the tale, “Beware of Fortune,” but his indictment really becomes, like the Pardoner’s, much more common to the Middle Ages, “Beware of Women,” a point that this chapter will later seek to explore.

When seen as typical anti-feminist patristic diatribe, the “Monk’s Tale” easily allies itself with a genre of popular sermons often preached in the Middle Ages about “the weakness of the female sex” (Owst 167). Certainly, the sermon preached against women was common enough in the Middle Ages, and one that as a monk Don Piers would be especially familiar with. This view of women found its point of popular dissemination from the pulpits in the form of the vernacular sermon. “To the vast mass of the middle and lower orders, for whom no romantic minstrelsy has provided a chivalrous ideal, the pulpit, their one oracle of learning and refinement, presented a picture of womanhood ill-balanced indeed” (Owst 357).

The way the Monk describes the effects of Fortune is much the same way preachers would describe women, taking their cues from the writings of the Church fathers, which we know the Monk avoids. “Woman’s chief glory[...]is by [medieval preachers] accounted as a snare and a delusion, her greatest field of activity little better than a wilderness of briars and pitfalls[...]husbands may lose wealth, strength or comeliness” (Owst 377-78, 379).

The next part of the sermon would be the prelocution or the proofs offered to support the veracity of the theme (Caplan 507). This prelocution would be brief and usually consist of “authoritative passages of the Bible and learned men, and by bringing in the authorities of philosophy” (Caplan 507). As prescribed by Caplan, in his

prelocution the Pardoner follows the pattern of reciting a scripture (“Radix malorum est Cupiditas.” 1 Timothy 6.10), and then proves the scripture with an anecdotal exempla. The “Monk’s Tale,” as will be discussed in the next section, lacks a clear prelocution, or grounding in scripture. After the Pardoner comments on his long (and I might add, personal) experience, preaching on the theme of avarice, and recites the scripture “Radix malorum est Cupiditas,” he moves neatly on to the third part of the sermon.

After the prelocution would come the division and/or subdivision, which comes at the end of the sermon, and which would contain most of the material of the sermon and interpretation of how the information in the division adequately proves and specifies the theme, putting the didactic point at the end of the sermon (Caplan 507). According to Chapman, the “Pardoner’s Tale” again follows the model for the genre of the sermon to the letter (509). The Pardoner describes his preaching style, “Thanne telle I hem ensamples many oon / Of olde stories longe tyme agoon” (435-36), and the Pardoner tells his tale; this kind of division is an interesting fourteenth century rhetorical device made popular, according to Smalley, by Franciscans: the *exemplum* (33). Because the Franciscans took Christ at his literal word and “went into all the world to preach” (Mark 16.15), the nature of sermons had shifted because of a broader audience. By the thirteenth century, “the popular character of the audiences modified, essentially, the style of preaching. It was necessary to interest[...]and even amuse the common people” (Crane 507). Because the listening public demanded entertainment as well as (or perhaps over) spiritual enlightenment, the character of genre changed widely in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and thus the entertaining *exemplum* was introduced and became a staple of the thirteenth and fourteenth century sermon. The practice of using stories to

preach against the particular sin of greed was a common practice in preaching and in sermons of the Middle Ages. Thus the “Pardoner’s Tale” is particularly apt.

The use of exempla, though a fairly recent homiletic development, was a staple of the medieval sermon of the fourteenth century (Smalley 33). “‘Exempla’ is the general inclusive term for any kind of homiletic simile of illustration” (Owst 152). The aim of the medieval preacher was to use a single story or a small series of related stories to prove a scriptural or canonical point.

Most medieval sermons would involve the use of one, or sometimes two or three, closely related anecdotes to illustrate a scriptural or patristic point, such as “Radix malorum est Cupiditas.”

Owst divides the medieval exempla into three categories, according to the categories that appear in the *Speculum Laicorum*. The first category comprises largely patristic exempla, including the canonized writing of the Church fathers, the second category includes the retelling of historic and modern events, and the third category involves the use of stories that involve that natural world, often relying on stories of “moralized animals” (Owst 154). The Monk’s contempt for things past and for studying the Church fathers is evident in his lack of exempla consisting of “excerpts ‘de sanctorum patrum ac doctorum legendis et scriptis,’” the kind of exempla that were most commonly used. The Monk favors instead, the second, more secular class of exempla, those ‘de temporum preteritorum ac modernorum quibusdam eventibus’” (Owst 154).<sup>4</sup>

While the Monk lacks the necessary canonical grounding to explicitly compare Fortune with the patristic antifeminist model of woman, he still uses the second class of

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<sup>4</sup> The third kind of exempla Owst speaks of, involving natural images is not found in “The Monk’s Tale,” nor, is this class of exempla as common as the other two in the medieval sermon.

exempla to prove his point that men ought to beware of Fortune. Like the Pardoner, or any good preacher, he will use stories too. Secular monk that he is, instead of stories of the Church fathers, he uses stories from classical mythology and history. And he really is quite thorough, using many stories to prove that Fortune and (I will argue) the feminine can wreck the lives of great men. In addition to the exempla de temporum preteritorum, Chaucer adds the four short “Modern Istances,” as they are called: the tragedies of Petro Rege Ispannie, Petro Rege de Cipro, Barnabo de Lombardia, and Hugelino comite de Pize so that the Monk can conform to the expectation of having exempla “de temporum modernorum” (Owst 154). These tales are regarded by most scholars as being a very late revision to the text “for the tragedy of Barnabò, who died in December of 1385, could only have been written in 1386 or later” (Kelly 411). The Modern Instances do not appear in some of the Canterbury Tales manuscripts, though they are present in both the Hengwrt and Ellesmere. Further, the Monk chooses only scriptural and historical exempla, which according to the prevailing thought of the regular orders, had more credibility than the fanciful stories of friars and pardoners (Smalley 19). The tragedies the Monk selected may have even been the Monk’s attempt to show the Pardoner what constituted appropriate exempla material.

The Pardoner does not digress into any subdivisions, or further material to prove his claim; he is content with his sermon of one exemplum each. After the Pardoner concludes the division of his sermon, he ends with an indictment of the sin against which he was been preaching, “Now, goode men, God foryeve yow youre trespas, / And ware yow fro the synne of avarice!” (904-05) Thus concludes what both Chapman and Caplan call the model of the medieval sermon (507, 509); and it is evident that at least in some

part, the “Monk’s Tale” of tragedies at least echoes that form, as the Monk too concludes his tale (though he is interrupted) with one last warning against the ills of Fortune. Certainly had the Monk time to conclude his tale he might have been able to conclude with a stronger indictment against the folly of trusting to Fortune, although the Monk does interrupt his own tale several times to “bewail” the tragic consequences of trusting to Fortune. He is able to emphasize the theme several times throughout his speech. And as it stands, he is able to slip in his moral once more in the last lines of the tale, just before the Knight stops him,

But that Fortune alwey wole assaille  
With unwar strook the regnes that been proude;  
For whan men trusteth hire, thanne wol she faille,  
And covere hire brighte face with a clowde. (2763-66).

### **The Monk’s Tale as Un-Sermon**

It is appropriate that the Monk frame his tale in some of the forms of a sermon, as that would be the genre the pilgrims would expect from him, and as even a nominally involved cleric, the genre he would be most familiar with. “The significance and the influence of vernacular sermons in the late Middle Ages is difficult for us to imagine in our secularized age” (Volk-Birke 23), but the secular Monk as imagined by Chaucer only knows how to copy elements of its form, leaving echoes of the genre while never actually committing to it. And while his sermon does rely on antifeminism that reads like some patristic writing, the language and grounding of the tale is entirely secular.

While the Monk certainly pronounces his theme, “Beware of Fortune,” there are problems with the theme from the beginning, if it is to fit the mold. According to the

*Speculum Laicorum*, “Woman, as saith Secundus the Philosopher, is the confusion of Man[...]a continuous anxiety, an incessant warfare, a daily ruin, a house of tempest, a hindrance to devotion” (Owst 378). This description aptly parallels the Monk’s concept of Fortune and her mortal counterparts, who cause ruin in the lives of the seventeen who suffer the tragic falls the Monk recounts as exempla. But while the parallel is apt and Fortune does fit the model of the fallen woman, the Monk himself never explicitly links the pagan/secular goddess Fortune with women. Nor does the Monk choose a genre with the doctrinal and religious grounding that might have legitimized his tale, making it an actual sermon on the dangers of women. After all, he has never directly claimed to be preaching, as the Pardoner does, nor does he cite any religious or canonical authority to ground his theme. So there is the problem of the Monk’s choosing a secular, non-traditional theme as a kind of proverbio-parallel. Avarice was a common trait against which many preachers warned their congregations; the “Pardoner’s Tale” certainly dealt with a theme very common to pulpits of the time. Though Fortune is a classical theme, Chaucer may have included her as an indicator not only of the Monk’s secular view of the world, but as the Monk’s secular attempt to deal with a patristic theme.

This is the second problem with the “Monk’s Tale” as a true sermon. It lacks an appropriate prelocution. The “Monk’s Tale” omits an authentic prelocution, grounding the tale not in scripture or the patristic canon; the Monk’s supports are the “clerkes” which he often mentions: the Monk does not base the proverbio of his exempla in scripture. While the Monk certainly has a proverbio, “For whan men trusteth [Fortune], thanne wol she faille” (2765), he seems to have drawn it not from scripture or from the canon of the Church Fathers, but from classical writers like Martial.

Nevertheless, though the Monk lacked an overt religious grounding in his tale, he continued undaunted following many of the other conventions, nuances and finer points of the genre. He certainly has a lengthy division and subdivisions, following (though exaggerating) Caplan's model of the genre. The Monk's point, "Beware of trusting in Fortune" (linked to the popular patristic theme, "Beware of women"), though not scriptural is perhaps, atoned for in the mind of the Monk by using no less than seventeen exempla to prove the point. While the "Pardoner's Tale" uses one anecdotal exemplum, as was the norm for most sermons which included an anecdote (it should be noted that the Pardoner uses the tale within a tale model, even covering some of the same falls as the Monk does, notably, Adam and Samson) these tales are not distinct from the larger tale which focuses on greed. This practice of including tales within tales was common in medieval literature, and not uncommon to the medieval sermon. The Monk, however, is unusual in using seventeen exempla that are separate and distinct from each other.

As the Monk decided, perhaps wisely, to abandon his hagiography of St. Edward the hunter, he tells the pilgrims, ""tragedies I wol telle, / Of whiche I have an hundred in my celle" (1971-72). In the area of tragedy, the Monk can really outdo himself. He will not merely tell the pilgrims one story like the Pardoner did, or two or three stories, as he had promised previously (1968), but a hundred of them. Though the "General Prologue" has identified him as a man not likely to be given to a lot of study, for "why should this fine gentlemen, asks Chaucer ironically, make himself mad with work or study?" (Bowden 109), he certainly knows his tragedies. The Monk might have easily had a hundred tragedies in his cell, as during the Middle Ages there were many example-books in circulation, like Bromyard's *Summa Praedicatorum*, "compiled solely for the clerical

reader” (Owst 149). The Monk, might well have taken his tragedies out of an example-book, designed to help homilists preach, evidence that the Monk’s tales are tied up in the genre of sermon and that Chaucer knew such books.

Monks, realizing their parishes and livelihoods were endangered by wandering friars, and characters like the pardoner captivating their audiences with stories and tales, sent young monks to Oxford to be trained in this new rhetorical technique (Smalley 33). The rivalry between regular orders and wandering friars and preachers was quite hot at times, the latter group telling fantastic stories for money and winning large crowds, and the former shocked by the unorthodox style of the latter and yet realizing that compromises must be made in order to keep the flock (Smalley 33). The friars and pardoners were willing to tell any story that attracted a large audience (and large profits); the monks felt a need for maintaining a more dignified ethos. As I mentioned previously, this might have been the reason for the Monk’s choosing the “eminently respectable” historical events of both ancient *and* modern origin: it was his way of showing the Pardoner the kinds of stories appropriate to use for entertainment.

As a Monk himself, it is possible that Don Piers was a trained preacher, or at least that he had paid as much attention to his training as a preacher as he is paid to other scholarly pursuits. However, as a Benedictine living in the fourteenth century, the sermon and the clash between the wandering friars and pardoners, and the regular clergy for audiences would be one the Monk would not have been able to escape. While the “Monk’s Tale” is certainly not a sermon in the sense that the “Pardoner’s Tale” is, the Monk appropriates and misuses rhetorical elements of the sermon in the recounting of his

tragedies, undermining further his status as a man of the cloth by secularizing elements of a genre meant to be holy.

In the “Monk’s Tale,” both parallels and, literarily speaking, falls short of other tales in *The Canterbury Tales* specifically meant to be read as sermons, like the “Pardoner’s Tale.”<sup>5</sup> It parallels the other Chaucerian example of a sermon, the “Pardoner’s Tale.” The “Monk’s Tale” also follows, with the omission of a scriptural base, the structure of the typical historical medieval sermons with some humorous exceptions and exaggerations. These humorous exceptions are deliberate and read like a bad medieval pseudo-sermon from a secularized sermonizer,<sup>6</sup> which certainly is a fair description of Don Piers, the Monk. The pseudo-sermon genre fits the character of the Monk: both the Monk and the tale are completely farcical, from a pompous Monk who brags about his learning, to a proposed one hundred exempla, instead of the usual one or two, these exaggerations augment the element of the farcical already apparent in the Monk’s total lack of a scriptural, non-secular base for his pseudo-sermonly tragedies.

From Chaucer’s original attempt at retelling classical tragedies, the “Monk’s Tale,” is altered and takes on elements of the sermon, but the elements are poorly used, making the tragedies liable to all the foibles of a bad sermon; they are faulty, poorly written, overly complex, pompous, boring.

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<sup>5</sup> “The Parson’s Tale” might be included in the tales that function like sermons but as I read the tale it is really less of a medieval sermon than the “Pardoner’s Tale” and I will argue, the “Monk’s Tale.” While “The Parson’s Tale” is didactic, it is not based in the devices common to medieval sermon such as allegory and exempla.

<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this paper I will use the terms “preaching” and “sermonizing” synonymously. In other words, in this paper, a preacher is allowed to give sermons, and those who are sermonizing may preach.

### **The Monk and His Tale as Parodic: The Meaning of the Monk**

While the “Monk’s Tale” contains an indictment of Fortune(/women), what it lacks leaves us an interesting perspective on the Monk. Though the Monk’s tale contains much of the form of medieval sermons: the pronouncement of a theme, prelocution (albeit one that relies on secular authority), and division through the use of exempla both modern and ancient, it lacks any kind of a scriptural, or even patristic grounding. The Monk is going to talk about the injustice of Fortune and her mortal female counterparts from, appropriately enough, a completely secular point of view. While Fortune is a secular, neo-classical concept that suits the Monk; had the Monk been more familiar with scripture, and especially with patristic anti-feminism he might have easily quoted patristic or even scriptural authorities to prove the fickle nature of womankind. However, the Monk is not directly preaching about biblical/patristic women—he is “preaching” about Fortune, and it sounds as though he is comically unaware that he is citing many of the exempla like the story of Delilah, and Adam’s fall from paradise, that the Church fathers used to condemn women.

For the Monk, the very same scriptural evidence the Church fathers cite as being proof that women are evil, became a way to prove his secular point on the evils of the pagan goddess, Fortune. Instead of using stories to prove the truth of a scripture, the Monk uses scriptural stories to prove his classical point. From the Hebrew Bible accounts of Adam, Samson and Nebuchadnezzar, instead of pulling a scriptural theme that he will use the other exempla to prove, he tells the stories as a way to prove his neo-classical secular, point. Scripture for the Monk, becomes another evidence for his secular view of the world.

Instead of choosing one or a very few stories that are very obviously related, the Monk wants to be able to tell all the tales he has memorized, so that he can show off what little he has gained from the study he so conscientiously eschews. The common convention of a sermon—selecting one or two biblical or historical exempla—simply will not suffice for the Monk. He will tell them a tale of one hundred exempla, thus proving how exceptionally well-read he is. Unfortunately, Chaucer and the Monk's audience of pilgrims know him better. He has been identified as disliking study, "neglect of study, dislike of the old strict rules—were traditionally associated with monks" (Mann 28). Both Chaucer's audience, and the Monk's audience of pilgrims, would have been familiar with this stereotype, making the Monk's claims to wisdom and study laughable.

The Monk initially says that he will only tell his audience "a tale, or two, or three" (1968) a number which would be consistent with the anecdotal sermon, quickly emends himself, "Or ellis, first, tragedies wol I telle, / Of whiche I have an hundred in my celle," (1971-72). After nearly every tale, the Monk will repeat his indictment as if the audience has forgotten what he has said and must be reminded of the ills of Fortune, so that the audience will not forget what he is talking about in the midst of so many exempla the Monk has so conscientiously memorized.

If the Monk is in fact, Chaucer's representation of the stock-character of the clerical-monastic scoundrel, Chaucer has created a comical, biting and surprisingly round stereotype, and some equally biting, if more subtle social commentary. In putting such a ridiculous, flawed homily with the message "Beware of Fortune/Women" in the mouth of the Monk, Chaucer is not only undermining the character, but undermining the message—and to a degree, undermining the institution that perpetuated the message: the

Church. Chaucer had good reason to be subtle; challenging the Church's view on anything could have grave repercussions. Making the message and the messenger of anti-feminism in the "Monk's Tale" look ridiculous was one way to subtly point the finger. And more and more authors from Chaucer onward found creative and interesting ways to challenge the Church's view of everything, particularly of women.

Chaucer's Fortune in the mouth of the Monk becomes a laughing-stock. In implying that Fortune, and by extension women are the cause of mighty falls, the Monk only succeeds in boring his audience and looking even more ridiculous. By putting a poorly adapted version of Boccaccio as a secular sermon in the mouth of a monk, Chaucer is also making the message "Beware of Fortune and her mortal personifications, women" look ridiculous.

### **The Monk Personifies Fortune**

The Monk is serving a strange master (mistress) as he has put judgment in the hands of the classical trope, Fortune. While God remains constant, and will judge both the righteous and the sinner, Fortune will desert whomever she chooses. As Chaucer's Monk explained it, "For certein, whan that Fortune list to flee, / Ther may no man the cours of her withholde" (1995-96). She is typical of woman: fickle, and incapable of making sound decisions, thus ruining lives.

Still, the ambiguity between the Judeo-Christian God with a classical trope remains an odd choice for a monk, perhaps further reason to believe what Chaucer's character has implied: this monk is not the most pious cleric the company of pilgrims has ever come upon; and his world is upsodoun—secular and classical images take the place of sacred and scriptural ones.

With the Monk's clerical credibility already in question, he goes on to chronicle the lives of seventeen illustrious individuals as Fortune causes their fall from prestige and honor into poverty, humiliation, and death. But Fortune does not act without the aid of others. In several of the most prominent "tragedies" the Monk chronicles, Fortune is personified and her will enacted by means of a woman or women. One woman, Zenobia, is even the means of her own doom. These women are meant to personify Fortune and represent the qualities that patristic teachings found so abhorrent in women. Peter Braeger notes that Fortune is never described in the same way twice through the tale, and notes the various descriptions of her. She

can "list to flee" (VII. 1995); "may noon angel dere" (tale of Lucifer, line 2001); can "list to glose" (Hercules, line 2140); can "caste [one] down," "forsake" one, and then [she] "bereth away...richesse" (Belshazzar, 2189, 2241-42); can have "in hire hony galle" and can make one "falle / To wrechednesse" (Cenobia, line 2347, 2349-50); can hold "is hye in magestee" (Peter of Spain, line 2376); can "hir wheel governe and gye" (Peter of Cyprus, line (2397); can "brides...putte in swich a cage" and "carf" one away from "heigh estaat" (Ugolino of Pisa, lines 2414, 2457); can "lough, and [have] a game," (Nero, line 2550); can kiss "likerously, and [lead one] up and doun" (Holofernes, lines 2556-57); can enhance "in pride" (Antiochus, line 2583); can make one "the heir of hire honour" and then turn "sys...into an aas" (Alexander, lines 2643, 2661); can serve as "freend" or "foo" (Julius Casar, line 2723)" can make one "gape" "on

galwes” and “assaille / With unwar strook” (Croesus, lines 2734, 2763-64); can, moreover, think (line 2522) and fail (line 2765). (Braeger 224)

Fortune in the “Monk’s Tale” is slandered the same way that women are in the scholarly and clerical traditions. The Monk, as seen in the descriptions of Fortune, always describes her in the terms of a typical fallen woman. Braeger, in reviewing these descriptions of Fortune, noticed that Fortune’s descriptions “are suited to the tone and character of the individual narrative that includes them” (224).

### **Zenobia**

One woman, who is clearly given the quintessential antifeminist treatment in the tale is Zenobia. Braeger’s idea that Fortune often mirrors the persona of the main character is very accurate in this case. The seventh tragedy the Monk recounts is the only tragedy of the seventeen in which the tragic figure is a woman. Zenobia, the Queen of Palmyra, is an Amazon who at the beginning of the tale has refused the traditional female role. “From hire childhede I fynde that she fledde / Office of wommen” (2255-56) the Monk chides. Zenobia refused the control of any man either over herself or her kingdom, thus breaking with the cultural and legal norms of the Monk’s day. When Zenobia’s friends finally persuaded her to marry, she did not relinquish any control to her husband.

o thyng: that she wolde nevere assente,  
By no wey, that he sholde by hire lye  
But ones, for it was hir pleyn entente  
To have a child, the world to multiplye  
And also soone as that she myghte espye  
That she was nat with child with that dede

Thanne wolde she suffre hym doon his fantasye

Eft-soone, and nat but oones, out of drede. (2279-86)

Zenobia, not Onedak, her husband, had control of the couple's sex life. And Zenobia would withhold relations from her husband, contrary to the prescriptions of scholars and clerics during the fourteenth century. Woman was merely to "help [man] in the work of procreation," (Aquinas 92) not by any means have control over it. And while "multiply[ing] and replenish[ing] the earth" (Gen. 2.7) was certainly God's commandment to Eve, the reference to the scripture may have only been for the Monk, a way to highlight Zenobia's deviance.

While Zenobia's abstinence except for the purpose of childbearing was in line with the Church's teachings, the notion of a woman's choosing the terms of procreation would have been unthinkable sacrilegious, and would certainly warrant punishment. The material doctrinal point in question in the case of Zenobia is found in Ephesians 5:22 and Colossians 3:18, "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands."

In accordance with the teachings of the Church, a woman was not permitted to make any vow of abstinence for any duration without her husband's consent. The prescriptions for sexual activity within marriage were even more strictly prescribed by lay scholars than by clergy:

It is evident that the law has wanted woman to be under the authority of man so that none of the vows which she makes for the sake of abstinence may be enacted by her unless her husband has authorized it by giving his permission[...]It is the order of nature among human beings that women

obey man[...]because it is justice in these matters that the lesser obey the greater. (Gratian 84)

For these scholars, any kind of control asserted by a woman even resembling equality between the sexes was a sacrilege and in violation of their scholarly perceptions of God's laws.

In maintaining control of herself and her kingdom, instead of willingly turning them over as the rightful possessions of her husband, she deserved to be punished. And her punishment fits her crime. Through her fleeing the office of woman, submission, she must eventually be shown to submit. Shortly after her husband's death, Zenobia's kingdom fell to Claudius of Rome, and she and her sons were taken back to Rome captive, having lost all control of her kingdom and herself.

And she that helmed was in starke stoures  
And wan by force townes stronge and toures,  
Shal on hir heed now were a vitremyte;  
And she that bar the ceptre ful of floures  
Shal bere a distaf, hire cost for to quyte. (2370-74)

While Fortune is implicated in the tale as having caused her fall, like Fortune, Zenobia is 'list to flee' (1995) in this case from the dictates of tradition, decorum and the role of woman as understood by the Church. The description of Fortune and Zenobia in her tale match so completely, that it seems almost as though the Monk is allying the two, blaming Zenobia for her own fall, arguing that she really was the one who brought the fall on herself, a censure the Monk withholds from even such characters as Holofernes. The Monk argues that through Zenobia's own renunciation of the "office of women" (2256),

Zenobia fell and ended in doing the “office of women” being forced into submission as a captive in Rome, or as the Monk would have it: a punishment for her own actions in presuming to be man’s equal.

### **Delilah**

While the story of Zenobia clearly smacks of traditional antifeminism, in the case of Delilah the Monk need not exaggerate or twist the Tragedy of Sampson to make Delilah look bad. If Chaucer was trying to make the Monk look ridiculous by incriminating innocent women, this certainly would not be the story to choose. Delilah’s actions speak for themselves.

Many clerks and Fathers wrote about the story of Sampson as a cautionary tale for men on the ills of women. While Delilah’s actions were terrible, Chaucer may have selected her and placed her so early in the “Monk’s Tale” because she is so quintessentially feminine by patristic standards, and is a good standard to measure the other women against. Delilah had come to represent the kind of behavior a medieval man could expect from any woman. It has been said of Delilah, “the Nazarite whose conception was announced by an angel, Delilah alone overcame; betrayed to his enemies and robbed of his sight, he was driven by his suffering to destroy himself along with his enemies” (Abelard 90). Apparently, the Monk knew Abelard as he introduces the tale,

Sampsoon, which that was annunciat

By th’ angel longe er his nativitee[...]

But to his wyves toolde he his secree,

Thurgh which he slow himself for wrecchednesse (2015-16; 2021-22)

The similarity between Abelard's introduction to Delilah and the Monk's introduction is striking. The Monk himself calls Delilah, "false" (2027), "untrewe" (2026), says that she "to [Sampson's] foos his conseil gan biwreye, / And hym forsook, and took another newe" (2029-30). Delilah is so characteristic in antifeminist literature and so quintessential of the medieval view of women that the Monk never has to mention his usual femme fatale, Fortune. Delilah and Fortune as stereotypically female, are practically synonymous.

Fortune is described in other places in the tale as having the same traits the Monk ascribes to Delilah in the tragedy of Samson. In the tale of Nero, the Monk says the Fortune was Nero's "freend" but then decides to betray him to prove she is stronger. Delilah made a similar decision in deciding to ruin her husband. She certainly caused her husband to "falle / To wrechednesse" (2349-50). In fact, nearly every description of Fortune in the tale<sup>7</sup> applies to Delilah, the model of the quintessential woman decried in patristic and scholarly writing. "Armed with[...]vices woman subverts the world; woman, the sweet evil, compound of honeycomb and poison[...]Who eliminated a man's strength when his hair was cut off? A woman" (Marbod 101). The Monk simply substitutes Delilah with Fortune, and therefore does not need to mention Fortune in the tale at all: since both Fortune and Delilah are quintessentially female, the Monk only needs to mention the latter to invoke the former; Delilah is not a case of the Monk getting it wrong and blaming an innocent woman, rather it is a chance for him to show just how alike the goddess Fortune and a mortal woman can be; he does not directly say so. He does not need to, Delilah fills the role of Fortune for her husband. This first account of a

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<sup>7</sup> See pages 30-31

woman who causes a man's ruin<sup>8</sup> links Fortune and women together. We know that Fortune, as the villain of the tale, has caused Sampson's ruin, and yet the only person ever implicated with Samson's destruction is Delilah. The two are described identically in the tale; Delilah is so akin to Fortune that Fortune need not even be mentioned to be implied. Delilah also sets the standard at the beginning of the piece that makes the Monk's later incarnations of Fortune, i.e. Dianarah and Judith, look all the more ridiculous.

### **Dianarah**

As with Zenobia and Delilah, Fortune and women throughout the rest of the tale are libeled with antifeminist platitudes and endowed with the classical antifeminist scholarly and patristic traits of women whether they deserve to be or not. This pattern remains no different with Dianarah, the "lemman" of Hercules. The description of Fortune in the tale is "Fortune list to glose, / Thanne wayteth she her man to overthrowe / By swich a way as he wolde leest suppose" (2140-42). Dianarah best fits this description of Fortune. She did beguile Hercules in a way that he (and even she) did not expect. While the Monk pardons Dianarah, because he has read that "somme clerkes hire excusen" (2127), it was literally Dianarah who was the one to "glose" and "overthrowe" "her man" in a way that neither Hercules nor she expected (2140-41). The Monk, to build his own ethos, admits the scholarly opinion that perhaps Dianarah was not at fault, but he still compares her implicitly with Fortune. Whether knowingly or unknowingly Fortune and her mortal counterpart, Dianarah, have proved the "overthrowe" of Hercules. If, and by bring up the argument the Monk admits the possibility of her guilt, Dianarah knowingly participated in Hercules' demise, then she is a woman of the worst sort. Once

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<sup>8</sup> Eve is never directly mentioned by the Monk.

again, a (potentially) ignorant woman, “ruined everything” (Chrysostom 59). If, however, we take the Monk’s statement “I wol hire noht accusen,” to mean he believes her innocent of any knowing part, then she is still subject to the censure of traditional antifeminism, or at least fits the mold of the typical patristic type, “woman is by nature subordinate to man, because the power of rational discernment is by nature stronger in man” (Aquinas 93).

In fact, Dianarah is the subject of many “clerkes” and is commonly pointed to as quintessential woman, whether or not the particular clerk in question thinks her complicity was knowing or not. As the description of Fortune matches the depiction of Dianarah and the classical arguments made about her, then clearly Fortune herself is, in the tale of Hercules, being represented as a “silly, and ignorant woman willing to do her husband more harm” (Blamires 194).

### **Judith**

Braeger suggest the description of Fortune in the tale of Holofernes as another example of Fortune’s meirroring the main character. “Fortune ay kiste” him “So likerously, and ladde hym up and doun / Til that his heed was of, er that he wiste” (2556-58). Braeger concludes that this characterization is appropriate, and Fortune is described to particularly suit Holofernes. Braeger does conclude that the description of Fortune is crafted to fit this individual tale but stops short of identifying her directly with the character whose actions Fortune is attributed with. Fortune is described by the Monk as performing the actions that Judith did. The Monk uses the names “Judith” and “Fortune” interchangeably through the tale. And in a story where the biblical Judith should come off the hero, it is Holofernes that the secular Monk mourns.

Just as the Monk has replaced the traditional male God of Christianity with a pagan goddess, in his tragedy of Holofernes the Monk reverses traditional expectation again. The Book of Judith is her story, not the story of Holofernes. But in the Monk's upsodoun world, Judith, the savior of the Jews, becomes a personification of fickle Fortune. She kills Holofernes, general of Nabugodonosor. Yet though Holofernes is the villain of the Book of Judith, and is, the Monk admits, responsible for making "every man reneyen his lawe" (2560), the Monk praises him:

Was nevere capitayn under a kyng  
That regnes mo putte in subjeccioun  
Ne strengre was in feeld of alle thing,  
As in his tyme, ne gretter of renoun (2551-54)

It is Fortune (and by extension, Judith), who is vilified. "Fortune ay kiste" him "So likerously, and ladde hym up and doun / Til that his heed was of, er that he wiste" (2556-58). While Holofernes is called "streng," "heigh," by the Monk, and the Monk also says that "this world hadde hym in awe" (2553, 2555, 2559), Judith is merely referred to as "a womman" (2571). And the Monk represents Judith's behavior not as courageous or heroic, but furtive at the least, maybe even dishonorable. "Sleepynge, his heed of smoot, and from his tente / Ful Pryvely she stal from every wight, / And with his heed unto hir toun she went" (2572-74). In the Monk's narration of the events it seems that Judith, and not Holofernes is the culpable party.

To claim that Judith was at fault for any sin would seem absurd, unless the Monk subscribed to the idea that the beautiful woman "is represented by the man who uncovers the pit. The pit is her fair face...and her hand if she holds it out before his eyes; and

further her speech is a pit. All this our Lord calls a pit” (*Ancrene Wisse* 96). Judith is the beautiful woman who uncovers her face, and like an innocent animal, Holofernes cannot help being drawn in. Judith is, after all, described in scripture as captivating Holofernes with her beauty. Where the patristic canon advocates modest and simple dress for women, Judith purposely set the standards aside.

8.7 She was also of a goodly countenance and very beautiful to behold [...]

10. 4 And she took sandals upon her feet, and put about her bracelets, and her chains, and her rings, and her earrings, and all her ornaments, and decked herself bravely, to allure the eyes of all men that should see her.

10. 23 And when Judith was come before him and his servants, they all marveled at the beauty of her countenance [...]

12.16 Now when Judith came in and sat down, Holofernes’ heart was ravished with her, and his mind was moved, and he desired greatly her company: for he waited a time to deceive her, the day that he had seen her.

(Book of Judith)

Therefore, according to antifeminist thought, in allowing and in plotting that Holofernes should lust after her, Judith’s means were “likorous,” however justifiable the end. A literal reading of such teachings as contained in the *Wisse* would make Judith the more culpable in the case of the “tragedie” of Holofernes. If the Monk had read more widely, he would find many apologists for Judith among the Church fathers, but once again, in the Monk’s twisted worldview all that matters is what the Monk knows; and Judith and Fortune are at fault.

## Phanye

There is one, and only one mortal female character in the “Monk’s Tale” that the Monk sees fit to praise. Phanye, Croesus’s daughter is described by the Monk as being “in heigh sentence habounde” (2748). It is Phanye who divines Croesus’s future correctly. While the Monk praises Phanye’s judgment, he also praises Fortune much in the same vein. Fortune is, after all, also able to “governe and gye” (2397), and the Monk needed at least one mortal woman to represent this side of Fortune. This does not in any way ameliorate the Monk’s depiction of Fortune; it rather highlights her fickle nature further. In this case, Fortune, through Phanye, did something potentially praiseworthy: she foretold the future. However, the Monk never claims that Fortune is always cruel—she can be freend” or “foo” (2723). And while Croesus’s fate is predicted, it is not a kind one; this is further evidence of the fickleness of femininity. Phanye’s prediction is not much kinder than Fortune herself in this tale. The Monk calls her prediction to her father “ful plat and ek ful pleyn” (2757). While Fortune and Phanye do have some uncanny and even unnerving abilities to “gye,” the results of Fortune and Phanye’s intervention in Croesus’s life do not help him, they merely spell his doom.

In the majority of the other accounts the Monk is able to give before he is interrupted by the Knight, women participate in their father’s/lover’s/husband’s falls to varying degrees of culpability. Yet in every case, the women’s presence is evident in the fall in stereotypically patristic and malicious ways, as in the case of Judith. The Monk seems unfit to give ecclesiastical condemnation of anybody, especially with regards to chastity. Not only do his own ethics cripple his argument, but his logic is faulty and his tales are tired—Alison, the Wife of Bath, has already alluded to such antifeminist tales

and dismissed them as stories in “that cursed book” (III<sup>9</sup> 789) of her husband’s. Further, because the form of the tale, having the form of the homily but lacking the proper content, is laughable, the patristic arguments themselves become so. The Monk, as the comic ecclesiastical stereotype, is preaching doctrine equally stereotypical (the evils of women) rendered comical in the mouth of such an impious “manly man” (I 167).

### **The Redemption of Women in Chaucer**

The “Monk’s Tale” depicts Fortune, as the quintessential woman, her female mortal counterparts as doing all the stereotypically patristic things women do: beguiling men with their beauty, betraying men to their deaths, refusing to obey rightful authority, becoming the harbingers of certain doom. Yet, we and the pilgrims have to consider the source of this pseudo-sermon. The Monk is meant to be ridiculous and at least two of the pilgrims (Chaucer and the Host) already regard him as being suspect. The opinion of many of the pilgrims of the clergy is not very high already,<sup>10</sup> and the “Monk’s Tale,” which fits the form of a sermon but mistakes spotty classical secularism for scriptural grounding, would not have done much to renew their confidence in the Monk. He seems to be using this tale, more than anything, as a chance to show off. It is clear then that neither Chaucer nor the pilgrims took the Monk or his philosophies on Fortune and femininity very seriously. In fact, by placing such a patristic stereotypically feminine deity in the hands of an impious Monk, Chaucer may have been trying to do just the opposite of what the Monk had in mind. In making the Monk and his tale look so ridiculous, Chaucer was undermining the prevailing antifeminist thoughts of the time that through turning Judith into a villain and Holofernes into a hero.

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<sup>9</sup> All references to the WB will be from Fragment III.

<sup>10</sup> See “The Reeve’s Tale” as an example.

There is other evidence that Chaucer espoused feminist views. One of the most common pilgrims cited in connection with Chaucer and feminism is the Wife of Bath. While St. Jerome argued that “Christ loves virgins more than others” (66), marriage was one of the three honorable professions for a woman in the Catholic Church and “despite this lower status of life, many of the female saints were in fact married” (Schullenberg 177). The Wife of Bath, no doubt informed by this happy fact, is quick to point out biblical complicity in her situation.

Men may devyne and glosen, up and doun,  
But wel I woot, expres, whithoute lye—  
God bad us for to wexe and multiplye;  
That gentil text kan I wel understonde.  
Eek wel I woot, he seyde myn housbonde  
Sholde lete fader and mooder and take to me. (26-31)

Though the Wife has more than her share of ridiculousness, and plainly does not completely understand the text of the Bible the way the Church interpreted it with regards to whom the command to multiply and replenish the earth was given (the maternal line of Christ), and while there is no mention in the *Canterbury Tales* of Alisoun’s ever having children, she is right in that there is certainly biblical precedent for marriage. The Wife seems to further reinforce the notion, contrary to patristic writings, of marriage and womanhood being an honorable profession when she says, “And everich hath of God a proper yifte / Som this, som that, as hym liketh shifte” (103-04). She then explains that though virginity is “greet perfeccion” (105), that Christ in *His* perfection, did not ask each of his followers to go and sell all they had to the poor.

The Wife of Bath defends woman's sovereignty in marriage (an early answer to the tragedy of Zenobia, perhaps) and mocks the antifeminist scholars/theologians when she describes Jankin, her most recent husband. "Jankin [much like the Monk] is a parody of a man reading a sacred theological work. His wife's violent resistance to this travesty of spiritual guidance contrasts aptly with the silent attentiveness of the [patristic ideal of the] docile female pupil" (Martin 9). Jankin is respected, and his *Boke of Wycked Wyves* is at first tolerated by Alison. After all, she says, he had "a paire / of legges and of feet so clene and faire" (597-98); so at first, his silly ideas could be overlooked. But she is quick to acknowledge her over-indulgence. "And to hym yaf I al the lond and fee, / That evere was me yeven therbifoore. / But afterward repented me ful soore" (630-32). Soon, Alison could no longer keep her dissent quiet. She had already torn a page from his book and been punished by Jankin. She had been struck so hard in the ear by him that she lost her hearing in that ear. Finally, she is unable to listen to Jankin any longer.

And whan I saugh he wolde nevere fyne  
To reden on this cursed book al nyght,  
Al sodenly thre leves have I plyght  
Out of his book, right as he radde, and eke,  
I with my fest so took hym on the cheke (788-92).

At first Alison is content to listen passively to Jankin as he explains to her the faults of women and wives, and afterwards merely laughing about it with her friends and anyone else who will listen to her. But being the "archewyf" that she is, a word Chaucer coined to describe domineering women like the Wife of Bath (Miller 3), she is unable to find a more discreet way to confront Jankin than ripping pages from his books and slapping

him. For her act of defiance, Jankin severely beats Alison. “And with his fest he smoot me on the heed / That in the floor I lay as I were deed” (795-96). Though Alison eventually succeeds in getting Jankin to burn the book, the beating is perhaps Chaucer’s acknowledgment of how dangerous it could be to directly oppose theological authority in any form.

Unlike Alison, Chaucer was more subtle in defying and undermining theological authority. In dropping hints like the host’s as to the behavior and morality of the Monk, Chaucer is critiquing the theologians of his day, not by ripping pages from their books but rather by writing new ones. The Monk with his questionable deities and even more questionable morality is just such an example. Like the Wife of Bath, but with much more caution, Chaucer makes his ecclesiastics look ridiculous and spiteful. He couples the already dubious ethos of the clerics with the stereotypical antifeminism exaggerated to the point of absurdity in the “Monk’s Tale,” where biblical heroines like Judith are made to look like Fortune’s henchwomen. And Fortune, with her hordes of female personifications, is the sole cause of men’s ruin.

Judging by Chaucer’s popularity, such characterizations of the clergy were well received. He was widely read and listened to, and tremendously popular in his time, though careful not to offend those with power. When Chaucer slighted the gentry or clergy, he did it carefully.

Chaucer’s criticism of the canon of antifeminism, while not nearly as bold as Alison’s was so cleverly constructed for the knowing audience, but invisible to many of those who would have felt threatened by it. Judging from Chaucer’s popularity, it is probable that Chaucer’s anticanonical sentiments were appreciated and enjoyed.

Most people, especially women, in Chaucer's time probably tolerated the scholarly and patristic antifeminism quietly, perhaps laughing with a group of friends about it, but at least outwardly respecting its propagators. However, by near the end of the fourteenth century their appeared to be some men and women who were ready to voice their dissent.

## Chapter 3

### Christine's Fortune

Like Chaucer, Christine de Pizan also used Fortune to defend women. But the Monk and Christine come up with two very different conclusions. In treating Fortune initially, Christine used as flat a depiction of Fortune as the Monk, saying of her, "I was burned, destroyed and reduced to ashes by cruel Fortune" (Pizan, *Vision* 15). Eventually though, the character of Christine becomes persuaded, as Boethius had been, that Fortune is not a monster, but that her acts of cruelty are really kindnesses. Christine comes to this realization when she herself becomes the agent of Fortune, and interestingly enough, Fortune changes her into a man so that she can better serve and personify Fortune. I will argue that, again, Fortune serves as a model of traditional femininity for Christine as it did for Chaucer, and that Christine's purpose in depicting Fortune in this way is to make an argument that is twofold: first, Fortune's acts of cruelty can be gendered masculine more appropriately than feminine, and second, Christine reasserted the Boethian argument that even Fortune's cruelties are actually kindnesses when viewed in perspective.

In order to explore Christine's personification of Fortune as Christine, a brief introduction to her biography and career is necessary. From there, I will analyze why autobiography was such an appropriate choice for Christine. Because Christine's genre was autobiography, she could rely on her own ethos as a chaste widow, a condition the Church looked on as second only to virginity, to make her arguments defending femininity. With her ethos established, I will explore her arguments themselves, demonstrating how Christine was able to use herself as Fortune's agent and as a

personification of Fortune and that she did this in order to demonstrate Fortune's masculine harshness and to ultimately show that Fortune's cruel acts may ultimately be kindnesses.

### **Christine's Biography**

Christine de Pizan was born in Venice in 1365 to "noble parents" (Pizan, *Vision* 6). Though her father, Thomas de Pizzanno (Tomasso di Benvenuto da Pizzano), was part of the noble class, his family was not so well off that he could afford a life of complete leisure. Thomas was noticed early in his life by Christine's maternal grandfather, Tommaso Mondino da Forli, a Professor at the University of Bologna where Thomas had been a student. Through that connection, Thomas de Pizzanno was appointed a "counselor to the rulers of that city (Venice)" (Pizan, *Vision* 7) and was able to secure the hand of Christine's mother. As a well-connected nobleman in Venice, recognized as a gifted scholar and physician, Thomas caught the eye of both the French and Hungarian courts. But it was to the court of the newly ascended Charles V of France that Thomas moved his young family. Thomas became the court physician and astrologer, a position he would hold until the death of Charles in 1380.

Though we do not know as much about Christine's life as we might like, Christine was unusual for the writers of her time in that once she became an established and popular writer, she wrote an autobiography, *Christine's Vision*, taking her cue perhaps from Petrarch, one of the few authors of the era to write an autobiography.<sup>11</sup>

Christine was only four years old when she moved to Paris where, according to her own account, the members of her family were, "greeted warmly and given many generous gifts" (Pizan, *Vision* 7). Christine describes her childhood growing up in the

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<sup>11</sup> Petrarch most probably knew Thomas Pizzanno in Venice.

French Court as “a full and happy life” (*Vision 7*). Thomas, by Christine’s own account, was a close confidant of the king’s. Charles found Thomas so indispensable that he would not even give Thomas leave to return to Italy to see relatives, or indeed to help his own family in the move from Venice to Paris (Pizan, *Vision 7*).

Thomas ran a liberal household in every sense of the word. Her father insisted on Christine’s education despite her mother’s objections. The particulars of her education are unclear, but Thomas is believed to have overseen Christine’s education personally in large part. Thomas also was quite liberal in his spending, but while Charles lived, “the good king’s generosity took care of every need in the household of his beloved servant” (Pizan, *Vision 8*).

When Christine came of age in 1380, Charles V was still alive. Though Christine was not very highborn, as the daughter of the king’s favorite courtier, Christine became an object of interests in the French courts. “Although I was still quite young, I was nonetheless sought after by several knights, other nobles and wealthy clerks” (Pizan, *Vision 8*). Christine recognized the motives of her young suitors; however, she says “my own worth was not the cause, rather the respect enjoyed by my father, for whom the king showed great love and esteem” (*Vision 8*). Apparently, Christine’s perception was keen from a young age, as it is not only in retrospect that she was able to determine the motives of her suitors, but during her courtship as well. She left the choice of her husband to her father, true to convention at the time. However, in her father she recognized someone who “valued above all knowledge and a worthy life” (Christine, *Vision 8*). He chose for Christine a young man named Étienne de Castel, a well-educated nobleman who had, according to Christine “more virtue than wealth” (*Vision 8*).

Christine did well to trust her father as apparently she and Étienne were very happy together. He encouraged the furthering of her education, and the couple had three children. Through the influence of Thomas, Étienne gained the position of court secretary, “along with wages and other rewards.” (Pizan, *Vision* 8)

Christine’s family would need Étienne’s salary, for soon after Étienne’s appointment to the position of court secretary, Charles V died. There had been some jealousy in the French Court of Thomas de Pizan’s closeness to the king, and after the death of Charles, Thomas was demoted, lost his pension, and no longer had the money to support the lavish lifestyle to which he had become accustomed. The pensions that Charles had promised Thomas and his heirs: Christine, and the daughter of Christine’s brother, were not given “first through oversight, and then through neglect” (Pizan, *Vision* 9). The strain of running a household on so little money became too much for Thomas, and he died in 1385 at the age of only forty-four. Christine said of her father,

He was truly missed by princes, colleagues, and friends for his integrity, good deeds, loyalty, truthfulness and other virtues, among which there was nothing blameworthy, save perhaps his excessive generosity towards the poor to the detriment of his wife and family. (Pizan, *Vision* 10)

Christine would always regard her father with tremendous respect and affection, though there is some hint of resentment in his leaving the family in such dire financial straits. To some degree, Christine blamed her father’s early demise on financial stress: “he grew ill and feeble and had to endure many hardships that the money spent earlier could have alleviated. For this reason, I deem prudent saving a wise practice in youth, as it provides comfort in old age” (Pizan, *Vision* 9).

Christine's husband, who was apparently more financially prudent than his father-in-law had been able to barely maintain the household until he too died suddenly when Christine was twenty-five—sometime near 1390. Christine, grieving for her husband, was left with crushing debts accrued by both her father and husband, three children, a widowed mother, and a niece to provide for. With her political connections to the French Court severed, those who owed her money refused to pay it, and those to whom she owed money demanded it. Christine was in and out of court for bills outstanding over the course of the next fourteen years, according to her own account. In any event,

ten years were to pass between Étienne's death and Christine's emergence as a recognized court poet. It is not certain how she survived this trying period of her life, but the most plausible explanation is that she worked as a copyist or perhaps a corrector in a workshop where manuscripts were being prepared for the expanding of the book trade. (Willard xi)

The last century had seen the production of books move from the realm of the clerical scribe to the secular publishing house. By the end of the fourteenth century, book production “provided one of the few professional opportunities open to women” (Willard xi).

Though the family of Thomas de Pizzanno had fallen out of favor in the court, Christine retained a few friends among the ladies of court. Though her loyalties were French, Christine referred to herself as a “femme ytalienne” (Blumenfeld-Kosinski 9). She found a friend in the wife of Louis of Orléans, the younger brother of the king. Louis's wife, Valentina Visconti, was the daughter of the Duke of Milan “who was a notable bibliophile, and the head of Valentina's household was Giles Malet, a friend of

Étienne du Castel's family" (Willard xii). Louis Orléans became a patron of Christine's and much of Christine's early work is dedicated to him.

Christine's earliest published work consists of poems mourning the death of Étienne. The experience of her early life in losing both a beloved father, and a husband whom she seemed to genuinely love, coupled with the responsibility she had from the age of twenty-five to care for a household of six, imbued even her fictional and poetic work with a refreshing practicality: "Love, I will no longer serve you, / So farewell I now would say. / You enslave me when I'd be true"(Pizan, *Letters*, page 6). Although Christine mourned her husband, her responsibilities pressed her too hard to allow her to dwell for too long in grief.

### **Her Career**

In 1399, the year before Chaucer's death, Christine de Pizan began her career as a popular published writer. Chaucer's covert criticism of the antifeminist tradition became overt in Christine de Pizan's hands. By the turn of the fifteenth century, as early as 1402, Christine's works were being read in translation by English audiences, and her work would continue to be popular in both the original French, as well as in numerous translations through the fifteenth and into the sixteenth centuries in Europe. Christine's *City of the Ladies* (*Le Livre de la Cité de Dames*) was even translated into Portuguese and published in 1518. To be able to publish a text that took issue with Church teachings during the Inquisition on the Iberian Peninsula in an Iberian language, shows just how popular Christine was, and how her ideas resonated with the reading public in Europe. Certainly, by the height of Christine's career, a mere decade after the death of Chaucer, there was an audience for literature by a woman about the virtues of women.

Christine wrote *City of the Ladies*, her most popular work in defense of women in 1415. Before Christine's most well-known defense of women, she penned numerous letters and responses to various patristic and scholarly writers who condemned women. Some of Christine's earliest defenses of women are dated to 1402. About this time, when Christine was achieving tremendous popularity both at home and abroad, she began work on the semi-autobiographical "*Livre de la Mutacion de Fortune*" (Solente xi). While the precise date of the work is unknown, Christine probably wrote it between the beginning of the year 1400 and "novembre 1403 put donc être offerte dès le premier de janvier au duc de Bourgogne" (Solvent xi). During the beginning of her career, Christine's work was nearly always commissioned by the husbands of Christine's lady friends in court. In the poem, Christine describes Fortune's transformation of her (Pizan, *Mutacion* Book II), so that she is better able to meet Fortune's whims for Christine and her life. Christine uses Fortune again in her autobiography of 1405. According to McLeod, "*Mutacion* foreshadows *Avision* in many ways. Both blend an allegorical autobiography with an historical approach, and both set the mixture within an exploration of the inexplicable failures in the lives of individuals and nations" (McLeod xvi).

### **The Genius of Christine's Genre**

Christine de Pizan always portrayed herself as a devout Catholic and wanted to leave no question of her devotion to Christ's Holy Church. "I attribute the glory to almighty God alone, who preserved me because of my Catholic faith" (Pizan, *Vision* 18). When her husband, Étienne, died in 1390 when Christine herself was twenty-five, Christine resolved to remain a widow, though after her fame as a writer was established, she received several offers of marriage.

The decision to remain a widow granted her some credibility, and even some immunity in the eyes of the Church and those who were familiar with patristic thought concerning the estate of womankind. A married woman was the lowest of all acceptable estates for a woman, but a chaste widow was almost as good as a virgin (Schullenberg 267). A chaste widow had a kind of holiness. Later Christine would cement her legacy as a faithful Catholic by spending her retirement in a convent. Christine's own daughter, Marie, would become a nun.

Through her whole career as a writer, Christine walked the precarious line between the devout thinker, and the heretic. While the rhetoric of the Church regarding women was often harsh, in some ways the Church was more lenient toward women than many secular scholars—the Church at least allowed for some good women, notably Mary, St. Anne, and other female saints. Indeed, the Church even acknowledged honorable positions for women. In the Church during the Middle Ages, a woman was respected according to “the spiritual meritocracy outlined by the early medieval Church” (Schullenberg 177).

Now, there are three professions in the holy Catholic Church: there are virgins, widows and the married. Virgins produce the hundred-fold, widows the sixty-fold, and the married thirty-fold. One bears more, another less but they are all kept in the heavenly barn and happily enjoy eternal bliss. (Caesarius 43)

While the Church acknowledged the estate of marriage and of married women as honorable, though inferior to widowhood or virginity, the Church Fathers advocated and enforced, where possible, strict codes of behavior for married women pertaining to both

their domestic and sexual conduct. “The woman taught the man once and made him guilty of disobedience and ruined everything. Therefore, because she made bad use of her power over the man, or rather her equality with him, God made her subject to her husband” (St. John Chrysostom 59). Woman had once dared to think herself equal to man and by so doing “ruined everything” (Chrysostom 59). Thus, a woman so intimately involved with a man as a wife had to be watched that much more carefully. Chaste widows were of much less concern and were respected by the Church. All were subject to male authority, of course, but the jeopardy of the wife’s soul was much more in question than that of the chaste widow or virgin. Christine’s status as a chaste widow in some respects gave her leeway to critique and undermine patristic writings in the way a Chaucer never could.

Christine’s status as “chaste widow” made her defense of woman, even against revered Church authorities more credible and more innocuous in the eyes of the Church. Nevertheless Christine recognized her precarious position and is careful in her attacks of the patristic writers. Christine was careful not to attack these revered patristic writers directly, as she believes that “attacking [their] vice is one thing; condemning individuals by name is another—indeed it is disallowed by God” (Blamires 280).

While as a noblewoman and a chaste widow living in France she enjoyed some freedom in her writing that Chaucer did not, she treaded carefully through her critique of patristic misogyny, using more overtly a device Chaucer had used two decades before her: the personification of Fortune.

## **Fortune and Christine in *Mutacion***

*Le Livre de la Mutacion de Fortune* is a struggle between two goddesses. Nature made Christine female so that she could resemble Nature in form, but after Christine's bereavement and widowhood, Nature leaves Christine ill-equipped to handle the situation in which she found herself. "Aside from her sorrow at Étienne's untimely demise, she was woefully uninformed about the household accounts and hence an easy prey to unscrupulous men" (McLeod xii). The tension of the poem revolves around Nature's original creation of Christine as female, and Fortune's resexing of Christine to better represent Fortune's will. Christine herself becomes Fortune's agent, and does the work that Fortune dictates. To be able to obey Fortune's will, Fortune recognizes that Christine must be changed.

At the beginning of the poem, Christine describes her first "mother," Nature. Christine begins her narrative by describing the kindness of Nature who "Trop plus que lui, si vould avoir / Femelle a elle ressemblable" ["wanted to have a female child resembling her" (Mutacion 390-91; Newman 118). In Book II, when Christine turns fifteen, the of the poem describes the palace of Fortune. Christine recognizes as soon as she meets Fortune that although she is "a lady of high birth, who was slightly related to [Nature][...] they did not look at all like each other, and they were not cut from the same cloth" (Newman 118). Christine had previously described Nature as her "beautiful mother Nature" (Newman 118). That Fortune looks nothing like her must mean that "Christine could only be disparaging Lady Fortune" (Newman 118). Fortune, for Christine, is not the feminine that she understood. Nature was the archetypal female for Christine: kind, and good.

Fortune is not a kind mistress. Nature turned Christine over to Fortune once Christine reached the age of fifteen (marriageable age), and immediately Christine distrusted her, though Fortune gave her “ten happy years at the court of Hymen” (Newman 118). Fortune throughout the text of *Mutacion*, is an overtly sexual Goddess. Where Nature merely gendered Christine in her own image, and seems to be concerned with reproduction, Fortune seems concerned only with sex. The ten happy years at the court of Hymen are the years that Christine spent with Étienne. When Étienne dies, Christine allegorizes his death in *Mutacion* as a shipwreck. “et Fortune, ayant pitié de son malheur, la [Christine] changea en homme et la rendit capable de mener une nef” (and having the pity of a woman, Fortune changed Christine into a man and makes her capable of steering a ship” (Solente xiv). Fortune needs a servant who can suit her needs, reflect her wishes. As Nature has made Christine female, so that Christine can resemble that goddess, so Fortune makes Christine male to best resemble her.

The description of Christine’s change at the hands of Fortune highlights Fortune’s masculinity. Christine describes her encounter with Fortune and subsequent resexing in terms that suggest a sexual experience, in which Christine is characterized as the female participant. After the experience, however, Christine awakes to realize that as a result of her night with Fortune, *she* (Christine) has become masculine. Fortune visits her one night, after her bereavement; Christine retires to bed and is overcome.

Adont vers moy vint ma maitresse  
Qui a plusieurs la joye estrece  
Si me toucha par tout le corps[...]  
Chacun membre, bien me’en recors

Manyä et tint a ses mains[...]  
Transmuee me senti toute[...]  
Et ma voix forment engrossie  
Et corps plus dur et plus insel  
Mais choit de mon doy fu l'anel  
Qu'Ymeneüs donné m'avoit  
Dont me pesa, et bien devoit,  
Car je l'amoie chierement.

("Then my mistress came to me / she who gives joy to many / and she touched me all over my body / she palpated and took in her hands each bodily part, I remember it well / I awakened and things were such that / I touched myself all over my body / and my voice was much lower, / and my body harder and faster. / However, the ring / that Hymen had given me had fallen from my finger, / which troubled me, as well it should have, / for I loved it dearly" (Newman 118). The product of the union of female Christine with Fortune is changed. Through a night with Fortune, Christine has become masculine. Although she still refers to both herself (as seen in the French above) and Fortune in the feminine, clearly there is a difference in Christine. Fortune, unlike Nature, did not create Christine a woman, but changed her into a man, to better represent *her* (Fortune's) will.

Christine's Fortune begins as female, and a female as deeply flawed as Christine herself, after the death of her husband. By the end of the poem, Christine becomes a masculine representation of Fortune. And because she uses her own voice—the voice of the respected writer, devout Catholic and chaste widow—she is able to point to the flaws inherent in a Fortune whose personification is male. By extension, Christine is hinting

that some of Fortune's harshness and cruelties are masculine. Christine has already described Fortune's male agents as "revenge-hungry ants" (Pizan, *Vision* 15), the men who were her creditors and tried to take advantage of her widowhood.

Christine's male mutation by Fortune is not all bad, however. She says that just as men have the strength to steer ships, so Fortune, though still technically a Goddess, has this very masculine ability. Christine's Fortune is much closer to a Judeo-Christian God than the classical depiction of Fortuna. Christine is very clever: in comparing men to God, the Church and male scholars of the time could hardly take issue with their argument. But because she never outright claims *the* Judeo-Christian God as Fortune, her male Fortune can have some of the flaws classically associated with the Goddess Fortune: fickleness and occasional disloyalty and cruelty.

Christine de Pizan argues that Fortune is not categorically cruel and fickle, but like Christine, rather like one "guiding a ship" (Solent xiv) that must steer individuals through their lives, through good and bad seas. She asserts that a man is naturally more capable of performing this task than a woman with her "pitié." Woman is too gentle and merciful, Christine argues, to make her a suitable manifestation of the work of Fortune. Thus Fortune herself, has masculine traits. Fortune, like Christine, is manly without becoming male (both Fortune and Christine throughout the poem are referred to in the feminine). In depicting both herself and Fortune as a combination of male and female, Christine, cleverly defended women, as I will show.

Christine must become manly because with her "pitié de son Malheur," she is not suited to steer a ship. When Christine was the female widow, still wearing the ring Hymen gave her, she was taken advantage of as poor widow. While not overtly

criticizing men, she is implying at least that they are *less* capable of pity than women are. While the female castings of Fortune by Boccaccio and the Monk are fickle and cruel, Christine de Pizan, who at first took Fortune to be “cruel” (*Vision* 15) is complimentary of Fortune as gendered male or female. Christine does not overtly claim that cruelty is in the province of one sex or the other—but that each is equally capable of weakness and strength. She praises Fortune as sometimes inclined to “mercy” (*Solente* xiv), Christine even praises Fortune for her transformation, grateful that she will be able to provide for her family. (*Solente* xiv) Still, Christine is well aware that she has lost something in her masculine transformation.

When Christine was entirely female, she was created in the express image of a Goddess, Nature. According to the poem, Christine’s literal mother is the goddess, Nature, and her father is Thomas de Pissano (Newman 116). Therefore, Fortune’s transformation of Christine into a male causes her to fall back into a state of mortality. No longer is Christine completely cast in the image of her godly parent. In becoming male, Christine becomes loses her divinity. Though Fortune caused the change in Christine to reflect her masculine traits, Christine’s *physical* changes cause her to fall from a state of divine femininity; she is no longer like her Mother, Nature (Newman 118). In becoming a masculine, Christine falls from the natural feminine divine, but is able to serve Fortune, and gains Fortune’s ability to guide the ship of her life (*Mutacion* 6939). Thus, Christine prevents herself from ultimately implying that masculinity (or a masculine Fortune) is cruel: in the end, Fortune masculine or feminine is kind; but femininity emerges as the divine trait (*Mutacion* 6939-42).

## Conclusion

Christine, by the standards of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries would seem quiescent in her views. She was not advocating a new place for women; she does not wish to see them involved in politics, trade, or industry. This, Christine comments is one of their virtues, for although, says Christine, most women are good, the ones who are not have little significance in the world, and they do little harm, “car peu s’empechent des affaires / En gouvernements necessaires (for they occupy themselves little with the things necessary for governing)” (Blumenfeld-Kosinski 12). Rather than trying to advocate women’s involvement in new spheres, she is an apologist for women in the traditional roles they had occupied for centuries past.

Christine did not argue that women should leave their homes to work in trade. She argued for the importance and sanctity of motherhood. Given the antifeminism that was in vogue in the most popular secular and religious literature, Christine’s task of resuscitating womankind might well have been more difficult than the task of the Women’s Liberation movement of the last century. While defending women from misogyny was not a completely new concept, it was frowned upon by the Church. Christine’s work was made all the more difficult as the genre in which she wrote did not yet exist in her language. French was not a language of any scholarly importance, and philosophical dialogues were not conducted in French until Christine de Pizan. In order for Christine to write in the vernacular about philosophical topics, she needed a different vocabulary, parallel to writers like Boccaccio who wrote in Latin and French.

By Godefroy or by the authors of the *Dictionnaire générale de la langue*

*Française*, she is credited with using for the first time a large number of words: artiste, vindicatif, compact, pertinent, circonspect, infleur, invective, palpable, stimulation, temporizer, investigation, preparative, blandices, transcendent, [and] harangue. (Richards 21)

Not only have these words become common usage in speaking and writing but most of them are words commonly used in the English language as well. It is to Christine that modern speakers and writers in French and English owe a number of their more abstract philosophical terms. Christine de Pizan, along with her some of her contemporaries like Froissart helped to make French the language of continental diplomacy and discourse in the centuries that would follow.

What this situation essentially entailed for Christine was nothing less than rewriting her literary forerunners, Boccaccio and Jean de Meun particularly (Richards 19).

What Christine did do, was to create a vivid picture of the many injustices that scriptural women like Eve and Mary Magdalene had to endure to classical and historical figures like Helen of Troy and Joan of Arc. Christine de Pizan made the literate European reconsider the whole of the scriptural and historic picture of womanhood, decrying the situation that so many women had to endure, some of them women of her own acquaintance.

My God! How many harsh beatings—without cause and without reason—how many injuries, how many cruelties, insults, humiliations, and outrages have so many upright women suffered, none of whom cried out for help? And consider all the women who die of hunger and grief with a home full

of children, while their husbands carouse dissolutely or go on binges in every tavern all over town, and still the poor women are beaten by their husbands when they return, and *that* is their supper! (Pizan, *Book of the City of the Ladies*, 297)

## Chapter 4

### Conclusion

Before her more direct attack on the canon of antifeminist writings, Christine, like Chaucer, used Fortune. Fortune, the classical goddess who so completely represented the stereotype of femininity was a good place to begin undermining traditional thoughts on women. For Chaucer, as with Christine, undermining antifeminism by recasting Fortune was much safer than directly attacking the patristic writers.

Chaucer used Fortune as the absurd centerpiece for an upsodoun un-sermon, exploring the hypocrisy of antifeminism and of the Monk and the trope he represented. Christine would explore the very validity of labeling Fortune entirely cruel, fickle, and female. In Chaucer's the "Monk's Tale" the agent of Fortune is usually female, but can be male (as in the case of Brutus Cassius) even though the culpable party is always female (either Fortune, or Delilah, etc.)

In the work of Christine de Pizan, Fortune takes on a very different persona by Christine's becoming the personification of Fortune, and by saying the goddess Fortuna went against Nature's laws by turning Christine into a man. Christine is ingeniously recasting the goddess Fortuna as male as well. Christine asserts that the domain of Fortune is masculine—and that therefore, she needed to become male in order to serve Fortune. While the goddess (and Christine) technically retain their womanhood, Christine is able to show us a view of her life, herself, and deity that is both female and male without becoming androgynous. By showing her readership her vision of a world after a mutation of Fortune, she is able to undermine antifeminist criticism by shifting the sex of a stereotypically patristic feminine, Fortune, to show Fortune's more masculine

side. Instead of recasting Fortune as completely male, the deity combines aspects of both male and female. This implies that Fortune with all of her shortcomings and strengths—and Christine, like Boethius, acknowledged the strengths—is in fact, at least partially masculine in character. In showing Fortune’s flaws were just as masculine as feminine, Christine deflected the stereotypical censure of women by equally attributing such criticism to both men and women.

While in some of their work, such as the “Monk’s Tale” and *Mutacion*, their apologies for women were subtle, in other works by these authors their defense of women was much more overt, and had lasting social and cultural impact. The impact of these writers on their societies was so profound that we still feel it in very relevant ways. What these writers did to influence their times cannot be under-appreciated—and both writers ameliorated, or at least caused us to think critically about the condition of women by invoking creative devices, especially the Goddess Fortune, to explore the condition of womanhood and to undermine past stereotypes. Fortune was a type effectively used by both Christine and Chaucer to respectively criticize and satirize traditional antifeminism and the institutions that advocated a vindictive view of women. Through their exploration of Fortune, patristic sources, and their treading carefully through their criticism of canonical sources, these writers were able to voice ideas that might have otherwise seemed subversive.

### **Christine’s Impact on Language and Culture**

At the turn of the fifteenth century when Christine began to write and publish prolifically, French was still not a language used for writing in prose. “Just as there existed before Christine no [and I would add, “comprehensive”] defense of women, there

also did not exist—as far as Christine was concerned—any suitable linguistic vehicle for argumentation” (Richards 15). Though French writers had produced, by this time several important works of poetry, “before Christine, prose works in France largely fell into one of three categories: translations from Latin or Italian; ‘prosified’ versions of earlier epics and romances; and various chronicles on historical subjects” (Richards 15). In *City of the Ladies*, Christine does, out of necessity, recount the same history and female historical figures that antifeminists have decried. Her work is not primarily historical. Although *City of the Ladies* is by necessity a work which chronicles history, she does so to acquit the women of history. According to Richards, Christine’s writing of *City of the Ladies* marks a new genre introduced into the French language. Because she was writing not just a selective historical chronicle, but an apologia for a universal history, her work is “more readily associated with such Latin works as Orosius’ *Historias rerum adversus paganos libri VII*, or Augustine’s *City of God*” (Richards 17).

Christine, for her time was translated remarkably widely. When her son Jean was taken to the English court of Richard II and later Henry IV, Henry was so captivated with the work of Jean’s mother that he kept Jean, then a boy of about fifteen in England, presumably against his will, in hopes that his mother would become a court poet of England. The result of Jean’s stay in England “was that some of [Christine’s] work became known in England” (Willard xii), with some translations of her work occurring as early as 1402. Throughout the rest of the medieval period and at the beginning of the early modern period, Christine’s work enjoyed tremendous popularity, as witnessed by the translation of her *Livre des Trois Vertus (Book of Three Virtues)* into Portuguese in the next century.

She wrote at least twelve treatises on political subjects and on the wars that France was involved in. During her declining years in the convent, she would interview soldiers returning from the civil war. From those interviews, classical sources, and her own personal opinions she wrote *Le Livre de Fais d'armes et de chevalerie* (*The Book of Feats of Arms and Chivalry*). Her characteristic practical style and common sense made the book so useful that Henry VII asked William Caxton to translate it into English and print it “for the benefit of English men-at-arms” (Lawson xxiv).

Her ideas of the equality and worth of women are interesting, perceptive and were extremely popular by her in her time, as witnessed in the manuscripts that survive in both French and English. Christine had a wide acquaintance among all classes of society, whom she took a real interest in. Christine made the literate classes aware of their need to recognize woman and have compassion for her.

### **Chaucer, Christine and their Legacies**

While the pragmatic social agenda of a Christine and her impact on culture are easier to gauge, assessing the social significance of a figure as ubiquitous as Chaucer is much harder to determine. One of the lasting epistemologies we inherit from the end of the Middle Ages with movements like the mystics and into the beginning of the Renaissance is personal experience. While the very first words the Wife of Bath is given by Chaucer are “Experience [is] noon auctoritee” (1), her actions speak louder than her words as she uses her own experience to make her entire argument. In this, she is not so very different from Christine, who also used her own biography as a means of contradicting many of the commonly held beliefs by men.

Both Chaucer and Christine tread carefully and by using the classical trope, Fortune, who represented so much of what was considered quintessentially feminine, the audiences of both authors are forced to reconsider femininity in a more favorable light: in the case of the “Monk’s Tale,” because of the ridiculousness of the Monk and his reversed morality and sermon, in the case of *Mutacion* and *Avision*, because of the ethos of Christine herself, the beloved writer and devout Catholic widow.

Any attempt to undermine the writings of canonized saints like Jerome and Thomas Aquinas could have been seen by the Church as heretical and might have actually physically endangered the writer. Though Christine borrowed from the apologists for women before her, most of her defense of woman is a unique response to the canon of antifeminism.

Although there were more pressing concerns to life and limb in confronting centuries-old views of the Church, taking exception to such revered scholars as Boccaccio was no easy task for a woman of the early fifteenth century. Where Chaucer undermines Boccaccio by translating him and putting his words in the mouth of his silly Monk, Christine is more direct in her criticism, as Chaucer was in his “Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale.”

From Boccaccio in the middle of the fourteenth century to Chaucer at the end, and Christine de Pizan at the beginning of the new century, a shift in the opinions and expression of these popular writers can be seen. Boccaccio openly endorses the patristic and scholarly canon, Chaucer subtly ridicules, and Christine de Pizan, in many cases, openly defies. Christine de Pizan and Chaucer enjoyed tremendous success and popularity throughout their careers. Their success must be in part attributed to a

readership that was entertained by their covert and overt feminist agendas and their criticism of those who propagated the antifeminist tradition. Perhaps their audiences felt as Christine did that

Every man should feel affection in his heart for woman, who is mother to each and every one of them, and who, rather than being horrible or cruel to him, is gentle sweet and loving, offering compassion and help when he needs them. She has done so much for him and continues to do so, for her actions are very effectively designed to nurture a man's body gently. From his birth, through life to death, women help and succour him, providing compassion, sweetness, and support. And if a man refuses to acknowledge this and, lacking gratitude, harshly slanders them, my response is to repeat my view that a man who utters defamatory remarks, insults, or reproaches against women by criticizing them (whether it be one, two of them or women in general) offends against nature. (Pizan, *Ladies* 279)

Through their use of Fortune, these writers were perhaps able to defend the “gentle sweet and loving” side of femininity, by exposing the “fickle” nature of femininity to be nothing more than a farcical invention.

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