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Images, Texts, and Exegetics in Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale*

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How shulde I rede in the book of peynture and of ymagerye?
— Dives in *Dives and Pauper*

As any reader of the *Canterbury Tales* is well aware, Christian iconography provides a rich context for reading many of Chaucer's tales — the wheel of Pentecost in the *Summoner's Tale*, St. Cecilia's bath in the *Second Nun's Tale*, and the garden of the *Merchant's Tale*.[1] Indeed, scholars such as D. W. Robertson and V. A. Kolve have drawn on iconography in order to illuminate the symbols available to Chaucer and Chaucer's readers: Kolve writes of "the vast store of conventional imagery, mostly religious, some secular, that served to illustrate the major ideas of the time."[2] Similarly, Robertson writes in *A Preface to Chaucer* that "a medieval poet had at his disposal various sources of figurative material," and that this material "enabled [the medieval artist] to appeal, first of all, to the reason, and through the reason to the affective values which philosophy and theology pointed to as the highest and most moving values possible to humanity."[3] As these quotations suggest, both approaches share the premise that there was a "medieval language of sign," and that this language was used by poets and artists and understood by readers and viewers.[4] And, of course, both approaches promise that modern readers will also benefit from understanding this language.[5]

While these approaches have drawn our attention to the similarity of text and image, their shared use of certain symbols, it is worth noting that both rely on an assumption about medieval interpretive practices — that medieval readers/viewers interpreted texts and images in the same way.[6] Indeed, Kolve's and Robertson's equation of books and images is not only a theory of how to interpret medieval literature, although it surely is that as

well; it also reproduces the medieval church's defense of religious images. This equation should be familiar from the much-quoted statement that appears in Gregory the Great's letter to Bishop Serenus: "images are books for the unlearned."[7] It would seem, then, that these scholars would also accept Gregory's (and his followers') equation as culturally unproblematic—that it can tell us what we need to know about the relationship between texts and images in the late medieval period.[8] While it may be true that Chaucer and his readers were familiar with the notion that texts and images could be equated, this familiarity probably had more to do with the religious controversy in which the issue was debated than to a widespread commitment to the idea. Consider, for example, a late-fourteenth-century polemical treatise that acknowledges the usefulness of images as signs only after raising concerns about images:

> Also we beleuen that neither the crosse that Crist was don upon, neither any other roode or ymage maad of mannys hand schulde be worschipid as God, ne as resonabel creaturis, for wosoeuer worschipith hem so doth mawmetrie [idolatry] and is cursed. But natheles the making of ymages trewly peynted is leueful [permissible] and men mowen leuefuliche [may licitly] worschippe hem in sum manere, as signes or tokones.[9]

What is implicit in this statement is the idea that the laity do not use images as "signs" (as books), but they worship them instead. In other words, the usefulness of images as books is threatened by their potential as idols.

This polemical treatise suggests that as much as Gregory's formulation was accepted as a defense of images during the late medieval image debate, Gregory's formulation did not fully address concerns about the laity's use of images. For this reason the debate over images should also belong to the investigation of medieval interpretive practices and the medieval language of sign—the symbolic language shared by image and text. In this essay I shall argue for the importance of the image debate, particularly as it concerned the status of Gregory's pronouncement, by exploring it in relation to Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale*, which has been illuminatingly read in terms of its iconography.[10] I will show that the link between text and image not only elucidates important aspects of this particular tale but also is partly what the tale is about. From this perspective, Chaucer's text exhibits a liminal awareness that to alter the hermeneutic interdependence of text and image, as the debate over images threatened to do, is to require a new interpre-

tive mode, one that is, perhaps, not yet entirely available to late-fourteenth-century readers and interpreters.

Images in the late fourteenth century

The debate over images belongs to the larger religious controversies of late medieval England surrounding the Wycliffites or Lollards, those followers of John Wyclif.[11] What is at stake in this debate is the first Commandment—whether or not the veneration of images is an act of idolatry. Although the debate certainly had a long history in the Christian church, in late medieval England it gained in intensity as images were rejected and their veneration vilified by the Lollards as "mawmetrie" (idolatry). While the arguments for and against images (by Lollards and their opponents) have received detailed attention, most notably in the work of Margaret Aston, the consequences of this debate for the interpretive practices of medieval readers and writers have not been fully examined.[12] As the work of Kolve and Robertson should remind us, to link texts and images (as Gregory and his followers did) is to take a particular interpretive approach to both.[13] In this section, I shall outline that approach briefly; I shall then argue that the Lollard attack on images raised concerns about Gregory's equation of text and image, particularly in regards to its use in the education of the laity.[14]

As indicated above, the link between text and image in medieval culture has its source in Gregory's oft-cited equation of books and images: "images are books for the unlearned." This equation first appears in his letter to Bishop Serenus, who questioned the use of images, and was repeated throughout the medieval period largely without question—about whether, in fact, images could possibly function as books, whether they were the same kind of representation at all.[15] For those medieval authors who followed Gregory in treating images and books as the same kind of representation, both forms were containers for meanings that preexisted their material representations. Augustine, for example, in *On Christian Doctrine* outlines this symbolic view of language: "thus we say 'ox' and by that syllable understand the animal which is ordinarily designated by that word, but again by that animal we understand an evangelist, as is signified in the Scripture."[16] Such an understanding of signs should be familiar not only from St. Augustine, but from modern exegetical critics who see medieval signs as containers of "affective values," in the words of D. W. Robertson. This view of signs as containers appears consistently in discussions of religious images. St. Thomas Aquinas writes:

Dicendum quod sicut Philosophus dicit in lib. *de Mem. et Remin.* duplex est motus animae in imaginem: unus quidem in ipsam imaginem, secundum quod res quaedam est; alio modo in imaginem, inquantum est imago alterius. Et inter hos duos motus est haec differentia: quia primus motus, quo quis movetur in imaginem ut est res quaedam, est alius a motu qui est in rem; secundus autem motus, qui est in imaginem inquantum est imago, est unus et idem cum illo qui est in rem.

[As Aristotle points out, there is a two-fold movement of the mind towards an image: one goes to the image insofar as it is an independent reality; the other goes to the image insofar as it is the image of something else. There is this difference between the two movements, that the first of them, by which the image is attained as an independent reality, is distinct from the movement which attains the reality represented; whereas the second movement, by which the image is attained as image, is identical with the movement which attains the object represented.][17]

Like the example from Augustine, this passage describes the mind's translation of the sign (here an image of Christ) to its meaning, and this translation allows Aquinas to justify the veneration of the image. For Aquinas and, later, Roger Dymmok, a late-fourteenth-century defender of images who quotes this passage, no reverence is shown to the image of Christ as a thing but to what it represents, Christ himself.[18]

This understanding of books and images as containers of meaning has much to do with their function as reminders of what readers and viewers already know. Defenders of images insisted on their importance as "commemorative signs." John Wyclif promotes images "ut sint libri laicis et signa recordativa singulis christianis, ut adorent debite sanctos Dei" [in order that they may be as books for the laity and signs for remembering to each Christian so that they might adore the saints of God].[19] Similarly, Walter Hilton (if he is indeed the author) insists throughout the tract *De Adoracione Ymaginum* that images are signs for remembering past and absent things: "recordacio rerum preteritarum et absencium" [the remembrance of things past and absent].[20] From this perspective, both images and words can serve to remind viewers or readers of the important doctrines and stories in Christian tradition.

Although the passage from Aquinas distinguishes between the form

of the representation and the object represented in the course of "remembrance," this distinction rarely appears when the defenders link images with books. Indeed, Gregory's equation (which is taken up by image defenders) depends on conflating the two activities that Aquinas distinguishes: seeing a representation and understanding its meaning. This conflation is apparent in the second letter Gregory writes defending images:

> Nam quod legentibus scriptura, hoc idiotis praestat pictura cernentibus, quia in ipsa etiam ignorantes vident quid sequi debeant, in ipsa legunt qui literas nesciunt. Unde et praecipue gentibus pro lectione pictura est.

> [What writing does for those who read, a picture does for the unlearned, because the ignorant see in it what they ought to do; those who do not know letters read in it. Therefore, chiefly for the people, a picture replaces reading.]21

Here the unlearned see ("vident") what they should do ("quid sequi debeant"), *not* the picture itself, and they read ("legunt") the picture ("in ipsa"), *not* what they should do.

In pointing out this conflation, I seem to be making quite an obvious point, that for Gregory the meaning of the picture and the picture itself are interchangeable, because both can be seen.22 After all, our use of the phrase "I see" for "I understand" suggests that this conflation still exists in our own culture. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the equation of books and images requires that one disregard the form of the representation entirely. As should be apparent to anyone seeing an image (or reading a book), the similarity of a book and an image is not immediately obvious.

Gregory's conflation is not only a truth about the way we interpret, although it certainly suggests itself as such, it is, more importantly, an assertion about educating the laity with images in the face of an opponent who wanted to restrict them. To be sure, images were not always necessarily educational, and most defenders of images also addressed their efficacy for stimulating devotion.23 Even John Wyclif, who criticized images, although not as strongly as his followers, described images as made "bene excitandum, facilitandum, et accedendum mentes fidelium" [well in order to rouse, assist, and kindle the minds of the faithful] (*De Mandatis*, 156).24 Nevertheless, Gregory's letter suggests the educational import for the laity in his claim that the unlearned learn about morality from images (when they see what they ought to do). Indeed, a later defender, Roger Dymmok, not only repeats

Gregory's equation, "Ymagines sanctorum atque summe Trinitati libri sunt laicorum et catholice veritatis" [images of the saints and the high Trinity are books of the laity and of universal truth], he also argues that images are superior to texts in education: "ille ymagines expressius et immediacius easdem conclusiones nobis insinuant" [these images bring us to the same conclusions more clearly and immediately] (*Rogeri Dymmok Liber*, 182).[25] Walter Hilton likewise asserted their educative potential:

> ecclesia hoc considerans . . . prudenti consilio contra infirmitatem carnalium congruum ordinauit remedium, videlicet exercicium corporalium signorum, per que humilientur ceruicosi et ociosi exerceantur, indocti erudiantur et imbecilles manducantur ad internam et spiritualem Dei cognicionem et dileccionem.

> [in considering this the church in its prudent council ordained a remedy against the weakness of the flesh, that is the use of bodily signs, through which the stubborn are humbled, the idle are trained, the untaught are educated, and the feeble commanded to the internal and spiritual knowledge and love of God.] (*De Adoracione*, 188)

Although Hilton spends far more time discussing the affective potential of images, here he considers images suitable for teaching in that their "bodiliness" matches that of the unlearned. In this way, Hilton not only repeats Gregory's equation, "quod scriptura clericis, hoc pictura laicis solet exhibere" [as writing to clerics, so does a picture typically exhibit this to the laity], he insists that images are a kind of material writing for the laity: "grossam scripturam quasi palpabilem" [as it were writing gross and palpable] (*De Adoracione*, 192, 186).

At this point we can note that Gregory's formulation had two consequences for the education of the laity as reflected in defenses of images: the insistence that the mode of representation (the sign) does not affect the content (the meaning) for the reader or viewer, and the assumption that the reader or viewer is essentially passive (even lacking sophistication) since the meaning of signs can be directly apprehended.[26]

Critics of images contemporary with Chaucer, such as Wyclif and the early Wycliffites, rejected the veneration of images as potentially idolatrous, yet they often acknowledged their usefulness. Indeed, at first glance many of the earlier critics of images seem to have reproduced the equation associated with Gregory—that images are books for the laity. Yet, a closer

look reveals that the Wycliffites began to chip away at the link between texts and images informing Gregory's much-cited defense. To be sure, this shift was not as dramatic as Reformation critiques.[27] No medieval critic of images suggested that images are *not* the same as books. Nevertheless, critics of images began to recast the debate in terms of representation, with attention to the specificity of the signs or tokens (to draw on the language in the critique cited above), an attention that was missing in Gregory. Indeed, these writers noted how the text/image equation raised problems with signification—books signify with words (immaterial signs), and images signify with materials (this is particularly true for sculpture, which was, of course, the most problematic kind of image in this period).[28] By taking an extreme position in the image debate (rejection and even destruction), the Wycliffites exploited the gaps in the church's reasoning, namely, that the link between text and image requires one to ignore, or at least be very imprecise about, the impact of the mode of representation on the content (the meaning) and its apprehension.

Calling attention to the methods by which the laity are instructed, Lollards reconfigured the relationship of texts, images, and words. Instead of advocating the unity of signs (their capacity to contain meaning), Lollards distinguished between material signs (images) and immaterial signs (words) in the instruction of the laity. Wycliffite polemic is filled with an insistence on the materiality of the signs they reject: "siche stokkis" [such blocks of wood] and "deade ymagis" and "sensible signes" (*SEWW*, 84, 87). Moreover, these "sensible signes" are contrasted with words; a Wycliffite writer who refers to Gregory writes, "thes ymagis ben bokis of lewid men [the unlearned] to sture [stir] them on the mynde of Cristis passion," but he goes on to state, "And now men shulden be more gostly and take lesse hede to siche sensible signes, as dyden the apostlis of Crist that, by schort tyme and rewlis of Goddis hestis [commandments] and charite, ledden men to heuene withouten siche newe peyntyngis schewid by manus craft" (*SEWW*, 83, 84).[29] This writer outlines the progression of "peyntyngis" and other "sensible signes" to "rewlis of Goddis hestis." What's important here is that God's law and the deeds of the apostles are not assigned a "bookness" (as the images are). Rather, the writer creates the opposition that drives his polemic not out of the books and images that inform Gregory's mandate (as one might expect since he has cited it) but from the viewing of images and the hearing of sermons that inform devotional practices: "sensible signes" and "peyntyngis" should be replaced with hearing, the command to take heed, to listen to words. "Take heed" is, of course, a formula familiar from sermons. In this

way, the Wycliffite writer transfers reading from the realm of seeing to that of hearing (how many people experienced texts).[30] Emphasizing "hearing" in the education of the laity, the Wycliffite author separates reading from the material that is read.[31] Indeed, the Wycliffites suggested that hearing is intellectually superior to seeing, in contrast to defenses of the visual (such as Dymmok's). In doing so, they were building on an established devotional tradition that had circulated alongside (but not in overt conflict with) the insistence on the visual. For example, the author of a guide for contemplation, the *Cloud of Unknowing* (ca. 1370s), writes, "Alle is one in maner, redyng & heryng; clerkes redyn on bookes, & lewid men [the unlearned] redyn on clerkes, whan thei here hem preche the worde of God."[32] Here the author has replaced the traditional equation books = images with books = clerks, a sentiment with which the Lollards would be in agreement.

In abandoning the traditional link between images and books that conceptualized them as similar forms of representation, Lollards revisited the problem not of what the laity should be taught (this is, for once, not the issue) but *how* they should be taught—how they should understand the representations given to them. That there was concern about the laity's understanding of images is clear quite simply from the discussion of idolatry. If images are idols, they cannot also be educational tools. Wyclif presents this division by acknowledging that images serve as books for the laity (*libri laicis*), but also warns of the dangers:

> Ideo licencia constituendi ymagines preter auctoritatem scripture est diligentissime laicis exponenda, non solum dicendo quod potest bene fieri . . . sed oportet in particulari diligenter exponere periculum et profectum

> [Therefore the license to make images should be most carefully explained to the laity beyond the authority of scripture, not only by saying that it can be done well . . . but it is necessary in particular to put forth carefully both the danger and the profit.] (*De Mandatis*, 158)

Drawing on Wyclif, the Wycliffite polemic against images took up the danger more specifically, and its motivating question can best be summarized as follows: Does one look at an image and know it has to be read in the same way that one looks at a word on a page (or a book) and knows that it has to be read?[33] Like frustrated teachers, these critics, no matter where they stood along the spectrum of reforming to destroying images, lamented that some

people do not "read" the image, do not see it as a representation. This problem is made quite apparent in the twelfth of the "Sixteen Points," a Lollard tract:

> Also we beleuen that neither the crosse that Crist was don vpon, neither any other roode or ymage maad of mannys hand schulde be worschipid as God, ne as resonabel creaturis, for wosoeuer worschipith hem so doth mawmetrie [idolatry] and is cursed. But natheles the making of ymages trewly peynted is leueful [permissible], and men mowen leuefuliche [may lawfully] worschippe hem in sum manere, as signes or tokones; and that [type of permissible] worschipe men done to hem, if thei louen hem and vsen hem to that ende that thei be ordeyned fore, as clerkis don her [their] bokis, dispising the avowes, preiers and sacrifice and misbeleues [that are] vnlawfully don to hem [the images]. (*SEWW*, 23)

In this passage, the writer clearly marks the boundaries between worshipping an image "as God" and venerating "in sum manere" as a representation, like a book. The mediating effect of representation is made clear in the use of the term *manere* as well as *signes* and *tokones*. Here the conflation of the two kinds of seeing (seeing the image and seeing its content), which belongs to Gregory's dictum, is not enabling but dangerous: people see not tokens but "God."[34] For this writer, using books as "clerkis don" means reading the words. Those who read words seem to be on somewhat surer footing—someone who hears or reads the word *cross* (as opposed to seeing an object that is shaped like a cross) may think of a cross, or Jesus' crucifixion, or something else entirely, but he is unlikely to fail to acknowledge the word as a sign.

The Wycliffite shift away from the traditional interpretive mode is nowhere clearer than in discussions of the Trinity. This is a concept that renders the traditional equation of books and images useless because any image of the Trinity is, for the Lollards, necessarily false, unlike paintings of Christ's passion. Wyclif's views on the misleading nature of images targets the Trinity in particular:

> et male ut occasione ymaginum a veritate fide aberretur, ut ymago illa vel latria vel dulia adoretur, vel ut in pulcritudine, preciositate aut affeccione impertinentis circumstancie minus debite delectetur. Sic enim depingunt infideliter trinitatem, ac si Deus pater foret grandevus paterfamilias, habens in genibus Deum filium

suum crucifixum et Deum Spiritum Sanctum columbam utrique descendentem.

[And (they are used for) ill when by reason of images there is deviation from the true faith, as when the image is worshipped with *latria* or *dulia*, or unduly delighted in for its beauty, costliness, or attachment to irrelevant circumstances. And thus they depict the Trinity unfaithfully, as if God the Father was an aged *paterfamilias*, having God the Son crucified on his knees and God the Holy Spirit descending on both as a dove.] (*De Mandatis*, 156)[35]

Similarly, a much-publicized Lollard tract states that "the ymage usuel of Trinite is most abhominable" (*SEWW*, 27).[36] For Wyclif, and for many of his followers, the Trinity defies representation as image. Unlike crucifixes, for example, which are simulacra, and, therefore, imitate the form of the original cross, the Trinity cannot be represented as a simulacrum. In this way, the Trinity comes to stand for the signified that must be taught through words and not through images, and references to the Trinity often suggest the failure of lay education regarding this particular doctrine.[37]

As a sticking point in the education of the laity, the Trinity reveals the limits to the traditional link between text and image. When it comes to this concept, texts and images do not have the same representational power; only words can be the container of this particular content. Wyclif's *De Mandatis* underlines the relationship between the interpreting mind and the "uncreated Trinity":

Et si queritur quomodo Augustinus et alii sancti dicunt quod tres res in anima sunt idem personaliter cum eadem, correspondenter ad trinitatem increatam, sunt memoria, racio et voluntas . . . .

Et hinc prophete veteris testamenti tam boni quam mali, sicut et Christus ac sui discipuli verbo et opere docuerunt non esse in transitoriis solicite inmorandum, sed ad fontem eorum trinitatem increatam potenter transcurrendum, et in ipso sapienter meditandum et perseveranter delectandum.

[And if it is sought how Augustine and the other saints say that three things (powers) in the soul are the same in person with it—corresponding to the uncreated Trinity—they are memory, reason, and will. . . .

And thus the prophets of the old testament, both the good and the bad—just as Christ, and his disciples did—taught by word and deed that we should not dwell anxiously upon things which are transitory but rather should hurry quickly to the fountain of things, the uncreated Trinity, and upon it to meditate wisely and take steadfast delight.] (96–97)

The Trinity refers both to the interpreting faculties of the soul (Augustine's reason, will, and memory) and to the meaning of Christ's words and works, once one passes over their transitoriness. For Wyclif here, the Trinity is a completely transparent and true sign—the unity of the interpreting mind with what it interprets, after the representation has been discarded. While the Wycliffites do not take up this aspect of the Trinity overtly in their attacks, their description of images of the Trinity as a "bok of errour to the lewid puple" (*SEWW*, 27) effectively draws our attention to the misleading nature of the image as sign, its deceptive connection to the true meaning afforded by words in books.

The Wycliffite polemic against images raises a question about lay devotion and education that cannot ultimately be answered: How can one know when someone is worshipping what an image represents (understanding it as a sign) as opposed to worshipping an image in and of itself? In the absence of a clear answer, the Wycliffites, who were far more concerned with the practicalities of educating the laity than Wyclif himself, usually rejected images entirely instead of navigating the dangers that Wyclif had outlined. From this perspective, the attack on images was an attempt to limit signs to words in order to create a kind of interpretive stability, to guarantee that when lay people see a sign they will recognize it as a sign and proceed immediately to understanding its meaning.

The clearest example of this attempt at controlling signs is the Wycliffite approach to the Bible, which is quite obviously a sign (or series of them) that consistently points toward its content and does not distract or mislead with its appearance as images do. In emphasizing the transparency of the Bible's signs, the Wycliffites followed a long tradition of understanding scripture as a mirror into which one looks.[38] Take for example *The Cloud of Unknowing*, whose author notes that "Goddes worde, outher wretyn or spokyn, is licnid [likened] to a mirour" (72).[39] Such a transparency enables precisely that conflation of seeing and understanding central to the traditional hermeneutic, because the words of the Bible are read, and reading is a process that links seeing and understanding; first, one sees the words on the

page, and then one understands them. Indeed, the writers of the "General Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible" make use of the very equation (seeing is understanding) that is generated by the traditional understanding of signs as containers:

> This process of Paralypomynon [narrative of Chronicles] in the j. and ij. Book schulde stire [move] cristene kingis and lordis to distroie synne, and loue vertu, and make Goddis lawe to be knowe and kept of her puple, for here *thei mown se* [may see], hou sore God punschide [punished] yuele kingis, that lyueden yuele [who lived evilly], and drowen the puple to idolatrie, either other gret synnes, and hou greatly God preyside, rewardide, and cherischide good kinges, that lyueden wel, and gouernede wel the puple in Goddis lawe, and opin [plain] resoun, and good conscience.[40]

The Wycliffite author uses the word *see* to refer to the act of reading the book of Chronicles; in this way, the book becomes a kind of mirror in which the reader sees images of God's punishments and rewards. Interestingly enough, this seeing as understanding is not linked to seeing as a mode of perception outside of the text. Here seeing is merely a metaphor for the transparency of reading the Bible (as is looking in a mirror). More strikingly, although the text concerns idolatry, idolatry is not defined in visual terms at all; there is no mention of anyone viewing the idols (or being forced to view them). The security of seeing in this text may very well stem from the denial of seeing a visual (literal) meaning. If seeing is only understanding, only metaphorical, then this passage shores up the traditional interpretive mode by limiting its range to words, signs that always depend on the two-stage process identified by Aquinas: seeing the representation then understanding its meaning. The need for this limitation/redefinition also informs Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale*, which is also concerned with idolatry.

 As my discussion of the biblical text suggests, the Wycliffites' interpretive stability is largely achieved by setting aside the visual. Even the signs that should be seen literally (the idols) end up not being seen at all. This is also true for nontextual signs. Consider, for example, the priest as a living image: inherent in most discussions of a priest's exemplarity is the fact that we are *looking* at him. Indeed, ideally the priestly image would be a happy marriage between words and vision, as the description of the Parson in Chaucer's *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales* makes clear: we are watching the priest act according to the words of the Gospel. But for

Wycliffite writers, this priestly image is significant not primarily as an image but as a container of words:

> a doumb [mute] prelat is an ydol, and not a very [true] prelate; a doumb prelat is not a very prelat, sithen [since] he vsith [practices] not the offis of a prelat, but he hath oonly the licnesse [likeness] of a prelat, as an ydol that vsith not the offis of a man is oonly liik a man, but it is noo man; therefore such doumbe prelatis moun [may] rightfully be seide symylacris, either ydolis. ("General Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible," 31)

This passage describes two prelates, each of whom has a different status as sign and only one of whom, the false one, is visibly seen, although both stand before the reader. The true prelate is a transparent sign, that is, a container of words, whose meaning is immediately apprehended, like the Bible itself. We know that he is, therefore, also a "true" sign, because his image leads us to words (and does not distract by his appearance). In contrast is the mute prelate, who is an empty sign, and therefore not a sign at all. The emptiness of the "doumb" prelate is apparent not only in his lack of words (his muteness) but also in that he is called an "idol," which is a figure for emptiness. As Michael Camille writes, "Idolatry seemed ridiculous to Christians because of this very lack of signification, this absence of reference beyond."[41] In addition to emphasizing words and hearing, the passage consistently reveals the Wycliffite discomfort with the visual nature of the sign by underscoring that the falseness of this prelate has to do with what can be visually seen — he has the "licnesse" of a priest and he is a simulacrum. Once again, the discussion of images demonstrates that interpretive stability (the true meaning) depends on limiting the signs to words (either read or heard).

The Wycliffite passages that have been discussed reveal how the debate over images is always as much a debate over the nature of signs and the role of the interpreter as it is about the veneration of images. The critics of images consistently drew attention to the problems facing the reader (or viewer) of signs, in contrast to Gregory, who assumed the reader or viewer to be a passive recipient of signs whose meanings are predetermined and immediately apprehended. Although I am focusing here on the late-fourteenth-century debate, it is worth noting that one of the defenses of images that followed the Wycliffite attack, *Dives and Pauper* (ca. 1400), insisted that the laity must indeed be taught how to read images, just as one should be taught how to read books.[42] From the perspective of *Dives and Pauper*, the Wycliffites

had certainly exposed one of the problems with Gregory's assumption that images are immediately apprehended.

The ramifications of this debate for the education of the laity should be clear: the Wycliffites who opposed images did not want to teach how to read images, to understand images as containers of meaning; they wanted to teach how to read books and words. For this reason, they considered images "books of error," not books of instruction. But why did this question come to the forefront at this particular time? After all, as Gregory's letter makes clear, images had been attacked for quite a long time. While the terms of the attack on images may have remained constant over time (whether people were worshipping images or what they represented), the context of lay education had changed radically by the late fourteenth century.[43] Teaching the laity to read might have been impossible (or undesirable, or both) when Gregory was writing, but by the late fourteenth century in England, it had certainly become a conceivable (and desirable) goal. The Wycliffites were, after all, only the most extreme example of the increasing access to and interest in lay devotion. Indeed, their rejection of images was not merely a rejection of abuses nor a literal reading of the first Commandment (although it was surely these as well), but it was also an attempt to disrupt and reconfigure the education of the laity, particularly the interpretive skills necessary for the laity in a project of reform.[44] That is, images will no longer be books for the laity because books will be books for the laity. For the Wycliffites images were a poor substitute for books, particularly for the most important book, the Bible. As a result, the Lollard hatred of images must be read alongside their concern for translating the Bible for the laity (so that they could "see" what is in the book of Chronicles) and the resulting need to teach the laity to interpret the texts they have read.

The image debate, then, is another instance of Wycliffites breaking down the divide between unlearned and learned, between laity and clergy. This division is implicit in defenses of images that assign images to bodily learning and to the laity. Hilton's defense of images, cited above, identifies bodily signs, "corporalium signorum," as the domain of the unlearned and feeble ("indocti" and "imbeciles"). In texts for the clergy, such as the *Cloud of Unknowing*, the division between bodily and ghostly, between a simple and a learned understanding, is made explicit: "& thus me thinketh that it nedith greatly to haue moche warnes [caution] in vnderstonding of wordes that ben spokyn to goostly entent, so that thou conceyue hem not bodily, bot goostly as thei ben mente" (95). For this author, education in "wordes"

leads one away from the body and, one assumes, from materials such as images. Even Wyclif himself defends this division:

> Ideo est de philosophis contemplativis et laicis intuentibus hunc mundum sensibilem, sicut foret de duobus intuentibus librum sumptuosius fabricatum, quorum unus principaliter quietatus quoad intellectum et affectum quiesceret in his signis alius vero suspendens eorum noticiam quantum sufficeret quiesceret in signatis.

> [So contemplative philosophers and ordinary laymen look at the world of the senses just as two people look at a book rather sumptuously made; the one, chiefly quieted in intellect and emotion, would rest in these signs, while the other, suspending his knowledge insofar as possible would rest in the things signified.] (*De Mandatis*, 97)

This passage demonstrates the way in which the traditional view of the book/image equation (the Augustinian mode of sign as container) supports and reflects the traditional division of clergy and laity. Indeed, even though the laity are here given a book metaphorically, they are allowed only to delight in its sumptuous appearance, not to read it; they are resting in its signs, unlike philosophers, who have access to its meaning.

The Wycliffite debate over images is, then, as much about reading (both who can read and how to read) as it is about images. For the Wycliffites, images do not teach people how to read, how to move beyond the "sensible signes" and understand the spiritual meanings contained in the words of the Bible (*SEWW*, 84); only words can do that.

Chaucer's Second Nun

At first glance, Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale* seems to respond directly to the image debate. After all, this is a tale about Christians' refusal to worship pagan idols. Some critics, most notably Sarah Stanbury, have found evidence for a Wycliffite perspective on images in the tale, primarily in its condemnation of idolatry.[45] In a climactic speech, St. Cecilia rejects Emperor Almachius's command to worship idols and accuses him of blindness:

> Ther lakketh no thyng to thyne outter yen
> That thou n'art blynd; for thyng that we seen alle
> That it is stoon—that men may wel espyen—

That ilke stoon a god thow wolt it calle.
I rede thee, lat thyn hand upon it falle
And taste it wel, and stoon thou shalt it fynde,
Syn that thou seest nat with thyne eyen blynde.[46]

St. Cecilia underscores the materiality of Almachius's idol, and this concern
with materiality sounds very much like the images rejected by the Wycliffites
as "siche stokkis" and "deade ymagis" and "sensible signes" (*SEWW*, 84,
87). In addition, she castigates Almachius himself for his failure to inter-
pret properly, to see the object for what it is, a failure represented here as
blindness. This failure is identical to that discussed by the Wycliffites in
the polemic against those who take the "sign" for God himself: "thei maken
blynde byhestis to seke siche stokkis" (*SEWW*, 87).[47] Finally, her speech
attempts to rectify this failure of interpretation by invoking another realm of
senses entirely, not hearing, as the Wycliffites do, but touch. Because Alma-
chius does not see that the idol is stone, he should reach out and "taste" or
touch it.[48]

Yet the lines of influence between Wycliffite writings and Chaucer's
tale cannot be clearly drawn. Most obviously, the dating of the *Second Nun's
Tale* to Chaucer's early career in the 1370s would make the tale, if anything,
an anticipation of rather than an echo of Wycliffite views. Equally prob-
lematic is its insistence on the visual (the garlands, the old man, the angels)
and its embrace of the traditional hermeneutic for the characters within the
tale—seeing is understanding. In fact, St. Cecilia herself is a figure drawn
from traditional images, as V. A. Kolve has demonstrated.[49] What seems
to be distinctive about this tale, then, is its simultaneous awareness of the
critique of images and of the resources of the traditional interpretive mode,
a dual awareness that suggests a kind of liminality. In this section, I shall
explore this liminality by arguing that Chaucer first locates St. Cecilia
within the traditional interpretive unity of text and image (seeing = under-
standing), but then registers a discomfort with the visual that complicates
the traditional mode (and anticipates the Wycliffite perspective). The tale's
liminality is not just a matter of its interpretive mode but also of its setting,
early Christianity. In locating the traditional interpretive unity within the
early church, Chaucer suggests that this unity may no longer be possible in
his own time.[50]

From the opening of the *Second Nun's Tale*, Chaucer locates the
reader firmly in a world of visual signs. This is true not only for the objects
(the garlands) but for the words; both signs are importantly material, not

separated as sensible and spiritual (or bodily and ghostly) signs. The primary example is Cecilia herself, who carries the word of the Gospel in her material body, but the conversions of the tale make the link between the materialities of word and image explicit. When Valerian goes to find Pope Urban, he sees an old man

> That hadde a book with lettre of gold in honde,
>
> .   .   .   .
>
> And on his book right thus he gan to rede:
> "O Lord, o feith, o God, withouten mo,
> O Cristendom, and Fader of alle also,
> Aboven alle and over alle everywhere."
> Thise wordes al with gold ywriten were. (202–10)[51]

Materiality here does not consist in the book (a description of the parchment or the binding) but in the words themselves, the letters. Indeed, the value of the letters constitutes their materiality—twice we are told that the letters are of gold. The meaning of those letters, what the old man reads, is sandwiched between this account of their material value, as if the spiritual value could not, in fact, be separated from its material presentation.

Similarly, objects that are signs (what we might understand as images) are described with the same materiality as the words. When Valerian returns to Cecilia and sees the garlands, the phrase "in honde" is repeated, thus linking the old man's book with the angel's garlands:

> This angel hadde of roses and of lilie
> Corones two, the which he bar in honde;
> And first to Cecile, as I understonde,
> He yaf that oon, and after gan he take
> That oother to Valerian, hir make. (220–24)

Indeed, the phrase "in honde" makes clearly apparent that these signs (text and image) are equally "gross and palpable," in Walter Hilton's words (*De Adoracione*, 186). The description of the garlands, which have, of course, a symbolic meaning, emphasizes their "palpability," as the verbs of bearing, giving, and taking make clear. Indeed, Chaucer seems to have ensured that the garlands are understood as material by omitting the angel's phrase in the source, "et hoc vobis signum erit" [and this will be a sign to you].[52]

The unity of objects and words as equally containers of meaning in this opening episode depends on the unity of two kinds of seeing—seeing an

object and seeing what that object represents, the conflation that Gregory's letter encourages. In the *Second Nun's Tale*, seeing translates the material objects (words and images) into their spiritual meanings without pausing at the form of representation (the sign or token).[53] As a result, the characters see what is to be seen: the material and the spiritual are both immediately apparent to the believer. In this way, the tale asserts the unity of interpretation as much as the unity of the signs themselves (in their shared materiality). Once again, one can turn to the conversions for evidence: Cecilia promises Valerian that he will "see" her protecting angel (170), and this sight comes only after Valerian has told Pope Urban Cecilia's "wordes whiche I to yow tolde" (180); seeing and hearing are here one and the same. The association of seeing with conversion makes perfect sense — the characters have "seen the light," to use a more contemporary phrase. But this seeing is also always linked to words throughout the conversions, as is made clear in the case of Maximus:

> That he hir soules saugh to hevene glyde
> With aungels ful of cleernesse and of light,
> And with his word converted many a wight. . . . (402–4)[54]

In the use of the conjunction *and* to connect the appearance of the souls of Tiburtius and Valerian rising to heaven with the angels and the conversionary words of Maximus heard by many people, Chaucer reveals the logic by which seeing and hearing (the apprehension of images and words) share their interpretive function (revealing a newly Christian world to the believer).

Despite this unity of words and images, seeing and hearing, the role of "seeing" in this tale, its capacity to make sense of signs, is more complicated than the opening suggests, and the tale reveals a desire to shift the balance away from the visual toward words and texts. To be sure, the tale makes clear use of seeing: quite simply, the word *see* and its synonyms are repeated frequently, as Carolyn Collette has remarked.[55] But, these words are not used consistently throughout the narrative, and their use decreases as we move toward its conclusion.[56] In fact, one can trace the occurrence of these words quite clearly around points of conversion: they appear frequently in the first conversion (Cecilia's conversation with Valerian) and then somewhat less frequently in the second conversion (Tiburtius), and then once in the conversion of Maximus (at the death of Tiburtius and Valerian), which echoes the earlier conversions. As this summary suggests, *seeing* and its synonyms begin to decrease when the narrator gives the most attention to Cecilia's words,

specifically in her conversation with Tiburtius. To be sure, this onslaught of words is framed by her promise that he might "biholde / The angels face" (300 – 301) and the description of that promise fulfilled: "That every day he saugh in tyme and space / The aungel of God" (355 – 56). Despite the framing references to vision, seeing is not mentioned during Cecilia's exposition of Christian doctrine, and, more importantly, this exposition concerns the Trinity, a doctrine at the heart of the image debate in Chaucer's time:

> Right as a man hath sapiences three—
> Memorie, engyn, and intellect also—
> So in o beynge of divinitee,
> Three persones may ther right wel bee. (338 – 41)

In this passage, Cecilia offers a doctrine that is clearly associated in Wyclif's and Wycliffite writings with the rejection of the visual sign. As in Wyclif's exposition, the Trinity belongs to the realm of immaterial meaning that cannot be represented with garlands, old men, and souls flying to heaven, the realm that can only be represented with words—heard and not seen. Moreover, the doctrine of the Trinity is also linked to interpretation more generally (in Wyclif's writing), particularly the mind's apprehension of any sign, its search for meaning. These are complicated and contested issues, and here they are not only offered by a laywoman but directed to a layman. In this way, the speech breaks down the barrier between laity and clergy that the use of images both upholds and requires. Chaucer is most likely not responding to Wyclif himself; these are, after all, originally Augustinian views. Nevertheless, this episode anticipates Wycliffite concerns in its insistence on words, on a topic that cannot be rendered with images. Although St. Cecilia may be closely associated with the traditional unity of words and objects (such as the garlands), she does not limit the laity to material, bodily signs: when she explains the Trinity, she does not illustrate it with an analogy that invokes objects to be visualized (of doves and men, or of ice and water, as Osbern Bokenham's version does in his later translation, *Legendys of Hooly Wommen*) but with abstractions.[57]

It is Cecilia's encounter with Almachius, the idolater, that directly introduces a problem with seeing, specifically a need to redefine it or fix its range. Up to this point, the act of seeing has been limited to the small cadre of Christians, and this is a vision that is simultaneously literal and spiritual. With the pagan Almachius and his command "that he myghte hire [Cecilia] see" (422), Chaucer introduces a new, purely literal, kind of seeing into the

text. The use of the verb *see* here is Chaucer's choice: the source identified by Sherry Reames states only that Cecilia is presented to Almachius: "Ceciliam sibi presentari iubet" [he orders that Cecilia be presented to him].[58] In his later version of this story, Bokenham writes that Almachius "sent hys offycers & chargyd that she / Anoon to hys presence brouht shuld be."[59] When read against these versions, Chaucer's insistence on Almachius's sight abruptly splits apart the conflation between seeing and understanding that has been operating up to this point in the tale. All of a sudden, seeing must have only a literal meaning—vision.[60] Precisely at the moment when Cecilia confronts the idolater, the tale's interpretive mode is called into question, and we are faced with a form of seeing that does not understand, a vision that does not make the significance of objects (their status as idols or images or saints) immediately apparent.

This shift in the tale's approach to seeing appears not only in Almachius's command, but also in the apparent difficulty in describing what an idolatrous form of vision might be—that it does and does not see. In the passage with which I began this section, Almachius is twice accused of being blind. At the end of the passage, Cecilia states it quite clearly: "thou seest nat with thyne eyen blynde" (504); but the opening of the passage is somewhat tortured: "Ther lakketh no thyng to thyne outter yen / That thou n'art blynd" [Your physical eyes lack nothing to make you blind] (499–500).[61] This opening suggests that Almachius both is and is not blind: one sense of the sentence is that Almachius is blind in his idolatry but the literal sense is that he is not blind. That Almachius is and is not blind is also revealed in the following stanza when Cecilia states that "thise ymages wel thou mayst espye" (509). This phrase asserts that he can indeed see, but he cannot understand that the images are "nat worth a myte" (511).

Although the narrative struggles to keep the two forms of vision (Christian and idolatrous) separate, it cannot ultimately succeed. On the most obvious level, the terminology is not kept straight. Although Cecilia refers to idols throughout the text in her conversations with Tiburtius (e.g., 269, 285, 287, 298) and once to "the ymage of Juppiter" (364), in her confrontation with Almachius, when she is specifically speaking about her refusal to worship the idols, she refers to "thise ymages" (509), a term that is rather more contemporary and contested than the term *idol*.[62] More importantly, the narrative cannot sustain the distinction between images and idols as signs. Idols are traditionally denied a symbolic value (and are, therefore, distinct from the garlands). As Camille has emphasized, the idol can only represent itself, not something else.[63] This view of idols appears in the com-

ment that "they been dombe, and therto they been deve [deaf]" (286), similar to the bad preacher in the "Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible." But the idol in this text is not exactly an empty sign. It does have a symbolic value—not only as a sign of Almachius's false belief but also in its connection to "idle" in the prologue:

> And for to putte us fro swich ydelnesse,
> That cause is of so greet confusioun,
> I have heer doon my feithful bisynesse. . . . (22–24)[64]

In making this pun, the Second Nun (or Chaucer) is, in fact, drawing attention to the capacity of an "idol" to be a container, even a silly one.

Chaucer's struggle to redefine and sort out these boundaries around what can be seen and what can be understood ends in a retreat from vision: the word *seeing* and its synonyms quite simply disappear from the tale at this point. Although more conversions occur around the dying body of Cecilia, nobody sees anything.[65] The people stand around her; they take her blood; they hear her preach; they fetch her away. Yet interestingly enough, she is buried "by nyghte" as if to indicate that no one will see her soul rise to heaven as Maximus has seen the souls of Tiburtius and Valerian.

If Chaucer's tale reveals a discomfort with the visual sign, then this is a discomfort aligning him with the Wycliffites. Like the Wycliffites, his response is to make St. Cecilia as much like the written word as possible, because a word is always already a sign. Indeed, we should notice how "booklike" St. Cecilia becomes, despite her indebtedness to iconography.[66] When the narrator states that she "bar his gospel in hir mynde," the other half of the rhyming couplet is "as I writen fynde," as if to emphasize Cecilia's connection to writing (123–24). In locating the Gospel in the mind rather than the heart (as it is in the sources of the tale), the text refuses the expected allusion—that God's word is written on the fleshly tables of the heart.[67] In this way, the location of the Gospel affirms not only its immateriality, but its status as writing; the mind, not the heart, is the site of reading. This connection to writing as writing is also apparent in the tale's prologue, in the emphasis on "the legende in translacioun" (25). In other words, Chaucer has done everything he can to point out Cecilia's capacity as a sign, not just as an image but as a text. In prioritizing writing as a form of signification, Chaucer suggests that the kind of seeing that links vision with interpretation (the seeing here associated with Christianity) can only maintain its descriptive force when seeing is limited to reading (seeing the words on the page

and interpreting them), as the "General Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible" also indicates.

If seeing is the mode of interpretation associated with "the medieval language of sign," then, Chaucer's discomfort with seeing can also be understood as a discomfort with "the medieval language of sign" more generally, a discomfort with Augustinian exegetics. From this perspective, the *Second Nun's Tale* explores some of the same ground as the *Pardoner's Prologue and Tale*, whose relation to exegetics has been fruitfully explored by Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Patterson, and Marshall Leicester.[68] For each of these scholars, the Pardoner's symbolic language has a kind of sterility, whether that sterility is sexual or spiritual in nature. Of course, the *Second Nun's Tale* in no way reproduces this sterility—Cecilia and the symbolic language of Christianity generate "children" in her converts, not bleakness and despair, as with the Pardoner. Nevertheless, while the symbolic language is not sterile, it is certainly abbreviated, and one of the tale's most illuminating and careful scholars, Sherry Reames, finds a "theological pessimism," which she attributes to the "de-emphasis on understanding in the conversions."[69] Reames's observation could be reformulated as a deemphasis on reading and interpretation, despite the references to texts. Text and image must here be seen and immediately understood; no provision is made for how seeing will become understanding (how one might read the symbols). This is of course a concern of primary importance for writers of devotional literature, as in Dives' question, cited as the epigraph above: "How shulde I rede in the book of peynture and of ymagerye?"[70] That a layperson must ask this question certainly suggests that in all the defenses of images as books, no one has considered that perhaps laypeople need to be taught not only how to read the images but what, in fact, they are supposed to understand by them.

Like the perspective in *Dives and Pauper* (and unlike that of the *Pardoner's Tale*), the pessimism in the *Second Nun's Tale* comes from within traditional discourses. As such, this tale is ultimately far more interested in guaranteeing the truth of the traditional interpretive mode than with evacuating or abandoning it. After all, in choosing St. Cecilia as a sign, Chaucer preempts concerns about the status of the tale as a representation. In this way, Chaucer's tale shores up the traditional interpretive mode with the same kinds of guaranteed signs that the Wycliffites invoked: the readily apparent truth of the Bible and of the living image. As far as the tale's truth is concerned, it leaves very little room for doubt that St. Cecilia is, indeed, holy, even if the reader is a critic of the excesses of saints' lives (in the late medieval period) or looking for irony (in a modern or postmodern setting).

Short of renarrating a Gospel story, Chaucer comes the closest here to guaranteeing truth in a narrative form (I set aside the *Parson's Tale* because it is not a narrative): St. Cecilia not only bears the "gospel in hir mynde" (123), she leads an exemplary life in accordance with that text, preaching and converting. Second, Cecilia is both a container of words and a living image, or, in the words of the Wycliffite author, a "very prelat," in contrast to the deaf and dumb idols that surround her. With her preaching and other holy actions, she creates another kind of unity, not between text and image, but between text and the lived life. What is, perhaps, most striking about this living image is its implicit critique of dead images, who, unlike St. Cecilia, do not have the power to explain Christian doctrine.

As a "very prelat" who is also a member of the laity, Cecilia offers what might be considered a lay perspective on the debate. Indeed, the actions of St. Cecilia in her tale are pointedly directed against the anticlerical commonplace that images "rob" people: "Certis it semes that siche ymagis ben meenes cast [a human trick] of anticrist clerkis to robbe pore men bothe of feythe and hope, of charite and of worldly goodis" (*SEWW*, 85).[71] This view of images is directly tied to almsgiving: people should give money to living images, the poor: "to don almesse dede to men that ben nedy, for thei ben the ymage of God in a more liknesse than the stok or the ston" (*SEWW*, 27).[72] If Cecilia is an image, she does not rob but gives. By the end of the tale, St. Cecilia has given the people "hir moebles and hir thyng" (540). Although she "bitook" her property to Pope Urban to build a church, the people are the recipients of her largesse, as the continuity between her preaching to them and her gift of her things makes clear: "hem [to them] she gan to preche, / And hem she yaf hir moebles and hir thyng" (539–40).

In this way, St. Cecilia's actions at the end of the tale shift the focus from the clergy's concerns about lay perceptions of images to the function of images in the church. This shift seems to be particular to Chaucer's tale, which exhibits a sympathy toward lay desires to read (to know about the Trinity) and lay desires to have images. To be sure, many defenders of images, such as Wyclif, mention the personal benefit of images by describing their spiritual inspiration — "bene excitandum, facilitandum, et accedendum mentes fidelium" [images are made well in order to rouse, assist, and kindle the minds of the faithful] (*De Mandatis*, 156).[73] But Chaucer draws the reader's attention not to Cecilia's inspirational qualities but to her gifts to the community: "*hem* she yaf" her words and her possessions. In emphasizing her generosity, Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale* redirects our attention to the material and devotional relationship between the images and the communi-

ties and institutions they have generated. As such, the Second Nun points to the paucity of a debate that turns around a limited question, "Are images like books or not?" instead of asking what images give and how.

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Notes

1 See Alan Levitan, "The Parody of Pentecost in Chaucer's Summoner's Tale" *University of Toronto Quarterly: A Canadian Journal of the Humanities* 40 (1971): 236–46; V. A. Kolve, "Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale* and the Iconography of Saint Cecilia," in *New Perspectives in Chaucer Criticism*, ed. Donald L. Rose (Norman, Okla.: Pilgrim, 1981), 137–74; and D. W. Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1962), 387–88.

2 V. A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1984), 67.

3 Robertson, *Preface to Chaucer*, 63 and 389. To be sure, Kolve distinguishes himself from Robertson in that he cautions readers against taking the image out of context and, therefore, against absorbing all images into a kind of homogeneity (*Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*, 75–76).

4 Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*, 62.

5 The consequences of Robertson's work for our understanding of Chaucer and of medieval literature more generally have been investigated persuasively by Lee Patterson, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 3–39; and Marshall Leicester, "'Synne horrible': The Pardoner's Exegesis of His Tale and Chaucer's," in *Acts of Interpretation: The Text in Its Contexts, 700–1500*, ed. Mary Carruthers and Elizabeth D. Kirk (Norman, Okla.: Pilgrim Books, 1982), 25–50.

6 A premise of Kolve's book is "that literature can offer an experience that is in some sense 'visual'" (*Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*, 9).

7 The equation also suggests that images are translations of books for the laity, and, in this way, implies the priority of books as an educational tool. To be sure, we might assume that fourteenth-century followers of Gregory's view (such as Roger Dymmok) held that images have priority in terms of cognition, that words become images in the brain (in accordance with fourteenth-century epistemology). See, for example, Roger Dymmok, *Rogeri Dymmok Liber contra XII errores et hereses Lollardorum*, ed. H. S. Cronin (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, and Co., for the Wyclif Society, 1922), 182, hereafter cited parenthetically in the text. Translations from this work are my own. For a discussion of images in cognition, see Katherine Tachau, *Vision and Certitude in the Age of Ockham: Optics, Epistemology, and the Foundations of Semantics* (Leiden: Brill, 1988). See also Kolve's brief account in *Chaucer and the Imagery of*

Narrative, 24–31; and Zeeman's account in "The Idol of the Text," in *Images, Idolatry, and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval England: Textuality and the Visual Image*, ed. Jeremy Dimmick, James Simpson, and Nicolette Zeeman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 43–62. Zeeman writes, "Seeing is a characteristic mode of the medieval 'imaginative'—that is, rhetorical, 'inventive,' or 'poetical'—text" (43).

8   On the continuing equation of books and images by modern scholars, see Lawrence Duggan, "Was Art Really the 'Book of the Illiterate'?" *Word and Image* 5 (1989): 250–51.

9   "Sixteen Points on Which the Bishops Accuse Lollards," in *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*, ed. Anne Hudson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978; repr. Toronto: University of Toronto Press in association with the Medieval Academy of America, 1997), 23. Further citations of this and other Wycliffite writings in Hudson's collection (*SEWW*) are given parenthetically in the text. Thorns and yoghs have been modernized here and throughout quotations in Middle English.

10   Despite a shared emphasis on iconography in their approach to Chaucer, neither Kolve nor Robertson explores the image debate or considers how the debate may have affected Chaucer's relationship to images.

11   The seminal work on the image debate in England is, of course, Margaret Aston, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London: Hambledon Press, 1984), 135–92; and Aston, *England's Iconoclasts*, vol. 1, *Laws against Images* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988). The topic has received an increasing amount of scholarly attention as apparent in the new collection of essays *Images, Idolatry, and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval England*, ed. Dimmick et al.. See also Duggan, "Was Art Really the 'Book of the Illiterate'?"; W. R. Jones, "Lollards and Images: The Defense of Religious Art in Later Medieval England," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 34 (1973): 27–50; Kathleen Kamerick, *Popular Piety and Art in the Late Middle Ages: Image Worship and Idolatry in England, 1350–1500* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); and Ann Eljenholm Nichols, "Books-for-Laymen: The Demise of a Commonplace," *Church History* 56 (1987): 457–73.

12   I am less interested here in the arguments having to do with idolatry or the affective potential of images than I am with the arguments having to do with the education of the laity, as will become clear below.

13   Current scholarship on images does not explore extensively the justification for the link between texts and images (and its Augustinian emphasis) and how that link might have come into question once the debate over images came to a head in the late fourteenth century. To the extent that scholars do mention the symbolic language informing texts and images, they find it unproblematic. See, for example, Jones who writes, "The defenders of images explained their symbolic role by quoting familiar arguments like Augustine's doctrine of signs" ("Lollards and Images," 45 and n. 95).

14   The concerns with representation raised by the fine line between image and idolatry are taken up by Michael Camille in *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Image-Making in Medieval Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), who writes that "the perennial debate was how to define and separate 'correct' visual representations from incorrect idols and how to operate within that definition. . . . The problematic status of representation might seem a very modern, if not postmodern preoccupation.

Indeed, the disintegration of categories and critical self-consciousness in much contemporary art makes it comparable in many respects to that produced in the Middle Ages, which, before the 'rules' of art were laid down, was similarly a period of deep, unsettled questioning as to the function of the visual in society" (xxvii). Yet, one does not find a similar interest in the problematic status of representation among those scholars who take up iconography in relation to Chaucer.

15 In his article, "Was Art Really the 'Book of the Illiterate'?" Duggan's answer is "no." Any answer to this question would be difficult to prove; I am, therefore, far more interested in how this equation reflects and generates an interpretive approach.

16 St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 43. Of course, the emphasis here is on outlining the relationship between the literal and figurative levels of language. Nevertheless, the citation shows Augustine's understanding of the symbolic nature of language—even if he finds two symbolic levels.

17 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III q. 25, a. 3, ed. and trans. Colman E. O'Neill, O.P., vol. 50 (Cambridge: Blackfriars; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 192–93.

18 Ibid., 194–95. Dymmok quotes Aquinas in his response to the Lollard Twelve Conclusions attacking images (*Rogeri Dymmok Liber*, 185–86).

19 John Wyclif, *Tractatus de Mandatis Divinis*, ed. Johann Loserth and F. D. Matthew (London: C. K. Paul and Co., for the Wyclif Society, 1922; repr. New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1966), 155, hereafter cited in the text; translations of Wyclif are my own unless otherwise noted. See Aston's discussion of Wyclif in *Lollards and Reformers*, 138. Describing images as commemorative signs is typical for supporters and defenders of images. See Jones, "Lollards and Images," 40–41.

20 Walter Hilton, *De Adoracione Ymaginum*, in *Walter Hilton's Latin Writings*, ed. John P. H. Clark and Cheryl Taylor, 2 vols. (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1987), 1:187; translations from this text are mine unless otherwise noted. See also examples at 199, 207, 213. This is, of course, an accepted function of both books and images, on which there is a great literature. For an overview, see Duggan, "Was Art Really the 'Book of the Illiterate'?"; and Aston, *Lollards and Reformers*.

21 *Patrologiae cursus completus: Series Latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1896), 77:1128; my translation follows that by Duggan, "Was Art Really the 'Book of the Illiterate'?" 227. This passage is also quoted along with a Middle English translation in Nichols, "Books-for-Laymen," 458.

22 The relationship between vision and cognition is something of a commonplace. For a study that charts this relationship in detail, see Tachau, *Vision and Certitude*. See also, Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*, 24–31; Ethan Knapp, *The Bureaucratic Muse: Thomas Hoccleve and the Literature of Late Medieval England* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 129–57; and Zeeman, "Idol of the Text," 43–44.

23 See, for example, Hilton, *De Adoracione*. Hilton has a somewhat patronizing approach to the laity—they are so simple that they need such signs.

24 My translation follows that in Aston, *Lollards and Reformers*, 138.

25 See also Kamerick, *Popular Piety and Art*, 31.

26 Modern semiotic theory, in contrast, does not posit that there are "meanings" that precede representation. Rather, signs are what we think through. See, for example, Jonathan Culler, who writes, "Semiotics begins as a critique of the logocentric assumption that concepts exist prior to and independently of their expression" (*The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* [London: Routledge, 1981], 40).

27 Aston notes that the common Lollard view was "that images as lay books were acceptable, while image-worship was to be deprecated. It was the nature of this worship (that had troubled others long before Wycliffe) that was the problem" (*Lollards and Reformers*, 165).

28 See, for example, Michael Camille, *Gothic Idol*, 42–43; Aston, *Lollards and Reformers*, 146.

29 This view appears throughout Wycliffite writings. In the examination of William Thorpe, Thorpe advocates the "heerynge and knowinge of Goddis worde" and reiterates that the "word of God suffisith to alle men and wymmen withouten ony siche ymage" (*Two Wycliffite Texts*, ed. Anne Hudson, EETS o.s. 301 [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993], 59, 61).

30 As Aston writes, "This passage also reminds us that those who were weighing the respective values of book and image really were, for the most part, considering hearing and seeing as alternative modes of learning" (*Lollards and Reformers*, 184). See also Jones: "the Lollards maintained the pedagogical superiority of preaching and reading to the purely visual form of instruction represented by images" ("Lollards and Images," 36).

31 Wycliffites were consistently concerned to defend their words as words, having to fend off suspicions that they were devoted to the materiality of the book: "We schulde not trowe in this enke, ne in these skynnys that is clepud booc, but in the sentence that thei seyen, whyche sentence is the booc of lyf; for al yif ther ben manye trewthus and diuerse resonys in the gospelus, netheles eche of thes trewthus is the substaunce of God himself." *English Wycliffite Sermons*, ed. Pamela Gradon and Anne Hudson, 5 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983–96), 2:227; sermon 94, lines 19-24; thorns have been modernized. Here the Wycliffites are following Wyclif: "Secunda causa est, quare Christus non scripsit humanitus legem suam, quia docuit ipsam proporcionaliter ad eius deitatem, tanquam magistrum supremum illabi anime et non in pellibus mortuorum sed interiori homine reformato ad ymaginem eius cum aliis carismatibus mandata vite inscribere" (*De Mandatis*, 46).

32 *The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counselling*, ed. Phyllis Hodgson, EETS o.s. 218 (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1944), 71.

33 Aquinas writes, "Sic ergo dicendum est quod imagini Christi, inquantum est res quaedam, puta lignum sculptum vel pictum, nulla reverentia exhibetur: quia reverentia nonnisi rationali naturae debetur. Relinquitur ergo quod exhibeatur ei reverentia solum inquantum est imago. Et sic sequitur quod eadem reverentia exhibeatur imagini Christi et ipsi Christo" [Applying this to our problem, we conclude that no reverence is shown to the image of Christ insofar as it is an independent reality—a piece of wood, carved or painted—for reverence cannot be given to any but a rational being. It remains that whatever reverence is shown it has in view its function as image] (*Summa Theologiae* III q. 25, a. 3; 194–95).

34 Here the Wycliffites are following a long history of critics (beginning with Bishop Serenus, to whom Gregory was responding). Wyclif also warns against the dangers of worshipping the sign instead of what it signifies: "Cum ergo primo et maximo mandato precipimur non adorare humanam fabricam, in tantum quod Iudei precipuntur non facere tales ymagines, patet quod summa diligencia cavere debemus venenum sub melle adorando ydolatrice signum loco signati" (*De Mandatis*, 157).

35 The translation here follows Aston's, *Lollards and Reformers*, 138–39.

36 See also *Twenty-Five Articles*, no. 21, in *Select English Works of John Wyclif*, ed. Thomas Arnold, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1869-71), 3:491–92.

37 Both Hilton, *De Adoracione*, 206–7; and Dymmok, *Rogeri Dymmok Liber*, 199, defend the images of the Trinity. The frequency of mention in many texts suggests that the Trinity was a sticking point in the image debate.

38 Augustine is understood as the origin of this tradition, but it is quite common in medieval literature. See Ritamary Bradley's discussion in "Backgrounds of the Title *Speculum* in Mediaeval Literature," *Speculum* 29 (1954): 100–115.

39 The view of the Bible as a mirror is a commonplace accepted by both orthodox and Wycliffite writers in this period. For example, the Decalogue is described as "mirouris that men may se hemsilf ynne" (*Select English Works*, 3:83).

40 *General Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible*, ed. Josiah Forshall and Sir Frederic Madden (Oxford, 1850), 29, my emphasis.

41 Camille, *Gothic Idol*, 14.

42 See *Dives and Pauper*, ed. Priscilla Heath Barnum, EETS o.s. 275 (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 91:

> Dives: Sythin [since] ymagerye is but a tokene and a book to the lewyd [unlearned] people, teche me yet a lytyl betere to knowe this tokene and to redyn this book.
> Pauper: Ymagerye sumqhat betokenyyt in special [sometimes signifies a particular thing], sumqhat in comoun and in generall. In special tokene, the ymage of oure lady is peyntyd wyt a child in here [her] lefght arm in tokene that she is maydyn wytouten ende and flour of alle wymmen.

43 Aston notes a shift in the way imagery was approached: "imagery passed from being a means of instruction to being a means of communication between worshipper and worshipped" (*England's Iconoclasts*, 20). Although imagery was still defended for its instructional potential, its inspirational power was also being observed, perhaps indicating that the terms of the debate were beginning to shift.

44 See especially Rita Copeland, *Pedagogy, Intellectuals, and Dissent in the Later Middle Ages: Lollardy and Ideas of Learning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), for a discussion of the connections between scholarly debates about interpretation and the education of the laity.

45 Sarah Stanbury notes this topicality in "Visualizing," in *A Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Peter Brown (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 468. To be sure, the dating of the *Second Nun's Tale* to Chaucer's early career (in the 1370s) suggests that we should not read the debate over images necessarily as an influence, although concerns about images certainly predate the Wycliffites; see, for example, Holcot (Aston, *Lollards and Reformers*, 156–59) and Fitzralph (Jones, "Lollards and Images," 29). Whether or

not Chaucer was directly referring to this debate when he first composed the *Second Nun's Tale* (if it has an early date), we can assume that he and his readers would have been well aware of the polemic against images by the time he had inserted it into the *Canterbury Tales* in the 1380s or 90s. Chaucerians have been less interested in tracking this tale's topicality than for other of the tales. The only topical reading of which I'm aware (besides the brief mention in Stanbury's article) is Lynn Staley Johnson's "Chaucer's Tale of the Second Nun and the Strategies of Dissent," *Studies in Philology* 89 (1992): 314–33, revised and expanded in *Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture*, with David Aers (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 179–259. Staley situates the *Second Nun's Tale* within the "contemporary conflicts" of Chaucer's time, particularly the "problematic relation [of spiritual authority] to secular power" (180, 198). My reading is similarly informed by a sense of Chaucer's "dark analysis of the mechanisms by which society might be reformed" (180), but in this essay I focus not on the authority for that reform but rather on the language of devotional practice.

46   *Second Nun's Tale* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), VIII.498–504. Further references to line numbers are given parenthetically in the text.

47   See also *Twenty-Five Articles*, no. 5: "A! grete blyndenes is in thos pepul, that thei costen so myche aboute a roten stock [incur so much expense on account of a rotten block of wood], and offeren faste therat [and offer a fast to it], and suffren a pore man, [who is the] verrey ymage of tho holy Trinite mad of God hymselfe, for to lye in muche mescheif [poverty]" (*Select English Works*, 3:463; thorns modernized). Cecilia also describes idols as "veyn" (285), a word which consistently appears in the Wycliffite treatise, e.g., "siche veyn dede ymagis" (*SEWW*, 88). Stanbury also notes these connections ("Visualizing," 468). To be sure, the description of idolatry has a long history before the fourteenth century, and one can certainly argue that the connection between idolatry and the veneration of images haunts discussions of idolatry throughout the medieval period. See, for example, Camille's *Gothic Idol*, where he argues that the treatment of idols begins to change in the thirteenth century as authors and artists negotiate the boundaries between idols and images (4); see further 129–64. Nevertheless, it is only in the fourteenth century that charges of idolatry are explicitly leveled against the church in a systematic fashion.

48   Kate Crassons reads *taste* here in the modern (and also Middle English) sense "taste," a move that raises questions about eucharistic piety (in a paper presented at the Medieval Congress at Kalamazoo in 1999). The debate over the Eucharist certainly has important connections to the debate over images; for Wyclif in particular, and, importantly, both views were markers of heresy. As Aston writes, "the first sin Wycliffe considered against the first commandment was the twin transgression of worshipping images and the consecrated host" (*Lollards and Reformers*, 141). But the two positions do not always appear together, as Aston notes: "It is significant that so many of the heretics who were guilty of denying image-worship were not accused of eucharistic error" (189).

49   Kolve, "Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale* and the Iconography of St. Cecilia."

50   Earlier in the fourteenth century, Fitzralph criticized images from within the church

(Jones, "Lollards and Images," 29). By the time Chaucer is writing, orthodox writers, such as Hilton, had leapt to defend images. See, Nicholas Watson "*Et que est huius ydoli materia? Tuipse*: Idols and Images in Walter Hilton," in *Images, Idolatry, and Iconoclasm*, 94–111; and Joy M. Russell-Smith, "Walter Hilton and a Tract in Defence of the Veneration of Images," *Dominican Studies* 7 (1954): 180–214. For a discussion of Chaucer's interest in the early church and parallels with Wyclif, see William Kamowski, "Chaucer and Wyclif: God's Miracles against the Clergy's Magic," *Chaucer Review* 37 (2002): 5–25.

51 With this tale, one must confront questions about its source. To what extent are these choices Chaucer's, and to what extent is this text an exercise in translation? I note some of the differences that I believe are Chaucer's, thanks to the work by Sherry Reames in "A Recent Discovery Concerning the Sources of Chaucer's 'Second Nun's Tale,'" *Modern Philology* 87 (1990): 337–61. Of course, one cannot be sure whether, in fact, the source Chaucer used might have contained precisely those differences. Nevertheless, Reames's point is well taken: "What we must do, then, is change the terms in which we think about Chaucer's contributions to the tale. Most obviously, we should ask why he chose this particular combination of abridgments to translate. Are the affiliations just incidental, or was he trying to make some point when he joined together a Dominican version and a Franciscan version and assigned the result to the companion of the worldly Prioress?" (348).

52 Reames, "A Recent Discovery," 358, line 67.

53 In her essay, "A Closer Look at Seinte Cecile's Special Vision," *Chaucer Review* 10 (1976): 337–49, Carolyn Collette argues that this tale is concerned with sight, "that the apparent is not always the real" (337). She identifies the polarity of sight and blindness (337), noting that the sight imagery is "both literal and figurative" (338). Although I agree that the tale is concerned with sight, I think Chaucer is hesitant about embracing this Augustinian mode.

54 As Reames notes, this passage follows Chaucer's source quite closely ("A Recent Discovery," 340), but Chaucer introduces the phrase "with his word." The source states, "Quia vidi angelos Dei fulgentes animas eorum ferentes ad celos, plurimi crediderunt" (340).

55 Collette, "A Closer Look," 346.

56 Collette argues, by contrast, that the verbs increase: "As it moves towards its resolution, the tale and its action become increasingly concerned with verbs of sight and with true understanding" (346).

57 Bokenham writes,

        so snow, hayl, & yhs [ice]
    Dystynct ben, as seyn phylosophyrs wyhs [wise],
    In name & forme but substancyally
    They be but watyr. . . .

Osbern Bokenham, *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, ed. Mary S. Serjeantson, EETS o.s. 206 (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1938), lines 7833–36.

58 Reames, "A Recent Discovery," 359, line 123. In the source, only Christians use the word *see* or get to see.

59 *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, lines 8055–56.

60   If Almachius were to see Cecilia spiritually, then he would be a Christian. As Collette writes, "Almachius lacks the sight to translate things into signs" (Collette, "A Closer Look," 347).

61   Chaucer's source does not contain this odd double negative: "Sed ne quid desit, etiam exterioribus oculis te cecum ostendis," which may be translated "but nothing is lacking to your outer eyes [the appearance of your eyes], yet you show yourself to be blind" ("Recent Discovery," 360, line 151). Bokenham's translation is also clearer: "For not oonly thi resoun inward blynd ys, / But also thi bodyly eyne blynd been" (*Legendys*, 8188–89).

62   The Latin is *figuras* ("A Recent Discovery," 360, line 155), which carries a similar, nonpejorative connotation as *images* does.

63   Camille, *Gothic Idol*, 14 and 115–28.

64   For discussion of the word-play on *ydelnesse* and *ydoles*, see Benson, ed., *Riverside Chaucer*, 943 nn. 2–3.

65   This is true in the source as well (Reames, "A Recent Discovery," 360–61, lines 155 ff.).

66   Reames sees the references to reading and writing and not speaking as evidence of the fact that Chaucer wrote this tale before the *Canterbury Tales*. Sherry L. Reames, "The Cecilia Legend as Chaucer Inherited It and Retold It: The Disappearance of an Augustinian Ideal," *Speculum* 55 (1980): 55.

67   Reames's source has "in pectore suo" ("A Recent Discovery," 357, line 2). The allusion to Hebrews 10 ("fleshly tables of the heart") is often invoked to differentiate the text of the Bible from other texts; see the citation from Wyclif's *De Mandatis,* 46.

68   Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 156–84; Leicester, " 'Synne horrible' "; Marshall Leicester, *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the "Canterbury Tales"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 35–64; and Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 367–421.

69   Reames, "The Cecilia Legend," 40, 44.

70   *Dives and Pauper*, 83.

71   See also the "General Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible": "Now men knelyn, and preien, and offren faste to dede ymagis, that han neither hungir neither coold; and dispisen, beten, and sleen Cristen men, maad to the ymage and lycnesse of the Holy Trynite. What onour [honoring] of God is this to knele and offer to an ymage, maad of sinful mannis hondis, and to dispise and robbe the ymage maad of Goddis hondis, that is, a cristen man, either a cristen womman" (34). And in *Twenty-Five Articles*, no. 5: "Hit semes that this offrynge to ymagis is a sotile caste [subtle trick] of Anticriste and his clerkis, for to drawe almes fro pore men, and cumber worldly prestis with muck [unclean money]" (*Select English Works*, 3:463).

72   See Aston's discussion in *Lollards and Reformers*, 159–67, in which she discusses "the social injustice of images" (159).

73   Trans. Aston, *Lollards and Reformers*, 138.