THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

"ALL IS ALIKE GOOD": MELANCHOLIA AND DESIRE IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
JUNE 2023

For Grushenka

Contents

Abstract

This dissertation draws a distinction between medieval and psychoanalytic representations of melancholia as something repressed on the level of narrative structure and as a subjective mode of enjoyment. In each chapter I explore a problematic that psychoanalysis has traditionally conceived in melancholic terms: gender, the object, and the symptom. I argue that melancholia offers a useful reference point for understanding not only how medieval literary texts articulate accounts of gender, ideology and the family, but also some of the uses late medieval English writers made of melancholic affect for their novel interpretations of genres such as the dream vision and the complaint. If melancholia is symptomatic, repressive and pathological, I argue that there may also be a sense in which this symptomaticity itself might be seen as constitutive of a subjective position through which otherwise repressed forms of self-knowledge and enjoyment might begin to be articulated.

The medieval texts I engage begin from positions of lessened or foreclosed agency, in which a kind of subject position is occasioned by its own lack of information or authority with respect to its own form or destiny. In Heldris of Cornwall's *Roman de Silence*, the titular character's transgender embodiment is posited in order to advance a cissexist and homophobic claim about "natural" sex. *Silence*'s normative commitments emerge from a melancholic theory of gender emplotted by the sense of a departure from "Nature." In the process, however, its reparative ending demands the abandoning of the titular character's transgender embodiment. I then turn to Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale*, arguing that its treatment of the "little clergeon" is such that the child becomes sacrificed in order to be the instrument of the mother's racist jouissance. Though the *Prioress's Tale* centers the loss of a loved object, the tale is just as resistant to the melancholic as it is to the proper mourning of the child, as it paranoiacally attributes its repressed aggression towards him onto the Jews rather than ever identifying that aggression as an aspect of its own desire.

In Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, I argue for reading Chaucer's poetic "I" in terms of his treatment of the melancholic symptom as a literary device. The logic of identification which brings together the nested narratives in the *Book*, I argue, can be understood in a distinctly non-Oedipal

sense, indicating a kind of aesthetic subjectivity by which we melancholia might be seen as more open-ended than a pathology constantly teetering on the edge of sinfulness. In the last chapter, I turn to the poetry of Thomas Hoccleve, arguing that there is within his writing a novel take on the genre of complaint, which I read in terms of the Lacan's later revision of his account of the symptom. Complaint for Hoccleve is a benignly narcissistic genre: the "I" of Hoccleve's texts *is* Hoccleve, and the emergence of these texts out of and beyond the depressive isn't in the service of paranoid projection or the fetishization of some loved object. Rather, the complainer simply seeks to continue complaining.

Acknowledgments

Thanks should first go to my mentors. At Beloit College, Lisa Haines Wright taught me how to close read, introduced me to critical theory and Chaucer, and lovingly nurtured my intellectual idiosyncrasies. Ellen Joyce introduced me to medieval cultural history and the archive, got me my first teaching assistantship, and walked me through the process of applying to graduate school. At the University of Chicago, Julie Orlemanski introduced me to a vibrant and interdisciplinary community of medievalists, taught me to take historiography and the practice of criticism seriously, and challenged me to think anew about Chaucer and Hoccleve. Mark Miller taught me Langland, patiently listened – and always pushed me to think more capaciously – as I rambled on about Marx and Freud, and never failed to locate inviting contradictions in my own thought. I couldn't have written any of this without them.

Thanks, too, should go to the members of the medieval studies community during my time at the University of Chicago from whom I learned so much in workshops, reading groups, and over drinks at Jimmy's: Samuel Baudinette, Alexis Becker, Carly Boxer, Daisy Delogu, Aden Kumler, Andrés Millan, Jo Nixon, Willemien Otten, Benjamin Saltzman, Joe Stadolnick, Mary Kemp Thornberry, and Matthew Vanderpoel. When I delivered an earlier draft of chapter two at the Medieval Studies Workshop in 2022, Kashaf Qureshi and Jacqueline Victor gave immensely generous and helpfully critical feedback which pushed me to think differently about that paper's – and my own – relation to both medieval trans studies and symptomatic reading. Finally, Luke Fidler was a crucial interlocutor and dear friend throughout my time at Chicago, a seemingly bottomless source of reading recommendations and comradery.

In the Department of English, many conversations with Upasana Dutta, Marissa Fenley, Noah Hansen, Zachary and Traci Verleyen-Hope, Zoe Hughes, Katie Nolan, Michal Zechariah, Chris Taylor, Timothy Harrison, and Lauren Berlant constituted a formative part of my graduate education and my arrival at the intellectual trajectory that produced this dissertation in the first place. Madison Chapman, Jake Fournier, Kevin King, Sarah McDaniel, Bellamy Mitchell, Rivky Mondal, Benjamin Morgan, Debbie Nelson, Jordan Pruett, and Rebecca Velasquez all gave invaluable feedback on

some of my early attempts at articulating the project of this dissertation as well as drafts of the second chapter in our dissertation proposal and article writing workshops. At Graduate Students United, Abhishek Bhattacharyya, Tanima Sharma, Eric Powell, Amanda Shubert, Matthew Borus, and Uday Jain were tireless and dear comrades.

Alston Boyd, Jesi Gaston, Mara Iskander, and Sasha Karsavin were my co-editors at *Homintern* and were each, after their own very particular fashions, invaluable interlocutors and dear friends in more conversations and escapades than could possibly be done justice here. Conversations with Juliana Gleeson, Elle O'Rourke, and Natalie Suzelis about gender, feminism, and Marxism – in both Twitter DMs and at the *Historical Materialism* conference in London in 2019 – sharpened and matured my investment in some of the intellectual-political underpinnings of the present work. Working with Xandra Metcalfe on her contribution to Gleeson and O'Rourke's *Transgender Marxism* (Pluto Press, 2021), too, was productively challenging at an important juncture in my study of psychoanalytic theory and thinking through some of the ways in which it is both clarified and challenged by trans subjectivity. In the final writing stages of the dissertation, write-ins, coffee breaks, emotional support, and conversations with Mara Iskander and Daisuke Shen were life-saving in more ways than I can hope to quantify.

I would be remiss not to thank those who have simply been dear friends to me over the course of my writing this dissertation. Among those not already thanked, Sylvie Anyone, Valérie Dorr, Lillian Dragu, J. Michael Eugenio, Ruthe Foushee, Dakota Heron, Max Maller, Sabrina Sithikraipong, Abby Skwara, and Ethan Weinstein deserve special mention. Finally, no one can claim to have sat alongside me for more of the writing of the present work than my cat, Grushenka. This dissertation is dedicated to her.

1 Introduction

There's something repulsive about being mentally unwell. When fifteenth century poet Thomas Hoccleve shares his narrative of his own struggle with mental illness with a trusted friend in his *Dialoge* – the second framing poem of the collection of poems that we now call the *Series* – the latter's first response is to insist that Thomas show no one else: "Reherse thou it not ne it awake. / Kepe al that cloos for thin honours sake."[1] The friend's response to reading Thomas's complaint about his descent into a kind of depressive psychosis and the social alienation he's experienced as a result of it reminds us, though, that his mental illness is a *social* pathology. Thomas's health risks falling back into the realm of the pathological when he's perceived as having never parted from it in the first place. His sanity is contingent on his ability to "pass" as sane. For Hoccleve the symptom is less importantly an indicator of health than a reminder that his "health" is something determined and diagnosed by everyone but the one who bears it. Hocclevean irony being such that the poem is its own symptom, the *Series* never ultimately describes the illness in question except through second or third hand accounts, leaving us with a narrator who can only complain about how he's being talked about.

The present dissertation begins from an interest in such positions of lessened or foreclosed agency, in which a kind of subject position is occasioned by its own lack of information or authority with respect to its form or destiny. It begins, and will end, with Thomas Hoccleve because his is a poetics in which the affliction of this kind of lessness is transformed into a more or less tongue-in-cheek way of assuming a kind of subjective integrity. In the same dialogue, Hoccleve embarks on an extended digression complaining about coin clipping, noting that while the present stability of his mental health is indisputable, he is, like so many others, suffering from "feble moneie."[2] The worry in the digression is with the problem of coin washers devaluing the honest worker's wages:

> Manie a man this day, but thei golde weie,
> Of men not wole it take ne resceiue,
> And if it lacke his peis they wole it weiue.

[1] Hoccleve, "Dialoge," 2008, 27–28.
[2] Hoccleve, l. 102.

Howe may it holde his peis whanne it is wasshe
So that it lacke sumwhat in thiknese?[3]

Two things are worth noting about Hoccleve's fiduciary digression. It isn't, for one, a complaint about usury. As Jacques Le Goff has discussed at length, usury is "a sin *against nature*,"[4] insofar as the usurer transgresses the "natural" laws of just exchange by charging interest – performing, that is, a kind of unnatural reproduction by making money by means of money.[5] Hoccleve's digression comes to this moral-economic problem from a different position: his complaint isn't directed at those making unjust gains so much as he laments a much broader and more insidious devaluation that accompanies money's lost integrity (or "thickness"). The clipped coin is a circulating object whose devaluation has occurred prior to its falling into the hand of the recipient: it testifies to a kind of epidemic of falsehood and a concerningly widespread perversion of truth that fails to provide the complainer with a phobically cherrypicked Other to direct their resentment towards. This also, then, tells us something about the function of complaint for Hoccleve: the complainer laments, uselessly, a condition of exchange from the position of one whose affliction in a sense precedes him.

As I will elaborate further in chapter four, complaint for Hoccleve begins from the position of the depressive – in which (as Sigmund Freud describes in *Mourning and Melancholia*)[6] a subject fails to move past some sort of loss in part because they cannot quite articulate *what* it is they have lost. In psychoanalytic theory, the enunciation of this loss transforms it into something else. Complaint is a discourse which sustains itself against and through its own lack or fallenness, unfolding according to a kind of inverted melancholic logic in which the complainer's reproach radiates outward, making a world of its depressive symptom. It thus provides the complainer with a perverse kind of stability, a grounds of identification insofar as the complainer is in a sense committed to always already lacking something and is also, because of this, never to blame for the conditions producing that lack. This dissertation takes interests in such scenes, in which a rhythm of enjoyment emerges in

[3]Hoccleve, ll. 103–7.
[4]Le Goff, *Your Money or Your Life*, 28.
[5]"Money is infertile, yet the usurer wants it to produce offspring," Le Goff, 29.
[6]Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, 1957, 14:243–58.

tandem with a kind of dogged refusal to be satisfied. It attends to those subjects who, like the little boy Freud describes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* who, when making his toys disappear "with an expression of interest and satisfaction,"[7] remain stubbornly at the site of lack, as if faithful to a *pleasure in loss* that precedes and remains mysteriously in excess of the pleasure one might derive in the satisfaction of some desire.

The appearance of this kind of subject position has a particular character in medieval literary texts in part because of the presence of a kind of ethical pull: no subject can be sustained on refusal alone, but in order to imagine moving from unethical not-doing to ethical doing the positing of a subject who refuses becomes necessary, if also necessarily overcome. As D. Vance Smith has put it, melancholia in the Middle Ages "demanded a deep responsibility: there still had to be something that resolved or transcended it – that would terminate it."[8] This is in part because in the medieval moral imaginary, melancholia was really *acedia* – the sin of sloth. *Acedia* begins as a peculiarly intellectual affliction, a state of listlessness particularly afflicting early monks. M.B. Pranger has argued that for influential monastic thinkers like Anselm of Canterbury sloth performs an important function in the monastic form of life's dialectical "poetics" of melancholic despair and mystical rapture. This is the dynamic that gives shape to the *contemptus mundi* meditation, for instance, which Pranger argues for reading as an "exercise in despair about oneself and the world," which "sets the pattern of the monastic life, thereby preventing the self from dissolving into the vagueness and diffusion of the world and preparing it for 'living the way one reads.' "[9] Slothful despair of the world, one might say, is the symptom of the monastic form of life: it is at once a vexing byproduct of monasticism and a foothold for its sustenance. *Acedia* constitutes an affective reference point from which the erotic excess of divine rapture might be occasioned,[10] a position to which one continually returns in order to transcend again.

Sloth, then, might be seen in terms of a kind of suspension of satisfaction: that it anticipates –

[7]Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1961, 13.
[8]Smith, *Arts of Dying*, 4.
[9]Pranger, *The Artificiality of Christianity*, 7.
[10]"It is the fullness of the divine presence itself that is problematic," Pranger, 6.

without guaranteeing – that satisfaction is precisely what occasions the articulation of desire.[11] It's when that satisfaction is suspended indefinitely – when, in a sense, that suspension becomes a kind of theft – that it begins to slip into sinfulness. One may recall, for instance, the scene on the "half acre" in *Piers Plowman*, in which several pilgrims' refusal to work becomes transmogrified into a prosopopoeic "Waster." Here, sloth takes on a distinct form of expression in the context of the late feudal estate, articulating a refusal or lack of will to work as a will to waste:

> Thanne gan Wastour to wrathen hym and wolde have yfoughte,
> And to Piers the Plowman he profrede his glove.
> A Bretoner, a braggere, abosted Piers alse
> And bad hym go pissen with his plowgh, forpyned sherewe!
> 'Wiltow or neltow, we wol have oure wille,
> And of thi flour and of thi flesshe fecche whanne us liketh,
> And maken us murye thermyde, maugree thi chekes.'[12]

What begins as a series of refusals or excuses to avoid participating in the economy of the half acre of land that Piers conscripts the pilgrims to work in exchange for showing them the way to find "Truth" here becomes symptomatic of a far more aggressive desire. The will to waste, here, explicitly demands the elimination of the landowning plowman. Specifically addressing Piers, Waster threatens to consume "*thi* flour," "*thi* flesshe," to "maugree *thi* cheekes." Prosopopoeia has a distinctly political dimension here: it ascribes malicious intention and positive agency to a lack of will or action. It translates a lack of action into an act of *refusal*, and, in the political economy of the half acre's "experiment in agrarian utopian collectivity"[13] this act of refusal becomes expressive of distinctly classed anxieties.

As monastic texts became more available in translation, too, their "poetics" became entangled with the political and social concerns of urban European aristocrats and the emergent bourgeoisie. Amy Appleford has traced some of the ways in which monastic ethics and practices such as the

[11] Here and throughout this dissertation I generally refer to "desire" in the Lacanian sense of this term, that is, as "neither the appetite for satisfaction nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the very phenomenon of their splitting," (Lacan, *Écrits*, 2006, 580). Lacan locates desire at the heart of human subjectivity, as a "continuous force" propelling it forward that is "constant in its pressure" and never satiated (Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 37, 38).

[12] Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, 6.152–58.

[13] Miller, "Sin and Structure in *Piers Plowman*," 214.

contemptus mundi and *meditatio mortis* became adapted into a kind of "lay asceticism, responsive to the desires of a pious, educated, and privileged lay Londoners to participate in the perfectionist life of enclosed religious."[14] Instructively, the class character of this laicized asceticism in fourteenth and fifteenth century death culture may also in a sense purge the melancholic element from these contemplative practices. As dying a "good death" became a concern not only for the religious contemplative but for the merchant class, the poetics of lay asceticism as articulated in texts like the fifteenth century *Visitation of the Sick*, public murals which combined word and image like Lydgate's *Dance of Death*, and public projects like the almshouse of the wealthy merchant Richard Whittington, the poetics of lay asceticism appear to be less characterized by the neoplatonic "circularity" described by Pranger than by an investment in futurity and class reproduction. The almshouse, Whittington's last gift to the city of London which he commissioned on his deathbed, was in many ways a symptom of "an increased desire for social control inherent in alms being given only to the 'deserving' poor," emphasizing that "only 'discrete and humble' poor should be admitted to the house."[15]

What may be observed in both of these scenes is a parsing of sloth from melancholia that occurs as the character of the suspended satisfaction in *acedia* in a sense changes ownership. In the monastic context, *acedia* is symptomatic not only in the sense of being a "side effect" of a form of devotion, but also in the sense that *acedia* is itself something which can be both accomodated and put to work by an ethical life. In the case of the late feudal figure of the "waster," however, the enjoyment that is suspended belongs to somebody: with the figures of the wage laborer and the almsbeggar, *acedia* has become a form of theft and delinquency. This is the anxiety expressed by Langland's half-acre as the lack of volition to work fails to be accomodated by the political economy of the late feudal estate with a productive rhythm of enjoyment and thus can only be expressed as death-driven, that is, as an aggressive desire to devour the landowner that threatens the social formation itself. The scene is also instructive for its demonstration of how the moralized lexicon of the Middle Ages often leads texts to articulate their anxieties about changing social conditions in

[14] Appleford, *Learning to Die in London, 1380-1540*, 8.
[15] Appleford, 66.

terms which attribute structural problems to one or another "bad" actor – the waster, the Jew, the sodomite – whose sinfulness appears at once as a result of a constituent moral weakness and as a distinctly malicious aggressivity towards the social body.

This is often the function of prosopopoeia in the late medieval text, as the dualistic psychomachia characteristic of late antique allegorical texts like Prudentius's *Psychomachia* and Boethius's *Consolatio Philosophiae* finds new life in the representation of the different social anxieties of the later middle ages. In the process, these texts represent a new set of phobic "objects." This is part of the story I tell in my discussion of Heldris of Cornwall's *Roman de Silence* in chapter two. Much of *Silence*'s drama unfolds according to a conflict between Nature and Nurture, as the titular character continuously finds themself at various impasses resulting from the misalignment of their "nurtured" and their "natural" sex. Here, "nurture" is represented as something of an allegorical "bad object," a placeholder for anxieties about sexual and gender deviance which are ultimately to be understood as sinful for their unnatural abuse of the pleasure principle vis-à-vis a withholding of satisfaction. I argue that the text's ultimately homophobic and cissexist ideological commitments are articulated in its alignment of sexuality and pleasure with "nature," characterizing Silence's transgender embodiment as always a refusal of pleasure and a withholding of satisfaction that the romance's demand for a happy, reparative ending functions to render unsustainable.

Here, too, narrative begins from the melancholic: the departure from nature haunts the story in such a way that the generic imperative towards a resolution of the romance's prosopopoeic conflict requires that this "loss" be felt and repaired. This repair itself, though, may also in a sense be melancholic in the sense that it elaborately stages the assumption of a sex on the back of a *renunciation* of another, as if to suggest that, for Silence, the desirability of the masculine position ultimately forecloses identification with it. Relatedly, in classical psychoanalytic theory, melancholia gives form to a rather fundamental position of the psychoanalytic subject: it is constitutive of the post-Oedipal subject's assumption of a sex and testifies to the libidinal precariousness that attends to that assumption in the first place. After the early observation of the intimacy of melancholia with identification in 1917's *Mourning and Melancholia* – specifically, in the depressive's unconscious

identification with the lost object – beginning in 1923 with *The Ego and the Id*, Freud would come to explicitly identify the ego's post-Oedipal assumption of a sexed identity in melancholic terms:

> We succeeded in explaining the painful disorder of melancholia by supposing that an object which was lost has been set up again inside the ego – that is that an object-cathexis has been replaced by an identification. At that time, however, we did not appreciate the full significance of this process and did not know how common and how typical it is. Since then we have come to understand that this substitution has a great share in determining the form taken by the ego and that it makes an essential contribution towards building up what is called its "character."[16]

It's here where Freudian bisexuality – the theory that every human contains characteristics of both sexes – moves from the polymorphous to the normative, as the assumption of a male or female sex happens on the back of an identification that is also a renunciation.[17] Here, the ego is tasked with internalizing aspects of the abandoned object in order to wean, so to speak, the id off of its dogged attachments. If, for instance, when abandoning my erotic attachment to my lover, I come to internalize certain of their characteristics – perhaps I grow to really like one of their favorite records, or catch myself repeating certain of their trademark expressions – these identifications don't act to undermine my sex but rather to ensure it survives my letting go of my attachment to them.[18] The ego, here, begins to appear as a "precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes" which remain within it as the scars of the object relations it has survived.[19]

This problematic informs Judith Butler's diagnosis of cis-heterosexual identity as inherently

[16]Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 1960, 23.

[17]This is a trajectory traced by Philippe Van Haute, who argues for reading a kind of epistemological break in Freud's writing between the early analysis of hysteria and the later privileging of obsessional neurosis, psychosis, and the Oedipus complex. "As long as Freud considered infantile sexuality as essentially autoerotic," Van Haute writes, "the Oedipus complex, as the formative complex of subjectivity in early childhood, was literally unthinkable" (Van Haute, "Freud Against Oedipus?", 42). This changes in 1909, when Freud publishes *Notes Upon A Case of Obsessional Neurosis* (the "Rat Man" case study, Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, 1955, 150-318). Whereas in earlier work (*Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, both in Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, 1953), "the sexual body as a constitutive field of forces with an ever-changing strength and intensity, which in principle never gives us any rest," after 1909 this line of thought "becomes progressively inscribed in an Oedipal logic that concretizes the reference to the law (of the father)," as the "partial drives" become placed within phases of development that aim towards heterosexual object relations and the different psychopathologies are understood as "failed attempts to overcome the Oedipal problematic" (Van Haute, "Freud Against Oedipus?", 43-4).

[18]This is, of course, Freud's example: "In women who have had many experiences in love there seems to be no difficulty in finding vestiges of their object-cathexes in the traits of their character," (Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 1960, 24).

[19]Freud, 24.

melancholic: "gender identification," they write, "is a kind of melancholia in which the sex of the prohibited object is internalized as a prohibition."[20] Butler's reading attends to a prohibition within this prohibition. If the assumption of a sex is attended by the "internalization of an internal moral directive" prompted by the incest taboo, then "the taboo against homosexuality must *precede* the heterosexual incest taboo,"[21] since in Freud's account the coincidence of identification with and desire for the object is necessarily pre-Oedipal and thus pre-linguistic, a phenomonenon characteristic of the narcissism of early childhood in which difference is not yet comprehensible. This prohibition is, as I'll discuss further in the chapter two, one shared by *Silence*'s narrative when the foreclosure of homosexual desire puts Silence in the double-bind of having to choose between an impossible (because of his lack of a penis) sexual relationship with the queen or accepting the idea of playing the "passive" role in a sexual encounter.

A story like *Silence*'s, then, poses problems to the narrative of identification articulated by the Oedipal family structure, speaking to the way that identification proceeds alongside the repression of a violence which casts a darker hue on the story's reparative fantasy. Silence's "refusal" of satisfaction ultimately functions within the romance narrative to make the case for his transgender identification being one which impossibilizes his flourishing as a desiring subject. Silence, ultimately, becomes an apparatus of the narrative's reactionary ideological commitment to "Nature." As both *Silence* and Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale* – which I read in chapter three – demonstrate, this family structure enacts this kind of violent instrumentalization even – perhaps even especially – in those scenes where it isn't perfectly reflected in the form of an archetypal heterosexual nuclear family unit. The *Prioress's Tale*'s preoccupation with Marian theology underpins its phobic characterization of the Jews by way of its instrumentalization of the child, as the Prioress's own fetishistic identification with both mother and child – a relation in which the mother's psychotic identification with her loved object is so radical as to require its elimination – sacrifices its own loved object in order to preserve a fantasy of it.

One assumption made by many critics of the *Tale*'s antisemitism is that the blood libel narratives

[20]Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 85–86.
[21]Butler, 87.

it reproduces are, in a sense, prompted by the deaths of actual children which the narratives falsely attribute to a "bad object" in the form of the Jews. If such narratives can be described in terms of their emergence from a kind of melancholic structure, then, it is due to their inability or refusal to mourn those children. The narrative's need to preserve an idealized image of the child prevents it from being able to ever move on from the loss, and the scene is returned to again and again without ever coming to terms with a reality more complicated and damning than can be explained by the racist projection of death-driven aggression onto a minority group. It's in such cases that I think narrative's departure or even resistance to a "melancholic structure" becomes important to keep track of: instead of introjecting the death-driven aggression towards the ambivalent aspects of its lost object, such narratives *project* these aspects onto another party altogether.

This problematic informs Klein's articulation of the "depressive position" as the fulcrum of neurotic subjectivity, which for her refers both to an actual moment of depressive self-reflection which the young child passes through in early development as well as a sort of affective reference point that stays with the subject throughout their life. For Klein, the depressive is the antidote to the paranoid psychosis of early infancy, a position in which the subject's own death-driven aggression is "projectively identified" with the other. In "The Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States," Klein observes how in her patients "paranoid fears and suspicions were reinforced as a defense against the depressive position" and describes the "depressive position" as "based on the paranoid state and genetically derived from it."[22] Depression is how the subject begins to reconcile herself with her own splitness; it names the moment when the subject begins to tarry with the ambivalence of the drive as constitutive of her own subjectivity instead of anxiously projecting its qualities onto everyone but herself in order to compartmentalize its erotic and death-driven components. As the dialectical complement to the binary thinking of the paranoid-schizoid position, depression is when we begin to accept that our loved objects can be ambivalent – that they can have both "good" and disturbing qualities at the same time, and that there can be a coexistence of love and hate in our relationships with them.

[22]Klein, *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works*, 1975, 274, 275.

There's an important sense in which the resistance to the depressive position that Klein traces from a very early point in the individual subject's history has a social component, finding expression in a larger societal investment in "running away" from (or striving to eliminate altogether) the depressive. We've seen this already with the response of Thomas's friend, whose instinct is to immediately attempt to brush any question of the narrator's mental instability under the rug. This allergy to the depressive and the pathological – and to affective and desiring positions which in some sense elide or subvert the pleasure principle – inform Jacques Lacan's articulation in the 1960s of the Freudian super-ego in light of Kant's categorical imperative. The super-ego, for Lacan, represents a "ferocious figure" which torments the neurotic subject with a "senseless, destructive, purely oppressive, almost always anti-legal morality," reducing moral law to the simple imperative of "*You must.*"[23] This reduction of the law to the imperative is characterized by a kind of sadistic enjoyment that exceeds – or misrecognizes – the law. For Lacan, it's this enjoyment which inheres both to the moralist and the trangressive hedonist, both of whom (as he argues in "Kant with Sade") ultimately derive an enjoyment with respect to the law in such a way that ultimately reinforces it. On this telling, then, the super-ego is foremost an *imperative to enjoy* by which the subject is "reconstituted through alienation at the cost of being nothing but the instrument of jouissance."[24]

On the one hand, then, the melancholic might be seen as such an instrument – as a victim of her own super-ego's sadistic imperatives directed back against her own ego. However, Klein's emphasis on the developmental necessity of (and *resistance to*) the depressive position in terms of the child's learning to love their loved object as an ambivalent "whole" as opposed *splitting* it into "good" and "bad" "part-objects"[25] suggests that there's also a sense in which this imperative to enjoy – extrinsic to the subject – might be characterized in terms of a phobia of the depressive position, insofar as the depressive position introduces an element of ambivalence to enjoyment itself that leads to the subject on some level refusing this tyrannical imperative. It's on this point that I take an interest in the literary experiments of poets like Chaucer and Hoccleve which explicitly locate their poetic

[23]Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book I*, 102.

[24]Lacan, *Écrits*, 2006, 654.

[25]"Not until the object is loved *as a whole* can its loss be felt as whole," Klein, *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works*, 1975, 264.

subjects in the depressive position.

Prompted, in part, by Leo Bersani's reading of the Freudian "trait," I argue in chapter three that in *The Book of the Duchess* Chaucer's use of the melancholic symptom as a literary device in itself suggests a mode of identification that is distinctly non-Oedipal. Bersani's re-reading of the Oedipus complex proceeds from the question of what it might mean to rethink Freudian identification in light of those (homosexual) forms of identification which don't foreclose desire and in which identification isn't coterminous with renunciation. In *Gender Trouble* Butler argues that the outcome of bisexuality in Freud's account of the Oedipus complex in *The Ego and the Id* is the entrenchment of heterosexuality: if the boy desires his father, for instance, it is the result of a "feminine disposition," thus making bisexuality a mere "coincidence of two heterosexual desires."[26] As Bersani emphasizes, though, Freud retains a certain amount of ambivalence about the basis of these "dispositions" themselves, noting that even if we do read his account of bisexuality here in terms of its reinforcement of the "binary," heterosexual couple form, he "also institutes a mobility of desiring positions and a multiplicity of identities that make of the couple itself a unit in continuous dissolution."[27] As he argues in "Against Monogamy," for Bersani there may be a sense in which identification can survive difference and detachment, and even derive a kind of pleasure from it, and he suggests a reading of the Oedipal scene in which what is at stake is

> not how we preserve a relation to those [lost] objects, but rather, whether we will successfully, *and with pleasure*, move away from, abandon love-objects. This can be done only if the rival father, or the rival mother, for both the little boy and the little girl, is no longer seen either as a rival or as a parent, but rather as a seductive summons. He or she intrudes upon familial intimacy with a promise (and not merely the prohibitive threat Freud emphasizes) – the promise that if the child leaves the family it will have the narcissistic pleasure of finding itself in the world.[28]

It's this "narcissistic pleasure of finding oneself in the world," in which difference is no longer a trauma but a "nonthreatening supplement to sameness"[29] that Bersani posits as a basis for identification that is far more open-ended than the "heterosexual matrix" inferred by the classic

[26]Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 77.
[27]Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays*, 92.
[28]Bersani, 96.
[29]Bersani, 100.

reading of Freud one encounters again and again in both queer theory and the more conservative strains of clinical psychoanalysis.

It's Bersani's aesthetic and "impersonally narcissistic" account of the subject who passes through the world seeking "inaccurate replications" of themself that might testify to their "already established at-homeness in the world"[30] that I argue sheds a light on the function of "I" in *The Book of the Duchess*. Here, Chaucer centers the melancholic symptom as a literary device, utilizing it as a foothold of identification and an invitation to a kind of movement carried along by narcissistic recognitions that dictates the passage between its various nested narratives. It's with the *Book* that we begin to arrive at a literary form proper to the depressive position as a "mode of enjoyment," as an affective position whose open-endedness isn't only conceivable as forever teetering on the brink of sin. It's here, too, where this dissertation finally begins to arrive at an account of the "symptom" as a point of identification and solidarity as well as something along which we can begin, perhaps, to imagine a mode of enjoyment or form of life.

When I turn to the poetry of Thomas Hoccleve in chapter four, I also turn to Lacan's revised account of the symptom in his later work which, in his famous case study of James Joyce, articulates a sense in which the symptom is a kind of weaving together of the self. Hoccleve's privileged symptomatic genre isn't the dream poem but the complaint, which I argue he makes wholly his own. Complaint for Hoccleve is a (benignly) narcissistic genre: the "I" of Hoccleve's texts *is* Hoccleve, and the emergence of these texts out of and beyond the depressive isn't in the service of paranoid projection or the fetishization of some loved object. Rather, the complainer simply seeks to continue complaining.

[30]Bersani, 118, 119.

2 *Silence*: sex or nature

2.1 "So totally yours that you must not use it"

Heldris of Cornwall's *Le Roman de Silence* is no doubt best remembered now for its unusual and provocative treatment of gender and surprising prosopopoeic conflict between Nature and Nurture, but we're introduced to the romance's idiosyncratic narrator through a lengthy complaint about the avarice of stingy patrons. The poem opens with a request that the reader burn his verses "rather than share them with the kind of people / who don't know a good story / when they hear one," and who, perhaps more importantly, are too stingy to appropriately compensate its author.[1] The nostalgic, tongue-in-cheek plaint takes a special interest in money and excrement:

> Generosity, jousting and tourneying,
> wearing ladies' sleeves and making love
> have turned to heaping up mounts of dung.
> What good does it do one to pile up wealth
> if no good or honor issues from it?
> Assets are worth much less than manure:
> at least dung enriches the soil,
> but the wealth that is locked away
> is a disgrace to the man who hoards it.[2]

The moralizing tenor of this prologue doesn't so much betray a pious world-weariness as it laments greed as a waste of enjoyment. Money is worth less than excrement because the hoarder who fetishizes it doesn't actually enjoy it: instead of spending his money he is only compelled to accrue more of it. Those who hoard money do so at the expense of sport, sexuality, and, most importantly, generosity towards gifted poets. Instead of expressing contempt for the world, Heldris' prologue laments the neglect of earthly pleasures: "I don't know what to say of those hateful men / who thus abuse this earthly life – / they have enclosed their courts with shame forever."[3] Money – and more specifically, hoarding – is an abuse of the pleasure principle, a short-circuiting of desire from the objects that normally occasion it.

[1] Heldris of Cornwall, *Silence*, ll. 3–13. Throughout, I will default to Roche-Mahdi's English translation, engaging the original French where relevant to my interpretations.

[2] Heldris of Cornwall, ll. 43–51.

[3] Heldris of Cornwall, 65–67.

If there is any distinction to be made between money and shit, it can at least be observed that excrement can be usefully enjoyed, say, as a fertilizer – *Li fiens encrasse vials la terre*.[4] But the hoarder shits on himself rather than on the earth: "All he does is soil himself [*Il ne fait el fors soi sollier*]. / He doesn't trust his wife any more: / he doesn't want her to spend any of it."[5] The hoarder withholds from circulation what can only have value when given away. He fetishizes his object, but can't do so without staining himself. It makes him incontinent, even impotent. What Freud identified as the hallmarks of early anal eroticism is certainly at play here, not only in the equation of money and shit that his writings on the topic are well known for, but perhaps more importantly for the economy of pleasure and displeasure that they help bring into view in many medieval texts that are so preoccupied with the intersection of moral and sexual economy.

In his 1917 essay "On Transformations of Instinct as Exemplified in Anal Eroticism,"[6] Freud expands upon his earlier observations on anality[7] to argue that excrement functions as the child's first object of desire, preceding the phallus (and with it the vicissitudes of the castration complex):

> Defaecation affords the first occasion on which the child must decide between a narcissistic and an object-loving attitude. He either parts obediently with his faeces, 'sacrifices' them to his love, or else retains them for purposes of auto-erotic satisfaction and later as a means of asserting his own will. If he makes the latter choice we are in the presence of defiance (obstinacy) which, accordingly, springs from a narcissistic clinging to anal erotism.[8]

By describing toilet training as a primal scene in which the subject makes a choice between a "narcissistic" (or "passive") and an "object-loving" (or "active") attitude, Freud's heteronormative language runs into its own limitations. While his argument concerns itself with a stage of sexual development that precedes the child's perception of anatomical difference between the sexes that marks the "phallic stage" and the castration complex, he might be read as imposing a gender binary. In opposing an implicitly "masculine" "object-loving attitude" to a "feminine" narcissism, Freud

[4]Heldris of Cornwall, 49.

[5]Heldris of Cornwall, 59–61.

[6]Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, 1955, 17:125–33.

[7]Cf. Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, especially the fourth section of the second essay, "Masturbatory Sexual Manifestations" (Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, 1953, 125-244); "Character and Anal Erotism" (Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, 1959, 168-75); "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis" (Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, 1955, 7-122).

[8]Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, 1955, 17:130.

even characterizes the "faecal mass" as "the first penis" and likens the rectum to the vagina.[9] The apparent essentialism of Freud's terminology may be complicated by the anatomical situation it describes, however. Because anal eroticism precedes, in his schema, the child's erotic fixation on the genitalia, it is not anatomy alone that determines whether the "passive" or "active" attitude towards the object will be adopted.

Sexual difference for Freud is phallocentric: the phallus is what introduces the subject to the very idea of sexual difference in such a way that it resignifies the objects and economies of pleasure that preceded the subject's perception of it. This is not a biologically essentialist position: for Freud, our anatomies don't suggest (to the subject) or determine sexual difference before the subject becomes aware of it. What Freud's phallocentric language comes up against here, though, are the problems of signification that arise in the observation that, psychically speaking, before the intervention of the phallic signifier, *there is no latent sexual difference*: there is no "male" and "female" unconscious, and there is nothing inherent in a child's early relationship with anal sexuality that suggests such a difference. Freud is of course also interested in the problem of penis envy in this essay, because it's during the anal stage that we first encounter the object as a cause of desire:

> At first they had wanted a penis like a man; then at a later, though still childish, stage there appeared instead the wish for a baby. [. . .] The importance of the process described lies in the fact that part of the young woman's narcissistic masculinity is thus changed in femininity, and so can no longer operate in a way harmful to the female sexual function.[10]

If the anality reveals the child's first object cause of desire to be the genderless lump of shit, femininity would seem to testify to both a mobility and a passingness to phallic desire. Though Freud's understanding of sexual difference here is hampered by his symbolic equation of the penis with the phallus,[11] what his analysis of childhood object choice suggests is a precarious relationship between sexuality and the body, as "femininity" makes its appearance not because of an inevitable anticipating equation between anatomy and sexual disposition but as an imperfect, improvised solution to a deeper problem of desire. If "exclusive" heterosexuality is a "problem that needs

[9] Freud, 17:131.
[10] Freud, 17:129–30.
[11] Cf. "The Signification of the Phallus," Lacan, *Écrits*, 2006, 575–84.

elucidating" and "not a self-evident fact based on attraction that is ultimately of a chemical nature"[12] – if, that is, the "female sexual function" which is "harmed" by a kind of prior "masculine" mode of enjoyment isn't, in fact, "natural" or destined by anatomy – then what may be so discomfiting to heterosexual masculinity about childhood anality is the way it reveals narcissistic attachment to the object to be coextensive with its *loss*.

Anal eroticism poses a challenge to sexual difference, not because it's expressive of some sort of primary femininity or "passivity" but because it complicates and calls into question what those words signify in the first place. The child's attachment to it isn't rooted in a desire to be a passive object of someone else's desire (this would be the position of the fetishist),[13] but is in fact defiant, "a means of asserting his own will." The consequences of "penis envy" are far more problematic to sexual difference than understanding it as some sort of caricature of gender difference because what it suggests is that the thing which the woman knows herself to lack – and which serves as the anchorpoint of the sex/gender system – is itself lacking and derivative. By the time it comes into view as a signifier of sexual difference, Patricia Gherovici notes, "the penis is already functioning as a substitute," as a rehearsal of this more primary erotic situation found in the anal stage.[14] It's for this reason that for Lacan the first *objet a* – that is, the object when it is understood as the occasion for desire – isn't the penis but excrement. Anal eroticism defi(l)es the fantasy upon which the so-called "castration complex" is established: it reveals the basic situation in which the subject finds itself negotiating its own desire to be determined not by anatomy alone but by the use we make of it. But as we've seen in the prologue to *Silence*, excrement has a social component: I must be taught when to hold it in and when to give it away. The child must be taught to control its own sphincter. As Gherovici notes, "the ability to retain feces outlines the child's dominion of something that is a part of the body and can be released upon request," as a gift, but also as something that is disgusting and abject. It's in toilet training, then, that "the child recognizes separation as a major principle."[15]

[12]Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 11–12n.1.

[13]Cf. 1927's "Fetishism" (Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, 1961, 152-57) and "Kant with Sade," (Lacan, *Écrits*, 2006, 645-68).

[14]Gherovici, *Transgender Psychoanalysis*, 125.

[15]Gherovici, 128–29.

Anality introduces a dimension of otherness, and with it a primary alienation that precedes Oedipal symbolization, that is, the introduction of language.

Anal eroticism, then, would seem to speak to a desiring situation which is in some senses fundamentally scandalous and amoral. I desire the object, as it were, not only because I lack it but also because I wish to withhold it from the Other when the Other demands that I give it to them. It's through anality that I'm introduced to my desire by way of an object that is at once intimate and alien (or "extimate")[16] to me, in a deeply ambivalent situation where the thing through which I derive satisfaction is at once an aspect of me (a *gift*) and not me (an abjection, a lump of shit). The withholding and letting-go of the object doesn't directly translate to two "positions" or "sexes." Regardless of my anatomical, endocrinal or chromosomal situation, I am still expected to handle my shit. Nonetheless, though, as Guy Hocquenghem emphasizes, this *disciplining* of anal eroticism is "the precondition of taking responsibility for property" as well as the grounds on which homosexuality is repressed: "Your anus is so totally yours that you must not use it."[17] If my excrement is extimate to me, then, my coming to terms with otherness is associated with a territorialization of my body. I am taught to associate the expulsion of the object – of the abject – with pleasure and to associate holding it inside me not only with the withholding of pleasure but also with the abjection of portions of my own body, that is, with a foreclosure of certain uses of it.

The prologue to *Silence* is acutely invested in this erotic economy. The stingy patron who refuses to give the gift of his shit to others – whose mode of *jouissance* isn't oriented around sacrificing his object to the Other – ultimately only debases and soils himself [*soi sollier*]. By withholding

[16]"Extimacy is not the contrary of intimacy. Extimacy says that the intimate is Other – like a foreign body, a parasite" (Miller, "Extimité", 123).

[17]Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, 99, 100. For Hocquenghem "all homosexuality is concerned with anal eroticism, whatever the differentiations and perverse re-territorialisations to which the Oedipus complex subsequently subjects it" (103). Though Hocquenghem is more steeped in the language of Deleuze and Guattari than of Lacan, what concerns him here is not only actual bodies but also their status in relation to the Symbolic: "Our anal sexuality is enclosed somewhere between the sublime, rarefied air of the mind and the deep excremental swamp of the anus" (100). Hocquenghem's reference to anality as a condition for property ownership also recalls the ascetic dimension of capitalist accumulation that Karl Marx describes in *Capital*. For Marx, an essential characteristic of the capitalist is that from the perspective of the market they must act as a personification of capital itself, which requires that they must always be sacrificing their own enjoyment of the product of capitalist circulation. This is what distinguishes capitalist accumulation from hoarding. "For capitalism is already essentially abolished once we assume that it is enjoyment that is the driving motive and not enrichment itself" (Marx, *Capital Volume II*, 199; for another example see also Marx, *Capital Volume I*, chapter 23, on "Simple Reproduction," 711-24).

the object from circulation, he renders it abject. The narrator's prologue ends with a concluding complaint about *Avarisse*, which Heldris apologizes for, too, in terms of the need to expel a bad object – "I want to get it all out of my system beforehand [*Car jo me voel tost desivrer*] / so that when it's time to tell the tale, / there'll be nothing left in me to spoil [*enpire*] the telling."[18] *Desivrer* (*des* + *ivrer*) refers to an overcoming or passing over of intoxication – "to stop being drunk."[19] It's this privileging of the moment of division, and of the expulsion of some intoxicating object, that governs Heldris' understanding of the distinction between nature and artifice – or "nurture" – in the rambling multi-generational tale that comprises his romance. The determination of what is "natural" is also a dynamic question for Heldris. "Nature" isn't an inevitable or static category, but it does have a truth value and it is sensible: if nature's truth and moral value is ultimately privileged over that of nurture or habit, it's because it's nature's repression that makes it *felt*, that occasions the demand that it be embodied.

Though late medieval natural philosophers generally didn't treat "nature" and "nurture" (the more common term would have been the Aristotelian "habit") as mutually exclusive categories,[20] for Heldris the distinction between them is a central thematic concern. When it comes to the question of gender, *Silence's* ideological wager ultimately lies not in a supposition that "anatomy is destiny" but in its attempt to yoke a particular orientation towards enjoyment to nature. Its central claim about desire is that desire makes itself most felt when it's been repressed, and that the objects that occasion it are coterminous with the desiring subject's "nature." To withhold the object is to repress it – to deny nature – but also to open the door for its inevitable return. In order to accomplish this, the text has to stage a repression of nature: in other words, in order to make nature desirable it must structure itself around a sense of its loss.

[18] Heldris of Cornwall, *Silence*, 80–82.

[19] *Dictionnaire Étymologique de l'Ancien Français*, DEAFplus online ed, s.v. "Ivre," accessed 1 February 2023, https://deaf-server.adw.uni-heidelberg.de/lemme/ivre#desivrer.

[20] Cf. Cadden, *Nothing Natural Is Shameful*: "… whereas modern polemics have occasionally erupted around concepts like 'the gay gene' and 'the homosexual lifestyle,' most of the medieval authors treated here thought that both 'nature' and 'nurture' made sense" (6).

2.2 Perverse genealogies

The nostalgic tenor of the prologue's complaint and the "once upon a time" opening to the tale itself is entirely conventional to Arthurian romance – we're asked to look back to the reign of its King Ebain, a time when the king's "rules were not just idle talk" and when good deeds were not only expected but also rewarded.[21] What's remarkable about *Silence*, though, is the way the text specifically brings this nostalgic comportment to bear on the question of its protagonist's sex, figuring femininity in the process as a lost object whose return is continually deferred up until the narrative's conclusion, when the protagonist's "natural" sex is finally restored.

The indeterminacy of Silence's sex provides the material for the narrative's central conflict, and is made into a problem by an event that occurs before they are even born.[22] When a deadly quarrel breaks out over inheritance rights after two counts marry a pair of twins and can't agree upon which of the twins is the eldest, Ebain, overwhelmed by grief, abolishes female inheritance altogether.[23] It's for this this reason that Silence's father, Cador, insists to his new wife Eufemie that their child be raised as a man:

> "Whichever you have, male or female,
> you shall have the lady announce to me,
> sweet, that you have had a fine son;
> let it be announced in the presence of all.
> For if we have a daughter,
> she won't get a single shred
> of our earthly possessions,
> unless we arrange things so
> cleverly and secretly that nobody finds out what we're up to.
> We will raise her as a boy,
> watch her closely and keep her covered up.
> Thus we will be able to make her our heir:
> no one will be able to challenge it."[24]

[21] Heldris of Cornwall, *Silence*, 107, 112.

[22] Silence's gender in the *Roman* is unstable throughout the text. My practice will generally be to default to gender neutral pronouns, but since the pronoun usage in the text is as unstable and to a degree situational as Silence's gender, my usage will reflect that. When Silence makes the explicit resolution to identify as a man and is referred to with masculine pronouns while wrestling with complications of masculine identification, for instance, I will follow the text's pronoun usage.

[23] Heldris of Cornwall, *Silence*, 309–18.

[24] Heldris of Cornwall, 1747–60.

The determination of Silence's sex here is reliant upon the linguistic framework of patrilineal inheritance and recognition: so long as the child's father thinks the child is a boy, it's a boy. The plan is contrived to the point of absurdity, however. When Cador brings up his concern over inheritance to Eufemie, her initial response is puzzled indifference: " 'I am not to blame, you know, [*En moi, cho savés, n'a nul blasme*] / whether the child is male or female. / God who created and who watches over mankind / has decreed that the mother should be happy / and the father pleased with any child.' "[25]

Cador's pithy invocation of Paul,[26] and insistence that they ought "be of one mind [*aiens le voloir commun*]"[27] on this agreement, though, doesn't stop him from eventually breaching the terms of his own legal fiction. Nature quickly goes to work on the child, going out of her way to create a girl of exceptional beauty ("there is absolutely nothing wrong with this girl – / except that she's too beautiful. / [. . .] Nature will never work so well / on any mortal being again").[28] Once the child is born, the announcement is made publicly that they've given birth to a son, but Cador finds himself unable to contain his curiosity and asks Eufemie directly to tell him the child's sex: "He was in a state of tremendous uncertainty [*moult grant error*], / for he didn't know the truth / [. . .] but he himself had caused this doubt [. . .]. / He wanted to know the truth."[29] The moment the parents decide to raise the child as if it were a boy, Nature of course decides to give them a girl. What's even more ironic about Cador's plan, though, is that it's as though the purpose of deciding ahead of time to raise the child *as if it were* a particular sex were less to ensure the child's sex than to ensure that its sex would always be subject to doubt and uncertainty. On the terms of such an arrangement, even if the child were born "anatomically male," its maleness would need to be a fiction and its "true" sex withheld from the father's knowledge.

As Zrinka Stahuljak has pointed out, while the "discourse of medieval genealogy explicitly promotes the primacy of the natural blood relation between father and son,"[30] many literary narratives

[25]Heldris of Cornwall, 1696–1700.
[26]Ephesians 5:22-23.
[27]Heldris of Cornwall, *Silence*, 1724.
[28]Heldris of Cornwall, 1950–51, 1956–57.
[29]Heldris of Cornwall, 1983–84, 1989–90, 1994.
[30]Stahuljak, *Bloodless Genealogies of the French Middle Ages*, 11.

of the time show a particular concern with the ways in which genealogy has less to do with procreation than with language. "Genealogical filiation," she argues, "is not natural and sanguine; instead, it is a denaturalized, because linguistic, relation between father and son."[31] To the extent that he notes the way in which "literary genealogy" departs from "nature," Blake Gutt's reading of *Tristan de Nanteuil* rhymes with this analysis, going a little further when he aligns the "genealogical imperative" common to the *chanson de geste* with "queerness" as such because of the way that narrative's protagonist changes their sex as part of a "fulfillment of genealogical necessity."[32] *Silence* is consistent with other romances contemporary to it in its emphasis on this linguistic aspect of genealogical filiation. I would argue, however, that given that its narrative rather bluntly pits nature against genealogy to the point of satire, *Silence* puts pressure on the notion that the opposition between genealogy (which the text is always ready to remind us is *patrilineal*) and nature is equivalent with the contradiction between queerness and gender normativity.

Heldris doesn't pretend, for instance, that King Ebain's abolition of female inheritance is especially just or noble. It's a decision he makes while in a "terrible rage [*grant ire*],"[33] and when he demands that his nobles swear an oath to follow the decree not all of his nobles are particularly eager to do so.[34] What distinguishes Cador from his king in this respect though is that he waffles with respect to his commitment to his own speech act, to uphold it as law. Cador's need to know the child's "natural" sex doesn't in fact change his intention to raise the child as a boy; the knowledge of its "natural" sex instead only prompts him to go to even greater lengths to maintain the fiction for the rest of the world. He decides outright to "disguise [*desguiser*]" the child, "to make a male of a female [*faire en voel malle de femiele*]"[35] by way of an elaborate plot to fake the child's near-death and send it to live in isolation in the woods with a family confidant. One should note, though, the emphasis that's placed on the new plan's transactionality. Cador assumes that he can essentially

[31] Stahuljak, 13.

[32] Gutt, "Transgender Genealogy in Tristan de Nanteuil," 130.

[33] Heldris of Cornwall, *Silence*, 308.

[34] "Some did it in anger, / but most did it quite gladly – / the ones who had nothing to lose. But as for those who had only daughters / and huge holdings to bequeath, / don't you think their hearts were filled with rancor?" (Heldris of Cornwall, *Silence*, 324-26).

[35] Heldris of Cornwall, 2039, 2041.

purchase a male heir by paying someone to raise the child for them in seclusion – "I certainly see nothing wrong / with rewarding the lady handsomely," Heldris wryly remarks, "for they will be getting a boy for a girl, / a little male heir instead of a daughter."[36] The child's masculinity must not only be saleable, though. It also needs to be revocable.

The way the narrative lays the groundwork for the confrontation between Nature and Nurture is to pit what we may want to today call "gender" against "sex" in such a way that the former is always forcibly and arbitrarily imposed. The will of the father is such that the child's gender is always exchangeable, subject to the wants of the father. Cador reminds Eufemie that they can't be sure they'll ever have a son, but that in the event that they *did* they can always "turn this one back into a girl [*Cesti ferons desvaleter*]."[37] The word Heldris uses here is *desvaleter* (literally: to "disboy")[38] which as Michèle Perret notices is a neologistic play on *despuceler* – to "disgirl," that is, to deflower.[39] In a recent reading, Caitlin Watt follows Perret's post-structuralist emphasis on this line's linguistic playfulness (one of many "purs jeux sur le signifiant" to be found among romances of its kind), finding it significant of "a remarkable level of flexibility in the formation of gender and the erotic implications of Silence's switching between 'natural' and 'unnatural' gendered positions."[40] Watt argues for a reading of Silence as a transgender man, on the grounds that

> he is a character who spends much of the text living as a man and presents a masculinity based not on genitalia but on his upbringing, his outlook and decisions, and malleable features of his physiognomy, and presents a valuable model of a changeable and vulnerable masculinity that may be best explored by referring to him using masculine pronouns.[41]

There are strong grounds for such an interpretation, particularly in those remarkable moments in the text, which I'll return to later, when Nature is explicitly pitted against both "Nurture" – a prosopopoeial figure without precedent in other narratives of the time – and *Reason.*

[36] Heldris of Cornwall, 2207–10.

[37] Heldris of Cornwall, 2047.

[38] *Valeter* appears to be a verbification of *valet*, a young male servant to a noble: "jeune homme noble placé, pour sa formation, au service d'un seigneur (comme page, comme écuyer. . .)," *Dictionnaire Étymologique de l'Ancien Français*, DEAFplus online ed, s.v. "vaslet," accessed 22 April 2023, https://deaf-server.adw.uni-heidelberg.de/lemme/vaslet#vaslet.

[39] Perret, "Travesties et transsexuelles," 336.

[40] Perret, 336; Watt, "'Car Vallés Sui Et Nient Mescine'," 139.

[41] Watt, "'Car Vallés Sui Et Nient Mescine'," 138.

What seems to get lost in these kinds of readings, though, is the extent to which the departure from Nature is occasioned by a perverse exercise of patriarchal authority: who "dis-boys" the child but the father? *Desvaleter* reduces the line between plucking a child's virginity and castrating them to a mere slip of the tongue. The undertone of sexual violence here is somewhat surprisingly overlooked in these readings, given that the whole scene speaks to the degree to which Cador's occupation of the position of patriarch is addled with anxiety, whether it's in his inability to resist breaking his own rules to have absolute certainty of the child's anatomical sex, or in his elaborate plans to fake the child's death and send it off to live in the woods and be "mis-raised" by a trusted nursemaid.[42] When Cador declares that the child will be named "Silence, / after Saint Patience, / for silence relieves anxiety [*silensce tolt ance*]," it might well be asked: *whose* anxiety?[43]

The Lacanian term *père-version* is perhaps helpful here, which describes the way perversion in psychoanalytic theory is "the sole guarantee" of the paternal function, which the actual (not symbolic) father can only ever attempt to imitate.[44] Perversion describes the father's (deeply alienated) state of being nothing more in his Oedipal role as a *separator* between the mother and child than "the instrument of *jouissance*,"[45] but which – when invoked in the context of how that function is in fact often embodied – names a futile aspiration. While the ("real") father seeks to embody the symbolic function of a mediator, or "happy *me-deum* [*le juste mi-dieu*]" between the mother and child through an intervention that presents himself as an alternative *objet a* for the mother, he rarely succeeds. The failure to embody the function, however, doesn't foreclose its pursuit, which helps explain why "there is nothing worse than a father who proffers the law on everything."[46] Cador is arguably such a father, at once furiously committing himself to establishing the conditions by which his genealogical line might be preserved and unable to follow through on his own commandments.

[42]"La dame estoit al deviser / Ki l'enfant devoit desirrer…" (Heldris of Cornwall, *Silence*, 2175-76). In the glossary of her edition Roche-Mahdi explains that she translates the otherwise unattested word *desirrer* as "mis-raise" or "to put on the wrong path" – *des* + *iterare* (334).

[43]Heldris of Cornwall, 2067–69.

[44]Lacan, Mitchell, and Rose, *Feminine Sexuality*, 167.

[45]Lacan, *Écrits*, 2006, 654.

[46]Lacan, Mitchell, and Rose, *Feminine Sexuality*, 167. On the child as the mother's *objet a*, see "Note sur l'enfant" (Lacan, *Autres Écrits*, 373-75; English: Lacan, "Note on the Child").

Silence is full of such moments of patriarchal caricature. Ebain's impulsive and over-correcting abolition of female inheritance, for instance, is echoed by the hysterics Cador and Eufemie go into when Silence, now a young man, runs off in secret to see the world with a pair of troubadours. In addition to decreeing that all troubadours found within the borders of the duchy be sentenced to death (ironic given that the son whose imagined loss they're grieving had run off to become one),[47] the parents enter a period of extreme and disproportionate mourning. Heldris recounts how Cador and Eufemie's mourning period is marked by so much swooning that taking care of them becomes a full-time job for the nobles attending to them, who are forced to restrain their desire to mourn (*refragnent lor volenté*, which Roche-Mahdi translates as "repressing their natural inclinations") and refrain from crying out in grief (*Eskivent soi de noise faire*) for fear of letting the hyperventilating countess from so much as skipping a breath.[48] For all the tongue-in-cheek hysterics of such a scene, it betrays a preoccupation with discerning between those who have the emotional self-control to perform their duties and those who are of *povre abstinence*,[49] whose refusal to let go of the thing they've lost deprives others of the space to mourn.

Silence, the hero of the romance, will of course emerge a paragon of virtue and restraint against this backdrop of weepy patriarchs. They check off all the boxes of self-effacing courtly nobility, maybe even too well. He excels, for instance, at sports[50] and proves himself so musically gifted that the troubadours he runs off with hatch a plot to murder him because he's netting in more money than they are.[51] I don't think it's in any way an interpretive stretch of Watt's to read Silence as a model of masculinity in this light when she argues for reading him as trans. I think it's important to ask, though, how it is that this transness comes into view in a poem like *Silence*: on what terms does gender get posed as question in the first place? Up to this point I've emphasized the moments in the romance that precede or are more or less anecdotal to what's often read as its main plot as a

[47]Heldris of Cornwall, *Silence*, 3118–26.

[48]Heldris of Cornwall, *Silence*, 3024-25. Eufemie's shortness of breath: "Mais cist nen osent faire noise / Que la contesse ne s'en voise, / Don't on ne puet coisir alainne" (Heldris of Cornwall 3043-45).

[49]Heldris of Cornwall, 3088.

[50]"And by the time he was in his twelfth year, / none was his master any more. / When they practiced wrestling, / jousting or skirmishing, / he alone made all his peers tremble," Heldris of Cornwall, *Silence*, 2492-96.

[51]Heldris of Cornwall, 3215–3402.

series of scenes in which people experience some sort of loss that they don't know quite what to do with or even what it is they've lost. The characters I've focused on – especially the men – commit to doing something about it anyway, and in the process simply shift the grounds on which loss is felt. They defer it. Silence, however, doesn't quite embody that position. Does that make Silence a "valuable model of a changeable and vulnerable masculinity"?[52] Is it the right question to ask if they're a "model" of anything at all, or to imagine that in reading their "transness" we're somehow doing the work of restoring some sense of agency to someone?[53]

In an influential essay on *Silence*, R. Howard Bloch remarks that the "proper of romance" lies in the "interstices between nature, an assumed propriety of names, sexual difference, and the rule of primogenital inheritance, on the one hand, and, on the other, the ruses of language expressed as artifice or hiding (and including silence), transgression of grammatical property, sexual inversion, and the deflection of a proper succession."[54] Part of what I'd like to suggest is that a trans/queer reading practice perhaps ought not be obligated to either pick a side within this list of antimonies or simply add more terms to it (like those of the "sex/gender distinction").[55] In the case of *Silence* in particular, I'd also suggest that such readings can't afford to ignore the transgenerational and violently reparative aspects of the narrative. Is it really the "proper" of a symptomatic reading, for instance, to write off the poem's ending – wherein Silence is "restored" to their "natural" (feminine) sex – as only a "sideshow" in which the text's queerness can only be a slip of a larger ideological agenda?[56]

The range of scholarly responses to Silence's unusual sexuation may nonetheless be indexical of something that is genuinely problematic and difficult given the hermeneutic tools available to both our contemporary moment and Heldris' for describing aberrant gender positions. It's in such

[52]Watt, "'Car Vallés Sui Et Nient Mescine'," 138.

[53]On the critique of the historiographical fashion of "giving back agency" to certain kinds of historical subjects, cf. Johnson, "On Agency."

[54]Bloch, R. Howard, "Silence and Holes," 87.

[55]For one particularly powerful critique of the medicalist invention of the category of "gender" as a means of disciplining the sexual plasticity of trans and intersex bodies in the mid twentieth century, see Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child*.

[56]Cf. Clark, "Queering Gender and Naturalizing Class in the 'Roman de Silence'," who argues that the poem's "queering of gender" is ultimately "a sideshow, albeit a spectacular one, part of a larger strategy which seeks to naturalize social hierarchy" (61-62).

a light that the question of how to account for Silence's gender may be less interesting than how the *Roman de Silence's* narrative poses the *question* of gender in the first place. By attending to some of the ways the romance is punctuated by *loss*, I've meant to suggest that loss is constituent of how it poses that question in some important ways. But "loss" isn't, in itself, an answer to this more basic question. What I'd like to suggest is that the grounds by which any reading of Silence's "gender" (including those which may make a claim to their "transness") might take place are in part established by the ideological commitments of the text's own melancholic structure, through which a social and psychological repression of "femininity" preserves femininity as an essence or lost object whose recovery is the object of a reparative desire. *Silence's* narrative, then, presents a theory of gender insofar as it fetishistically presents it as something which exists prior to the subject and which, having been fantasized as something which that subject has abandoned, can be restored.

2.3 The melancholic supplement

In terms of its avowed narrative commitments, *Silence* is of course by no means a "depressive" text. Performative authorial complaints aside, "the proper of romance," we might say, has less to do with consolation than with telling a good story.[57] But it's worth remembering that about a third of the text is concerned with establishing the staging of the life that concerns that story: the abolition of female inheritance, the meeting and lengthy courtship of Cador and Eufemie, the hatching of the plot to raise their child as a boy. I've suggested that this prehistory is to a large extent characterized as a series of losses, each of which precipitates a deferral or misrecognition of the object of those losses. By treating its subject's occupation of an affective position that is first and foremost shaped by contradiction – whether between desire and demand or between the subject and its identifications – as the site of a kind of narrative tension that necessarily demands a resolution, the romance form can take on a specific ideological force with respect to questions of sexuation. What I haven't addressed, though, is the question of loss itself. What sort of loss is loss, and in what sense is a narrative or form of desire "melancholic" when it's structured around it? In this section, I'd like to

[57] Cf. Bloch, R. Howard, "Silence and Holes," 87.

attend to how the text's understanding of sexual difference depends on an ideological notion that desire, properly understood, is something which follows a subject's "nature," and suggest that a large part of such an account relies on a melancholic theory of desire.

If *Le Roman de Silence* prompts the question of gender it's by way of a melancholic conception of desire: Silence's "natural" gender position is posited as something which has been *lost*, whose absence is felt in diffuse and indirect ways but often not consciously identified by Silence themself, at least not with absolute certainty. In the next section I will spend some time dwelling in this sense of uncertainty that the narrative opens up, but before I get to that I think it's important to explain what I mean by this sense of loss, as well as the sense in which desire itself is melancholic in both medieval philosophical and modern psychoanalytic thought. Like sodomy, melancholia is a sin centered on questions of what constitutes proper enjoyment, marking the point at which the consequences of my mode of enjoyment becomes problematic to my adaptation to the world. The object of melancholia is more elusive, however.

For Freud the difficulty of melancholia lies in the way loss appears to be something of an enigma. Karl Abraham had ventured in 1911 to explain "neurotic depression" in terms of a subject's resignation of gratification: "A neurotic will be attacked with anxiety when his instinct strives for a gratification which repression prevents him from attaining; depression sets in when he has to give up his sexual aim without having attained gratification."[58] By the time Freud turns to the subject in "Mourning and Melancholia," though, he's noticed a difference between those subjects whose symptoms could be attributed to a loss that was conscious – the grief over losing a loved one, or even for a time in which things were different – and those for whom it could not. Even in those cases where a conscious cause for grieving could be found, the significance of what had been lost wasn't self-evident: "He knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him."[59] The distinction ultimately hinges on identification: "in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself," as the thing which has been lost – and around which strong

[58] Abraham, *Selected Papers*, 137–38.
[59] Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, 1957, 14:245.

feelings of both love and hatred have gathered – is unconsciously identified with.[60]

If this all sounds rather abstract it's because melancholia doesn't have one form or cause: the problem Freud begins from is the question of why there are those who demonstrate many of the same symptoms of someone who has experienced some great tragedy or loss but doesn't themself know what the cause of those feelings may be. Depression may begin from grieving but it isn't identical with it. It helps to describe when the perfectly "normal" response to some sort of loss becomes "pathological," that is, when it persists beyond the reckoning with loss itself ("real" or otherwise) and may even become deadly. The melancholic ego is an open wound and a libidinal vacuum: it confronts us with the possibility that loss may not be all there is to loss. When my affective investment in my object – necessarily ambivalent – has nowhere to go upon losing (or losing interest in) that object, I turn that investment inwards. The question of loss now opens out onto questions of identification and the object itself: if there is a sense in which I "identify" with that object – that is, incorporate the elements of that object that elicited such strong feelings into my own ego – we may well wonder if that "object" is identical with the one that may have been lost or let go of in the first place.

It's because melancholia brushes up so closely to questions of desire, identification, and even pleasure that subjects (and narratives) often go to very great lengths to avoid it. What Freud called melancholia's *ambivalence* – the way the melancholic internalizes their repressed scorn for the loved object – offers, I think, an illustrative case of what Lacan would later refer to as *jouissance*. In melancholia enjoyment appears not only as the "beyond" of pleasure – that is, the point at which physical stimulation risks tipping over from pleasure into displeasure (as in an orgasm) – but also reveals itself in the melancholic's ambivalent attachment to their own symptoms and to the less dramatic ways a subject might take pleasure in their own displeasure. In both Abraham and Freud's early observations about melancholia we find the observation that the patients derive a kind of perverse enjoyment of their own suffering.[61] I become habituated to my own despair; I attach myself

[60] Freud, 14:246.

[61] "The patient will adopt a passive attitude, and will obtain pleasure from his suffering and from continually thinking about himself. Thus even the deepest melancholic distress contains a hidden source of pleasure" (Abraham, *Selected Papers*, 147). "The self-tormenting in melancholia, which is no doubt enjoyable, signifies, just like the corresponding

to it. It's the sense of what Lauren Berlant would perhaps refer to as *stuckness* that's of interest here: the problem of melancholia comes into view alongside the observation that I may become attached to my own suffering in such a way that it begins to feel like home, so that to abandon it becomes unthinkable because it is, in a sense, unbearable.[62] Perhaps this is why melancholia is, in the middle ages, so strongly associated with *acedia*, with sloth generally being understood as not so much a sin against "work ethic" as of a certain perversion of desire, as a mismanagement of *jouissance*.

In the medieval moral imaginary, concerns over money, anality, and sloth are ultimately economic: what's at stake for so many texts that concern themselves with the ethics of these subjects is the question of how one ought to manage one's own enjoyment, and the ways in which falling into and out of sin is less a question of epigenetic causality or a subject's failure to conform with a specific model or type than it is a kind of libidinal balancing act. What these particular anxieties ask again and again is whether one's enjoyment of an object that one doesn't *sacrifice* and *dis-identify* with is really enjoyment at all. It's the prickliness of this question that "Nature" is so often mobilized to smooth over, to provide an anchor point by which a subject might find its balance. In order to parse the antimony between "Nature" and "Nurture" (or *habitus*) in this imaginary, then, I think it's important to account for how Nature is already a kind of supplement to the deeper state of ambivalence and uncertainty that marks the depressive position.

While by the later middle ages sloth's "innocent mixture of unwillingness and laziness" that we may at times be wont to understand as "a sin against the capitalist work ethic" is certainly something that we might trace coming into view in such expressions as the fourteenth century English preoccupation with *waste,* Giorgio Agamben reminds us that for the church fathers it named something far graver.[63] If the affliction manifests itself as a "withdrawal from the divine good," it is because this "*recessus* of the slothful does not betray an eclipse of desire but, rather, the becoming unobtainable of its object: *it is the perversion of a will that wants its object, but not the way that*

phenomenon in obsessional neurosis, a satisfaction of trends of sadism and hate which relate to an object, and which have been turned round upon the subject's own self in the ways we have been discussing" (Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, 1957, 251).

[62] Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 112: "There is converging that is inseparable from abandonment, movement within varieties of intense stuckness, and foreclosing gestures that are also openings [. . .]."

[63] Agamben, *Stanzas*, 5.

leads to it, and which simultaneously desires and bars the path to his or her own desire."[64] When, for instance, Augustine recalls the ways in which his youthful love of the theatre was connected to a love of suffering – "I was allured all the more by the actor's interpretation when it moved me to tears"[65] – part of what's sinful about this form of *jouissance* lies in its banality. Augustine's appetite for suffering wasn't for one that would "penetrate [him] deeply" but for a kind of suffering which would ultimately amount to an accretion of sickly little pleasures, "a seething, swelling putrefaction and revolting pus" of sinfulness.[66] What begins to come into view in such an account is the precariousness of the relation between enjoyment and desire: I take pleasure in suffering not because it's suffering itself that I desire but because what that suffering occasions is my continued desiring. It's here where sin enters the picture: ultimately, my desire is not, or not only, my own, and if that is the case than neither is the satisfaction which I withhold in my effort to continue desiring without end.

The state Lady Philosophy finds Boethius in when she casts out the poetic muses in the beginning of the *Consolation of Philosophy* is not so dissimilar. These "chorus girls" (*scenicas meretriculas*), as they are described, substitute reason for the "useless thorns of passion" (*infructuosis affectuum spinis*), habituating the mind to illness rather than liberating it (*mentes assuefaciunt morbo, non liberunt*).[67] The narrator's ailment is all the more grave for how comfortable he has become in occupying it. Melancholia is a *habitus* that extends beyond whatever may occasion it, a practice of suffering for its own sake, of digging one's own heels into your grief. As the *Consolation* continually insists, however, such a state carries with it a "responsibility," as Vance Smith puts it, for there "to be something that resolve[s] or transcend[s] it – that would terminate it."[68] Answering such a demand is anything but straightforward. The cure for melancholia isn't to be found in the mere rejection of suffering in order to aspire towards happiness and "good" pleasures. In fact, happiness – that is, fortuitous happiness, the kind that one generally pursues – can be in its own way cruel and

[64] Agamben, 6.
[65] Augustine, *Confessions*, 54.
[66] Augustine, 55.
[67] Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 1973, 134.
[68] Smith, *Arts of Dying*, 4.

capricious:

> [A]sk of a man who has been having a run of good luck whether he knows or doesn't know that it can be taken away. If he doesn't know, then he can't be happy but only ignorant; and if he does know, then he can't be happy because he is worried about losing everything at any moment, and this continual fear will keep him from being happy. Or there is a third possibility, which is that he thinks it won't matter when he loses it all. But in that case, he doesn't value it very much and doesn't care about what he can so calmly imagine losing.[69]

The problem with pursuing happiness in good fortune is that this sort of contingent, temporary satisfaction will always be predicated on a kind of cruel optimism insofar as it is predicated on whether or not one possesses it, and possession is always accompanied by the possibility for dispossession. A privileged case for this is money. "Are riches ever really yours?" Lady Philosophy asks, observing that "money is precious not when you have it but when it passes on from you to somebody else, in which case you don't have it anymore."[70] The paradox of wealth is that we only aim to accumulate it in order to spend it, we can only enjoy it by losing it.

This doesn't mean that a state of total dispossession is desirable or morally superior, though. The hypothetical existence of a "single man who had all the money in the world" so that "the rest of mankind would have to live without it" demonstrates that money "can't be possessed without making others poorer."[71] The question of value is also a question of *enjoyment*: just as the melancholic goes against nature in refusing the satiation of their own suffering, the hoarder of wealth accumulates gold at the expense of their own enjoyment of it, and makes everyone around them impoverished in the process. In Lady Philosophy's thought experiment, the existence of even one person who has abundant wealth while everyone else has none doesn't amount to the abolition of money: rather than his money being worthless because it can't be *exchanged*, the presence of wealth is always accompanied by its own lack. What should be noted in this account, though, is that this critique of wealth isn't a critique of money itself: what's importantly retained is a sense that there can be such a thing as a just exchange, and that the existence of money doesn't in itself inevitably pave the way for the unequal accumulation of wealth. It's possible, that is, to imagine a world in which we all

[69]Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 2008, 41.
[70]Boethius, 43.
[71]Boethius, 44.

lack equally.

This dynamic is played out more fully in the dialogue on happiness. If worldly happiness doesn't necessarily preclude suffering, it's because people go to irrational, self-destructive lengths in order to pursue it: "we know that many men have looked for happiness even through pain and suffering. How, then, can this present life make them happy when the prospect of its end does not make them miserable?"[72] If there's something cruelly optimistic about happiness, then, it isn't our desire for happiness itself that obstructs our own flourishing – the problem isn't, in other words, that happiness is an *object* of our desire – but rather that we fetishistically mistake some *aspect* of happiness for Happiness qua Happiness. What Boethius grapples with in the first two books of the *Consolation* is the ethical impasse that accompanies just this realization. We may well ask if the mistake of the melancholic – the *morbus mens* – is, then, not only in mistaking fortuitous happiness for Happiness as such, but, moreover, because they *know better than to be happy.* In justifiably turning away from the false and momentary happiness of fortune, the melancholic also casts out God.

The melancholic situation, then, always demands some sort of supplement. To the extent that it (like death) can't ever be thought in terms of pure negativity or lack, it follows that the notion of a subject who *has no will* or who wills their own death is a kind of aporia, understandable only in terms of logical fallacy or (self-)deceit. That the depressive position registers an *impasse* wherein the subject is opportunely positioned to discern between the way their desire and their knowledge join hands to negate that subject is just what makes this impasse so productive for medieval writers. Melancholia has a *telos* in the sense that it produces the terms for its own dissolution, it demands a supplement by which its impasse can be traversed.

Towards what, though? For Boethius, at least, the endpoint of consolation is perpetually deferred. As Mark Miller has pointed out, at the center of the *Consolation's* dialectic is its collapse of two contradictory accounts of action, that is, between an essentially Aristotelian account according to which "everything an agent pursues is under the aspect of some good" and a stronger Platonist claim

[72]Boethius, 42.

that "all action aims at one thing, which is 'the good' as such."[73] It's this failure to satisfactorily reconcile these two viewpoints, however, that makes the *Consolation* a compelling account of subjectivity, because it's precisely in his attempt to conflate these two versions of agency in accounting for the human capacity for self-destruction that he introduces a split between will and desire.

One of the more powerful moments where this split comes into view is in Book III, when upon demonstrating that "everything that exists endures [*manere*] and perseveres [*subsistere*] as long as it is a unity [*quam diu sit unum*] but is destroyed as soon as it ceases to be a unity" Lady Philosophy asks Boethius if, when acting "naturally," if any living thing ever "abandons its appetite for existence and survival."[74] When Boethius denies this, with the possible exception of "plants or trees or things that are in no way alive," Philosophy interjects that the same is true of them too, for "Nature gives each plant what is appropriate for it and keeps it alive for as long as possible."[75] This "love of survival" unites both willing subjects and the natural world:

> "We are talking here not of voluntary motions of intelligent souls but of the workings of nature, in which we also participate. We digest the food we have consumed without any conscious thought and we breathe in our sleep without being aware of what we are doing. Even in living things, then, the love of survival [*manendi amor*] is not something that is willed but a consequence of natural principles. Indeed, there are times when the will may decide it is better to die, while nature fears and avoids death. Or although nature always wants it, there may be occasions when the will decides to refrain from the act of procreation that perpetuates all mortal things. You see, then, that this love of self comes not from the will but from nature, as a gift of providence, so that all things desire to persist and endure for as long as they can."[76]

The existence of free will introduces the possibility that the subject may act against their own desire, which, she explains, is always a desire for "unity" [*Omnia . . . unum desiderant*], which is not only "the same thing as the good," but also both the "end and the object of all things."[77] The culmination

[73]Miller, *Philosophical Chaucer*, 115.

[74]Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 2008, 94; Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 1973, 278.

[75]Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 2008, 95.

[76]Boethius, 96.

[77]Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 2008, 3.11.97; Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 1973, 282. When I cite both Slavitt and Tester's editions of the *Consolation*, I refer to Slavitt's English translation and the Loeb edition's Latin as supplement. The original Latin for this latter passage is a little less concise than how Slavitt renders it, though my reading here agrees with his interpretation. Lady Philosophy's original wording might be more literally

of this argument is found in the next book – when Lady Philosophy explains that since everyone desires the Good whether they realize it or not, "the wicked are actually happier being punished than they would be if there were no retribution to restrain them."[78]

This split between will and desire is necessary for the *Consolation's* dialectic to establish God as both the *telos* and *object* of all desire. That is, in order to maintain that the subject falls under the swing of what might be read as an ontologically primary "life drive" – that is, of an erotic "desire to be one" that inheres to the "love of survival" – it is necessary to ontologically abolish from "nature" and from *desire* any suggestion of a division within desire itself. The subject can *will* their own death, but in doing so they are acting contrary to their own desire and, it follows, against nature and the good: "Nam saepe mortem cogentibus causis quam natura reformidat voluntas amplectitur" (the will [*voluntas*] often, with good cause [*cogentibus causis*], embraces death while nature recoils from it).[79] The split between *desiderium* and *voluntas* on the one hand preserves the rationality of both terms. For even when the will embraces death, it doesn't do so without *cogentibus causis*, that is, without compelling grounds or cause for doing so. But why should this account of the will emerge first from an observation about procreation? What's striking in this account is the will's negativity: it appears here in the act of *refraining* from procreation, "the act that perpetuates all mortal things."

Given the *Consolation's* lack of concern with the more overtly theological entanglements of things like carnal desire and sinfulness, it's notable that here there should be some urgency in establishing an account of the will by introducing a point of divergence from it and a deeper, more authentic, desire that is coterminous with the natural imperative to reproduce. I would argue that this is an important feature of the *Consolation's* ideological commitments, which can also be found is in later medieval texts which more explicitly deal with questions of gender and sexuality. In a text like Heldris of Cornwall's *Roman de Silence*, for instance, something like a distinction between sex and gender emerges in such a way that also ultimately binds them together, marking their

rendered as "all things end [in the highest good] and it is that [i.e., the highest good] which all things desire"[*'Quis esset,' inquit* – referring back, that is, to Boethius' earlier acknowledgment that all things tend towards the "summum bonum" a little earlier on lines 115-116 – *rerum omnium finis. Is est enim profecto, quod desideratur ab omnibus*].

[78]Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 2008, 122.

[79]Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 1973, 292 (my translation).

divergences from one another as unnatural. While in *Silence*, however, part of how the titular character's "natural" gender is discerned is through the plot's determination that their socialized one forecloses sexual enjoyment, what's striking in Lady Philosophy's account of procreation is how radically desexualized it is.

This is in stark contrast to a thinker like Augustine, for whom sexuality, as Willemien Otten has argued, provides a privileged reference point for understanding sin itself as a "permanent destabilizing human force."[80] On this account, the division between carnal and spiritual desire is a point of productive contradiction. When Augustine confesses to being "in love with being in love," for instance, carnal pleasure in a sense serves a purpose for its inability to provide the satisfaction of divine eros.[81] As Alenka Zupančič puts it, sin here inscribes a *lack in nature*. If we are *naturally* compelled to reproduce, the thing that makes the actual carrying out of this imperative unbearable lies in nature itself: sex reminds us that "nature lacks something in order to be Nature (our Other) in the first place."[82] The symptom of this predicament is the shame that accompanies knowledge. The awareness of one's own nakedness – and of the necessity of the sexual act in order to fulfill this procreative imperative – is itself a reminder of a kind of loss: " 'knowing the other in the biblical sense' is to engage with the point in the Other where knowledge is lacking."[83] What the *Consolation* represses, then, may be just this lack.

For Boethius, though, the division between will and desire speaks to the myriad ways the subject is prone to misrecognizing or misreading their own desire. The result is that this constituent negativity is less characteristic of knowledge than it is of the will. Perhaps this is why Lady Philosophy only addresses the issue of reproduction by way of a digression on plants – to address human reproduction would mean locating negativity within knowledge itself rather than within the will. This may be where the ideological kernel of the *Consolation* begins to come into view: not, perhaps, so much in the explicit unstitching of sexuality from *jouissance* as in the unconscious

[80]Otten, "Augustine on Marriage, Monasticism, and the Community of the Church," 387.

[81]"You were always there, savaging me in your pity, scattering the most acrid upsets on everything illicit that I enjoyed, and you did this to make me look for enjoyment without any upset and be unable to find it in anything but you," Augustine, *Confessions*, 36–37.

[82]Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*, 15.

[83]Zupančič, 17.

need to preserve the wholeness of "Nature" as a bedrock of certainty against which I might discern the truth of my desires. Such an account remains coherent only so far as sexuality and enjoyment remain outside of the picture, but it's in moments like this one when their absence is most felt. Insofar as the *Consolation* is a text about discerning one's desires, perhaps it's this elision that allows the text's dialectic to take on its curative function in the first place when it introduces its melancholic supplement in the form of discourse. If, as I'd argue, a literary text like *Silence* could take the supposition of such an alignment between desire and "Nature" for granted several centuries later, though, the fact that it reintroduces the question of sex comes uncomfortably close to undoing that work.

2.4 Sex or nature

While one of the most famous and ideologically significant moments in the *Roman de Silence* is the allegorical confrontation between Nature and Nurture, what's at stake in this confrontation is not so much the question of whether one or the other is ultimately determinate of the protagonist's sex as is whether Silence's good nature will be allowed to find expression despite their unconventional upbringing.[84] Though the text does present a situation in which there is a divergence between its subject's "natural" and socialized sex, the appeal it makes to the reader in terms of recognizing which of these is Silence's "right" sex is ultimately more concerned with morality – with keeping in tact, that is, their "good nature" – than it is with either etiological explanation or with something like what we might today understand as "biological" sex. What interests me here is on what terms Silence's gender becomes a question for the reader, particularly when speaking of a character in large part defined by how they find themself at an impasse of what the text terms "nature" and "nurture."

At what point and how does "Nature" cease to be a merely metaphysical category and come to be embodied in such a way that we might unthinkingly recognize it as a more or less material

[84]When Silence runs off in secret with the travelling jongleurs, he adopts the nom de plum Malduit, "because he thought himself very badly brought up [*moult por mal duit*], / very badly educated with regard to his nature [*sa nature*], / and also to conceal his identity" (Heldris of Cornwall, *Silence*, 3176-80).

reality? Upon registering Nature's "mourning and grieving" [*plaint et dolose*] over the loss of the child to Nurture, the narrator recounts some of the circumstances under which a person's upbringing can override their nature. The main claim of this narrative aside has to do with the compulsion towards evil: negativity for Heldris has a gravitational pull that goodness doesn't, and questions of nature and *habitus* are generally secondary to this more fundamental moral economy. "A little bad nurture," we're told, "harms a good nature more / than lengthy instruction in doing good / can mend a heart intrinsically evil."[85] Likewise, when a person has a "vile nature," it *pays a deposit* on them:

> We have seen many a man do the right thing
> for one, two, three or four years,
> only because of nurture,
> whatever his vile nature wants,
> and then afterwards repent of it,
> go back on his fine behavior;
> thus his wicked nature wins out
> by plunging him back into villainy.
> For his vile nature has paid a deposit on him [*Car li nature vils l'enerre*],
> and his heart of coarse clay [*cuers de la grosse terre*]
> holds sway over him
> and soils his fine apparel.[86]

We might imagine the antinomies of "good" and "evil" and "nature" and "nurture" as separate axes here, independent variables that come together in the determination of a person's character. To settle on that, though, wouldn't quite capture the text's assumptions about agency and free will, which I think when accounted for don't allow us to read these antinomies as is they were free-floating variables. While part of what's novel about *Silence* is the fact that it allows for a figure like "Nurture" to appear as a character at all (let alone one capable of overpowering "Nature"), the narrative's supposition that Nature, regardless of subsequent accidents of life and habit, "pays a deposit" on the subjects may be a point that the introduction of a rival "Nurture" ultimately functions to reinforce. In other words, we may well ask whether there's a sense in which the split between nature and nurture functions to naturalize nature, to lend a sense of validity or truthfulness to what's natural over and against "nurture" or habit.

[85] Heldris of Cornwall, 2339–42.
[86] Heldris of Cornwall, 2313–24.

In Boethius we found proof of the existence of something like free will in the observation that subjects are capable of abstention. In the case of the "will to survival," for instance, Boethius understands the will to be operating contrary to nature when it refuses life – that is, when it abstains from reproducing itself. Just as pertinent to his theory of subjectivity, though, are those scenes in which acting in accordance with nature requires a similar act of abstention. Such is the position of the melancholic, for whom the *habitus* of sloth must be overcome in order to act in accordance with their own nature and "life-driven" desire. It's in such a position that something like a "death drive" comes into view as that aspect of subjectivity that operates contrary to "nature." What *Silence* introduces is something that the moral philosophical form of the *Consolation* can't quite make room for, perhaps because of the way it exists somewhere in between and in excess of the antimony between the "will to survival" and the *jouissance* that accompanies the "love of suffering": that is, sexuality.

Silence's assumption of a masculine role appears to be more than simply a matter of performance or disguise. The narrative implies more than once, for instance, that Silence takes on a number of presumably "male" physiological traits: as a child, they "gr[ow] more sturdily in a year / than others do in three," and, as I briefly touched on before, when they begin to enter adolescence they quickly prove themself to be hardly lacking in matters of athleticism – "when they practiced wrestling, / jousting or skirmishing, / he [Silence] alone made all his peers tremble."[87] It's at this point that Nature is summoned by Silence's own guilty conscience for "practicing deception" [*fesist par couverture*], reprimanding Silence that they're wasting the "speciäl forme" that she had used to make them.[88] The definitive – "natural" – criteria for their sex, though, don't simply have to do with questions of embodiment. Heldris notes wryly that "whatever one could see was certainly male" but that "there's more than meets the eye," and Nature taunts Silence by pointing out that

> [. . .] there are a thousand women in this world
> who are madly in love with you
> because of the beauty they see in you –
> you don't suppose they think something's there [*Car puet scel estre eles i croient*]

[87] Heldris of Cornwall, 2352–53, 2394–96.
[88] Heldris of Cornwall, 2499, 2505.

that was never part of your equipment at all? [*Tel cose qu'en toi nen a mie*]
There are those who love you now
who would hate you with all their hearts
if they knew what you really are![89]

The fact that Nature makes her claim on Silence on the basis of phallic criteria is itself, of course, a kind of ideological error. As Geneviève Morel puts it, this error "consists in changing the status of the phallus, from signifier of jouissance into master signifier of the discourse on sex."[90] That Nature's claim on Silence's sex is illustrated with the taunt that any attraction women might feel towards them is based on the mistaken assumption that they have a penis illustrates the nature of this error quite lucidly. It consists in the identification of the penis with the phallus, as both the bearer of *jouissance* and the privileged signifier of sexual difference as it pertains to either gender or biological sex. Silence's masculinity is ultimately thrown into doubt not because of how he is embodied or interpellated but up to a certain point despite these things, insofar, that is, as the "error" of their assigned sex assumes a criterion of difference that consists in fetishizing a specific organ.

As becomes clear soon enough, the result is that Silence can only experience the sexual encounter itself as a threat, capable of unravelling their being. This is why these phallic criteria underwrite so much of how we're told Silence comes to term with their own male identification, even (or especially) in those moments where Silence seems to come to this identification against the grain of those criteria. Nature's scolding instantiates a crisis of identification rather than some sort of revelation about their true nature: when Nature tells Silence to give up manhood and "go to a chamber and learn to sew!" she triggers something of an identity crisis in Silence.[91] "I am other than who I was [*jo sui altres que ne fui*]," Silence laments, "I am Silentius, / as I see it, or I am no one."[92] Part of what makes this scene so remarkable, though, is how this private dysphoric struggle gets transformed into a neurotic psychomachia when Nurture shows up to make the case for Silence's manhood. Silence complains to Nurture that Nature is probably right:

Did anything like this ever happen to anyone?

[89]Heldris of Cornwall, 2478–79, 2513–20.
[90]Morel, *Sexual Ambiguities*, 132.
[91]Heldris of Cornwall, *Silence*, 2528.
[92]Heldris of Cornwall, 2534, 2537–38.

Never! Now, when I get dressed,
and don't participate
in the kinds of games that boys are used to,
all my companions jeer,
'This one will be a terrible coward,
if he lives that long!'
But they don't know how it is with me.
Whenever I happen to get undressed,
I am afraid my sex will be discovered.[93]

Nature's intervention doesn't appear to have needed to be argued: her appeal doesn't need to be made by way of an appeal to reason or dialectic because what summons her is an already existing fear about an already suspected truth. The prosopopoeic element of this scene stands out in a tale that up to now hasn't place a strong emphasis on allegory: up to this point Nature is represented outside the actual world in which Silence lives, as a device of the narrator. The appearance of Nature and Nurture here, though, appears less as an *intervention* than as a realization of an internal psychic conflict, enacting a sort of prosopopoeic free indirect discourse whereby the terms of that conflict can be projected outside of Silence's inner world into the language of allegorical dialogue.

Nurture does have a thing or two to say in response to this rather impulsive decision of Silence's to turn their life upside down and cease living as a man, however. Nurture chases off Nature and summons Reason, who makes the case that if Silence were to "abandon her nature / to take up the habits of nature, / it would be almost as bad / as killing herself," not only because it's how they've lived their whole life up until this point but also because they would be giving up their inheritance.[94] It's at this point, in an oft-cited passage, that Silence reflects upon the implications of continuing to live the rest of their life as a man:

Then he began to consider
the pastimes of a woman's chamber –
which he had often heart about –
and weighed in his heart of hearts
all female customs against his current way of life,
and saw, in short, that a man's life
was much better than that of a woman.

[93]Heldris of Cornwall, 2563–72.
[94]Heldris of Cornwall, 2611–13.

"Indeed," he said, "it would be too bad
to step down when I'm on top.
If I'm on top, why should I step down?
Now I'm honored and valiant.
No I'm not, upon my word – I'm a disgrace
if I want to be one of the women.
I was trying to make life easy for myself,
but I have a mouth too hard for kisses,
and arms too rough for embraces.
One could easily make a fool of me [*On me poroit tost afoler*]
in any game played under the covers, [*Al giu c'on fait desos gordine*]
for I'm a young man, not a girl.
I don't want to lose my high position;
I don't want to exchange it for a lesser,
and I don't want to prove my father a liar.[95]

Here Silence attempts to convince themself to hold onto their masculine position and renounce "Nature." The logic of this speech is interestingly twofold: on the one hand, there is the relative privilege granted to men under the patriarchal inheritance system that they would be foolish to throw away. But it's anxiety around the sex act itself that occasions the thought, which I think Robert Clark is correct in identifying as anxiety about the prospect of committing sodomy: "What would he, a boy, have to do if he went underneath, if he wanted to be 'like a woman' (which is something different from being a woman) in the game 'under the covers?' "[96] This sexual discomfort disturbs the social logic of gender in this passage, as Silence's shame at the possibility of giving up a preferential social position for a moment seems only to be a way of compromising with a deeper anxiety about the otherness of feminine sexuality.

This discomfort is especially apparent in the fact that their masculinity is accounted for not strictly through identification but by way of negation: with their "*trop dure boche*" and "*trop rois bras*," their chiseled physique would hardly allow them to pull off the "feminine" sexual role (so they imagine). The remark introduces some ambiguity, though, in its elision of the role of the phallic function: Silence's claim to masculinity isn't made on the grounds of what he *has* so much as what he *doesn't* have. We may well ask *which* "game" Silence has in mind when they say that they would

[95]Heldris of Cornwall, 2632–53.
[96]Clark, "Queering Gender and Naturalizing Class in the 'Roman de Silence'," 55.

be made a fool of in any game played "under the covers" [*desos gordine*]: would this be any less the case if the sexual partner were a woman? Part of what's surprising about the passage is that this latter question, at least for now, seems to be the wrong one – the proof of his masculinity at this moment in the narrative isn't to be found in his sexual prowess but, in a sense, in his incompetence, in the anticipation of something not quite working.

The passage articulates some of the ways in which heterosexual masculinity is produced on the back of the foreclosure of certain forms of enjoyment. As we're told after this little soliloquy, one of Silence's defining virtues is his *abstinence*: "If what the story that keeps alive / the memory of Silence tells us / is true, you never heard of such forbearance [*abstinence*] / as was to be found in Silence."[97] As I touched on earlier, this is on the one hand in sharp contrast with his father and king, but scenes like this one also make clear how central sexuality is to how gender functions within the text's moral system. If one takes "Nurture" to be on the side of something like gender, what I think can be seen starting to take shape in this dysphoric scene is an attempt at unstitching gender from *jouissance*, because what the narrative is beginning to establish is an identification of living in accordance with one's "nature" with the capacity for taking part in the sexual act. However, the distinction between gender and sexual enjoyment that the text seems to be drawing here isn't one that supposes that the separating of the two is either ethical or desirable. What the overpowering of nature by nurture in this scene implies is a trade off: Silence can take on a position of phallic power – the athletic prowess, the inheritance of his father's lineage and wealth, his "high position" – only by giving up sex altogether. In other words, within the demand that Silence sacrifice their feminine sexuality without providing any viable sublimation for it there is also be the quiet suggestion that their eventual reconciliation with their "nature" is inevitable if only because it is the only way for them to be a sexual subject.

The only moments in the narrative where Silence is actually confronted with the possibility of having a sexual encounter are in the series of seduction attempts by Queen Eufeme, who becomes a sort of moral foil to Silence. Upon Silence's return to his homeland after their time abroad with

[97] Heldris of Cornwall, *Silence*, 2657–60.

the minstrels, Eufeme (not to be confused with Silence's mother, Eufemie) becomes obsessed with the youth after hearing them play the harp after his triumphant return to court and Cador's re-legalization of minstrelry. Having had Silence come play the harp for her in her chamber one evening, Eufeme offers Silence "two kisses for one," explaining that it's a *riche cange*, a splendid deal or "rate of exchange."[98] What becomes apparent in this exchange is that the distinction between their two characters' moral natures is not strictly reducible to questions of adultery and loyalty but also bears on questions of enjoyment and moral economy:

> Right on her forehead, just below her wimple,
> Silence gave her one chaste kiss –
> for you can be very sure he had no intention
> of kissing her the way she wanted.
> But the lady, who did not care
> to be kissed in this manner,
> gave him five long kisses,
> exceedingly passionate and very skillful.
> Besides the two kisses she had promised,
> she gave him so many others
> that he was extremely upset.
> The lady said, "My God! are you running away?
> What's the matter?" she said, "is something wrong?
> Don't you like the rate of exchange?" [*Ene vos plaist si fais cangiers?*][99]

What's striking about this interaction isn't so much that Eufeme treats the kisses as if they were subject to laws of valuation as it is that the laws by which she seems to think they operate aren't *just*. Her kisses are usurious kisses: what she describes as a *riche cange* isn't a kiss-for-kiss exchange but an unnatural transformation of one chaste kiss into five lascivicious ones. This disposition towards kissing for its own sake indicates a distinction between Eufeme and Silence that may not be strictly sexual.

When Eufeme begins to take off her clothes and continue groping him, Silence continues to be completely uninterested in her – "his nature kept him from responding [*nel consent pas sa nature*]."[100] In what sense does Silence's "nature" refuse to "consent" to Eufeme's advances? The

[98] Heldris of Cornwall, 3761–62.
[99] Heldris of Cornwall, 3765–78.
[100] Heldris of Cornwall, 3824.

function of euphemism here seems to be to insist upon a difference of natures in such a way that begins to erode the pretext of sexual difference. Silence's "nature" doesn't respond to Eufeme, both because he lacks Eufeme's insatiable desire for kissing but also because his body apparently isn't equipped to signify its own arousal in a discursive situation that involves a naked woman pressing herself against him. Ironically – not only given Silence's earlier disgust at the thought of bottoming but also the narrative's suggestion here that Silence is "really" a woman – Eufeme, upon once again failing to seduce him later on, concludes that Silence is a "heretic" who must not be interested in sleeping with women at all: "He likes young men a lot / and really enjoys their company. / *Herites est*, I'd swear to it, / and my love threatens him."[101] It's striking, though, that neither of these scenes provoke another moment of private reflection on Silence's part.

Rather than the dysphoric vertigo of that earlier scene of adolescent self-doubt and its prosopopoeic conflict with an allegorically embodied, capital-n "Nature," what the narrative now runs up against is *Silence's* "nature." Given the way the final scenes with Merlin unfold, I would suggest that this move away from the prosopopoeial register is intentional, cleverly foregrounding an eventual return of "Nature." What the narrative suggests, in other words, is that the repression of "Nature" in the earlier dysphoric scene inevitably doesn't amount to her total exile but instead preserves her insofar as "nature" is something that continues to be *felt* by its characters even when only as a lack, as the "something" that's felt to be missing in the subject. I would argue that this is the central ideological conceit of the tale, as it – startlingly – does seem to be offering the reader some sense of an emergent account of "gender" that isn't strictly reducible to "nature" (let alone "biology"), but in the same motion that it marks that distinction it also binds its terms together.

2.5 Merlin's laugh and feminist critique

It's the bizarre final sequence of events, though, that brings back "Nature" and "Nurture" one more time. In a final elaborate scheme to thwart Silence, Eufeme convinces Ebain to have them find and capture Merlin, who (legend has it) can only be captured with a "woman's trick."[102] Silence is at a

[101] Heldris of Cornwall, 3945–48.
[102] Heldris of Cornwall, 5803.

loss about how to go about tracking down Merlin, but they're visited by "a man with long white hair flowing down his back,"[103] who provides very specific instructions for how to capture Merlin, describing him as "a man all covered with hair," "as fleet as a woodland deer," and living off of herbs and roots in the forest.[104] Silence follows the instructions closely, roasting and salting some meat to lure him out and strategically placing some honey, milk, and wine so that he will overindulge and pass out.[105] Merlin smells the meat and begins to head towards it when he is stopped by Nurture – " 'Merlin was nurtured in the woods for so long / that he certainly should have put / his human nature behind him, and should have wanted / to continue eating herbs, the way he was used to.' "[106] This prompts another debate between Nature and Nurture, in which Nurture argues that Nature is the source of evil, casting the fall of Adam and Eve in terms of in terms of how it was their natures that drew them away from God.[107] Nature wins out over Nurture on this point, arguing that "Nothing was ever in Adam / except what God created / and placed there,"[108] and kicks Merlin towards the food.

In an important piece, Sarah Roche-Mahdi has argued for the relevance of the Arthurian canon in the final scenes of *Silence*, noting that the consistency with which Merlin is characterized here with tales like "Flualis" and "Grisandole" in the Arthurian *Vulgate* cycle. "By the mid-thirteenth century," she writes, " his international persona is fully formed: he is omniscient, a prophet, a king's counselor, a master shapeshifter; he has an urge to live as a Wild Man; he is given to strange fits of laughter."[109] While these latter two characteristics are especially strongly attested in *Silence*, it's his "omniscience" and knack for disguise that make him especially important to the plot of the text for Roche-Mahdi, who argues that the two scenes in the text in which an old man appears as a "friendly helper" – first, in Cador's court as the first person to notice that the minstrel "Malduit" is in fact Silence in disguise and then again in the form of the man with the long white flowing hair and the

[103]Heldris of Cornwall, 5875.
[104]Heldris of Cornwall, 5929–32.
[105]Heldris of Cornwall, 5940–93.
[106]Heldris of Cornwall, 6003–6. Merlin's response: "What have you to do with cooked meat?" (6006).
[107]Heldris of Cornwall, 6035–44.
[108]Heldris of Cornwall, 6059–61.
[109]Roche-Mahdi, "A Reappraisal of the Role of Merlin in the Roman de Silence," 7.

suspiciously finegrained instructions for how to capture Merlin. These scenes speak, she argues, to Merlin as a "manipulator of the action" of the narrative, whose "function is to reintegrate Silence into her [sic] 'natural' social role as daughter, wife and mother."[110]

Merlin certainly brings some revelations with him: upon arriving at King Ebain's court, he bursts out laughing at a nun in the queen's entourage, prompting Eufeme to complain to Silence for bringing a drunk to the court. Merlin eventually explains that what's provoked his laughter the most is the ironic situation that all of them have been fooled in one way or another by each other: " 'Two of us, I'll have you know, have tricked two of us / by wearing borrowed finery.' "[111] He outs the nun in the queen's entourage as her lover disguised as a nun and claims that Silence had tricked him "by dressing like a young man."[112] In what follows, the king has the nun and Silence seized and stripped naked in the court,[113] Silence confesses that they've been living as a man in order not to lose their inheritance,[114] the nun and Eufeme are flogged to death,[115] the king restores women's rights to inheritance, and Silence is finally dressed in women's clothes and married to the king.

The conclusion of the text prompts more questions than it answers. In light of its abrupt and arguably unsatisfying ending, Roche-Mahdi characterizes *Silence* as an "antiromance."[116] The public revelation of Eufeme's ill intent is contrived and brutal, and Silence's outing is likewise abrupt and humorless: if the romance hero, according to Bloch, is tasked with achieving "a balance between personal desire and social necessity," then, for Roche-Mahdi, the "substitution of *she* for *he* makes such a resolution impossible."[117] This seems to be in reference to the deeply antifeminist undercurrent of the text, of which Eufeme serves as the primary exemplar and whose comeuppance at the end is very much consistent with this. It's difficult at this point in the text, for instance, to read Ebain's speech about how "a woman's role is to keep silent" as mere irony when Eufeme gets

[110]Roche-Mahdi, 9.
[111]Heldris of Cornwall, *Silence*, 6483–85.
[112]"King, this nun is Eufeme's lover; / he is deceiving you in woman's dress. / [. . .] Silence, on the other hand, tricked me / by dressing like a young man: in truth, / he is a girl beneath his clothes," Heldris of Cornwall, 6530–36.
[113]"It was just as Merlin had said: / he found everything in its proper place," Heldris of Cornwall, 6569–74.
[114]Heldris of Cornwall, 6582–6628.
[115]". . . the nun was executed, / and the queen was drawn and quartered," Heldris of Cornwall, 6655–56.
[116]Roche-Mahdi, "A Reappraisal of the Role of Merlin in the Roman de Silence," 19.
[117]Bloch, R. Howard, "Silence and Holes," 226; Roche-Mahdi, "A Reappraisal of the Role of Merlin in the Roman de Silence," 19.

frustrated at Merlin's refusal to explain himself to her for his laughter at the nun.[118] Despite having been, by their own characterization, *mal duit* for having been raised as a boy, much of Silence's noblesse is established in contrast to the deceitfulness and lust that is attributed to femininity so many times in the text. Merlin's own words in outing them to the king reflect this ambiguity:

> Silence is wise and valiant,
> good Sir King, so help me God,
> I don't know any man, however strong,
> who could have conquered him in combat.
> A woman, tender little thing,
> knows she can dishonor you and does.
> And it was a woman who captured me.
> Is it any wonder I'm laughing,
> when they have deceived both of us like this,
> when they have set a snare for us
> such as twenty thousand men couldn't?
> Sire, I think this is really funny.[119]

The text is keenly interested here in how Silence's masculinity blurs the line between deception and performativity, at once proving its authenticity through Silence's infatigable chivalry and undermining those traits insofar as they mark a fundamental departure from Silence's own "true" feminine nature. This ambiguity seems to provoke, but also in a sense escape, Merlin's laughter, which is itself worthy of some discussion.

Mladen Dolar has argued that "laughter is a condition of ideology" insofar as it makes room for a kind of affective loosening-up or "distance" that allows ideology to creep in under the "appearance of spontaneity."[120] Merlin's laugh occurs at the site of a malicious withholding of not jouissance but knowledge. It functions as "a condition of ideology" insofar as it ascribes an integrity to knowledge; it assumes that the Real is knowable (even if it isn't knowable at any given moment by *you*) rather than fundamentally precarious. The laughter, then, also assigns a perverse sovereignty to Merlin when this withholding of knowledge also amounts to a willingness to let people suffer and die. Before realizing himself to be in the presence of two crossdressers and a cuckold, Merlin laughs

[118]Heldris of Cornwall, *Silence*, 6398.
[119]Heldris of Cornwall, 6541–53.
[120]Dolar, "Strel Sredi Koncerta"; ctd. Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 3.

at a content peasant who doesn't anticipate his own imminent death, a leper begging for alms not knowing that he is standing over a buried treasure, and a corpse being buried in a churchyard.[121] What ought one make of the proximity of this laughter to death, especially given that one of the gender noncomforming characters he laughs at next is, too, sentenced to death? The suggestion of the text is that despite Merlin's cruelty and gruff wildness that he possesses a kind of insight about reality that others lack. This status isn't fundamentally undermined by the fact that he has apparently been "deceived" by Silence, as that deception itself provides him with the hermeneutic fodder that up to this point nobody else has had, that is, to "out" Silence as a woman disguised as a man.

Heldris concludes the text with the admonition that "one should praise a good woman / more than one should blame a bad one" because "a woman has less motivation, / provided she even has the choice, / to be good than to be bad."[122] Despite this, Roche-Mahdi writes that

> The fact that Merlin subjects Silence to the prevailing cultural norms of what is 'natural' for a female does not mean that the *Silence* poet is an archconservative misogynist. Merlin is simply being true to his character, as so well defined by Bloch: guarding patriarchal values, reaffirming the power structure. I suggest the author had a far from sanguine outlook on the possibilities the female sex from traditional roles at upbringing.[123]

For Roche-Mahdi, the incoherence and abruptness of the "antiromance's" resolution suggests that the author to some extent shares our disappointment in the structures refracted in his own text. "In the real world, where men are on top, biology is destiny," she concludes, "the exceptional woman who crossdresses and outperforms men is no solution. The idea that dares not speak its name is that society must change."[124] But whose "real world" is being referred to here? Are Heldris's misogynistic asides and the violently normative thrust of his narrative to be merely taken as ironic?

This readiness to align a feminist reading of the text with the identification of the text as feminist reflects a tendency in medieval feminist scholarship that I think is worth calling into question. There may be something similar afoot in some recent attempts to bring gender-bending texts such as

[121]Heldris of Cornwall, *Silence*, 6191–95, 6202–5, 6210–13, 6315–40.
[122]Heldris of Cornwall, 6685–91.
[123]Roche-Mahdi, "A Reappraisal of the Role of Merlin in the Roman de Silence," 19.
[124]Roche-Mahdi, 20.

Silence under the purview of a "medieval transfeminism," insofar as they assume a (white, bourgeois, implicitly medicalist) model of transgender identity that assumes gender to be something coherent, transparently knowable and thus worthy of repairing and protecting. In a reading of Gower's Narcissus in the *Confessio Amantis*, for instance, M.W. Bychowski goes so far as to invoke the *DSM-V's* definition of gender dysphoria to diagnose of Narcissus as a transgender woman.[125] In his reading of *Tristan de Nanteiul*, Blake Gutt asserts that gender identification is "not a willful decision, with a 'before' and 'after,' but rather a deep and innate sense of who one (always already) is."[126] What's striking about these readings isn't so much the criteria that they assume for what counts as a trans subject as the sense of universalism they lay claim to in doing so: trans identification appears to only be legitimate so long as it can be explained in terms of a diagnostic model or its ontological certainty. What's problematic about such accounts are less their utility for giving voice to the self-understanding of this or that trans person than their willingness to dispense with questions of difference – questions which are of some importance if we want to be able account for those scenes in which trans and queer desire might be *sustained* by lack and historicity rather than only ever ontologically threatened by them.

What these sorts of readings seem to symptomatize is a desire for a kind of intimacy with these medieval texts that one should be cautious not to simply dismiss though, since they, usefully, prompt the question of how to account for the apparently foreclosed forms of life that these texts seem to testify to. Roche-Mahdi begins to get at this in her diagnosis of the centrality of Merlin to the plot of *Silence*; accounting for this centrality undoubtedly lends to the sense that Merlin's laugh functions as a kind of death sentence insofar as it expresses a willingness and ability to "let die" that is coextensive with the possession and withholding of knowledge.[127] Chief among the deaths

[125]"As a diagnostic, dysphoria works to describe an objective reality within both nature and nurture. These conditions may be understood subjectively and affected by society but are nonetheless part of a wider reality. For instance, while gravity is not a concept that medieval society understood in modern subjective and social terms, nonetheless gravity existed during the Middle Ages. One can surmise dysphoria and gravity by the effects we see recorded in the world, even if their recorders did not understand them as such" (Bychowski, "Necropolitics of Narcissus", 236).

[126]Gutt, "Transgender Genealogy in Tristan de Nanteuil," 140.

[127]Cf. Michel Foucault: "The very essence of the right of life and death is acutally the right to kill: it is at the moment when the sovereign can kill that he exercises his right over life. It is essentially the right of the sword. So there is no real symmetry in the right over life and death. It is not the right to put people to death or to grant them life. Nor is it the right to allow people to live or to leave them to die. It is the right to take life or let live. And this obviously introduces a

that laugh might be taken to accompany is Silence's. Though Cador's decision to raise his child as a man was always predicated on the assumption that Silence's masculinity would be revocable, the flipping of the switch, so to speak, is never something that Silence is given the power to do themself, which makes their feminization at the end of the story particularly grotesque. After having already been stripped naked in front of the court in order for the king to find "everything in its proper place," Silence is dressed again in women's clothes:

> They dressed Silence as a woman.
> Lords, what more can I say?
> Once he was called Silentius:
> they removed the -us, added an -a
> and so he was called [*est només*] Silentia.
> After Nature
> had recovered her rights,
> she spend the next three days refinishing
> Silence's entire body, removing every trace
> of anything that being a man had left there.
> She removed all traces of sunburn:
> rose and lily were once again
> joined in conjugal harmony on her face.[128]

Silence's, well, silence throughout this scene has been often remarked upon – Sharon Kinoshita has objected, for instance, that the marriage to Ebain is illegitimate on these grounds given thirteenth century marriage laws requiring freely-given consent.[129] It seems notable to me, though, that the text makes no remark upon this silence, especially since it is often very ready to make puns on its titular character's name at other points in the narrative. While Silence's lack of agency in this scene certainly lends itself to the sense of irresolution or anticlimax that accompanies this ending, I think there may also be some wishful thinking in the implication that that lack of agency is simply deployed as an ironic commentary or exposée of patriarchal social structures or the romance genre itself. It may be unwise, in other words, for a feminist reading practice to always count on the good faith of the objects of its analysis.

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startling dissymetry" (Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended"*, 240-41).

[128]Heldris of Cornwall, *Silence*, 6664–76.

[129]Kinoshita, "Male-Order Brides," 72. Kinoshita also points out that Silence is technically Ebain's great-niece, which would have also been illegal.

While readings of *Silence* often make reference to Howard Bloch's discussion of the romance in terms of the tension between the desires of the hero and society,[130] one might also recall Fredric Jameson's emphasis on the "*worldness* of romance" and the ways in which the romantic hero will often function as a "registering apparatus for transformed states of being, sudden alterations of temperature, [. . .] in short, the whole semic range of transformation scenes, whereby [. . .] higher and lower worlds struggle to overcome each other."[131] An intertextual account of *Silence's* place within the Arthurian canon or in light of other thirteenth century romances may be insufficient in this light, and if Silence functions as a "registering apparatus" of the various antimonies of a larger generically delimited *narrative*, then criticism of the text perhaps ought be able to account for the many ways in which Silence's "agency" and desire are never posited as Silence's own in the first place. In such a light our obligation as readers may not be to repair that instrumentalization but to diagnose it in such a way that might acknowledge and make room for other spaces of subjective possibility.

Rather than attempting a decisive conclusion as to Silence's gender identity, then, the role of transfeminist critique may be to account for the way Silence's carrying out of this function as a "registering apparatus" of the narrative's various contradictions repeatedly poses gender as a question. To do so may appear to run somewhat against the grain of some of the presuppositions of a lot of recent transfeminist scholarship, which is often understandably resistant to falling into a kind of reading practice predicated on etiological explanations for transgender subject formation, or in installing transgender subjectivity as a kind of allegorical referent that can do the work of explaining gender or sexual difference in a more universal sense. Emma Heaney's work is particularly revelatory in this respect, rigorously mapping the ways in which a "modernist trans allegory" emerges in the work of various modernist writers (including Freud) and post-war critical theorists that instrumentalizes transgender subjects in deeply dehumanizing ways.[132]

My interest in Freud, though, comes less from a place of historicism than from an investment

[130]Bloch, R. Howard, "Silence and Holes."
[131]Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 112.
[132]Heaney, *The New Woman*.

in a long history of leftist and feminist appropriations and extensions of the speculative kernel in his work. Part of what I have in mind here is a distinction Jacqueline Rose once offered between the "question" in the political sense – that is, of *demand* – and the "question" in the psychoanalytic sense. This latter sense of the "question" is less immediately concerned with demanding, for instance, the conditions for liberation – that is, with questions of recognition and identification – than it is with the unconscious as the site of "an interminable self-questioning which undermines any possible conclusion to self-definition." "The argument," says Rose, "would be that feminism, in so far as it is in touch with the sexual not just as an assertion, important though that is, but as a self-questioning, can undo a certain rhetoric of certainty."[133] Once one accounts for this instantiating impulse of psychoanalytic thought – to undermine, that is, "rhetorics of certainty" – it becomes clearer that Freudian theory begins from a set of observations about human sexuality that makes the notion of something like a "cisgender" subject in a sense unthinkable. From the perspective of transgender politics, such an orientation can just as easily be a weakness as a strength, and has been instrumentalized to as many utopian ends as phobic ones. This is, in part, because a challenge that psychoanalysis has posed to other theoretical idioms by understanding the signification of the phallus as first and foremost based in an error or misrecognition has been to prompt the question of how contingent or "universal" this signifying system is itself.

On the one hand, one can argue that in the work of Freud or Lacan the signifiers that describe the way sexual difference comes about aren't in themselves ever advertised as universal. On the other, for psychoanalysis the fact that we come to a concept of otherness in the sexual relation on the basis of such an error doesn't necessarily mean that error ought to be *corrected*, insofar as it enables desire. Part of what locating this error helps us do, however, is to locate something more insidiously ideological in the way people and bodies are interpellated by the discourse on sex: that is, in the association of the phallic function with a specific anatomical criterion or criteria (whether that be according to the possession of certain organs or chromosomes or some other ideal typical combination thereof). As Lacan emphasizes in "The Signification of the Phallus," there's an

[133]Rose, *Why War?*, 231–32.

important sense in which the "phallus" as a signifier is never quite identical with what it signifies or finds its form of appearance as – whether that be in fantasy, an object, or in the organ with which it "symbolizes."[134] However, the fact that in Lacan's formulation the phallus "symbolizes" the penis or the clitoris without being identical with it introduces some ambiguities.

For Geneviève Morel, who I cited earlier, this fraught relation between the symbolic phallus and the real organ of the penis would apparently seem to suggest that in a sense anatomy is destiny: the error that grounds the neurotic subject's desire consists, too, in this anatomical misinterpretation. To reinterpret or reconfigure one's anatomy is, for her, often an act of "mutilation" that the trans subject does to themselves in order to fruitlessly solve the unbearable aspects of sexual difference.[135] In other words, for her (and many other Lacanian analysts) "transsexualism" is at bottom *psychotic* insofar as it represents an attempt to remove oneself from the phallic function altogether, which requires, in essence, talking oneself into misrecognizing the ways in which that function is itself based in a misrecognition. Morel fails to account, however, not only for the myriad ways in which transgender subjects' identities are so often formed *against* the grain of the postwar ego psychology of psychiatrists like Robert Stoller,[136] but also the ways in which the modern discourse of "biological sex" today is not (has it ever been?) simply an Aristotelian binary switch. Take, for instance, how even this discourse's most shrilly reactionary proponents, when cornered, will cry wolf about gender being determined by not genitalia, hormones, or performance but by "chromosomal sex." If Morel's "transsexuals" psychotically try to sidestep the symbolic in such a way that in fact insidiously enshrines it, then it can just as easily – and, frankly, more relevantly – be observed that the transphobe's myopic and fetishistic devotion to the fantasy of a coherent account of "biological sex" that is held together by a comparatively minor biological feature at the expense of all other determinants also begins to resemble a psychotic retreat from the Real.

It's for this reason that I tend to agree with Shanna Carlson that it's more useful to describe the components of something like the Oedipus complex as "singular statements, instead of as particular

[134]Lacan, *Écrits*, 2006, 579.
[135]Morel, *Sexual Ambiguities*, xvi.
[136]For one recent account of some of this history, see Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child*.

types of identifying or identifiable persons."[137] What this would point to is a way of capturing the dynamics of "intrasubjective economy" that Lacan and Freud were able to discern by way of their observations about the phallus without repeating the "error" in question in such a way that fails or refuses to account for the fact that what Lacanians refer to as a "mode of jouissance" isn't a "mode" (e.g., of production) or a "mentalité" as these concepts function in historicist discourses but is rather something which must be *read* within a context specific to the subject of an analysis. What I identify as specifically "ideological" in *Le Roman de Silence*, then, is not so much the erotic economy of difference that Silence finds themselves in an uncertain position within, but more specifically the way "Nature" begins to appear as a guarantor of desire that is bound inextricably to the question of Silence's "equipment."

By "posing gender as a question," then, my intention is simply to keep that question an open one rather than to demand some framework for etiological explanation or, heaven forbid, reproduce a "gender critical" rhetoric through which I might imagine myself to be "just asking questions" to the end of denying the legitimacy of someone's claim to or disavowal of a gender.

[137] Carlson, "In Defense of Queer Kinships," 266.

3 Two positions of the object in Chaucer

In the previous chapter, gender appears melancholically insofar as it is ultimately posed as an object cause of desire upon being staged as lost. It's in the course of that staging, too, though, that the subject in question becomes a kind of object, a "registering apparatus" not only of the narrative's constituent contradictions and ideological investments but also of those of contemporary critics seeking to make claims about the reading of "transness" historically. It's this alienated condition of the literary subject as an object of narrative – in which the subject appears only as a form of appearance of a desire that is not their own, and whose subjective disorganization and reparation is contingent upon the turnings of a narrative outside of their control – that the present chapter begins from. As I'll elaborate, gender appears within psychoanalytic discourse as the symptom of the melancholic theory of desire that is most infamously outlined in Freud's account of the Oedipus complex, in which the subject *identifies* with what they've *lost* in the formation of the ego. Queer and trans desire, of course, substantially complicate this account, if not by negating it completely then by indicating some of the ways gay and trans subjects introduce certain plot holes to this narrative.

It's with all of this in mind that I visit two scenes in the writing of Geoffrey Chaucer. *The Prioress's Tale*, I argue, hinges on the question of the child as an "object" in the Lacanian sense of the term – as a "cause of desire" who functions as a symptom of the family form itself. This symptomaticity, though, takes on a particular form within the context of the Marian spirituality in which the Prioress is steeped. It's the erotic tendency of Marian spirituality, specifically as it's articulated in the attachment between mother and child, out of which the genocidally antisemitic affects of the tale emerge. There is another side to Chaucer's writing that I'd also like to address, however. When I turn to *The Book of the Duchess*, I ask what a different orientation towards loss might look like, in which melancholic loss isn't manically denied, covered over, or repaired but something which might occasion a kind of enjoyment. Are we only ever the outcomes of our tragically melancholic identifications or is there a sense in which loss can itself be pleasurable?

3.1 Voice and death spasm: The Prioress's Tale

The Prioress's Tale jarringly prompts the question of the "lost object" in part because of how it demonstrates the violence implicit in the refusal or inability to mourn. It recounts a baldly racist blood libel story in which the cold-blooded murder of a little Christian boy at the hands of a mob of Jews is followed by a miracle in which, despite having had his vocal chords severed, the boy continues to sing his devotion to the Virgin Mary until his body can be given a proper Christian burial – and of course, those taken to be responsible for his murder can be executed. In an influential (and at the time provocative) reading of the tale, Aranye Fradenburg articulated a critical imperative with respect to Chaucer's poem that I take to be axiomatic: that to understand the *Prioress's Tale*, we have to be able to describe its *fictionality*. Its fiction is founded upon a melancholic repression of Christian violence that is projected onto the phobic object of the Jew: "Mourning in the *Prioress's Tale*," she writes, "is most profoundly mourning for the losses inflicted by Christian culture on itself, its self-repressions and self-silencings."[1]

The importance of being able to situate the story in terms of its unprocessed sense of loss is not bound to the formal analysis of the story itself. Work by critics like Steven Kruger[2] and Anthony Bale[3] have been important for illustrating the extent to which the fantasies of late medieval antisemitic propaganda are purely ideological because after a certain point antisemitic narratives didn't even need the presence of its "bad objects" – actual Jews – to continue circulating and developing. As Bale shows, despite the fact that England had more or less successfully expelled all of its Jews in 1290, "antisemitism, unlike Judaism, did not disappear;"

> rather, it prospered. Old themes were sustained and embellished (ritual murder, the mocking image of the Jewish nose) and new themes emerged (in particular surrounding the Jews' imputed abuse of the Eucharistic wafer). Such discourses permeated Latin chronicles, theological treatises, sermons, vernacular poems, ecclesiastical art and architecture, drama and marginalia [. . .].[4]

The persistence of such propaganda independent of its phobic objects doesn't, of course, indicate

[1] Fradenburg, "Criticism, Anti-Semitism, and the *Prioress's Tale*," 203.
[2] Kruger, *The Spectral Jew*.
[3] Bale, *The Jew in the Medieval Book*.
[4] Bale, 16.

that it doesn't bear on them. Stories like the *vitae* of William of Norwich and Hugh of Lincoln (the latter of whom the Prioress pays tribute at the end of her tale) circulated widely enough that they helped to provide justification and motivation for pogroms and genocidal expulsions like that which occurred in 1290. Understanding the tale's fictionality – the ways, that is, in which its investment in the representation of its phobic objects exceeds the real objects which occasion it in the first place – requires taking seriously the fact that such fictions function in response to and in anticipation of real violence. It requires, in other words, taking seriously the tale's *ideology*. As recent work by critics like Heather Blurton and Hannah Johnson have emphasized, the *Prioress's Tale's* fiction is not Chaucer's alone, but is situated in this broader network of antisemitic propaganda, and the recurring critical impulse to speculate about the tale's "missing source" often serves to obscure its embeddedness within this network. Chaucer's source, they write, "is not 'unknown' at all, but rather ubiquitous."[5]

Moreover, readings like those of Fradenburg and Bruce Holsinger[6] bring into view not only the centrality of anti-Jewish violence to the *Prioress's Tale* but also the intimacy of this violence with the dark side of reproductive futurism: the function of Marian theology in the tale and others like it is to paranoiacally project responsibility for the violence Christian culture inflicts on its own children onto an Other.[7] What such propaganda brings into view especially dramatically is that if, as Lee Edelman famously put it, within such a culture "the sacralization of the Child [. . .] necessitates the sacrifice of the queer," *then it also requires the sacrifice of the child* to the same symbolic order which sacralizes it.[8] In the *Prioress's Tale*, this sacrifice happens in large part on the level of the voice. Often, the "voice" is taken to be something that is more or less self-present, autonomous – the voice can be silenced or restored, sometimes, it needs to be "listened to," allowed to speak for

[5]Blurton and Johnson, *The Critics and the Prioress*, 62.

[6]Holsinger, "Pedagogy, Violence, and the Subject of Music."

[7]"We might put the question this simply: if the Jews were not responsible for those dead Christian children, who was?" (Fradenburg, "Criticism, Anti-Semitism, and the *Prioress's Tale*," 223).

[8]Edelman, *No Future*, 28. Edelman's capitalization of "Child" follows Lacanian idiom to suggest that he specifically refers to the "Symbolic" Child, rather than any specific child. By referring to the child in the lowercase, I mean to suggest that such an ideological investment in the preservation of "the Child" in fact requires the sacrifice, in one form or another, of actual children.

itself.[9] Part of what's discomfiting in the *Prioress's Tale* is the way it disturbs this self-presence.

This disturbance is in part a result of historical difference. In modern parlance, the voice is often closely associated with *agency*, itself a concept steeped in historiographical and ethical connotations which, as Walter Johnson has critiqued in the New Social History's treatment of slavery, so often smuggle "a notion of the universality of a liberal notion of selfhood" into the very scenes that the notion of agency was initially defined *against*.[10] In the *Prioress's Tale*, the question of the voice is in part posed on the back of the tale's fetishization of "song." As Bruce Holsinger has argued, this fetishization amounts to an exploitation of commonplace assumptions about the apolitical nature of musical sonority: the tale "exploits its reader's assumption that musical sonority somehow exceeds the temporal realm in which it is produced – and thus resists political imbrication and, by extension, historicist analysis."[11] Reading the tale from the perspective of the text's violence – its genocidally reparative affect with respect to otherness and its latent aggressiveness towards what it purports to sanctify in the service of that reparativity – also requires calling into question certain ideological assumptions about the self-presence and self-transparency of the voice itself.

One of the more striking features of Chaucer's characterization of the Prioress is her oral fixation. Perhaps no other character in the *Tales* has such interesting eating habits: in the *General Prologue*, the prioress is characterized as prim and uptight, with a "faire and fetis," if insular, command of French and impeccable table manners. Chaucer takes care to note that "She leet no morsel from her lips falle"[12] as she eats her meals, and as someone who takes a special delight in politeness and the maintenance of a clean upper lip: "In curteisie was set ful muchel hir lest. / Hir over-lippe wyped she so clene That in hir coppe that was no ferthyng sene / Of grece, what she dronken hadde her draughte."[13] Her moral character is represented in terms of a deep aversion to waste, whether it be

[9]Fradenburg, for instance emphasizes that "too much scholarship on the *Prioress's Tale* has participated in the unmaking of the voice of the Jew" (Fradenburg, "Criticism, Anti-Semitism, and the *Prioress's Tale*", 203). See, too, Eve Salisbury's writing on Chaucer's representation of childhood in *Chaucer and the Child*: "By 'Child Chaucer' I mean the component of mind that enables the poet to breathe life into his characters, speak in the voice of the child, and lure readers into his virtual worlds"(Salisbury, *Chaucer and the Child*, 7).

[10]Johnson, "On Agency," 115.

[11]Holsinger, "Pedagogy, Violence, and the Subject of Music," 166.

[12]Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, l. 128.

[13]Chaucer, ll. 132–35.

in the form of a stray crumb of food[14] or a waste of life. We're told, for instance, that she would cry at the sight of a dead mouse[15] and that she makes sure to keep her little dogs well-fed out of fear of them dying.[16] The portrait here is characterized by an economy of nourishment in which nothing is wasted, from its account of the delicacy of her lips and her untarnished breasts to her neurotically selected meals for her little dogs.

This is accompanied by language of fullness and plenitude: her smile is "ful symple and coy"[17] and the mouth which she uses to speak French "ful faire and fetisly"[18] is "ful smal, and therto softe and reed."[19] She sings the divine service "ful weel"[20] too, intoning the music through her "nose ful semely."[21] Alongside the observation of her broad, fair forehead[22] and "ful fetys" cloak,[23] this could easily be a description of a young eligible lady of respectable birth. The language of fertility here, however, is just as striking for the childishness of the woman to which it is applied, who cries over dead mice and at imagined scenarios in which someone kills her little dogs. Striking, too, though, is Chaucer's attention to the Prioress's voice: her French is notable not only for her linguistic competence but also for her accent, and her nose is distinguished by the monastic song which resonate through it.

As the prioress insists in the prayer to the Virgin that serves as the basis of her prologue, the praise of God can be "performed" even by the youngest of children. The lines here are somewhat ambiguous: the praise of the lord can be performed not only by "men of dignitee, / But by the mouth of children thy bountee / Parfourned is, for on the brest soukynge / Somtyme shewen they thyn heriynge."[24] The lines are somewhat semantically ambiguous, in part because of the ambiguity of the act of "performing praise" itself, which carries with it a question of political theology. What

[14]"No drope ne fille upon hire brest," Chaucer, 131.
[15]"She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous / Kaught in a trappe," Chaucer, 144–45.
[16]"Of smale houndes hadde she that she fedde / With rosted flessh, or milk and wastel-breed. / But soore wepte she if oon of hem were deed, / Or if men smoot it with yerde," Chaucer, 146–50.
[17]Chaucer, 119.
[18]Chaucer, 124.
[19]Chaucer, 153.
[20]Chaucer, 122.
[21]Chaucer, 123.
[22]Chaucer, 154–55.
[23]Chaucer, 157.
[24]Chaucer, 455–59.

sort of speech act is "praise," one might ask, and what does its performance bring into being or enact? Of more pressing concern to the present writing, however, is the question of the act itself, and of the mouths of the nursing children who praise God. "On the brest soukynge" may describe a stage in one's life where sucking is mutually exclusive to speaking, but the prioress's wording also suggests that the act of sucking is itself a performance of praise, perhaps even itself an attempt at interpretation. In the tale's prologue, the prioress identifies her own voice with that of the pre-linguistic infant:

> My konnyng is so wayk, O blisful Queene,
> For to declare thy grete worthynesse
> That I ne may the weighte nat susteene;
> But as a child of twelf month oold, or lesse,
> Right so fare I, and therfore I yow preye,
> Gydeth my song that I shal of yow seye.[25]

Already, a concept of childhood is being put to work by way of a theory of the voice: the pre-linguistic infant speaks to the prying apart of praise from linguistic signification itself. "Praise," here, doesn't refer to any particular speech act or performance, but is itself, in a sense, an object. The suggestion is that the *speaking* of praise is an aftereffect of "praise" itself, a reverberation of something more or less indifferent to the lips from which it is uttered.

This identification with the child's pre-linguistic voice is an important component of the text's ideological investments, and it may be that any account of the *Prioress's Tale's* representation of racial chauvinism or childhood must proceed from how the text understands what Mladen Dolar terms "the voice object." For Dolar, the voice functions not as a testament to the presence of the speaking being but instead marks a "rupture in the middle of the full presence"[26] of that being, insofar as, linguistically, the voice is to be distinguished from language as something which "*does not contribute to making sense*."[27] This distinction, for Dolar, is dialectical: if the voice is often understood to be *expressive*, or to bear witness to something, this expressiveness is itself an outcome of a "retroactive construction," an *interpretation* of what is otherwise senseless: "it is only through

[25]Chaucer, 481–87.
[26]Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 42.
[27]Dolar, 15.

language, via language, by the symbolic, that there is voice."[28] This ascription of meaning, of course, happens in logical time:[29] the voice, in Dolar's telling, takes on meaning the moment it is *heard* and its reception determines its fate.

One may recall, for instance, Freud's famous account in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* of the game played by a little boy who throws his toys out of sight. Each time he throws the toy, he lets out a cry of "'o-o-o-o', accompanied by an expression of interest and satisfaction," which the mother interprets as an attempt at articulating the German word *fort* ("gone").[30] The second half of the game proceeds entirely from this moment, in which the cry is interpreted as a *demand* that the object return. Though the return of the toy and the joyful proclamation of *da* ("there") is marked by "greater pleasure," the game of disappearance is the part which is "repeated untiringly as a game in itself."[31] The game is significant for Freud for marking a kind of enjoyment of loss that is distinct from satisfaction and pleasure itself: the child's "great cultural achievement" lies not in the successful communication with the mother but in the "instinctual renunciation [. . .] which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting."[32] The game also, though, marks that enjoyment as an excess, with the moment that marks the split between the two halves of the game having been provided by the voice-object which from the moment it appears is transformed retroactively. Regardless of what occasions the cry, Dolar writes,

> the moment it assumes the place of the addressee, the moment the other is provoked and interpellated by it, the moment it responds to it, *scream retroactively turns into appeal*, it is interpreted, endowed with meaning, it is transformed into a speech addressed to the other, it assumes the first function of speech: to address the other and elicit an answer.[33]

The voice object, then, would seem to precede the subject herself, voicing her splittedness in the rupture that appears in its retroactive acquisition of meaning in the articulation of a language which precedes it. What's striking in the Prioress's prologue, though, is the elision of the distinction

[28]Dolar, 31.
[29]Cf. "Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty," Lacan, *Écrits*, 2006, 161–75.
[30]Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1961, 13–14.
[31]Freud, 14.
[32]Freud, 14.
[33]Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 27. Emphasis added.

between the voice-object itself and "praise": by identifying her own voice with that of the pre-linguistic infant, the interpellative moment is stretched back to precede the voice itself, glossing over the rupture of presence which the voice object marks. In her assumption of the child's voice, in other words, the voice of the child himself is already in a sense silenced.

The tale begins in a "greet citee" in an unspecified country in "Asia," where among an otherwise Christian populace a Jewry is supported by the patronage of a local lord with a love of usury and villainous profiteering.[34] The ghetto is described as "open at eyther ende,"[35] such that people would come and go through it, including Christian children passing through on their way to their "litel scole [...] Doun at the ferther ende"[36] of the street, where they learn to sing and to read.[37] The protagonist of the story comes from among these children: a "litel clergeon," – a future clerk in the making (the Prioress even emotionally invokes the presence of Saint Nicholas, patron of clerks: "ay, when I remembre on this mateere, / Seint Nicholas stant evere in my presence")[38] – "seven yeer of age,"[39] taught from an early age by his widow mother to show a special reverence for the Virgin. The child's habits precede him: every day he walks to the school he passes an image of Mary, and whenever he passes an image of Mary he kneels and says his *Ave Maria* and goes on his way.[40]

Eventually, in school, the child begins to learn *Alma redemptors mater* from his primer, studying it until he's memorized the first verse.[41] Not knowing what the Latin words mean, he asks an older schoolmate to explain what the song is about.[42] The other student tells him that the song is a prayer to the Virgin ("To been oure help and socour whan we deye"), but he too, doesn't understand Latin: " 'I kan namoore expounde in this mateere. / I lerne song; I kan but smal grammeere.' "[43] The mere

[34]"Sustened [...] / For foule usure and lucre of vileynye," Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 490–91.

[35]Chaucer, 494.

[36]Chaucer, 495–96.

[37]"Children an heep, ycomen of Cristen blood, / That lerned in that scole yeer by yere / Swich manere doctrine as men used there, / This is to seyn, to syngen and to rede, / As smale children doon in hire childhede," (Chaucer, 497–501).

[38]Chaucer, 514–15.

[39]Chaucer, 503.

[40]"That day by day to scole was his wone, / And eek also, where as he saugh th'ymage / Of Cristes mooder, hadde he in usage, / As hym was taught, to knele adoun and seye / His *Ave Maria*, as he goth by the weye," Chaucer, 504–8.

[41]Chaucer, 516–22.

[42]Chaucer, 523–29.

[43]Chaucer, 534–36.

mention of Mary is sufficient to goad the child into determining to learn the rest of the song:

> His felawe taughte hym homward priveley
> Fro day to day, til he koude it by rote
> And thanne he song it wel and boldely,
> Fro word to word, acordynge with the note.
> Twies a day it passed thurgh his throte,
> To scoleward and homward whan he wente;
> On Cristes mooder set was his entente.[44]

At the center of this little *vita* in miniature is the emphasis on routine, repetition, and ritual; the little clergeon is passionate about having a *habitus*, and takes to singing the song twice a day, every day, on his way back and forth from school. The poem takes a certain pleasure in repetition in the first part of this little *vita*: there's the repetition of "little" – the "litel scole," the "litel child" with his "litel book lernynge" – as well as the emphasis on habit and doing things by rote – the memorization of songs, the routine of walking through the Jewish ghetto every day to go to school. The word "throte" appears four times in the short tale; only in the stanza above is it used as an end word, rhyming, here, with "rote" and "note."

The detail is perhaps notable, if only for the irony with which the song quite literally becomes stuck in the child's throat. The Jews, apparently sick of hearing the child skipping through their neighborhood singing *Alma redemptoris*, are goaded by "the serpent Sathanas"[45] to kill the little clergeon, cutting his throat and throwing him in a latrine.[46] Eglentyne's warning to the "cursed folk of Herodes al newe," characterizes the crime in terms of its impossibility of being *contained*: "Mordre wol out, certeyn, it wol not faille, / And namely ther th'onour of God shal sprede; / The blood out crieth on your cursed dede."[47] When the child doesn't return home, his mother searches tirelessly for him, asking "every Jew that dwelte in thilke place, / To telle hire if hir child wente oght forby":[48]

> They said seyde "nay"; but Jhesu of his grace

[44]Chaucer, 544–50.
[45]Chaucer, 558.
[46]Chaucer, 569–73.
[47]Chaucer, 574, 576–78.
[48]Chaucer, 601–2.

Yaf in hir thoght inwith a litel space
That in that place after hir sone she cryde,
Where he was casten in a pit bisyde.

O grete God, that parfournest thy laude
By mouth of innocentz, lo, heere thy myght!
This gemme of chastite, this emraude,
And eek of martidom the ruby bright,
There he with throte ykorven lay upright,
He *Alma redemptoris* gan to synge
So loude that al the place gan to rynge.[49]

There's a striking temporal compression that seems to occur in these lines: Jesus whispers in the mother's ear, we suppose, where her child's corpse lies; this happens upon her exhausting the ghetto of Jews to implore and, presumably, walking past the latrine in which he's been disposed. Curiously, the referent of line 605's inaugural "that" – presumably, the revelation of the child's location – seems to have been elided. Christ puts – *something* – in the mother's thought within a "little space" which coincides with her physical proximity to the latrine in which her child's corpse has been disposed. It's at this point that she emits a cry and the cry is answered, as the child's corpse suddenly sits itself upright and, despite having its vocal cords severed, bursts into song.

In what follows, the local Christians gather around the scene to "wondre upon this thyng," fetching the child out of the latrine. The Jews presumed to be responsible for killing the child are bound and sentenced to death,[50] and the child, "syngynge his song alway,"[51] is carried to the nearest abbey. There, the abbot sprinkles some water on the child and asks him to explain how he's continued to sing despite his throat being cut. The child recounts a vision in which he is visited by the Virgin, who instructs him to continue singing his song "in… deyynge,"[52] and places "a greyn"[53] on his tongue:

"Wherfore I synge, and synge moot certeyn,
In honour of that blisful Mayden free

[49]Chaucer, 603–13.
[50]Chaucer, 620, 29.
[51]Chaucer, 621.
[52]Chaucer, 660.
[53]Chaucer, 662.

Til fro my tonge of taken is the greyn;
And after that thus seyde she to me:
'My litel child, now wol I fecche thee,
Whan that the greyn is fro thy tonge ytake.
Be nat agast; I wol thee nat forsake.' "[54]

At this point the abbot gently removes the grain, allowing the child to die peacefully in the church. The dilation of the actual process of dying in order to suspend the instant of death itself that occurs here is in stark contrast to the way this suspension occurs in *The Book of the Duchess*: rather than being stolen from view by the scaffolding of the fiction, here it's dramatically staged, ritualized and *witnessed*. Heather Blurton and Hannah Johnson have written on the similarities between *The Prioress's Tale* and other antisemitic ritual murder stories, noting that in such stories "the ritual production of the miracle"[55] is at least as central to the narrative as the murder itself, and that both elements are inextricably linked by a body that refuses to remain hidden.

There's an insistently circular logic at play here: the hymn serves as both the cause of the child's death and means of his discovery, instantiating one form of sacrifice and retroactively transforming it into another. "The repeated return of the dead body" in "miracle of the singing boy" stories that circulated widely in fourteenth century England, Blurton and Johnson write, "mirrors the compulsion to repeat the story."[56] The metaphor of crying blood that can't be contained invoked by the Prioress, too, poses a notable contrast with the Prioress's own portrait in the *General Prologue*, in which her prim table manners suggest an aversion to spilling and waste. It's in this respect that the Prioress's characterization may have as much of the maternal as the childish. Readings of the poem have often emphasized its relationship to a liturgical culture in which "adults were strongly encouraged to assume the likeness of children and to submit to religious authority,"[57] but within the text, too, is an economy of circulating blood and milk and "grains." The insistent return of the body, of the blood that won't be silenced, excludes the Jews from this insular economy by suggesting their inability to contain – or properly consume – its circulating objects.

[54]Chaucer, 663–69.
[55]Blurton and Johnson, *The Critics and the Prioress*, 90.
[56]Blurton and Johnson, 100.
[57]Salisbury, *Chaucer and the Child*, 105; cf. Patterson, "'The Living Witnesses of Our Redemption'."

As Salisbury points out, in the burial of the clergion it's the "affective puissance of the child" that comes to the fore: "the child makes the action happen, moves the adults to pay attention to the child's needs and remember what it was like to be a child. When one of the precepts of this culture is for adults to become *like* children, it signals the value of childhood by exposing the sacrificial economy in which a child lives."[58] This sacrificial economy is vividly illustrated with the initial call and response between mother and child. Here, it isn't the child who emits the initial demanding cry, but the mother, and it's the child's voice which returns the proof of love in the form of the hymn to the Mother. Part of what's so remarkable about this scene is that the tautological economy in which God performs his own praise "by mouth of innocentz" sutures the voice-object to the body of the child. Our perspective on the agency of the child – and on the relation between it and the mother – may begin to look quite different, then, when we shift our perspective back from the altar to the shitter.

It's on this point that the Marian register of the tale appears as particularly entangled with its more explicitly violent ideological commitments. The tale is animated by a network of female figures whose desires with respect to a Child are explicitly identified with each other (Mary, the little clergeon's mother, and the Prioress herself). It's worth observing, too, that the relation between these maternal figures and the child is one which is noticeably organized around an absent father. That the clergeon's mother is a widow and the Prioress is, of course, unmarried are important points of identification with the Virgin, figuring the child as a means for intimacy with a divine father figure. In psychoanalytic terms, the child functions here as the substitute for the mother's *objet a* or symptom, never just a child but itself the instrument by which the mother discovers what she finds lacking in the father. The child, here, is at once, in a sense, "objectified" in such a way that they must subordinate their own individuality to the performance of this compensatory function, but is also an obstacle to the mother's self knowledge: the child-as-object, as Lacan puts it, "alienates in himself all possible access by the mother to her own truth through giving it body [. . .]."[59] Clinically speaking, the situations in which this dynamic most often appears are of course

[58]Salisbury, *Chaucer and the Child*, 106.
[59]Lacan, "Note on the Child," 14.

unambiguously abusive. A famous paper by Sándor Ferenczi, which Lacan presumably had in mind when he wrote his "Note on the Child," reflects on the "dream of the wise baby" described to him by a patient, in which "the fear of the uninhibited, almost mad adult changes the child, so to speak, into a psychiatrist," and, in so doing, must learn to "*identify himself completely*" with the parents.[60]

I make note of this not in order to suggest (as psychonalaysis has often done) that certain configurations of the family – ones organized around single or homosexual parents, for instance – are somehow "pathological" while others – heterosexual, Oedipal – somehow *aren't*. Rather, what's striking about Marian ideology's absent father isn't that the father function is foreclosed but that it's *exalted*: it collapses Father into Son in such a way that sacrifices the particularity of any given father or son, subordinating individuals to their function within the symbolic Family. Arguably, then, the "pathologically" exceptional case of the "overbearing" desire of the mother here speaks to the inherently abusive structure of the family itself. It's on this point which I would like to take a moment to interrogate this rather fundamental problem in psychoanalysis, before returning to a different Chaucerian scene in which a different modality of desire and identification might begin to be traced.

3.2 Assuming a symptom

As I've touched upon in the introduction to this dissertation, the psychoanalytic account of the family hinges on the way the Oedipus complex scripts the melancholic assumption of a sex: the child assumes their sex by way of their renunciation of the opposite-sex parent, resulting, in post-Oedipal subjectivity, in the mutual exclusion of desire and identification. While the Oedipal family is founded on this melancholic structure, however, it's in the pathology of depression where there occurs a kind of short-circuiting of desire and identification which may pose some problems to the integrity of this structure. In order to understand some of the ways in which some of these problems might begin to appear, though, it may be necessary to begin from the pathological.

When Karl Abraham first wrote about melancholia, he had initially understood it in terms

[60]Ferenczi, "Confusion of Tongues Between the Adults and the Child," 228, emphasis added.

of sexual frustration and disappointment: the unconscious latches itself onto some person and doggedly refuses to let go.[61] With the 1917 essay "Mourning and Melancholia," though, Freud had begun to notice that the problem of melancholia hinged on questions of identification: "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty," he observed, "in melancholia it is the ego itself."[62] Here, melancholia already appears as a pathology distinct from mourning specifically in the melancholic's identification with the lost object. This identification is ridden with ambivalence: because their identification with their loved object also includes its faults and injustices, the melancholic's investment in their object demands of them that they perform a kind of balancing act between love and hate, directing violent aggression towards their own ego all the more intensely for how much they love the object they've unconsciously incorporated.

In 1923's *The Ego and the Id*, Freud relegates this ambivalent relationship between object-investment and identification to a much earlier stage in the subject's development than he had previously. While for the young child in the oral stage, "object-cathexes and identification are no doubt indistinguishable from each other," one consequence of the division he's now begun to describe between the id and the ego is that as the latter develops, the ego's identification with their loved object may become the *precondition* for the id's letting go of it. By the 1920s, Freud's topography of the human psyche is defined by division and conflict: the dogged refusal to let go of the object is now identified as the property of a specific agency that he identified as *das Es* (latinized as the "id" in Strachey's *Standard Edition*), which "feels erotic trends as needs" and puts the still young and "feeble" ego [*Ich*] in the position of having to choose between acquiescing to the id's demands or repressing them.[63]

While in Freud's earlier metapsychological work in the teens the melancholic's identification with their lost object appeared as a pathology that results from the inability or refusal to mourn an object which has been lost, in Freud's "mature" theory the melancholic mode of surviving loss becomes much more fundamental to the establishment of the subject's character. The function of

[61] Cf. 1911's "Notes on the Psycho-Analytical Investigation and Treatment of Manic-Depressive Insanity and Allied Conditions," Abraham, *Selected Papers*, 137–56.

[62] Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, 1957, 14:246.

[63] Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 1960, 23.

the developing ego is to take on the role of substituting itself for the lost object in order to appease the "id":

> When it happens that a person has to give up a sexual object, there quite often ensues an alteration of his ego which can only be described as as a setting up of the object inside the ego, as it occurs in melancholia; the exact nature of this substitution is as yet unknown to us. It may be that this introjection, which is a kind of regression to the mechanism of the oral phase, the ego makes it easier for the object to be given up or renders that process possible. It may be that this identification is sole condition under which the id can give up its objects. At any rate the process, especially in the early phases of development, is a very frequent one, and it makes it possible to suppose that the character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes and that it contains the history of those object-choices.[64]

An important shift has occurred between the Freud of the metapsychological papers and now. The earlier account of melancholia is more concerned with the discernment of melancholia's *pathology* as it distinguishes itself from grief and mourning. Now, however, melancholia has become a much more foundational subjective structure. It appears as a *precondition* for the development of the ego, and one may well ask if in the process the ego itself has become an "object" to which we find ourselves stubbornly and pathologically tethered.

What this shift also happens alongside is a more profound Oedipalization of psychoanalysis. Freud notes that the outcome of the Oedipal conflict – wherein the subject identifies with either the mother or the father – is somewhat surprising given the melancholic theory of subjectivity outlined above, as the assumption of a gender does not apparently occur by way of "introduc[ing] the abandoned object into the ego."[65] That an assumption of a sex might happen *despite* the introduction of the abandoned object into the ego is "easier to observe in girls than in boys," as girls, by Freud's observation, will quite often respond to the relinquishing of their father as a love object by identifying more strongly with the masculine aspects of their own latent bisexuality. It's in such scenes where bisexuality, specifically from the vantage point of femininity, once again becomes troublesome to Freud's account of sexual difference, since (as was the case with the passage between anal and genital sexuality that I discussed in the previous chapter, or, that is, with

[64]Freud, 24.
[65]Freud, 28.

Silence's assumption of a male sex) the assumption of the feminine position here would appear to be somewhat arbitrary. This remains the case even if the "bisexuality" Freud describes here is no longer the object-indifferent polymorphous perversity of 1905's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* but is instead understood in terms of the Oedipus complex's narrative of the assumption of a gender on the back of an object choice. In the case of the little girl, that narrative fails to provide certain terms for how that assumption might take place, and Freud ends up somewhat unsatisfactorily falling back on "bisexuality" as what will ultimately determine the outcome of that narrative. How the child occupies those terms and ultimately identifies as either a boy or a girl is at the end of the day a question of "the relative strength" of their "masculine and feminine sexual dispositions."[66]

The extent to which those "dispositions" are themselves determined by the Oedipus complex or somehow precede it is left unclear, but, as Freud tells it, while the Oedipus complex provides the terms and narrative structures for the assumption of a sex, it doesn't from the outset determine how the subject and their individual circumstances will find themselves caught up within those terms. To use his own example, it's for instance entirely possible for a boy to simply pass through the complex as if they were a ("heterosexual") girl and vice versa. This underdetermined quality even makes Freud question, for a moment, whether the Oedipus complex is ultimately relevant at all in the determination of a subject's sex: "It may even be that the ambivalence displayed in the relations to the parents should be attributed entirely to bisexuality and that it is not, as I have represented above, developed out of identification in consequence of rivalry." Nevertheless, at least "where neurotics are concerned," it's safe to assume its presence in the subject's history.[67]

It's on the basis of this late formulation of Freud's that Judith Butler would later read Freudian theory as a theory of "melancholy gender," noting that Freud's account provides an emergent account of gender identification that presupposes the *preservation* of the same gender which it disavows. On Butler's reading, the masculine and feminine positions of the "heterosexual matrix" supposed by Freud's account of sexual difference maps onto his account of melancholia insofar as

[66]Freud, 28.
[67]Freud, 29.

heterosexuality requires a repudiation of same-sex desire and opposite-sex identification vis-à-vis a melancholic incorporation: "it appears that the loss of homosexual objects and aims (not simply this person of the same gender, but *any* person of that same gender) will be foreclosed from the start."[68] The ego now appears as a graveyard of queer identifications, formed by and also conserving its own disavowals.

However, since our disavowals are sustained by love, part of what afflicts the melancholic is not only the lostness or inability to identify their object but also their resistance to *mourning* it. Perversely, there may be a sense in which one can be invested in sustaining one's own melancholia, often for reasons as simple as the fact that we can't bring ourselves to let go of our loved objects. To mourn, in Freud's terms, would mean to think one's own splitness, to undermine the certainty against which knowledge and identification are measured: it would mean moving beyond the stultifying melancholia that accompanies the subject being stuck on its lost objects by recognizing and properly grieving those objects. That melancholia, too, begins to provide the terms through which that recognition might begin to take place, though, is a curious feature of Freud's 1917 account of depression. For Freud, melancholia also articulates a kind of self-knowledge and awareness that would seem to only be able to come into view *pathologically*.

While the melancholic excessively "reproaches" and "vilifies" themself to the point of expecting "to be cast out and punished" by those around them, it's in the course of this barrage of self-debasement that a kind of pathological clarity begins to emerge. Freud writes that it would be "fruitless" to contradict a depressive patient in these self-reproaches, for

> He must sure be right in some way and be describing something that is as it seems to him to be. Indeed, we must confirm some of his statements without reservation. He really is as lacking in interest and as incapable of love and achievement as he says. But that, as we know, is secondary; it is the effect of the internal work which is consuming his ego – work which is unknown to us but which is comparable to the work of mourning. He also seems to us justified in certain other self-accusations; it is merely that he has a keener eye for the truth than other people who are not melancholic. When in his heightened self-criticism he describes himself as petty, egoistic, dishonest, lacking in independence, one whose sole aim has been to hide the weaknesses of his nature, it may be, so far as we know, that he has come pretty near to understanding himself; we only wonder why a man has to be ill before

[68] Butler, "Melancholy Gender – Refused Identification," 171.

he can be accessible to a truth of this kind.[69]

Freud's tone here is of course a little tongue-in-cheek, walking a line between describing something about melancholic insight and prescribing how a practicing analyst ought manage their own counter-transferential response to a patient's aggressive self-deprecation in order to keep them talking. Crucially, the analyst is to refrain from assuming themself to be in a place to assuage the patient's guilt, or to assume that the melancholic's lost object is any more accessible to the analyst than it is to the patient. Melancholic insight, like psychoanalysis itself, "starts from pathology."[70] It's in the course of following through with the articulation of their own symptom that the melancholic also, unconsciously, articulates a truth about themselves and the nature of their desire. Such is the nature of the *symptom*: it sits at the place of the desired object, obfuscating it even as it instructively stages the subject reaching out towards it.

It's important that the analyst not correct the patient here, too, because part of the work of the analysis is to allow the patient to begin to listen to themself as the analyst listens to them, and it's in this respect that melancholia occupies a unique place in Freudian psychopathology because the melancholic has *introjected* their object. For if the melancholic's self-reproach is, in fact, a misdirected criticism of a beloved object whose ambivalence the melancholic hasn't yet been able to come to terms with, the working-through of that ambivalence with respect to the object might be coterminous with working through an ambivalent relation with the self. Such a position, it should be noted, is *foreclosed* by the racist investments of the *Prioress's Tale*. The Prioress's relation to her object is, in a sense, the opposite of that of the melancholic: she identifies herself with her fetishistically idealized "good" object in the Child and paranoiacally projects her own aggressive impulses towards that object onto the phobically-caricatured "bad" object of the Jews.

It may be the case that it's in this foreclosure of the depressive that there is also a foreclosure of the conditions by which the pathological avoidance of ambivalence might be processed and

[69]Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, 1957, 14:246.

[70]Cf. Van Haute, "Freud Against Oedipus?", 41-2: "Freud's claim for the primacy of sexuality is based on the discovery that sexuality confronts us with a number of unsolvable problems and conflicts that are rooted in our biological constitution and that are at the basis of psychopathology. But this biological constitution can only be studied properly *starting from* pathology. The primacy of sexuality and the primacy of the pathological for the understanding of human existence are thus for Freud two sides of the same coin."

overcome. It's in this inability to direct one's critical gaze inwards, perhaps, that phobia not only forecloses the reparative tempering of melancholic self-criticism but also approaches the psychotic. This problematic is of central importance to the work of Melanie Klein, for whom the "depressive position" forms a kind of affective reference point that functions as a kind of fulcrum of neurotic subjectivity insofar as it continually provides the material for which the ambivalence of our various attachments might be reckoned with.

3.3 Love and pacification

That Freud's accounts of sexual difference and depression are, relatedly, unfinished provides the starting point for understanding Melanie Klein's contributions to psychoanalytic theory. One of the more striking features of Klein's work is the way she centers the "depressive position" in her account of neurotic subjectivity. On this, Klein's thought is generally divided into three periods. In her early work, Klein takes an interest in the young child's process of integrating their internal images of the parents into a mature superego. Following this period is the discovery of the "depressive position," and, with it, the investigation into the ways in which, following the early integration of "good" and "bad" objects, the splitting of such objects becomes progressively more aligned with reality as the child learns to reconcile themself with the ambivalence of their attachments. In her later work, Klein's work with adult schizophrenics has brought her attention to the integration of the *ego* and the ways in which "[i]ntegration depends on love impulses predominating over destructive impulses."[71] This interest in the reparative capacity of love is something which emerges very early in her career. In 1930's "The Importance of Symbol-Formation in the Development of the Ego,"[72] for instance, Klein observes that the schizophrenic child's "flat affect" can be attributed to an overly strong superego, and that the child's guilt and suppression of his own destructive impulses correlates with an inability to form happy attachments. The corollary to Klein's observation of early childhood in terms of anxiety, fear, and splitting is that the trajectory of childhood development is towards love: "the child shows an ever-growing, deeply rooted desire to be loved and to love, and to be at

[71] Spillius et al., *The New Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, 373.
[72] Klein, *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works*, 1975, 219–32.

peace with the world about it."[73]

In her 1963 paper "On the Sense of Loneliness," her last, Klein's primary concern is the question of "integration." For Klein, integration is the central "*developmental task*" for the subject, but this doesn't mean that she thinks that there is any sense in which a subject is ever fully "cured" or that the split nature of subjectivity simply passes away.[74] That some of the more understated and quotidian affects like loneliness speak to both to the ever-postponed terminability and *necessity* of "integration" is what makes them of such importance to both Klein's theoretical and clinical work. As she observes in the essay on loneliness,

> Full and permanent integration is never possible for some polarity between the life and death instincts always persists and remains the deepest source of conflict. Since full integration is never achieved, complete understanding and acceptance of one's own emotions, phantasies and anxieties is not possible and this continues as an important factor in loneliness.[75]

Loneliness testifies to its own unrequitedness, representing a longing for a state of non-contradiction in which difference doesn't impossibilize reciprocity between our inner and outer worlds. Its longing is all the crueler for its resemblance to nostalgia, as its glance looks back beyond the conservative stasis sought by the drive and into an originating fantasy of wholeness that we know we ought to know better than to believe in. The "inner sense of being alone regardless of external circumstances, of feeling lonely even when among friends or receiving love" – is ultimately a "yearning for an understanding without words," that is, "for the earliest relation with the mother." Klein calls it "ubiquitous."[76] Loneliness marks a disjunction between feeling and unconscious knowledge, testifying to the way our fantasies imprint themselves on our day-to-day reality despite ourselves.

I think it's this sensitivity to affect that makes Klein's at times crudely allegorical and apparently dualistic interest in the life and death "instincts" a bit deceptive. While loneliness testifies to a melancholic foundation that grounds the subject's ego in a kind of nostalgic longing, this longing isn't made out to be foolish on account of its unrequitedness – there's a sense in which it's *necessary*,

[73] "The Early Development of Conscience in the Child," Klein, 257.
[74] Spillius et al., *The New Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, 373.
[75] Klein, *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works*, 1975, 302.
[76] Klein, 301.

since it also enables the capacity for love and enjoyment. Love in this sense isn't simply the victory of one instinct over another but the ongoing work that must accompany the rediscovery and reparation of the subject's desire. It's this "nostalgia" and longing for the mother's breast that enables "enjoyment" in the first place:

> A happy relation to the first object and a successful internalization of it means that love can be given and received. As a result the infant can experience enjoyment not only at times of feeding but also in response to the mother's presence and affection. [...] Moreover, there is a close link between enjoyment and the feeling of understanding and being understood. At the moment of enjoyment anxiety is assuaged and the closeness to the mother and trust in her are uppermost. [...] Enjoyment is always bound up with gratitude; if this gratitude is deeply felt it includes the wish to return goodness received and thus the basis of generosity.[77]

It's on this point that Klein moves beyond Freud's accounts of projection and melancholia – which privilege the projection or introjection of the destructive impulses of the "death instinct" – to the insistence that, at the same time, there exists the "urge of the life instinct to find a good object in the external world."[78] As in Freud, this finding is always really a *refinding*, and the fact that desire is structured by a melancholic relation to its loved object means that the melancholic subject can discover within themselves the means to mourn and repair their own attachments through love.

Klein's understanding of mourning and melancholia may be read dialectically insofar as love functions as the means for overcoming the dualism of the "instincts." As it does for the philosopher Gillian Rose, love for Klein provides a kind of "third" or "middle" term insofar as it "arises out of misrecognition of desire, of work, of my and of your self-relation mediated by the self-relation of the other."[79] It's a "work" that is independent of its object, but which is also made meaningful in relation to that object. It's in this sense that the Kleinian object begins to resemble something like Hegel's sense of the modern *law* (by Rose's account, at least), insofar as the "urge toward integration" that is propelled by love supposes that this "integration" is coterminous with a "full mutual recognition" that is both *necessary* and only able to "be approached phenomenologically, [...] by expounding its dualistic reductions."[80] Something of this can be seen in Klein's understanding of the ego. There

[77] Klein, 310.
[78] Klein, 312.
[79] Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, 75.
[80] Rose, 75.

are times in Klein when the ego appears as something that one only catches glimpses of within the flux of introjection and projection. Klein's ego appears only as movement, never able to be spoken of in terms of a discrete, self-present "object."

Nonetheless, the ego remains something whose "integration" Klein is keenly invested in. The securing of a "good object" in childhood serves as a lifelong counterweight to the death-driven parts of subjectivity in the libidinal balancing act of integration. Crucially, when the subject projects and introjects "goodness" and "badness" of the world, these processes

> are not *predominantly* related to fragmented parts of the personality but to more coherent parts of the self. This implies that the ego is not exposed to a fatal weakening by dispersal and for this reason is more capable of repeatedly undoing splitting and achieving integration and synthesis in its relation to objects.[81]

The "object" isn't "external" to the ego, and the "ego" is, in a sense, an object that the subject continually falls towards and away from in a "comedy" of misrecognition through which it is propelled by desire. Importantly, though, the ego *survives* its misrecognitions: within the flux of introjected and projected objects, as it moves through the world it manages to find a center of gravity, however precarious. As is the case for Rose, the Kleinian subject isn't simply doomed to their misrecognitions and caught forever in projected delusions. It *is*, in fact, ultimately able to form some sort rapport with the Real. The tenor of this process is *comic* in the Hegelian sense, insofar as part of what the approach towards integration entails is the development of an awareness of the fact that in reality the things which we take as our objects are in fact, often, also other *subjects* – they, too, are "split" self-relations.[82]

For Eve Sedgwick, one of the advantages of Klein's account of early childhood as opposed to Freud's and Lacan's is the way it reframes "omnipotence." "In Freud's view," she writes, "we want as much power as we can get and indeed start out with the assumption that we are omnipotent; everything after that is a big, disillusioning letdown called reality."[83] For Klein, though, "omnipotence

[81] "On Identification," Klein, *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works*, 1975, 144–45.

[82] "For the separation out of otherness as such is derived from the failure of mutual recognition on the part of two self-consciousnesses who encounter each other and refuse to recognise the other as itself a self-relation: the other is never simply other, but an implicated self-relation," Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, 74.

[83] Sedgwick, "Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes," 631.

is a fear at least as much as it is a wish":

> The Kleinian infant experiences a greed – her own – whose aggressive and envious component is perceived as posing a mortal threat both to her loved and needed objects and to herself. Thus the perception of oneself as omnipotent is hardly less frightening than the perception of one's parent as being so.
>
> In fact, this all-or-nothing understanding of agency is toxic enough that it is a relief and a relaxation for the child eventually to discover a different reality. The sense that power is a form of relationality that deals in, for example, negotiations (including win-win negotiations), the exchange of affect, and other small differentials, the middle ranges of agency – the notion that you can be relatively empowered or disempowered without annihilating someone else or being annihilated, or even castrating or being castrated – is a great mitigation of that endogenous anxiety, although it is also a fragile achievement that requires discovering over and over.[84]

Klein's narrative by which children experience object relations from an extremely early moment in life provides, for Sedgwick, a useful inversion of Freud's phallocentric narrative of the Oedipal stage. For Freud, though, the fact that the Oedipal phase happens prior to a final "genital" stage means that along with this sense of "omnipotence" he locates in early childhood that the sexual instincts are objectless. As Alenka Zupančič puts it, they are "not innate, not object-based, and not procreative."[85] Rather than being necessarily scripted by an a priori sense of something like "biological sex," the Oedipal narrative is primarily a way of allegorizing the way a child *assumes* a sex. It introduces a sense of differentiation to what was prior a polymorphous, undifferentiating sexual drive.

One would be justified in asking, then, what sorts of new attachments and desires are made available and foreclosed when Klein argues for the presence of object relations in early childhood. In a sense, the "relief" with which the child discovers the limits to their own omnipotence is rather importantly also a relief at assuming a normative sexuality. By arguing that Oedipal object relations are present for the infant before they can cohere into a narrative in which the child comes to terms with castration, Klein *psychically locates a melancholic structure of sexual difference prior to the development of the ego*. The outcome of this line of thought is an even more rigidly "binary" account of bisexuality than can be found in Freud at his most Oedipal. A dream of one of Klein's patients

[84] Sedgwick, 631–32.
[85] Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*, 9.

serves as an instructive example. In the dream, a little girl holds out a hoop for a lioness to jump through, only to be killed because on the other side of it lies a precipice. As this game plays out, a little boy off to the side kills a snake. Klein reads the lioness as herself and the little girl as the patient's "feminine part," noting that

> It was extremely painful to the patient to become aware that, being in competition with my femininity, he wanted to destroy me, and in the past, his mother. The recognition that one part of himself wanted to kill the loved lioness-analyst, which would thus deprive him of his good object, led to a feeling not only of misery and guilt but also of loneliness in the transference. It was also very distressing for him to recognize that the competition with his father led him to destroy the father's potency and penis, represented by the snake.[86]

One thing that's very striking about Klein's reading of such a dream is that even if it assumes an account of latent bisexuality, there also, exists, for Klein an unproblematized, coherent sense of sexual difference that she locates in the unconscious. Every object in the dream is saturated with Oedipal signification, taking for granted, then, that each one is *gendered*. If the violence towards the snake/phallus appears somewhat as an afterthought in this account, it's because for Klein the more fundamental problem is that the patient, being male, hasn't found it within himself to properly mourn "his difficulty over the feminine position," and the unbearable fact that he unconsciously wishes to destroy his own "feminine part."[87] Here, reparation comes on the back of a recognition whose function is to pacify the unruly and pathologically non-normative identifications that constitute sexuation, as the recognition of this "feminine part" serves only to foreground the patient's more stable assumption of the masculine position. The unconscious has been fully Oedipalized, reduced to a collection of readily interpretable signifiers whose allegorical referents can be found in a narrative which has been quietly pushed towards being a condition of the "normal."

Like Freud, Klein assumes the mutual exclusion of longing for and identifying with one's object; part of what the theory of reparation attests to is the existence of integrative instinct in the subject that counters the death drive. Reparation, then, is a facet of mourning: it names the process by which we recognize the lost object in order to come to terms with its lostness, that is, to identify the

[86] Klein, *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works*, 1975, 306.
[87] Klein, 307.

object so that we may dis-identify *with* it. Part of what attention to the centrality of sexual difference in Klein's theory of reparation brings into view is the sense in which reparation necessarily involves foreclosure and letting go, and the unmoored, ambiguous, and underdetermined qualities of the depressive position suggest their own undoing and working-through. Reparation, in other words, speaks to the violence of recognition whose function is to pacify not only the death drive itself but the identifications which are understood to be haunting the subject and standing in the way of their flourishing. While often necessary, this violence shouldn't be passed over, as it also speaks to the ways in which the reparative "urge towards integration" can find expression in much graver forms.

3.4 "Al is yliche good": The Book of the Duchess

The prologue to *The Book of the Duchess* establishes the text as a series of hermeneutic events mediated by a melancholic body. Chaucer's account of melancholia is a closed economy, in which the subject's affect is imprinted by their bodily state, which in turn is a condition of "thoght": the dreamer can't sleep because he suffers from "so many an ydel thoght", which he suffers from because he can't sleep.[88] What this dialectic produces is a sense of false equilibrium, an affected flatness:

> Al is ylyche good to me –
> Joye or sorowe, whereso hyt be –
> For I have felynge in nothyng
> But as yt were a mased thyng,
> Always in poynt to falle a-doun;
> For sorwful ymaginacioun
> Ys alway hooly in my mynde.[89]

The gravitational pull of melancholic thought levels the mind with the body, entangling one with the other. Depression here is a state of discomfiting equilibrium, in which for the "mased" (bewildered, dazed) subject "all is equally good." It's striking that a psychological state characterized in terms of its affective stagnation should be characterized as a perversion of the dialectical tension between thought and embodiment, and that the affective leveling that results in the perception of all things as

[88] Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, l. 4.
[89] Chaucer, 9–15.

"equally *good*" should be associated with morbidity. Melancholia's stagnation, perhaps, is somewhat restless. This may be why there may be something *unnatural* about melancholia insofar as the melancholic subject treads the line between living and dying: "For nature wolde nat suffyse / to noon erthly creature / nat longe tyme to endure / withoute slep and be in sorwe."[90]

It's from this psychic reference point that we're brought into *Book's* first nested text, a re-telling of the story of Ceyx and Alcyone from book eleven Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in which the shape-shifting god Morpheus takes on the form of King Ceyx in order to deliver the news of the king's death to his wife. Perhaps it's the grogginess of the reader that rushes the story along and fudges some of the details of the story. Whereas in previous versions of the story Morpheus is portrayed as a shape-shifting, flying god, a master of imitating the human form (*non illo quisquam sollertius alter exprimit incessus vultumque sonumque loquendi* – "no other is more skilled than he in representing the gait, the features, and the speech of man"),[91] here Juno has him go physically fetch Ceyx's corpse from the bottom of the ocean so that he might crawl into it: "byd hym that, on alle thyng, / He take up Seys body the kyng, / That lyeth ful pale and nothyng rody. / Bid hym crepe into the body / and do hit goon to Alcione."[92] In the *Metamorphoses* the tragedy of the tale comes in part from the foretelling of the king's death – Alcione dreams Ceyx's fate before his voyage and he fails to heed her warnings. In Chaucer's retelling details like this fall out or are glossed over. Alcione's initial swoon comes not from the chilling foresight of the dream and subsequent worrying of its coming true but from her uncertainty about the length of her husband's absence, and instead of praying to Juno for his safety, she asks for a dream, "Wherethrough I may knowen even / Whether my lord be quyk or ded."[93]

Julie Orlemanski has argued that Chaucer's use of poetic form in *The Book of the Duchess* is "unprecedentedly materialist, requiring the scarce and singular matter of the dead,"[94] and one may well ask how much this is colored by the melancholic dreamer's depressive position. As Orlemanski

[90]Chaucer, 18–21.
[91]Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1939, 11.635–36.
[92]Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 141–45.
[93]Chaucer, 120–21.
[94]Orlemanski, "The Heaviness of Prosopopoeial Form in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*," 134.

emphasizes, for Chaucer prosopopoeia has a *weight*; rather than attempting to distinguish form from materiality it awkwardly imposes itself and weighs down upon language. This weight is felt as well in the wandering attention span of the nested reading itself. In Ovid, Morpheus appears to Alcyone when she is in a dream state, as an *image*. Donning his form and imitating his voice and gestures, Morpheus-as-Ceyx informs Alcyone's of his death so she can mourn him properly. The plan is complicated by its own effectiveness, however: groaning, in a dream state, Alcyone implores Morpheus to stay, and in so doing wakes herself up:

> Awakened by the sound of her own voice
> and by her husband's image [*specie*], she attempts
> to verify if it was really him
> whom she has just observed; roused by her cries,
> the servants had brought in a lamp, and she,
> unable to find him anywhere,
> began to strike herself about the face,
> and tearing at the robes upon her breast,
> struck it as well, and without bothering
> to let her hair down, started tearing it.
>
> And answered, when they asked what caused her grief,
> "Alcyone is no one any more:
> she died with Ceyx! No consolation please!"[95]

In Ovid's text the distinction between the worlds of gods and humans remains intact: the voice responds to an image, but it's the former which wakes the body. Alcyone, inconsolable, doesn't perform funeral rites but instead goes to cast herself off a cliff, transforms into a bird, and flies to her husband's corpse to give him a final kiss, prompting the gods to show mercy and transform them both: "as birds, / their love and conjugal vows remain in force: / they mate and rear their young; for seven days, / *halcyon days*, in winter."[96]

This note of chipper reproductive futurism is dramatically cut off in Chaucer's abbreviated and cheekily morbid retelling. Chaucer's materialism here is to be found not so much in its refusal of metaphysics as in how it ignores the distinction between form and materiality. Rather than performing a convincing rendition of a rotting corpse, Morpheus literally drags the corpse to the

[95]Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 2004, ll. 965–77.
[96]Ovid, 1059–62.

foot of her bed in order to deliver the news,[97] upon the reception of which Alcyone swoons and dies within three days for reasons the narrator apparently just doesn't care to relate:

> With that hir eyen up she casteth
> And saw noght. "Allas!" quod she for sorwe,
> And deyede within the thridde morwe.
> But what she sayede more in that swow,
> I may not telle yow as now;
> Hyt were to longe for to dwelle.[98]

Did Alcyone see nothing because the corpse was a vision, or because it was simply dark in her bedchamber? What happens during the three-day swoon between "Allas!" and the instant of her death? These details fall by the wayside, because the story, apparently, is rather effective at getting the narrator to sleep. The narrator is primarily struck by the notion of a god of sleep – "I had never herd speke or tho / Of noo goddes that koude make / Men to slepe, ne for to wake, / For I ne knew never god but oon"[99] – and it's by fantasizing about Morpheus and resolving to ask him to help him sleep that the narrator eventually, finally, dozes off.

Even here, the materialism of *The Book of the Duchess* comes into view not only in the texture of the language itself – Chaucer's overdetermined use of the Germanic word *crepen*, for instance, to reimagine the "airy shape-shifter" Morpheus "as a lowly physicalized thing"[100] – but as well in a poetics that insistently points outside of itself, as if to indicate its own boundedness so as to surpass it. This is of course what happens with the climax of the dream itself that follows, in the way the Man in Black's definitive acknowledgment of his lover's death coincides with the waking of the dreamer such that the poem manages to scrupulously avoid representing the afterlife. This, too, is related in terms of the dreamer's gullible, heavy-handed reading skills, when the Man in Black, incredulous that the dreamer hasn't surmised this already, finally bluntly acknowledges that the lover he's been talking about for the bulk of the vision is indeed dead:

> Bethenke how I seyde here-beforn,

[97] "Took up the dreynte body sone / And bar hyt forth to Alcione," Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ll. 195–96.
[98] Chaucer, 212–17.
[99] Chaucer, 234–37.
[100] Orlemanski, "The Heaviness of Prosopopoeial Form in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*," 135.

'Thow wosst ful lytel what thow menest;
I have lost more than thow wenest.'
God wot, allas! Ryght that was she!"
"Allas sir, how? What may that be?"
"She ys ded!" "Nay!" "Yis, be my trouthe!"[101]

"Death itself cannot sustain poetry," D. Vance Smith observes here, as it is both death's immanence and deferral that sustains it.[102] The poem's sense of materiality, then, lies not only in the way it gives form the heaviness of the corporeal form, but also in the way the poem's *memento mori* comes into view in the poem's interruption of itself, that is, in the re-severing of language from the body. The conversation between the dreamer and the Man in Black is cut short by the horn indicating the end of the hunt, and the dreamer, in turn, is woken up by the striking of the twelve o'clock bell from a nearby tower.[103] This bell "announces the intrusion of a regime of memory that depends upon repetition rather than forgetting," Smith writes, "but, more important, it suggests a regime that is able to contemplate historical death directly and somehow translate it into meaning."[104]

It does seem important, however, that the text is sustained by these little flawed repetitions and imperfect identifications. While the ontological status of what wakes Alcyone is left ambiguous, the dreamer's awakening by the bell might well be a winking acknowledgment of Chaucer's source. That Chaucer's retelling of Ceyx and Alcyone skips over the quaint heterosexuality of the lover's metamorphoses into kingfishers in favor of slimy reanimated corpses and sudden death also anticipates the queerness of the dream that follows, which L.O. Aranye Fradenburg has read as a "series of survivals," in which "the hetero couple gives way to friendship" between the dreamer and the Man in Black and "relations of reproduction and substitution give way to replication."[105] As the dreamer comes across the Man in Black in mid-swoon, an erotics emerges in the man's passionate description of his deceased lover and, in turn, in the dreamer's apparently naïve inability to catch on to the fact that the lover has died. It's this same naïvete, though, that keeps the man talking.

[101] Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 1304–9.
[102] Smith, *Arts of Dying*, 95.
[103] "Ryght thus me mette, as I yow telle, / That in the castell there was a belle, / As hyt hadde smyten houres twelve. / Therwyth I awook myselve / And fond me lyinge in my bed…" Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 1321–25.
[104] Smith, *Arts of Dying*, 97.
[105] Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, 95, 100.

Fradenburg argues that within this play of polite deferrals and affected ignorance,

> courtly love has been displaced by courtier love, which stylizes the court through the vigilant and equalizing mannering of the group body always aware of and anticipating its own destructivity [. . .]. The mannered body and voice equalizes, but does not dissolve, rank; it deflects, but registers, danger. Rank permits special gifts of friendship, because a great man risks a little prestige when he condescends to courtly friendship with a lesser man, and a lesser man risks what rank he has by approaching a greater man. Courtesy is an economy of sacrifice as well as prosthesis, a mannering and extension of sentience that elaborates the form of *the* group, so that no one goes alone and the endlessly deferred other always goes first [. . .].[106]

It's within this series of repetitions and deferrals that there is any "meaning" to be found in death, as this cautious disclosure of attachments produces, for Fradenburg, a "zone of exacerbated sensibility" in which the Man in Black "is thrown toward death, and made to share the exemplary status of his lost object" when he declares a total identification with his own sorrow ("For y am sorwe, and sorwe ys y.")[107] One might also trace a kind of downward movements across the *Book* – whether in the Man in Black's tale of falling into love or towards death,[108] or in the prologue's sense of "poetic catabasis"[109] that leads us to the subterranean sliminess of Morpheus crawling into the waterlogged body of the dead king, or, finally, which might be traced along the *Book's* catalogue of swoons.

Chaucer's version of the story also has a kind of jarring presentism: in Ovid's original text, part of what registers as tragic is the fact that Ceyx's death *is* foretold – by Alcione, who begs him not to set off on his voyage. Chaucer cuts this part out: Alcione's deathly swoon becomes formally reflected by the dreamer's being lulled into sleep and *out* of the living death of melancholic insomnia ("I had be dolven everydel / And ded, ryght thurgh defaute of slep").[110] What's at stake here isn't a question of life and afterlife so much as life's *extensibility*: Chaucer's nesting of narratives is such that one life falls into another, and the reader falls into the reverie which makes up the main body of the *Book* with the same downward motion as that of Alcione's swoon. The pull of narrative here is gravitational rather than sequential, drawing inward rather than towards something. This movement

[106]Fradenburg, 100.
[107]Fradenburg, 101; Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 597.
[108]Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, 81.
[109]Orlemanski, "The Heaviness of Prosopopoeial Form in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*," 134.
[110]Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 222–23.

also nudges us towards an understanding of identification as something that isn't necessarily about a homology of being so much as a chain of provocative links – in the Lacanian idiom, "little objects" or occasions of desire – along which we are pulled.

It's in this sense that what Fradenburg refers to as an "exacerbated sensibility" names what's queer about the poem, recalling Leo Bersani's writing in various places on "impersonal narcissism", that form of self-love that emerges on the back of the "extensibility of sameness," and for which "the self out there is 'mine' without belonging to me."[111] The swoon gives the fall the shape of falling *into* something: Alcyone's swoon into her death becomes repeated in the reader's reception of the text, muffling the details as he himself falls into slumber. The Man in Black, too, exhibits all the same melancholic symptoms as Geoffrey himself: in between life and death but not necessarily dying, he observes, "Hit was gret wonder that Nature / myght suffre any creature / To have such sorwe and be not ded."[112] The man's face is drawn pale as the heart's downward gravitational pull that draws the blood from his face,[113] and when Geoffrey approaches him, cautiously, he "stood ryght at his fet."[114] There's a kind of intimacy in this scene beyond the demure chivalry of the gestures themselves ("no fors"):[115] the description and listing-off of the Man in Black's *symptoms* draws us – Geoffrey – closer towards him, until we find ourselves standing at his feet.

The way Geoffrey is drawn towards the Man in Black is communicated through a series of small recognitions. This is identification in the *analogical* sense, as Freud describes it in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*:

> One ego has perceived a significant analogy with another upon one point – in our upon openness to a similar emotion; an identification is thereupon constructed on this point, and, under the influence of the pathogenic situation, is displaced on to the symptom which the one ego has produced. The identification by means of the symptom has thus become the mark of a point of coincidence between the two egos which has to be kept repressed.[116]

The question which the above account emerges out of for Freud is an important one: can there

[111]Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays*, 118.
[112]Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 467–69.
[113]"The blood was fled for pure drede / Doun to hys herte, to make hym warm," Chaucer, 491–92.
[114]Chaucer, 502.
[115]Chaucer, 522.
[116]Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 49.

be identification with the loved object where the object is retained? Is it possible to be *and* to have one's object of affection? For Freud the answer is yes, though it depends on repression: "What is inconceivable in the Freudian scheme," Bersani writes in "Socialibility and Cruising," is "*identification as libidinal recognition*."[117] The exception, of course, lies with the "perversion" of homosexuality: even in the classic Freudian account of the Oedipus complex, Freud's hypothetical homosexual (man) essentially bypasses the conflict with the father vis-à-vis "an identification that is neither a loss nor object-love in the usual sense."[118] For Bersani, if the upswing of heterosexuality's inability "to think of desire other than as lack or loss" is a "nonmurderous wonder at difference,"[119] then homosexuality offers a way of thinking sociality in which the sense of a priori castration, rather than being either narrativized into a story of fallenness (as is the case in neurotic heterosexuality) or denied (as in psychosis), might be seen as the basis for a kind of sexual *sociability*, in which there may be a *pleasure* to be discerned in "being less than what we really are"[120] in the company of others. The homosexual, in Bersani's telling, "wanders in the world – cruises the world, we might almost say – in search of objects that will give him back to himself as a loved and cared for subject."[121]

While the play of "courtier love," as Fradenburg calls it, of course very much does depend on the repression of identification as libidinal recognition in the *Book*, there is also a sense in which Chaucer's dreamer resembles Bersani's cruising homosexual, in that what links together the series of disparate scenes that comprise *The Book of the Duchess* are these little recognitions, identifications, and imperfect replications, sexual or otherwise. There may be, in other words, a kind of solidarity of being to be found in the symptom. We find this in the "I": when the Man in Black laments "y am sorwe, and sorwe ys y"[122] the "I" is, on the one hand, "pure symptom" insofar as it "correspond[s] with pure suffering,"[123] but, grammatically, there's a sense in which the "I" is

[117]Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays*, 53.
[118]Bersani, 54.
[119]Bersani, 54, 56.
[120]Bersani, 47.
[121]Bersani, 55.
[122]Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 597.
[123]Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, 101.

always already less than what it really is. A.C. Spearing has pointed to the importance of *deixis* in what he's called medieval "autographical" texts like dream visions and the Old French *dit*, arguing that "the change to fictional speakers as the norm occurred," exceptional cases like *The Canterbury Tales* notwithstanding, "long after the Middle Ages."[124] There may be an important sense in which the "I" in a text like the *Book* functions linguistically as a pure "shifter": "the first-person singular pronoun need not be referential (referring consistently to an individual who uses the word"I"); it may only be deictic, its function being to convey proximality and experientiality without specific refence to a pragmatic center or *origo*."[125]

While Spearing's articulation of the deictic function of the "I" is insistent upon the way it loosens the "purely" grammatical function of pronouns from historical or sexed referents,[126] in the *Book* the grammatical unmooredness of the "I" is itself weighed down, contaminated, drawn in towards and outside of itself: rather than "pure shifter" it's an *analogy*. In her history of photography, Kaja Silverman distinguishes the analogical quality of the photograph from previous understandings of it in terms of its indexicality or capacity for representation:

> . . . analogy is also the fluid in which it develops. This process does not begin when we decide that it should, or end when we command it to. Photography develops, rather, *with us*, and *in response to us*. It assumes historically legible forms, and when we divest them from their saving power, generally by imputing them to ourselves, it goes elsewhere.[127]

Analogy, in this sense, is to be distinguished from the sense in which photography either indexes or represents, instead speaking to the way in which "Two is the smallest unit of Being."[128] When I identify with an object, I don't simply act upon it or mold myself to it; I involve myself with it. If the "I" is "pure symptom," then, there may be a sense in which it's necessary to account for the ways in which its purely grammatical indexicality is contaminated, if not fixed or determined, by the ways analogy involves it in its objects and points to the similarities that "give everything the

[124] Spearing, *Medieval Autographies*, 5.
[125] Spearing, 14.
[126] "In narrative especially it need be assigned no gender, no age, no social position, or it may be characterized to some extent in some passages (and perhaps differently characterized in different passages within a single text), while remaining elsewhere no more than an anonymous and unobtrusive channel of narration or discourse," Spearing, 13–14.
[127] Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy*, 12.
[128] Silverman, 11.

same ontological weight" in the world without collapsing difference.[129]

It's interesting, then, that Chaucer begins with the melancholic symptom, framing the poem as one related by an unreliable, morbidly sleep deprived,[130] "mased" reader. Returning to this moment now, the "I" appears to me not as an indexical container in which I might put myself but as a symptom amongst other symptoms, no more or less important in involving me with this affective state – in which "al is ylyche good" – than the symptoms of sleeplessness or "amazement." This is what I would suggest is "materialist" in Chaucer's poetic sensibility. Not only does Chaucer undermine some distinction between form and matter, but it takes *discourse itself* as the "matter" of poetry. Its subject doesn't exist prior to the material in which it recognizes and constitutes itself.[131] There's also something to medieval representation of melancholia itself that brings this into view, however, in the kind of leveling or unhinging that occurs when the object of desire is a somewhat open question.

"Depression," Lauren Berlant notes, is an ambivalent pathology, and has a way of "producing the prisonhouse or the lightness of not caring; or the freedom or vertigo from detaching and seeing multiple horizons; or the excited scanning or dark melancholy that might saturate everywhere when desire no longer has an object to give living on a discrete shape."[132] As I discussed in the previous chapter with Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, in the medieval moral imaginary melancholia demands a supplement. The flailing for "an object to give living on a discrete shape," in other words, may itself may be productive of something, or at least may provide the language by which that object might come into view. Part of what the *Book* helps bring into view, then, is that if depression speaks to an involvement in the world, it's in part because it's when we're depressed that this object is in question but also *posed* as a question, and in so doing might itself provide a means of a kind of subjective integrity.

[129]Silverman, 11.

[130]"Defaute of slep and hevyness / Hath sleyn my spirit of quyknesse," Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 25–26.

[131]Cf. Bersani's account of the unconscious in "Psychoanalysis and the Aesthetic Subject": "there is no specified unconscious prior to the material from the external world in which it at once recognizes and constitutes itself. The unconscious never is; it is perhaps an essentially unthinkable, intrinsically unrealizable reserve of human being – a dimension of virtuality rather than of psychic depth – from which we connect to the world, not as subject to object, but as a continuation of a specific syntax of being" (Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays*, 147-48).

[132]Berlant, "Do You Intend to Die?" section four.

4 Hoccleve the symptom

In the previous chapter, I explored some of the ways in which the symptom appears in Chaucer's writing as a technology of identification. In *The Book of Duchess*, the symptom – the *I* – takes on a kind of indexicality through the impersonal specificity of its *traits*, that is, those "point[s] of coincidence"[1] along which a kind of sociability between the reader and the text might be enunciated. The symptom's capacity to enable identification can be carried to extremes, however. In the case of the *Prioress's Tale*, for instance, one thing that the tale of the little clergeon dramatizes is the way in which the symptom can serve to enable fantasies of unification to a pathological extent. One notes the clergeon's role in the fantasies of both the Prioress himself and his single mother, ultimately functioning in the place of the Prioress's *objet a* as he is put in the position of having to subordinate himself to performing the role of an object that might embody what the mother lacks.

What these two texts share in relation to thinking about the symptom is the way it can draw a subject *in* to a relation with an other. In the *Book*, the reader is drawn into a relation with the dreamer by way of our recognition of his melancholic symptoms of sleeplessness, dread, and heaviness. The displacement of the *I* and decentering of the autographical in the *Canterbury Tales* doesn't do away with this function of the symptom, but rather allows for the interrogation of it within different scenes. For the Prioress, the child-symptom serves as the anchorpoint for an ultimately fascistic fantasy of wholeness which Aranye Fradenburg diagnosed as operating on a desire to "erase the difference between word and thing."[2] In the present chapter, I turn to the writing of the early fifteenth century poet Thomas Hoccleve, whose turn away from the autographical is not towards the novelistic heteroglossia of the *Canterbury Tales* but towards a rather startling psychological realism. Hoccleve's writing begins with the breaking down of the *I*. He trades the autographical for the autobiographical, deriving a kind of literary authority from his unique take on "My Compleinte." I begin by attending to this mode and Hoccleve's take on it as it appears in the *Compleynte paramont* and *La Male regle*.

[1] Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 49.
[2] Fradenburg, "Criticism, Anti-Semitism, and the *Prioress's Tale*," 214.

While in Boethian poetics the complaint plays an important role, it's generally presented as a prelude to the reparative discourse of consolation. As I argued in my first chapter, for Boethius the *telos* of consolation is perpetually deferred, and the introduction of a split between will and desire proceeds on the supposition that desire – that is, *true* desire – always tends towards the Good. Though the subject can *will* their own death, human desire is always a desire for unity with the Good – whether that good lies with Nature or with God. What the *Consolation of Philosophy* relies on, ultimately, is an account of Nature in which there is life-driven procreation but no *sexuality*, which would threaten the wholeness of Nature by introducing a lack at its center. What interests me in Hoccleve, though, is the way his poetry foregrounds the negative: it takes cynicism, world-weariness, and irony to comprise its founding point of reference. It's a melancholic discourse, but a *damning* one: it turns language against itself; it rebels against the signifier. At least in Hoccleve's minor poems, too, there's an important sense in which the complaint leaves the reparative and the consolatory outside its frame of reference. In so doing it also raises the question of sex insofar as it narrates the ways in which complaint is a mode of jouissance, a fragmenting of the body by way of language.

This jouissance is given voice most famously in Hoccleve's *Series*, in which the autographical *I* is assembled, in a sense, in reverse. Rather than drawing the reader into the text by way of deictic identification with the *I*, in Hoccleve the pleasure of the text might be traced by way of the *I*'s dissolution and reassembly. As Julie Orlemanski puts it, if for the Chaucer of the *Canterbury Tales*, *plot* serves as "the literary form most apt for thinking about etiology – which could orchestrate various systems of causation into a single sequence of events and demand readerly puzzling over which causes really made things happen," then Hoccleve's privileged form is *narration*, with the work of *writing itself* functioning, in a sense, to speak an *I* into being.[3] In *La Male Regle*, "My Compleinte," and the "Dialoge," writing becomes a kind of stammering speech, a writing of jouissance that unravels its own signifiers. Hoccleve's *I* resists the deictic pretension to universality by merit of its own precariousness and fragmentation. Insofar as Hoccleve's complaining begins

[3]Orlemanski, *Symptomatic Subjects*, 219.

from a place of dissolution and alienation, it doesn't take the truth of desire for granted in quite the same way as the *Consolation* does. If, for Boethius, what makes desire *true* is that it by definition takes the good as its object, for the Hocclevean complaint truth is uncertain insofar as it's *inexistent*, that is, produced retroactively. This is the principle of the symptom as Lacan (following Marx) would come to formulate it in his later work: a symptom always presupposes a truth which is "inexistent," which doesn't mean that it "doesn't exist" so much as it exists, logically, in retrospect. It exists insofar as the symptom which presupposes it "marks out its place."[4]

4.1 " 'I' is fro me fall": the Compleynte paramont

Complaint, as Lauren Berlant expressed it in *The Female Complaint*, is a genre characterized by ambivalent attachments. It speaks to both the disappointment resulting from "the failure of relation" and the survival of "some fidelity to the world of distinction and desire that produced such disappointment in the first place."[5] It's a "genre," but also a mode – of investment, of backhanded attachment, and of enjoyment. In Jewish humor, complaining – *kvetching* – "can be applied indifferently to hunger or satiety":[6] the *kvetcher* takes a special pleasure in complaining about complaining, about having complained, and about others who complain. The Yiddish word *kvetch* is derived from the Middle High German *quetschen*, meaning to crush, bruise, or squeeze;[7] but Michael Wex makes sure to highlight the anality of the Jewish translation of the word into its rich culture of complaint:

> It isn't simply to strain, but "to strain," as Harkavy has it, "at stool," to have trouble doing what, if you'd eaten your prunes the way you were supposed to, you wouldn't have any trouble with at all. [...] A really good kvetch has a visceral quality, a sense that the kvetcher won't be completely comfortable, completely satisfied, until it's all come out.[8]

The true *kvetcher*, though, is never completely comfortable. They withhold their own satisfaction, remaining within the scene of complaint. The complaint of the habitual *kvetch*, then, has an object,

[4] Lacan, *... or Worse*, 39.
[5] Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 2.
[6] Wex, *Born to Kvetch*, 2.
[7] "Kvetch."
[8] Wex, *Born to Kvetch*, 5.

but it isn't necessarily the one that occasions her kvetching at a given moment. To complain is to attend to the fact that there's something lacking in the real, which is to say that it touches the real through the presupposition of a fantasy. Complaint is itself a mode of "negotiating belonging to a world,"[9] even it proceeds from a dogged attachment to what's lacking in it. Complaint is a symptomatic discourse; it always has an object whose inexistence it both marks out and is occasioned by; it demands a supplement, which often must be created by way of what it occasions in the first place.

Thomas Hoccleve is one of Middle English poetry's most prolific kvetches. In the *Compleynte paramont*, his translation of a Marian lament from Guillaume de Deguileville's *Le Pèlerinage de l'Âme*, grief tips over into the realm of complaint when the subject's loss of a beloved object is world shattering, and brings into view a sense of loss that precedes the loss of the object in question. Narrated from the perspective of the Virgin Mary, the *Compleynte paramont* is uttered from a place of utter despair. At least within what's preserved in the passage selected by Hoccleve for translation, absent is the temporal logic of Boethian fortune. The speaker's "ioye hath made a permutacioun" – an exchange – "With wepyng and eek lamentacioun,"[10] and within the moment of agony the poem articulates, the anticipation of that joy returning is circumscribed:

> O Gaubriel, whan that thou come aplace
> And madest vnto me thi salewyng
> And seidist thus, "Heil Mary, ful of grace,"
> Whi ne had thu gove me warnyng
> Of that grace that veyn is and faylyng,
> As thu now seest, and sey it weel beforne?[11]

The shattering effects of loss reverberate in all directions, resignifying what precedes it. It reveals grace to be "vain," and divine hailing to have proceeded from the deceptive withholding of knowledge. This is the site that complaint takes as its founding point of reference, however contingently: contemptuously looking upwards from the nadir of existence.

It's this positioning of the subject of complaint that is of interest to the considerations of the

[9]Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 3.
[10]Hoccleve, "Conpleynte Paramont," 2008, ll. 13–14.
[11]Hoccleve, 29–35.

present chapter. The Marian complaint here begins with grief over *difference* – specifically, that between mother and son, and figures Christ as an ambivalent object of attachment. "It seemeth that thow makist departynge / Twixt thee and me for ay withoute endynge," she laments, making special note of the impersonal way in which he addresses her: "And namely syn thow me 'womman' callist, / As I to thee straunge wer and vnknowe. / Therthurgh, my sone, thow my ioie appallist."[12] More than grieving the loss of a son what she laments is his *separation* from her. Who enacts that separation? The Father or the Son? It's this entanglement of *taking* and *losing* that renders the Christ into an unbearably ambivalent object in this scene, as the loved object becomes, too, the agent responsible for the destruction of her joy.

The ambivalence I'm trying to emphasize in this passage can perhaps be clarified by way of a reminder of iterability of the father function in Freudian psychoanalysis. Within a certain trajectory of Lacanian readings of Freud, there is a particular emphasis on impersonality of the Father as a *function*. As Willy Apollon articulates it in his rereading of the Freudian Oedipal scene, this renders the family itself into a "problematic" in which "*the father* or the function of the father comes *to articulate a limit, to install the time of a loss.* He renders possible an object for desire, as long as this object is lost, inaccessible, or impossible. The *father* is then a *separator* [. . .]."[13] Or, as Lucie Cantin writes, "The father has no raison d'être other than to represent the law of the symbolic," and the performance of his function is somewhat portable: "The father is thus whoever is named as 'father.' He is *not* the father, strictly speaking, merely because he may have impregnated the female."[14] What the Marian scene re-enacts is the particular violence of this function when its falls upon the child to perform it. The child, here, is the mother's *symptom*: he "gives her, in immediately accessible form, what the masculine subject lacks: the very object of his existence appearing in the real."[15] Insofar as the child is the mother's symptom, his function is, in a sense, to occupy the space left empty by her lost object. In the scene of Marian complaint, this dynamic can be traced in her

[12]Hoccleve, 174–78.
[13]Apollon, *Psychoses*, 132; ctd. Carlson, "In Defense of Queer Kinships," 268.
[14]Apollon, Bergeron, and Cantin, *After Lacan*, 41.
[15]Lacan, "Note on the Child," 14.

total identification with her symptom by way of a process which exceeds the limits of life itself.[16]

Hoccleve's translation of the lyric is marked by a particular sensitivity to and emphasis on this moment of identification, in which grief has moved from world-shattering resignification, to the confrontation with the ambivalence of the loved object, and, finally, to a shattering of the self. As I touched upon in the previous chapter, one facet of Marian fantasy is a collapse of difference with the loved object; here, this is articulated in the jouissance of the destruction of the *I*: "Wel may men clepe and calle me Mara / From hennesforward, so may men me call. / How sholde I lenger clept be Maria, / Syn 'I', which is Ihesus, is fro me fall."[17] The play on spelling – and on the courtly language of "sweetness and gall" ("Mara" being itself a name derived from the Latin *amare*, bitterness) – slips into the grammatical a few stanzas later, when Mary's suffering provocatively risks tipping over into the experience of Christ's death as her own:

> For now the taast I feele and the streynynge
> Of deeth. By thy deeth feele I deeth me stynge.
> O poore modir, what shalt thow now seye?
> Poore Marie, thy wit is aweye.
>
> Marie? Nay, but 'marred' I thee calle.
> Vessel of care and wo and sorwes alle.
> Now thow art frosty cold, now fyry hoot,
> And right as that a ship or barge or boot
> Among the wawes dryueth steerelees,
> So doost thow, woful womman, confortlees.[18]

Hoccleve's rendering of the poem into rhyme royal in English is in part responsible for the devastating line break which results in the triple repetition of the word "deeth" on line 215. In the lines which follow – and for the remainder of the poem – the "I" is displaced, as the second person addressee is no longer God/Christ but Mary herself. Not only does her "wit" wander away, with

[16]The symptom in psychoanalyis is never in fact identical with the "object," but acts, in a sense, as its placeholder. Even if this means that it obscures this "true" object, the *form itself* of the symptom articulates the insistence of a desire that exceeds it. It's in this excess that an enjoyment beyond satisfaction – an "other jouissance" that comes from outside the symptom itself – can be said to insist in the subject's attachment to their symptom: "I love you, but, because inexplicably I love in you something more than you – the *objet petit a* – I mutilate you" (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 268).

[17]Hoccleve, "Conpleynte Paramont," 2008, 183–86.

[18]Hoccleve, 214–24.

her maternal function having been exhausted so too does her motherly "style". "And of modir haast thow eek lost the style," this new ghostly "I" entones, "No more maist thow clept be by thy name."[19] What's striking about the function of complaint here is that it doesn't appear to foreclose redemption, but it does locate the speaker prior to its arrival, in a moment when it is circumscribed and only present as a potentiality which has yet to make its imprint on the complaining utterance itself. In the *Compleynte paramont*, there's no mention of "redemption" until the final line of the poem.[20]

Though firmly positioned in the negative, the complaint marks the space of what it lacks: the object to which it's attached is preserved insofar as it structures its entire discourse even in its inexistence. The complainer is compelled to speak by and through the loved object which she's lost and never had but continues to create space and speech for nonetheless. In the *Compleynte paramont*, before it brings the poetic death of the speaker, the loss of the "I" occasions an overflowing of speech: "Of sorwe talke may I nat ynow," the Virgin complains, "Syn fro my name 'I' doon away is now."[21] While complaint is a symptomatic discourse, its structure – that is, the shape or trajectory of the desire its narrative belies – isn't determined by its symptom so much as it is articulated through it. While the "original" and famously autobiographical poems Hoccleve is now better remembered for articulate structurally distinct desires and narrative trajectories than the *Compleynte paramont's* Marian mode, these later works do share an interest in symptomatic discourse, particularly in the way that the complaint begins in negativity and self-difference.

The articulation of self-difference – of the representation of the dysphoria that results from feeling other to oneself that recurs so frequently in Hoccleve's writing – is also of course importantly sexed here. This is perhaps a banal observation to make about a Marian lament lyric, but is nevertheless striking in light of Hoccleve's more personal work. The figure of a wandering "wit" so famously associated with *My Complaint* (more on this later) of course makes its appearance here, but in a distinct overflowing of jouissance, in which the speaker is eliminated by and alongside her

[19]Hoccleve, 225–26.
[20]"And it was all for your redempcioun," Hoccleve, 245.
[21]Hoccleve, 181–82.

object, "wit" and "style" spilling out along with the "I." This, of course, proceeds from an unbearable recognition of sexual difference: in the strangeness, for instance, of being called "woman" by her own son ("As I to thee straunge wer and vnknowe"),[22] and in the severance so harsh that the entire experience of having been a mother takes on a new darker hue. Another, earlier, moment in which Mary apparently addresses herself in the second person is when she addresses the former self who had carried and nursed Christ:

> O womman that among the peple speek,
> How that the wombe blessid was that beer,
> And the tetes that yaf to sowken eek
> The sone of God, which on hy hangith heer,
> What seist thow now, why comest thow no neer?[23]

Especially contrasted with her current state, the passage is remarkable for its emphasis on the sensuality of motherhood. In *Mothers*, Jacqueline Rose muses on the ways in which the idealization of motherhood obscurs the centrality of pleasure and pain to it, recalling a quip of Jean Laplanche's regarding the absence in art and psychoanalytic writing of representations of breastfeeding. "I have known mothers who stopped breastfeeding," she notes, "simply because they felt they were liking it too much."[24] In another moment in the *Compleynte*, the speaker reminisces on all the moments in which her child snuggled up in her arms, or sat upon her knee, with kissing slipping into sucking: "Thow sat and haddist many a kus of me. / Eek thee to sowke on my brestes yaf Y, / Thee norisshyng fair and tendrely."[25] This provocatively erotic representation of breastfeeding may offer a nice counter-example to Laplanche's comment, and hardly less so for the unrecoverability of the enjoyment they speak to, in part because it's world-shattering loss of the object that brings into view the extent to which that world was structured by the object's presence in the first place.

Despite the poem's overtly melancholic register, too, and despite the way in which this jouissance comes into view when the speaker is forced to confront herself as an *other*, the poem doesn't begin and end with a melancholic theory of gender. The speaker isn't *less* feminized, for instance, for her

[22]Hoccleve, 177.
[23]Hoccleve, 43–47.
[24]Rose, *Mothers*, 86.
[25]Hoccleve, "Conpleynte Paramont," 2008, 75–77.

present condition, in which she finds herself "barren" of joy[26] and with a "woful wombe."[27] Rather, something like a "feminine jouissance" is found in the poem not in the signifiers of femaleness or femininity – or, for that matter, their lack – as much as it appears as something immanent in the complaint itself, which weaves together the extremes of pleasure and pain into a discursive whole that paradoxically constitutes the subject in the very process of its unraveling. It's from this register that the jouissance of the text proceeds: in the literal coming-apart of language on the level of the letter, in these silent shifts in grammatical subject/object, and in this unarticulatable distance between motherhood at its most serene and most abject. It's this non-communicative excess of language from which this "other jouissance" arises that Lacan referred to as *lalangue*, and which language, short of being able to represent, certainly speaks to it and strives to know it: "Language is what we try to know concerning the functioning of llanguage [*lalangue*]."[28]

4.2 Money as symptom: La Male Regle

Compare this with Hoccleve's *Male Regle*, which begins with a description of the speaker's unwellness. "And now my body empty is, and bare / Of ioie and ful of seekly heuynesse," Hoccleve laments, in lines striking if for no other reason than for their recollection of the *Compleynte paramont*'s language of emptiness and heaviness.[29] In *La Male Regle* the speaker is also looking back on a former self from the perspective of a miserable present, though the tone now is comical and mock-penitential. The first part of the poem consists in this disclosure of sin which begins, as it does for many, in the speaker's youth. This youthfulness appears, for a moment, in prosopopoeial form, and the speaker's "unwary youth" is referred to with feminine pronouns: "Myn vnwar yowth kneew nat what it wroghte," he writes, "whan fro thee twynned shee. / But of hir ignorance hirself shee soghte, / And kneew nat that shee dwellyng was with thee."[30] The feminine pronouns drop, however, when the invocation of "youth" moves to more general proclamation that "for the more

[26]Hoccleve, 40.
[27]Hoccleve, 49.
[28]Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XX*, 138.
[29]Hoccleve, "La Male Regle," 2008, ll. 14–15.
[30]Hoccleve, 41–44.

paart, youthe is rebel / Vnto reson."[31] The moment stands out if only because *La Male Regle* is not a poem that is otherwise especially interested in allegory. Though the poem is addressed to "helthe," the word only comes up three times in the poem,[32] and the concerns of the speaker wander substantially with respect to the question of his own health.

In fact, this passing reference to the speaker's own youth in this way is an example of one of the poem's many diversions in the unfolding of its speaker's symptomatic discourse. While the insistance of "another jouissance" can be traced in the gap between the maternal pleasure the *Compleynte paramont*'s speaker enjoys in her youth and the abjection of her narrative present, in *La Male Regle* the attempt to draw a contrast between the speaker's past self and present immediately falls flat and is forgotten. This is because in the temporality of the poem's symptomatic discourse, this "unwary youth" is very much part of the speaker's narrative present in his writing of an *ongoing* ailment. The "letter" of the speaker's symptom – the signifier, that is, around which it is organized – lies elsewhere, providing the *Male Regle*'s speaker with a fundamentally different relationship to his own enjoyment than what is seen in the Deguileville translation. Far from staging the speaker's identification with his symptom, what's notable about *La Male Regle* is that it self-consciously presents itself as a "writing of jouissance" with and against the signifier with which its symptom is embroiled. The poem's discourse, in other words, is symptomatic insofar as the poem speaks itself as its own symptom.

After broadly condemning youthful rebellion against reason, the first section of the main body of the poem mainly consists in the recounting of the speaker's various wrongdoings. The speaker's principal sins are gluttony and drunkenness, sins which are from the start tied to money. The speaker notes that he'd been inclined to drink as often as he could,[33] at least until he would run out of money to spend on alcohol:

> For me, I seye I was enclyned ay
> Withouten daunger thidir for to hye me
> But if swich charge vpon my bak lay

[31] Hoccleve, 65–66.
[32] Hoccleve, 8, 327, 401.
[33] "So often that men nat wel seyn nay," Hoccleve, 124.

That I moot it forber as for a tyme,
Or but I wer nakidly bystad
By force of the penylees Maledie,
For thanne in herte kowde I nat be glad[34]

Money functions as the signifier around which the speakers symptom takes shape: it functions to limit the enjoyment of the narrator's "greedy mowth,"[35] without which he would simply never stop shoving things in it. By providing his illness with a limit, however, money also grants it a shape and a temporality: it marks its pathology as something other than something characteristic of the subject's "nature" or as a passing illness by granting it a rhythm. It makes the symptom *repeatable* and imbues it with a rhythm, providing a scene to which the subject is compelled to return to over and over again. Money structures his pathological tendency towards "excess," but it also provides the rhetorical conceit around which the poem's tongue-in-cheek irony turns when its affected penitential tone is revealed to have been a complaint all along.

It's on this point that the subject's relationship with himself "as an other" is already radically distinct from that of the speaker in the *Compleynte paramont.* In the latter, the movement of the speaker's lament is carried along by a desire to overcome the difference between the subject and its object, even if this requires the shattering or death of the subject. Marian devotion is *erotic*: its desire is to transform two into one.[36] For the speaker of the *La Male Regle*, however, the object itself induces a split: if one will excuse the terminology, money partakes in a wholly "phallic" symbolic economy, insofar as it functions at the place of the phallus as limit to enjoyment while at the same time providing the terms on which the subject is able to enjoy at all. This is a "masculine" structure, insofar as the terms of enjoyment are incomplete without this limit, and insofar as the object "keeps the symbolic moving in the same circuitous paths, in constant *avoidance* of the real."[37] Whereas

[34]Hoccleve, 125–31.
[35]Hoccleve, 114.
[36]"Eros is defined as the fusion that makes one from two," Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XX*, 66.
[37]Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 107. I put "masculine" and "feminine" in scare quotes to emphasize that Lacanian psychoanalysis ultimately distinguishes between these positions in terms of the subject's relation to jouissance rather than in response to questions of gender socialization or identification – at least insofar as the latter is articulated in what Lacanians term the Imaginary. As Carlson, "In Defense of Queer Kinships" convincingly argues, however, Lacanians' preservation of Freud's normatively gendered terms even in their de-essentializing re-reading of them may be worth moving away from in order to better emphasize the ways in which Lacan understood these roles as *functions* that

Marian jouissance proceeds indifferent to the limits of language and life itself, in *La Male Regle* "thought itself is jouissance-laden,"[38] as the pleasure of the text is folded back on itself by way of its layers of self-deprecating irony.

One of these layers appears in the way Hoccleve represents his own masculinity in this section. While there seems to have been no shortage of beautiful women passing through among the taverngoers at his regular haunts,[39] he recalls that he never slept with any of them, and that, given the opportunity to, he would have been perfectly content with just a kiss: "Of loues aart yit touchid I no deel. / I cowde nat, and eek it was no neede, / Had I a kus, I was content ful weel, / Bettre than I wolde hand be with the deede. / Thereon can I but smal, it is no dreede."[40] And despite the rambunctiousness of tavern culture and his reputation as a regular amongst it, he insists upon the consistency of his "manly cowardyse" preventing him from ever slandering anyone – at least, that is, "on highte" – lest it come to blows.[41] As I discussed in the case of *Silence* when the titular character is being aggressively pursued by the queen, it's the *anticipation* of inadequacy that informs Hoccleve's timidity in these scenes. Here, the risk of an encounter – whether sexual or combative – is something the subject flirts with but doesn't go all the way through with; he is never bold enough to risk his actual emasculation moving beyond the level of a threat. Such is the assumption of "manly cowardice": not that one doesn't "have it" (that is, the "phallus") but precisely the opposite, insofar as what the manly coward fears most is having "it" taken away.

It's with exactly this kind of backhandedness that Hoccleve establishes something like an authoritative poetic voice throughout the poem. The next major part of the poem consists of an extended rant against flatterers. The digression is prompted by the recollection of a time when he's

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aren't reducible to either gender identity or biological determination. It should also be noted, of course, that both the poems in question here are written by men: if there's a sense in which the situating of the appearance of this "other jouissance" in the Marian lyric is "feminine," it's in a sense brought into view by a phallic structure and reference point which it exceeds and takes as its foil. Rather than somehow undermining the value of this jouissance, though, I think this only strengthens the case for the more formalist approach of theorists like Apollon and Carlson, in which the emphasis on *functions* and relations can potentially be more flexible to cultural and imaginary situations in which often-overdetermined terms like "masculine" and "feminine" may muddle more than they clarify.

[38]Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 106.

[39]"I dar nat tell how that fressh repeir / Of Venus femel lusty children deer / [. . .] At Poules Heed me maden ofte appeere, / To talk of mirthe and to disporte and pleye," Hoccleve, "La Male Regle," 2008, 137–44.

[40]Hoccleve, 153–57.

[41]Hoccleve, 172, 174.

headed home drunk and decides, lazily, to pay for a boat ride back. "Other than maistir callid was I nevere," he observes, noting that the politeness never failed to prompt him to tip well: "So tikelid me that nyce reuerence / that it me made larger of despense."[42] It's a clever moment of tongue-in-cheek self-deprecation, as the purpose of this doubling down on his own sloth and gluttony ultimately provides the material for a diversion. What follows is a lengthy digression as the speaker laments the ways in which the worst "combreworldes" – world-encumberers – of all are flatterers and "enchantours,"[43] and how "Men setten nat by truthe nowadayes."[44] Despite the speaker's own history of gluttony and sloth, one may suppose, it may at least be observed that he's honest.

The poem of course begins as a confession, and upon ending the digression with a pithy final condemnation of "excess,"[45] the speaker begins to loquaciously, and perhaps even with a hint of fondness, reflect upon his history with it once more:

> No force of al this. Go we now to wacche
> By nytirtale out of al mesure,
> For, as in that, fynde kowde I no macche
> In al the Priuee Seel with me to endure,
> And to the cuppe ay took I heede and cure,
> For that the drynke apall sholde noght,
> But whan the pot emptid was of moisture
> To wake aftirward cam nat in my thoght.[46]

"Go we now" to watch the night all the way through: this invitation in the present tense to stay up all night prompts in Hoccleve the memory of many nights spent drinking himself to sleep. One assumes, though, that with this "go we now," Hoccleve isn't sitting and pouring himself another drink but coming to terms with the consequences of his actions. The temporality of "go we now" is ambiguous. Even as the recounting of historical drunkenness implies the sins that the speaker recounts to belong in the past, the "now" in which the reminiscence is prompted speaks to an ongoing condition as the speaker grasps for more footholds to fill in the space left by lack of drink with words.

[42]Hoccleve, 201, 204–5.
[43]Hoccleve, 225.
[44]Hoccleve, 281.
[45]"The feend and excesse been conuertible," Hoccleve, 297.
[46]Hoccleve, 305–12.

It's a motivating conceit of the poem that the sickness suffered by the speaker is one "*As wel* of purs as body,"[47] and it's the ongoing sickness of Hoccleve's *purse* which remains the emphasis for the remainder of the poem. As he embarks on another digression about the importance of moderation in spending one's coin, he catches himself rambling: "Ey, what is me, that to myself thus longe / Clappid haue I? I trowe that I raue. / A, nay, my poore purs and peynes stronge / Han artid me speke as I spoken haue."[48] What's remarkable about Hoccleve's use of digressions is precisely the way he frames them as empty speech. Truly, they are *diversions* from the actual object of the poem – and the poem does very much *want* something. Hoccleve's digressions are clearly defensive: what the digression on "enchanters," for instance, would seem to want to imply is that for all the speaker's "excess," it at least may be said that he is honest, and that despite the "sickness" of his purse that he really, in fact, does have a genuinely good command of just price theory and abstinence. Given how Hoccleve himself has described his illness as a *compulsion*, one may well ask whether this moment of impoverishment is simply the prelude to another drunken binge, as it's this "sickness of purse and body" that physically and financially prevents him from continuing more than anything else.

But this perfectly logical deduction would perhaps itself be the outcome of another backhandedly ironizing gesture. What Hoccleve finally leaves us with is not a petition to "Helthe," but to his patron, who he now addresses in order to ask for his £10 annuity and to remind him that he still owes the speaker payment for previous years.[49] It's on this latter detail that the ending of the poem slips from confession to complaint: "I dar nat speke a word of ferne yeer, / So is my spirit symple and sore agast."[50] While what the poem demands is the payment of an owed wage, what the rhetorical shift suggests is that the speaker's "sickness of purse" may not entirely be the result of his own bad habits, but may at least in part result from a history of neglect on the part of his patron. It's here where the poem shifts to complaint, insofar as the thing that its speaker lacks speaks to a history of

[47]Hoccleve, 337, emphasis mine.

[48]Hoccleve, 393–96.

[49]"Lo, lat my lord the Fourneval, I preye, / [...] To paie me that due is for this yeer / Of my yeerly x li. in th'eschequeer, / Nat but for Michel terme that was last," Hoccleve, 417–22.

[50]Hoccleve, 423–24.

that lack which precedes the narrative present of the poem itself, a present in which the condition produced by this history of lacking is very much ongoing. It's exactly in this turn to complaint, though, that Hoccleve does something quite radical: he makes a *demand*, and he *names* the Other from which the poem makes that demand by addressing the poem to Lord Fourneval.[51]

Insofar as the poem is written in order to petition for the payment of a wage, there is a sense in which money is in itself the poem's symptom, insofar as it would appear to be the thing the speaker most wants. Because the speaker lacks that object, this lack occasions the poem itself and colors its scenes. It's this distance from the object that preserves it, however: unlike in the case of the *Compleynte paramont*, there's no sense in which the speaker *identifies* with his object, except insofar as he remains attached to the scene which it symptomatically structures. Rather than appearing as a world-shattering event, the loss of the object is ordinary, and is even in a sense pleasurable, at least to the extent that it produces a scene that he keeps returning to. It's the anticipation of this loss happening again (and again) which emplots the use he makes of the object in the first place.

In that sense, at least until a certain point in the poem, money would appear to be the speaker's symptom: we can trace the speaker's illness along its path, and see that insofar as it occupies the space left by his *objet a* it also obfuscates it by locking him into a self-destructive cycle of false need and false desires. Hence the fleetingness of Hoccleve's metaphors and digressions: the feminine, prosopopoeial "youth" dissipates as quickly as she is summoned because what she is invoked to give form to is in fact also embodied by the speaker himself in speaking her into being. The poem symptomatizes itself for its object; its speaker speaks himself as a scene which is made intelligible by its object's lack. And of course it does: as the poem nears the end and shifts to the register of complaint it confesses itself to have not been a confession in the first place and retroactively provides the terms of its own fictionality. This is of course a conceit: the poem wryly reveals the speaker's self-deprecating persona *as a persona* in an ironic twist that itself serves as the passive aggressive set-up to ask its audience for payment in a sense not altogether dissimilar to the plaint about spendthrifts that begins *Le Roman de Silence*, or any number of troubador lyrics.

[51] Hoccleve, 417.

I would suggest that there's also something deflating in the way Hoccleve levels the demand at the end of the poem. By addressing his specific patron by name, and by writing in an autobiographical rather than autographical mode, Hoccleve calls attention to the symptomatic function of money in his own poem. No longer does the poem appear to be addressed to God or "helthe," but more specifically to a certain Lord Fournival; and the rehearsal of the subject's gluttonous repetition compulsion whose cycles are determined by the phallic signifier of money take on a new character when the complaint shifts its mode of address from its own self-demeaning and ill speaker to a *failing on the part of the Other* who his discourse is revealed to have been addressing all along.

In psychoanalytic terms, what the writing of signifier of money *as a signifier* here does, then, is to help shift our attention away from the scene of the signifier – whose jouissance is centered on the subject's castration – and brings to its attention the *Other's castration*. "It is important to note," Apollon writes, "that the *symptom* has more to do with *the failure of the signifier* than with the loss that signifies the subject's castration. It's the *jouissance at stake in the symptom* that relates more radically to the *Other's castration*, in that the Other's castration is the mode in which the failing of language is verified."[52] What's most remarkable about *La Male Regle* lies in the fact that this ironic turn by which confession transforms into complaint casts the authority of this signifier into doubt, shifting the site of the speaker's enjoyment from the repetition of the signfier's scene to the writing of the symptom itself.

4.3 The complainer's impasse

In the later period of his career, Lacan would come to view the symptom (or *sinthome*) as itself a creative supplement invented by the subject around which they might organize a coherent mode of jouissance. Lacan's privileged case study for this is James Joyce, for whom art functioned as a supplement through which his subject could cohere in a very particular mode. On the one hand, insofar as Joyce expressly wanted to create work "to *keep the critics busy for three hundred years*," there is a keen sense in which "his art is the true guarantor of his phallus."[53] The paradox of the

[52] Apollon, Bergeron, and Cantin, *After Lacan*, 124.
[53] Lacan, *The Sinthome*, 2018, 7.

symptom is that while its function is, in a sense, to make the Symbolic, the Real, and the Imaginary cohere, there is also a sense in which it *abolishes* the symbolic: it turns language against itself and forecloses a certain degree of communicability. For Lacan, by the time Joyce is writing *Finnegans Wake*, it's clear that he's "cancelled his subscription to the unconscious,"[54] demonstrating the ways in which a symptom is wholly a subject's own.[55] What becomes of interest in such a text, then, isn't the meaning of the text but precisely the ways in which meaning is subordinated to jouissance, and the way the subject comes into being by way a work of creative artifice of their own making.

In Hoccleve's ironic poetic sensibility, too, there is a kind of cultivated inscrutability: it trades autographical, "empirical" "I"[56] for an "I" much more particular to its speaker, whose speech is, in a sense, "autobiographical" but in a way that isn't above fictionality, personas, and calling attention to its own unreliability. Hoccleve's poetic subjects, in other words, are always *supposed*, always half-said.[57] If there's something Joycean about Hoccleve's *Series*, his last major "work," it may not necessarily lie in the apparent "modernism" of its self-referentiality[58] as much as in the particular way he represents the literary subject's assumption of a kind of form. In what follows I want to pay attention to the ways in which the first poem in the *Series* – "My Compleinte" – supposes such a form even while it grounds it in a kind of bodily and subjective fragmentation and formlessness. More specifically, what I'd like to suggest is that it's the poem's reveling in the symptom itself that provides the script for the emergence of this form. Ultimately, for Hoccleve, as for Joyce, the subject only comes to assume any sort of recognizable form as an incessant *writing of jouissance*, of which "Hoccleve" is himself a symptom. Also as with Joyce, and in ways anticipated by my reading of *La Male Regle* in the previous section, the way in which this "writing of jouissance" asserts itself is also particularly phallic, insofar as in Hoccleve writing itself is, to use Lacan's phrasing,

[54]Lacan, 144.

[55]"If there is one thing that accounts for the fact noted by Clive Hart – that in following him step by step, by the end one finds oneself tired out by it – then it is precisely that this proves how your own symptom, for you like everyone else, is the only thing that holds any interest for you. The symptom in Joyce is a symptom that concerns you in no respect whatsoever. It is the symptom inasmuch as it stands no chance whatsoever hooking anything of your unconscious," Lacan, 145.

[56]Cf. Spitzer, "Note on the Poetic and the Empirical 'I' in Medieval Authors."

[57]"[T]he only truth is one that is said by half, just like the subject it entails," Lacan, *The Sinthome*, 2018, 20.

[58]Cf. Greetham, "Self-Referential Artifacts."

ultimately offered as the linguistic supplement to the author's "little scrap of a dick" that constitutes the phallus.[59]

A long-standing line of thought in Hoccleve criticism has taken a particular interest in the ways in which the *Series* is written as kind of self-fashioning. Lee Patterson, for instance, uses it as a point of reference to argue that Hoccleve's entire oeuvre constitutes an attempt "to fit the self into a coherent and unifying narrative" in order to lay claim to a sense of authorial "self-controlled direction."[60] Much of this desire to narrativize a kind of subjective coherence across Hoccleve's works might be attributed to the large amount of philological interest his work commands: as a poet-scribe under the employ of the Lancastrian Privy Seal, Hoccleve is also one of the earliest poets in English of whose work *autograph copies* survive. Critics like James Simpson[61] and David Watt, in turn, have emphasized that to read Hoccleve's work as a coherent whole in the first place requires accounting for the collection's self-awareness of its own *wroughtness*:

> Indeed, the texts that comprise the *Series* can be understood as parts of a coherent literary whole only if the reader imagines them as part of a coherent material whole (a book made in a physical sense). Yet no manuscript of the whole *Series* survives independently. Paradoxically, then, readers can imagine the *Series* as a coherent material whole only if they perceive the story of its making as a coherent literary whole (a book made in a literary sense).[62]

More recent "literary" readings of Hoccleve's work, though, have been notably less invested in reading Hoccleve's poetry in order to affirm its "coherence." "My Compleinte," the first poem in the *Series*, narrates, in a Boethian mode, the subject's recovery from an unspecified mental illness, but as a number of critics have pointed out, the nature, origin, and status of the illness *and the narrator's recovery* are very much in question. Ethan Knapp has argued that in the poem "madness is never truly surmounted,"[63] and that "what Hoccleve actually depicts in the *Series* are a set of descriptions of madness that are almost indistinguishable from sanity, accompanied by a series of

[59] "The phallus is the conjunction between what I've called *this parasite*, which is the little scrap of a dick in question, and the function of speech. And it is in this respect that his art is the true guarantor of his phallus," Lacan, *The Sinthome*, 2018, 7.

[60] Patterson, "'*What Is Me?*'" 86.

[61] Simpson, "Madness and Texts."

[62] Watt, *The Making of Thomas Hoccleve's* Series, 13–14.

[63] Knapp, *The Bureaucratic Muse*, 163.

proofs of sanity that are ironized and undercut as soon as they are presented."[64]

To read Hoccleve either solely in terms of his (doomed or not) idealistic attempts to form some sort of "coherent" ego-ideal or for how cleverly he might ironize any such attempts might also risk glossing over the gender politics of Hoccleve's work. Critics like Karen Winstead have noticed the ways in which the self-referentiality of the *Series* to Hoccleve's earlier work – particularly in the "Dialoge," in which the narrator determines to make right with his female readership after their apparently negative response to his condescending reworking of Christine de Pizan's *Letter of Cupid*, only to include translations of two blatantly misogynistic tales in the *Series* – adds up to a consistent antifeminist sensibility which hides behind its own irony.[65] Picking up on this criticism and putting Watt's observation of the way Hoccleve's writing puts the burden of "coherence" onto its readers in a different light, Julie Orlemanski has read the *Series*' "My Compleinte" and "Dialoge" for how this ironizing tone and mock-penitential task to redeem himself for his women readers constitutes a move away from the "pathological quaverings" of the symptomatic body in "My Compleinte" to the assumption of a masculine identity.[66] As I'll address later in this section, though I agree with this reading, I think there's an important sense in which this trajectory itself constitutes a symptom insofar as it's the assumption of a (sexed) identity as narrativized here – or, in another sense, the *assumption of the 'I' itself* – might also be understood as symptomatic. "My Compleinte" marks this assumption as a symptom not by pathologizing this "I" but by dramatizing the ways in which it presents a narrative impasse that, tautologically, can only be resolved by reference to this same "I."

Something shared between "My Compleinte" and the earlier *Compleynte paramont* is the way both poems center a jouissance of the body.[67] In the *Compleynte paramont*, the body is the reference point through which the alienation of signifiers like "woman" gives way to the insistence of some other, unarticulable enjoyment at the limits of subjectivity. As the speaker's bodily memory of the

[64]Knapp, 166.

[65]"Hoccleve's playfulness, however, neatly deflects criticism, for the woman who complains risks being classed among the disorderly wives and bad readers of the Dialogue, who insist on making *ernest* of *game*," Winstead, "'I am al othir to yow than yee weene'," 153.

[66]Orlemanski, *Symptomatic Subjects*, 247.

[67]"Jouissance is the jouissance of a body. Jouissance is the embracing, the clutching, the fragmenting of the body. In legal parlance, *avoir la jouissance* of something is precisely that, to be able to treat some thing as a body, that is, to wreck it," Lacan, . . . *or Worse*, 21.

pleasures of holding her child imposes itself on her "barren" present, what's prompted is a kind of splitting as the subject finds herself at an impasse between her ongoing attachment to her object – and her faith in God, which is coterminous with this attachment – and a present condition in which this attachment would seem to have been irreparably severed. What interests me in the Marian complaint here is that it's pre-dialectical: rather than having yet arrived at some sort of compromise that might allow her to live with this contradiction, the subject's integrity gives way to an insistent jouissance that exceeds her. There's also a sense, then, in which this complaint is pre-*symptomatic*: the speaker has no fetishistic substitute object to reach for, nor has she found her *sinthome* by which she might sustain a writing of this jouissance in such a way that might allow her to live.[68]

While the concept of a kind of "split subject" is present in Freud's thought from a quite early point, he specifically discusses the process of the "splitting of the ego" in 1938, describing the child's response to finding out that continuing to satisfy an instinct will result in intolerable danger:

> there is a conflict between the demand by the instinct and the prohibition by reality. But in fact the child takes neither course, or rather he takes both simultaneously, which comes to the same thing. [. . .] On the one hand, with the help of certain mechanisms he rejects reality and refuses to accept any prohibition; on the other hand, in the same breath he recognizes the danger of reality, takes over the fear of that danger as a pathological symptom and tries subsequently to divest himself of the fear.[69]

As Laplanche and Pontalis note, what's new in this account is that it describes a splitting on the level of the *ego* itself rather than between *agencies* (e.g. between ego and id) that is novel compared to the classic models of repression and the return of the repressed. "One of the specific traits of this process," they write, "is that it does not result in the formation of a compromise between the two attitudes present but that it maintains them simultaneously instead, with no dialectical relationship being established."[70] While Freud's privileged example in the 1938 essay is the fetish – which develops, on his account, from the child seeing a girl's absent penis and the fear that he might lose

[68]"The symptom as 'sinthome' is an invention that allows someone to live by providing an organization of jouissance. Identification with the sinthome occurs when one identifies with the particular form of their enjoyment, thereby deriving their selfhood. For Lacan, the aim of the cure was no longer to remove the patient's symptoms but to let the patient identify with her unique sinthome in order to enjoy it," Gherovici, *Transgender Psychoanalysis*, 142.

[69]"Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defense," Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, 1964, 23:275.

[70]Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, 429.

his own[71] – in the *Compleynte paramont* the loss of the object would seem to make this impasse itself into the symptom of Marian complaint.

It's this relation of complaint to the *impasse* whereby a subject doesn't give up on their desire – even when not giving up on that desire verges on existential threat to their being *while also not giving up on their attachment to that being* – that interests me in complaint and complainers. While, in Lacanian terms, it's within this impasse that we can begin to see something like the emergence of a dialectical solution to this impasse by way of the symptom-as-*sinthome* (as we've seen with the *Compleynte paramont* and *La Male Regle*), the mode of complaint doesn't itself offer a way beyond this impasse – on its own, anyway. Both of the earlier poems end open-endedly, demanding a supplement to their dialectical impasses that must come from the reader herself. In the *Compleynte paramont*, this demand finds its expression in the poem's generic ending and in the slippage of its second person address from Mary herself to the reader as her suffering becomes figured not only as an exemplary sacrifice but as a figure with which the reader is encouraged to identify with, as the Virgin's mothering of Christ is put in explicit comparison of the now-undifferentiated "I": "For chyld which that shee of hir body baar / To yeue her tete, as my chyld that heer is. / His cote hath torn for your gilt, nat for his, / And hath his blood despend in greet foysoun, / And al it was for your redempcioun."[72] In *La Male Regle*, as I've discussed, this open-endedness takes a more explicit form as a *demand*, as the poem's symptom ceases to primarily function as a means of by which a pathological repetition compulsion is organized but – by way of a complaint about an ongoing financial situation – a humorous writing of jouissance whose continuation is contingent upon the reader shoring up the poet's overdue paycheck.

Complaint, then, is hardly a nihilistic genre even as it doggedly grounds itself in negative affects. There's an important sense, though, in which it unloads a certain degree of responsibility for its critique onto whoever is willing to listen. In this respect it's a politically ambivalent genre, as the offloading of such responsibility can of course be carried out in a number of ways to a number of different ends. "Open-endedness" is not the same as "any-endedness." That said, as I turn to what

[71] Cf "Fetishism," Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, 1961, 21:152–57.
[72] Hoccleve, "Conpleynte Paramont," 2008, 239–45.

is by now Hoccleve's most famous poem, "My Compleinte," my interest lies less with making a claim about the ends to which it opens the question of its own impasses and their supplements but to provide an account of how it arrives at them in such a way that might itself supplement future readings that do engage such questions. "My Compleinte," I argue, stages the *assumption* of an "I" in such a way that opens the question of its dissolution, but it does so in a way that reveals itself to never quite enact that dissolution on its own. As with *La Male Regle*, then, its mode of jouissance differs rather fundamentally from the *Compleynte paramont* insofar as its speaker reserves a certain attachment to the integrity of his own "I." The poem moves beyond the scope of *La Male Regle*, however, insofar as it self-consciously *stages* the way in which that "I" functions as the poetic subject's *symptom*.

4.4 "The worlde me made a straunge countinaunce": the Compleinte *and* Dialoge

The brief prologue to "My Compleinte" begins with an inversion of that of Chaucer's *General Prologue*. Trading the chipper fecundity of spring for autumnal melancholia, the poem begins with the death of the summer foliage's green "lusty freisshenesse":

> Aftir that heruest inned had his sheues,
> And that the broun sesoun of Mihelmesse
> Was come, and gan the trees robbe of hir leues,
> That greene had been and in lusty freisshenesse,
> And hem into colour of yelownesse
> Had died and doun throwen vndirfoote,
> That chaunge sank into myn herte roote.[73]

Hoccleve's language here puts the speaker at the end of a long chain of seasonal withering, tracing a treacle of decay that creeps its way from the organic world down into the speaker's heart. One gets the sense that the speaker is spoken by his own melancholic affect here, appearing epiphenomenally in the final line of the rhyme royal stanza as an accumulation of rot. The speaker relates a sleepless November night, tossing and turning in bed, vexed by a "thoughtful maladie."[74] Like the dreamer in the *Book of the Duchess*, the Boethian condition – according to which "stablenesse in this worlde is

[73] Hoccleve, "My Compleinte," 2008, ll. 1–7.
[74] Hoccleve, 21.

ther noon"[75] – would seem to physically weigh down on the melancholic speaker. Here, though, this weight is expressed by way of a seasonal depression in which the melancholic symptom is imposed from *without*, raining down upon the speaker in a "dark shower" that soaks him nearly to the point of drowning. "The sunne abated, and the dirke shour," he writes, "Hilded doun right on me, and in langour / Me made swymme, so that my spirite / To lyue no lust had, ne no delyte."[76] There's a sense of both restlessness and exhaustion in these lines that may be familiar from *The Book of the Duchess*, but what's especially striking here is that the source of melancholic symptom is already described here as circumstantial. Melancholia has an external cause, and part of what characterizes the melancholic's will is its *exhaustion* – their almost physiological inability to continue wading through an atmospheric sense of weariness.

This metaphorical characterization of melancholic affect in terms natural world, too, lends itself to a sense of porousness between the subject's "inner" and "outer worlds," almost as if talking about the weather were itself a way of narrating the subject's symptoms in a sort of free indirect mode. But what the prologue ultimately most keenly seeks to narrate is an accumulation of some sort of tension that can only be resolved by way of speech:

> The greef aboute myn herte so sore swal
> And bolned euere to and to so sore
> That nedis oute I muste therwithal.
> I thoghte I nolde keepe it cloos no more
> Ne lete it in me for to eelde and hore,
> And for to preue I cam of a womman,
> I brast out on the morwe and thus began.[77]

It's in these lines that the Hocclevean complaint departs from a more traditionally melancholic discourse. Despite the Boethian and Chaucerian clichés invoked up until this point, the speaker doesn't find himself at the outset expressing a desire to seek solace or consolation for his ailments. Nor is there necessarily the sense in these lines of some "lost object" or forgotten cause to his suffering.[78] Rather, we're told that he would like to get something off his chest and that there's a

[75]Hoccleve, 9.
[76]Hoccleve, 25–28.
[77]Hoccleve, 29–35.
[78]Cf. "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, 1957,

something that's been "swelling" within and which can't be restrained any longer. It's as if prior to any expression of affect, the complaint were a response to an economic question, a way of managing libidinal tensions within the subject's psyche.

The body of the complaint begins by recounting that the speaker suffered a "wilde infirmite"[79] for an unspecified amount of time that, he writes, "me oute of mysilfe caste and threwe."[80] He puts a special emphasis upon how well known this illness was among both people who knew him as well as those who didn't: "How it with me stood was in euery mannes mouthe, / And that ful sore my frendis affright."[81] The speaker describes this illness – or bout of madness – in terms of his mind having wandered off for a time: "the substaunce of my memorie / Wente to pleie as for a certein space,"[82] but now, as he repeatedly insists, "My wit and I haue bene of suche acord / As we were."[83] It's his perception among the "prees" (crowds, public) that is given particular concern in the speaker's complaint, as he notes that because during the time of his ailment he'd been a "rietous persone" and forsaken most of his friendships, upon returning to his normal life he finds himself suddenly isolated where he previously hadn't:

> The worlde me made a straunge countinaunce,
>
> Wich that myn herte sore gan to tourment,
> For ofte whanne I in Westmynstir Halle,
> And eke in Loundoun, amonge the prees went,
> I sy the chere abaten and apalle
> Of hem that weren wonte me for to calle
> To companie. Her heed they caste awry,
> Whanne I hem mette, as they not me sy.[84]

Instead of amicable recognitions, as he walks through the crowded London streets he finds averted glances and dejected expressions. As the speaker goes on, these averted glances become increasingly suspect as he begins to ventriloquize them: "although his savage sickness has withdrawn and passed

14:243–58.

[79]Hoccleve, "My Compleinte," 2008, 40.
[80]Hoccleve, 42.
[81]Hoccleve, 44–45.
[82]Hoccleve, 50–51.
[83]Hoccleve, 59–60.
[84]Hoccleve, 70–77.

for a time, it will return, especially given his age,"[85] he imagines "manie oone"[86] saying as they pass by him in the street. In psychoanalytic terms, what the poem traces here is the transition of the "prees" from a "good" to a "bad" object, as the absence of a look of recognition gets taken to be a *deprivation*, a sign of aggressiveness.[87] As with the earlier weather metaphors, though, what's remarkable here is the sense of porousness with which Hoccleve represents mental illness. His symptoms are *outside* of his control in a way that also places them more or less outside of *himself* and places the responsibility for the discernment and diagnosis of his illness into the hands of the other in such a way that calls into question whether his illness has in fact passed.

This dynamic is underlined by the fact that, since during the time of his illness his memory had gone to "play,"[88] Hoccleve is completely reliant on others' accounts of his illness to discern what any of its symptoms were. According to these reports, the speaker looked like a "wilde steer," casting his eyes in all directions and shaking his head from side to side.[89] There are multiple accounts of his head and brain: his brain is "buck-ish,"[90] "unsound,"[91] and "sick."[92] Nonetheless, having already decided his illness to have been simply the result of it being his turn on Fortune's wheel to be afflicted with something, the narrator condemns these judgmental, nosy people who "wiser hem pretende that thei be,"[93] given that none of them know when it will in fact be their own turn to be visited with some divine misfortune.[94] The function of the Boethian conceit here appears self-consciously symptomatic for the unresolved contradiction in the text that it highlights, as the fickleness of Fortune is invoked here both to provide an etiology for his illness and to condemn the nosiness and exaggeration of the same people on whom the speaker is reliant upon in order to know

[85]Hoccleve, 86–90.

[86]Hoccleve, 85.

[87]Cf., for instance, Klein, "A Contribution to Manic-Depressive States" (Klein, *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works*, 1975, 262-89) for the ways in which, for her, the paranoiac "bad object" has its roots in the early childhood relation to the breast, which in the child's fantasy life becomes felt as a prosecutor when it's been *denied* from the child (285).

[88]Hoccleve, "My Compleinte," 2008, 50–51.

[89]Hoccleve, 120–22.

[90]"'Full bukkish is his brayn, wel may I trowe,'" Hoccleve, "My Compleinte," 2008, 123.

[91]"'. . . no sadnesse is in his heed,'" Hoccleve, 126.

[92]"Al brainseke," Hoccleve, 129.

[93]Hoccleve, 102.

[94]"No wight knowith, be it he or she, / Whom, howe, ne whanne God wole him visite," Hoccleve, 103–5.

anything of his illness in the first place.

Ironically, what all these whispers and rumors (each of which Thomas keenly and constantly listens for)[95] do is help "throw himself outside of himself" anew, as the narrator determines to police his own appearance and comportment so that he might never be suspected of madness again. Since nothing he can say in his own defense can ever be held "worth a leke," he throws out his "tunges keie" and keeps to himself whenever in public spaces.[96] In what is perhaps the most remarkable (and remarked upon) passage in the poem, he begins to scrupulously police his own appearance:

> My spirites labouriden euere ful bisily
> To peinte countenaunce, chere and look,
> For that men spake of me so wondringly,
> And for the verry shame and feer I qwook.
> Though myn herte hadde be dippid in the brook,
> It weet and moist was ynow of my swoot,
> Wiche was nowe frosty colde, nowe firy hoot.
>
> And in my chaumbre at home whanne that I was
> Mysilfe aloone I in this wise wrought.
> I streite vnto my mirrour and my glas,
> To loke how that me of my chere thought,
> If any othir were it than it ought,
> For fain wolde I, if it not had bene right,
> Amendid it to my kunnynge and myght.
>
> Many a saute made I to this mirrour,
> Thinking, 'If that I looke in this manere
> Amonge folke as I nowe do, noon errour
> Of suspecte look may in my face appere.
> This countinaunce, I am sure, and this chere,
> If I it forthe vse, is nothing repreuable
> To hem that han conceitis resonable.'[97]

The speaker finds himself caught up in a knot of anticipatory, paranoiac thinking, in which he must prove his sanity to a public which he imagines already thinks he's insane, which requires concealing the fact that he might suspect that he thinks they think that. Particularly striking is the image of "painting" his "countenance, cheer, and look": the subject's desire to cover up his fragmented

[95] "I leide an eere ey to as I by wente, / And herde al," Hoccleve, 134–35.
[96] Hoccleve, 144, 45.
[97] Hoccleve, 148–68.

affective state (his now-"frosty cold," now "fiery hot" heart) requires a *creative* act by which he might enact that "jubilant assumption" of an "alienating identity" that Lacan famously described in his account of the mirror stage.[98] In Lacan's account, however, the subject *invents* their own image in a double sense of both quite literally stumbling upon it by accident in the mirror in an event that precipitates an active *identification* with that image. Here, though, the mirror is consciously *consulted* to check upon an image which has already been characterized as having been "painted," as if to confirm the ongoingness of the speakers own identification with his "ideal-I."

One fairly obvious reading of the way Hoccleve stages this mirror scene would be to point out that this paranoid relation of self to self that compels the speaker to performatively re-enact his own assumption of a particular image of himself – in a sense, to will his own sanity – itself calls into question the integrity of that image and soundness of that assumption. In Lacan's telling of the mirror stage, which of course describes a moment very early in childhood development, the assumption of an "I" is coterminous with the resolution of the subject's fragmented sense of their own body such that the coherent gestalt that the subject anticipatorily takes up appears almost to have been "predestined."[99] In this sense, the "I" is itself a symptom: on the one hand, it's a hallucinated image, one which functions to protect the subject from their own – "real" – incoherence. On the other, though, it's also in a quite literal sense invented by the subject herself, whether it's when the child discovers their own image in the mirror or when an adult makes a decision to assume a particular countenance and gait. What's most striking about Hoccleve's mirror scene, though, is that the narrator's self-image *survives* all these compulsive glances he makes into the mirror every day: the cultivated appearance holds up. In an important sense, the narrator's "painted" appearance is *successful*, implying that its cultivation has a certain truth value and integrity that precedes its creative summoning. The "I" is a "symptom" precisely insofar as what it presupposes is "inexistent," but which, in this same presupposition, it "marks out its place;" it *produces* a kind of truth.[100]

It's here where it becomes clear that Hoccleve's representation of his own unreliability and

[98]Lacan, *Écrits*, 2006, 76, 78.
[99]Lacan, 76.
[100]Lacan, *. . . or Worse*, 39.

subjective fragmentation might be a bit misleading. For a moment, Hoccleve would seem to be calling his own practice of cultivated sanity into question when he observes that even if time and again the image he encounters in the mirror is one in which there surely "is nothing repreuable / To hem that han conceitis resonable," he observes that most people would seem, he assumes, to go about their days without giving their own painted countences so much as a thought.[101] Rather than undermining his sense of his own integrity, though, Hoccleve insists that his being *forced* to paranoiacally monitor his own cultivated appearance of sanity is in fact a sign of his moral uprightness: "Sithen I recouered was, haue I ful ofte / Cause had of anger and impacience, / Where I borne haue it esily and softe, / Suffringe wronge be done to me, and offence, / And not answerid agen, but kepte scilence."[102] We are humorously reminded here that the poem is, after all, a *complaint*, and this tongue-in-cheek invocation of the narrator's own martyrdom serves as an ironic reminder that the complainer's critical gaze is one that always ultimately looks outward while leaving the integrity of the complainer's ego intact. It's also at this point in the poem that its repetitive structure starts to become more obvious, as the narrator once again reproaches the "prees" for being so judgmental. He wonders, for instance, why he even bothers going to work at the Privy Seal anymore, given that everyone seemingly still just thinks he's a ticking time bomb.[103] This is followed by another increasingly unconvincing injunction against judging people by their appearances and the reminder that "commvnynge is the beste assay" of a person's integrity.[104]

What I'd suggest is that the scene to which "My Compleinte" ultimately can't stop returning to is the scene of complaint itself. What's interesting about Hoccleve's invocation of Boethian and penitential conventions in the poem is that rather than immediately generating more metatextual layers, it has the subject neurotically revisiting the same scene of frustrated sociability over and again. It's when the narrator seems to sense that this repeated elaboration on his complaint coming to an impasse that he begins (after a brief and somewhat precious digression about his long-suffering

[101]"'Men in her owne cas bene blinde alday,'" Hoccleve, "My Compleinte," 2008, 170.
[102]Hoccleve, 176–80.
[103]"'A greet fool I am, / This pauyment adaies thus to bete, / And in and oute laboure faste and swete, / Wondringe and heuinesse to purchace, / Sithen I stonde out of al fauour and grace,'" Hoccleve, "My Compleinte," 2008, 183-89.
[104]Hoccleve, 217.

social condition leaving him with no more options but to give away all of his possessions and "crepe into my graue")[105] to finally settle into his ultimately unconvincing solution, which is that his illness was a *gift*. The speaker reaches this conclusion by way of a borrowed book, in which another complainer is exhorted by a prosopopoeial Reason to accept suffering with grace.[106] In a characteristic but somewhat baffling gesture, Hoccleve actually includes a translation of the passage of the dialogue from this book that has provided him with consolation, but cuts it off at the point at which he actually *stopped reading it*, since the friend from whom he borrowed it took it back: "Lenger I thoughte reed haue in this book, / But so it shope that I ne mighte naught. / He that it oughte agen it to him took, / Me of his hast vnwar."[107]

The gesture is striking for how it would seem to self-consciously reflect on the compositional ethos of medieval bookmaking itself and incorporate into the poem, treating the confessional register of the poem as itself subject to the same silent principles of author-as-collator. Ethan Knapp has discussed these principles in terms of Hoccleve's "bureaucratic poetics," in which "the labor of the Privy Seal" is projected "into the world of poetic composition."[108] The speaking subject of "My compleinte" is explicitly assembled as a bricolage, as a collation of affective and generic registers, speaking always by way of being spoken.[109] Though the poem is punctuated by these kinds of references to the fickleness of Fortune and, by extension, the apparent arbitrariness of God's will, the final consolation that Hoccleve extracts from the borrowed allegorical text (whose source is most likely Isidore of Seville's *Synonyma*)[110] itself would seem to be in this spirit:

> Thorugh Goddis iust doom and his iugement
> And for my best, nowe I take and deeme,
> Yaf that good lorde me my punischement.
> In welthe I tooke of him noon hede or yeme,
> Him for to plese and him honoure and queme,
> And he me yaf a boon on for to gnawe,

[105] Hoccleve, "My Compleinte," 2008, 261.
[106] "'Golde purgid is, thou seest, in the furneis, / For the finer and clenner it shal be,'" Hoccleve, 358–59.
[107] Hoccleve, 372–75.
[108] Knapp, *The Bureaucratic Muse*, 181.
[109] "We are spoken, and, because of this, from the happenstances that drive us, we form something textured," Lacan, *The Sinthome*, 2018, 142.
[110] Cf. Burrow, "Hoccleve's *Complaint* and Isidore of Seville Again."

Me to correcte of him to have awe.[111]

It's a particularly "Hocclevean" conclusion to reach insofar as the consolation for illness is in some ways articulated in the same terms as its dysphoric symptomaticity: that is, *outside* of the subject in such a way that makes the subject at the mercy of others, the subject of others' observations and utterances. The difference, of course, is that now rather than being torn apart between a "prees" of others, he now can relegate this symptomaticity to the desire of one "Other." The perverse scopophilia of the passage is also striking, as the "gift" from God is apparently the privilege of suffering for his entertainment. Here, the function of the consolation isn't to resolve or work through the symptom but to *make complaint terminable* by fostering an identification with an imagined Other's desire.

The "Dialoge" complicates this suspiciously tidy consolatory ending. The first part of the dialogue in question revolves around the question of whether Hoccleve should continue writing and whether he should share the text of his complaint. The Friend's immediate response to reading "My Compleinte" is to ask Thomas not to let anyone else read it.[112] He insists that people have forgotten all about his bout of illness and that circulating the poem would only remind them.[113] Hoccleve's defense of his work revolves around the conviction that his having recovered in order to be an example for others.[114] This initial argument is followed by a familiar digression, though, in which Hoccleve complains of having "feble moneie"[115] and goes on an extended rant about coin clippers. Unlike *La Male Regle*, however, this complaint isn't the prelude to a *demand*, but to a complaint about a more general moral malaise. It's in this sense that the poetic world of the "Compleinte" and "Dialoge" is much more closed-off: their ironic conceits, intertextual referents, and heteroglossic imaginary ultimately function to fold the poem's attention back onto its own composition. The Friend would seem to pick up on this, and though the concern he expresses about Hoccleve's illness revolves around the identification of his commitment to writing his own illness as itself a kind of

[111]Hoccleve, "My Compleinte," 2008, 393–99.
[112]"'Kepe al that cloos for thin honours sake,'" Hoccleve, "Dialoge," 2008, 28.
[113]"'Men han forgete it. It is out of mynde,'" Hoccleve, 30.
[114]"'The benefice of God not hid be sholde,' Hoccleve, 92.
[115]Hoccleve, 102.

pathological symptom, the poem's solution is ultimately to foster the continued enjoyment of that symptom.

Coin clippers, who "wasshe" gold coins so that it might "lacke sumwhat in thiknese,"[116] like the "prees," remain unspecified and unnamed: if the "prees" receives his ire for hypocritically judging him for something that they are just as succeptible to under the fickle will of Fortune, coin clippers are a "bad object" insofar as they devalue the labor of workers by dishonoring just price:

> If it be holde and hool that men him profre
> For his laboure or his chaffre lent,
> Take it if him list and putte it in his cofre,
> For waisshinge or clipping, holde him content
> Or leue, he gete noon othir paiement.
> It semth but smal; othir is ther.
> Trouthe is absent, bu fasheed is not fer.[117]

What distinguishes this fiduciary complaint from that of *La Male Regle* is that rather than specifying a debt and making a demand for its payment, complaint here grounds itself in a more broad-stroked moralism: that is, in the conviction (shared, if one recalls, by Boethius in the *Consolation*) that labor can in fact be justly compensated and that its devaluing is a *moral* failure rather than a dynamic which inheres to the wage relation itself. It's also, importantly, not a punch line but a digression: the Friend seems uncertain as to the discussion's relevance to his argument and simply asks if he has any other reasons for wanting to publish his complaint.[118]

Hoccleve explains that he also wants to translate an *ars moriendi* treatise called "Lerne to Die,"[119] conceiving the work itself as an ascetic act by which he might "cleanse" his soul "sumwhat by translacioun."[120] The Friend regards this with suspicion, expressing concern that his "bisy studie"[121] is itself generative of illness and itself a symptom. Just as a thief, he explains, "no dreede hath eft his art to vse / Til that the trees him weye vp, body and bones, / So looth is him in his sory

[116]Hoccleve, 106–7.
[117]Hoccleve, 113–19.
[118]Hoccleve, 199–203.
[119]Hoccleve, 206.
[120]Hoccleve, 216.
[121]Hoccleve, 302.

crafte refuse, / Sa farest thow."[122] Hoccleve's obsessive work ethic, he suggests, is itself a death driven repetition compulsion, and his book project something that will "consume and deuoure" his "wit."[123] Hoccleve's response to this is that his mental break wasn't caused by exhaustion from intellectual labor but from his (still unspecified) "long seeknesse,"[124] which quietly shifts the terms of the debate from the nature of that illness to the question of whether he will become ill again. The friend concedes that the conversation has already reassured him of Hoccleve's sanity,[125] and eventually is convinced that Hoccleve should go ahead with his work.[126]

It's with reference to this shift that Julie Orlemanski observes that despite bringing into question the redemptive ending of "My Compleinte," the "Dialoge" ultimately fails to ever offer any "coherent counteretiology" that might clarify "why he went mad or how his 'wilde infirmite' came to be."[127] This lends itself to a sense that the poem simply loses interest in its own symptoms: Hoccleve and his friend move on to discuss the contents of the book, eventually concluding that what ultimately needs to be addressed is his need to repent for having often reserved "greet wyt and lak" for women in his writing.[128] This call to make amends with his women readers, though, turns on the mocking observation that women simply cannot take a joke or criticism from men: " 'The Wyf of Bathe take I for auctrice,' " Hoccleve explains, " 'that wommen han no ioie ne deyntee / that men sholde vpon hem putte any vice.' "[129] Though the poem ends by specifying that Hoccleve needs to atone for his mocking translation of Christine de Pizan's *Epistre Au Dieu d'Amours* – a poem which famously inverts the Genesis creation myth to feminist ends by insisting that "woman was the first to be / Created in the earthly Paradise, / Not man"[130] – he undermines this in advance with a misogynistic rant which, too, makes reference to Adam and Eve:

[122]Hoccleve, 142.
[123]Hoccleve, 406.
[124]Hoccleve, 426.
[125]"Had I not taastid thee, as that I now / Doon haue, it had been hard, maad me to trowe / The good plyt which I feele wel that thow / Art in," Hoccleve, 485–88.
[126]"'I am seur that thy disposicioun / Is swich that thow maist more take on hoonde / Than I first wende,'" Hoccleve, 519–21.
[127]Orlemanski, *Symptomatic Subjects*, 240.
[128]Hoccleve, "Dialoge," 2008, 667.
[129]Hoccleve, 694–96.
[130]Pizan, "Epistre Au Dieu d'amours," ll. 602–4.

‘Adam begyled was with Eeues reed,
And sikir so was shee by the serpent,
Th whom God seide, “This womman thyn heed
Breke shal, for thurgh thyn enticement
Shee hath ybroken my commandement.”
Now, syn womman had of the feend swich might,
To breke mannes heed it seemeth light.’[131]

The tone here is tongue-in-cheek – right on beat, the Friend’s response is to ask how things are between Hoccleve and his wife.[132] As Orlemanski puts it, though, the poem nonetheless leaves the reader with an acute sense of having addressed itself here to “the presumptively masculine space of *good* readers, who can appreciate the jibes at women’s expense.”[133] This would especially seem to be the case in Hoccleve’s references to his own translation of Christine – not only does he subtly reject her re-telling of the creation myth, but in a move that recalls his own backhandedly phallic avowal of his own castration in *La Male Regle* he disavows any ill intent in his translation of the *Epistre* by cheekily disavowing his own role as an author: “Considereth, therof was I noon auctour. / I nas in that cas but a reportour / Of folkes tales.”[134]

I would suggest, though, that the trajectory of the *Series*’ representation of its poetic subject in terms of its assumption of this “masculine” position which is established at the expense of the woman-as-other is itself the poem’s symptom. As the mirror scene in “My Compleinte” and the demanding self-deprecation of *La Male Regle* suggest, even when Hoccleve’s poetry revels in the fragmentation of its own poetic subject – that is, in a kind “jouissance of the body” whereby the subject’s embodied symptomaticity comes into view in its own tearing-apart between subject and other – a core element of Hoccleve’s poetic sensibility is the way in which he constantly ironizes his relationship to his own texts, always remains, in a sense, one step ahead of his own self-negation. There is a sense, in other words, in which its the very staging of this splitting of the subject in Hoccleve’s poetry that provides the terms and trajectory for the articulation of that subject in the form of a spoken “I.” Prior to the articulation of this “I” in contrast to a feminine Other, a shape

[131]Hoccleve, “Dialoge,” 2008, 722–28.
[132]“ ‘Thomas, how is it twixt thee and thy feere?’ ” Hoccleve, 739.
[133]Orlemanski, *Symptomatic Subjects*, 247.
[134]Hoccleve, “Dialoge,” 2008, 760–62.

and a trajectory for this "I" are suggested when it is articulated against and through a series of un-individuated others: whether it be the "prees," the coin clippers, the flatterers or Hoccleve's women readers.

The two poems are also of interest for what they do to the complaint as a genre. What I'd like to suggest is that the frame poems of the *Series* call attention to the ways in which complaint, as a genre, always presupposes a speaking subject in such a way that remains backhandedly committed to a certain fantasy of that subject's coherence by way of the "I," even if what the layers of ironizing gestures and kvetching across Hoccleve's work so often work to call attention to the tautological nature of this "I." It's in this sense that if the "Dialoge" fails to produce a convincing "counteretiology" to the consolatory ending of "My Compleinte" that it's already brought into question by introducing the interlocutor of the Friend in the first place, the failure lies outside of the scope of the text itself. The "failure" is successful insofar as it provides an occassion to continue writing. It provides the text with its own symptom and in the process reveals the symptomaticity of the poetic subject itself insofar as it tautologically aligns the writing of that symptom with the writing of that same subject.

4.5 Conclusion

What I've wanted to suggest in this chapter is that part of what Hoccleve's poetics does that distinguishes its theory of the subject from other texts I've discussed in this dissertation is that it dramatizes the *assumption* of that subject in a way that doesn't take the terms of that assumption for granted quite to the same extent. In chapter two, part of what I wanted to unpack in Heldris of Cornwall – by way, in part, of a detour on Boethius – was the way in which "Nature" functions as an ideological symptom in discourses on sex insofar as with respect to sex it so often functions as a *fetish* insofar as its invocation as a reference point for defining "a sex" covers up the question of sexuality in such a way that preserves it as a problem. There's an inescapable sense, then, in which the invocation of "nature" in a text like *Le Roman de Silence* resembles the invocation of "biology" in contemporary discourses on "sex and gender" (and it's precisely this resemblance, I would argue,

that ought raise critical suspicion with respect to both terms).

In the third chapter I introduced the question of the symptom and attempted to begin sketching out the range of registers in which this question might be posed. The melancholic subject of Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, for instance, brings into the view in which the symptom rhymes with Freud's account of identification by way of the *trait*, which, as Leo Bersani has argued, itself suggests a kind of sociability of "impersonal narcissism" through which the recognition of an "imperfect replication" of myself in the other provides the grammar for a kind of "solidarity of being" between subjects. The openness and eroticism of this form of identification is one which, crucially, preserves an account of difference, however. What *The Prioress's Tale* helps to illustrate is the way in which the symptom can just as easily be a means of objectification. Chaucer's tale, in some respects, calls attention to the ways in which the child often functions as the symptom of the *family itself* to devastating ends when the mode of identification occasioned by the symptom is predicated on the elimination of difference and, it follows, the elimination of the subject whose being finds its alienated form of appearance as the parents' *objet a*.

My interest in Hoccleve's poetics in this final chapter has centered on the way he articulates the *complaint*. What makes the complaint of interest to a larger concern in melancholia is in part the ways in which it partakes in a melancholic discourse in part by suppressing that discourse – that is, by both lovingly and contemptuously walking alongside it. As Lauren Berlant observed, it remains committed to "belonging to a world" even as it doesn't take that belonging for granted – part of its attachment to that world, too, is an attachment to the *work* of negotiating that belonging. Complaint, even when doggedly anchoring itself in negativity, always presupposes a fantasy of wholeness that it withholds from the Other. It's in this sense a deeply narcissistic discourse, but productively so: it attends to lack, to the shortcomings of the Other, without sacrificing its love for the Other and in so doing it also, perversely, marks out the space that its own subject might assume some recognizable form.

There is an important sense, then, in which the symptom of Hoccleve's complaint form is Hoccleve himself, who, as his writing never ceases to remind us, is a *written* subject whose

referentiality is always bounded by the text itself. What's easy to miss in attending to the fallacies, plot holes, and jouissance of his texts is the ways in which these inconsistencies constantly take the complaining "I" as their tautological reference point.

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