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The ministre and the norice unto vices,

Which that men clepe in Englissh idelnesse,

That porter of the gate is of delices,

To eschue, and by hir contrarye hire oppresse

–– That is to seyn, by leveful bisinesse ––

Wel oghten we to doon al oure entente,

Lest that the feend thurgh idelnesse us hente.

For he, that with his thousand cordes slye

Continuelly us waiteth to biclappe,

Whan he may man in idelnesse espye,

He kan so lightly cache him in his trappe,

Til that a man be hent right by the lappe,

He nis nat war the feend hath him in honde!

Wel oghte us werche, and idelnesse withstonde. (*The Second Nun’s Prologue,* 1-14)

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**The Second Nun’s (Aversion to) Tail: A Condemnation of Idolnesse**

Because Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* is a collection of several separate stories, Chaucer makes use of the prologue before each individual story to effectively transition between each story. However, as we saw in *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue*, the prologue can also be used to set the tone of the rest of the tale, even from the first line. She starts out saying “Experience, thogh noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right inogh for me / To speke of wo that is in marriage” (*The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, 1-3). She claims that her experience in marriage is more useful than the writings of those who have never experienced marriage, and her tale follows with the same idea, as she claims she knows what all women want. In a similar way, the first two stanzas of *The Second Nun’s Tale* set the tone and theme of the tale as a whole, arguing that good Christian works and sexual restraint are necessary attributes for spiritual fulfillment.

An initial reading of the first two stanzas, without the use of the Middle English Dictionary, paints a general picture of the Second Nun’s message, but fails to grasp the intricacies of Chaucer’s definition of idelnesse. Jill Mann’s definitions of “leveful bisinesse” and “lappe,” and the connotations that such interpretations bring to the meaning of “idelnesse,” I believe, dilute Chaucer’s true intent by defining idelnesse in a modern secular light (*The Second Nun’s Prologue*, 5, 12, 2). Idleness, according to Mann’s interpretation, is merely the opposite of activity. By delving into the depths of the Middle English Dictionary, I will show alternative interpretations of the above words, and in doing so, provide evidence that *The Second Nun’s Prologue* is more subtle than Mann’s reading claims, and that this subtlety is consistent with the religious tale that follows it.

In her description of idelnesse, the second nun describes “leveful bisinesse” as its opposite, so an accurate discussion of the religious connotations of “leveful bisinesse” paints a fuller picture of idelnesse by describing what it is not. According to the University of Michigan’s Middle English Dictionary, bisinesse is “the state or fact of being engaged in an activity,” which is pretty similar to our modern definition of the word (MED). Leveful, as defined by the same Middle English Dictionary, is defined simply as “pleasing,” which is relatively consistent with Mann’s interpretation (MED). However, if we look into lef, the root of leveful, we see that its meaning is much more diverse and complex. While it can pertain to pleasantness, in line with the original definition of leveful, lef can also mean “the spiritual beloved of God or Christ,” which has a dramatic effect on the meaning of “leveful bisinesse” (MED). While before “leveful bisinesse” merely meant devotion to an activity, it is now the devotion to a specific, religious activity. The scope of what constitutes leveful bisinesse is now narrowed to include only devotion to religious teachings, and therefore the definition of idelnesse is broadened, as it is defined as the opposite of leveful bisinesse. With the help of the Middle English Dictionary, we can see that the second nun, in her *Prologue*, describes those who have idelnesse as those who are not pious, and therefore gives her *Prologue*, and her tale by extension, a clearer religious message.

In line with the religious message, the focus on the manner in which the Devil claims his victims in the second stanza clarifies the sexual connotation of idelnesse. The focus of this discussion is the word “lappe,” which, like so many words in Chaucer’s Middle English, has a double meaning. Mann, in her editing of Chaucer’s work, chose the Middle English Dictionary’s first definition for “lappe,” which defines it as “a part of garment that is loose enough to admit being raised, folded or seized” (MED). With this interpretation, the Devil’s actions are asexual, and are merely focused on deceiving those who have idelnesse. In the second stanza, Chaucer’s description of the Devil’s actions build up imagery of a deceitful and omnipresent Devil, who is always waiting to seize a man “in idelnesse” (*SN Prologue* 10). The hand imagery and “thousand cordes slye” almost describe a puppet master, where the individuals think they are in control but are actually just appendages of the Devil himself (*SN Prologue* 8). Given this tone for the second stanza, Mann’s interpretation makes sense, as it would be only fitting that an omnipresent Devil could simply pluck up an unsuspecting idler at will.

However, I believe that this interpretation, while valid, is incomplete and fails to appreciate one of the second nun’s key arguments, that sexual misconduct, or sexual conduct in general, falls under the umbrella of idelnesse. A look at some of the other definitions paints a more vulgar picture of the Devil as he “hent[s] right by the lappe” (*SN Prologue* 12). The Middle English Dictionary tells us that “lappe” can be “a person’s lap,” “a person’s breast or bosom,” or, more explicitly, female genitalia (MED). Suddenly, the Devil is no longer just the epitome of idelnesse, but is now like hende Nicholas of *The Miller’s Tale* as well, who “caughte hire by the queinte” (*The Miller’s Tale*, 3276). The similar imagery characterizes the sexual nature of the Devil’s actions, and shows that sexual lewdness can lead to idelnesse and the susceptibility to the Devil that accompanies it (which has interesting implications for hende Nicholas, but that is the subject of a different paper). By reinterpreting the meaning of both “leveful bisinesse” and “lappe,” we get a more precise idea of what the second nun means when she talks of idelnesse in her *Prologue*. This reinterpretation is not only interesting to think about, but, as I will argue next, is necessary for the tale that follows, and effectively sets out the pious theme and sermonic tone of the whole tale from just the first two stanzas of the *Prologue*.

Without our reinterpretation of the meaning of idelnesse, *The Second Nun’s Prologue* and *Tale* are almost unrelated. The *Tale* depicts the life of St. Cecilia, and focuses first on her chastity, and then on her devotion to Christ and abhorrence for idols. The *Prologue* on the other hand, with solely Mann’s interpretation to go by, is simply condemning the vague idea of idelnesse. Of course, the presence of the Devil shows that the *Prologue* too is religious, but the *Tale’s* lack of a Devil makes the two appear to be disjointed at best. However, our new interpretation of the *Prologue*, with its emphasis on Christian works and sexual purity, is far more appropriate for the theme and content of the *Tale.*

The emphasis on Christian works from “leveful bisinesse” in the *Prologue* is exemplified in the *Tale* by St. Cecilia’s piety. The very nature of the tale, with its rhyme royal and depiction of the martyrdom of a saint, is of course a Marian tale. But the description of Cecilia’s character and actions further forges a connection between the *Prologue* and *Tale*. From birth, Cecilias was “fostred in the feith / Of Crist, and bar his gospel in hir minde. / She never cessed, as I written finde, / Of hir prayere, and God to love and drede” (*The Second Nun’s Tale,* 122-125). St. Cecilia, in never veering from her faith in God, is the epitome of “leveful bisinesse,” and therefore the opposite of the idelnesse that the second nun warns of in the *Prologue*. Even in face of death, Cecilia professes her love for Christianity and refuses to pray to the idol of Jupiter, saying “That ilke stoon a god thow wolt it calle. / I rede thee, lat thin hand upon it falle, / And taste it wel, and stoon thow shalt it finde, / Sin that thow seest nat with thine eyen blinde / … / That mighty God is in hise hevenes hye” (*SN Tale,* 501-504, 508). Cecilia fully rejects idelnesse by subscribing to “leveful bisinesse” from birth until death. Through her piety and her eventual martyrdom, the story of Cecilia’s life goes hand in hand with our reinterpretation of the *Prologue*, showing just how crucial such a reinterpretation is for our understanding of how the *Prologue* and *Tale* together demonstrate the nun’s message of piety.

Furthermore, we see another connection between the *Prologue* and *Tale* made more concrete with the contrast of the Devil’s lust and Cecilia’s desired chastity. Cecilia, in her prayers, asks God to “kepe hir maidenhede,” asking that her “soule and eek my body gye / Unwemmed, lest that I confounded be!” (*SN Tale,* 126, 136-137). In asking that both her soul and body remain undefiled, Cecilia is implying that sex is more than a physical activity, that the act alone has the potential to undo all of her piety and justify eternal damnation. While this may seem an overly harsh proclamation to make on its own, within in the context of the *Prologue*, it is perfectly logical. We see early on that it is the Devil who snatches his victims by the crotch, implying that sexual activity is in the Devil’s realm and therefore to be avoided at all costs. Once again, by reinterpreting the first two stanzas of *The Second Nun’s Prologue*, we can gain a deeper understanding and undergo more fitting analysis of the tale as a whole, and can see that the themes of faithfulness to Christ and sexual abstinence are prevalent throughout the entirety of the second nun’s monologue.

Nonetheless, even with our newfound connections between the *Prologue* and *Tale*, it is striking how large a role the Devil plays in the first two stanzas of the *Prologue,* and how seemingly absent he or his imagery is from the *Tale*. However, Chaucer’s use of homophones brings the Devil-centric subject matter of the *Prologue* to the moment before Cecilia’s martyrdom. Because “the feend thurgh idelnesse us hente,” idelnesse can be thought of as a tool by which the Devil controls and manipulates people (*SN Prologue,* 7). Before Cecilia’s death, Almachius summons her to light an incense for Jupiter, which she refuses to do because “alle idoles nis but a thing in vein, / For they been dombe, and therto they been deve, / And charged him hise idoles for to leve” (*SN Tale,* 285-287). Chaucer’s use of the idle-idol homophones brings the lessons of idelnesse in the *Prologue* directly to the Roman captors. Just as idelnesse leads to susceptibility to the Devil’s conniving ways, worship of idols is equally damning, so in effect, all of the Romans who pray to pagan gods fit the definition of idelnesse set in the *Prologue*. Therefore, the decision to kill Cecilia is not Almachius’s, but is in fact the Devil’s who can control the idle without their knowledge. Chaucer’s use of homophones allows for a continuity of the second nun’s sermonic theme, from her very first lines of her prologue to the climax of her tale.

Proper understanding of *The Second Nun’s Prologue* is critical for the overall analysis of the *Tale.* The themes brought up in the first two stanzas, of Christian piety and of sexual constraint, reappear as the crucial themes of St. Cecilia’s life. This continuity not only allows the narrative as a whole to flow more smoothly, but also allows the reader to know what to expect from the very beginning. While we saw that the themes transcended the barrier of prologue and tale, the tone of the piece is also set from very beginning. In the first fourteen lines, the phrases “oghten we” and “oghte us” both show up, indicating the sermonic nature of following tale. Just from the first two stanzas, we can deduce the major themes, tone and style of the rest of the piece. While some of Chaucer’s transitions are rocky at best and nonexistent at worst, it is safe to say the he had his thinking cap on while writing *The Second Nun’s Prologue & Tale*, and his ingenuity shined in the midst of the Dark Ages.