

The Second Nun: Fictional Translator and Narrator of the Life of St Cecilia

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Introduction

Why did Chaucer's Second Nun choose to translate the Life of St Cecilia?¹ Why did she choose to translate a story at all, as opposed to telling an ostensibly 'original' story, and why did she choose this particular story? This article argues that as a woman translator, Chaucer's Second Nun embodies the political nature of the translation process. Within the multiple layers of narration in *The Second Nun's Tale*, translation is a dominant theme, and the Second Nun acts as a reference point for translation within each layer.

In considering this approach, several levels of narrative must be acknowledged as existing within *The Second Nun's Tale*. The first is that of Chaucer-the-poet, in which he translated the Life of St Cecilia from, largely, two Latin source texts.² It is then assumed by scholars that he re-wrote or re-translated it for its inclusion in *The Canterbury Tales*.³ The second level of narrative is that of Chaucer-the-pilgrim, where we are presented with a fictional poet who is re-telling (itself a form of translation) what he can recollect of the tales told by the other pilgrims on their journey to Canterbury. The third level of narrative is that of the Second Nun herself, and I would suggest, this level becomes the focal point for all other levels of narration. She claims to have translated the Life of St Cecilia, and it is this translation that she presents to her audience of pilgrims. In this level of narrative, there are two additional stages of translation operating. The first is where the

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¹ All references to the works of Chaucer are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), and hereafter will be referred to by line number only.

² Sherry Reames, 'A Recent Discovery concerning the Sources of Chaucer's "Second Nun's Tale"', *Modern Philology*, vol. 87 (1990), pp. 337-361.

³ Larry D. Benson, 'The Canterbury Tales', in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 19.

Second Nun translates the tale, inferring it was a task she completed prior to the pilgrimage; the second stage is her actual, verbal, re-telling of her translation to the pilgrims. The fourth level of narrative concerns the translation as performed by Cecilia. This involves her hearing the words of God and translating and preaching them to Valerian, Tiburce, and the other Christian converts. Finally, the fifth level of narrative, also concerning Cecilia, is her ultimate spiritual translation from the physical world to the heavenly world by way of her martyrdom.

The five layers of narrative identified here are fundamental to establishing exactly why the Second Nun was created by Chaucer, and why she chooses the Life of St Cecilia as her subject. She serves to draw together the single most important theme from each level of narrative, that of translation. In the third level of narrative, the Second Nun behaves as a focal point around which all of the other levels of narration revolve. As the central aspect of the translation process, the Second Nun embodies the theme of how women's engagement with literature and translation.

Chaucer-the-Poet

The otherworldly simplicity of early Christianity in the Second Nun's Tale evokes a Wycliffite vision of the primitive Church as a contrast to the schismatic, politically involved institution of the day.⁴

Glending Olson's suggestion of the religio-political implications of *The Second Nun's Tale* brings to the fore the fact that Chaucer's writing is rarely overtly political or controversial. Scholars have previously pointed to *The Treatise on the Astrolabe* as evidence of Chaucer aligning his views with Wycliffism, to defend English as a credible and sophisticated language worthy of standing alongside classical languages; though as always, Chaucer seems cautious not to state this too loudly. As Roger Ellis reminds us,

In the increasingly dangerous closing years of the fourteenth century, when Chaucer was writing, and when the Wycliffites were mounting their determined but ultimately futile challenge to ecclesiastical authority - one focused by the question of the adequacy of the vernacular to translate sacred Latin texts - support for the vernacular was far from self-evidently the best cause for a writer to embrace.⁵

⁴ Glending Olson, 'Geoffrey Chaucer', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 585.

⁵ Roger Ellis, 'Translation', in *A Companion to Chaucer* (London: Blackwell, 2002), p. 448.

In light of the political environment, *The Second Nun's Tale* stands out as a conspicuous example of translation into English, in which Chaucer uncharacteristically draws our attention to the translation process. Catherine Sanok also notes this, describing how “Chaucer’s assignment of a virgin martyr narrative to a female narrator points to ... the danger posed by unlicensed translation of textual traditions into public performance.”⁶

The pieces of evidence utilised by scholars to justify their categorisation of *The Second Nun's Tale* as a translation come from its mention in the prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*,⁷ and from the apparently erroneous moment in which the Second Nun refers to herself as an “unworthy sone of Eve.”⁸ The former suggests a version of the Life of St Cecilia existed prior to *The Canterbury Tales*, and the latter suggests this earlier version had a male narrator.

There is little to dispute regarding its earlier incarnation. There is no reason to doubt that its mention in the prologue to *The Legend of Good Women* is genuine, and it is likely that this version predated *The Canterbury Tales*. Appearing in both the F and G Prologues of *The Legend of Good Women*, Alceste outlines the works of Chaucer, specifically referring to the Life of Saint Cecilia, along with the *Boece*, as works of “holynesse” that the narrator translated. It is conspicuous that the exchanges between the god of Love, Alceste, and the narrator refer to the narrator as a translator, not as an author. The god of Love says “thou hast translated the Romaunce of the Rose, / That is an heresyge ageyns my lawe.”⁹ In response, the narrator says

But trewly I wende, as in this cas,
Nought have agilt ne doon to love trespas.
Forwhy a trewe man, withouten drede,
Hath nat to parten with a theves dede;
Ne a trewe lover ought me nat to blame
Though that I speke a fals lover som shame.

⁶ Catherine Sanok, ‘Performing Feminine Sanctity in Late Medieval England: Parish Guilds, Saints’ Plays, and the Second Nun’s Tale’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, vol. 32, no. 2 (2002), p. 290.

⁷ In the *Legend of Good Women*, we hear that Chaucer ‘maad the lyf also of Seynt Cecile’ (F 426, G 416), an indication that the story had existed prior to its inclusion in *The Canterbury Tales*.

⁸ Geoffrey Chaucer, ‘The Second Nun’s Tale’, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), line 62.

⁹ Geoffrey Chaucer, ‘The Legend of Good Women’, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), F. 329-330.

They oughte rather with me for to holde
For that I of Creseyde wroot or tolde
Or of the Rose. Whatso myn auctour mente,
Algate, God wot, it was myn entente
To forthren trouthe in love and it cherice...¹⁰

Here, the narrator insists that he is simply following the intent of his “auctour”, and thus is not to blame for the content of his texts. This example emphasises a number of characteristics of translation that are pertinent to the discussion about *The Second Nun's Tale*. First, the narrator of *The Legend of Good Women* is undoubtedly Chaucer, a familiar instance of the poet blurring the distinction between author and narrator that we see in many of his works. Second, the suggestion that the translator is innocent of responsibility towards the texts he translates is surely disingenuous. The choice of text to translate is itself a decision for which the translator is responsible, as is the choice of which exemplar to use. Finally, of course, is the fact that this example reiterates the existence of a version of the Life of Saint Cecilia translated by Chaucer himself.

Whether the “unworthy sone of Eve” is a strong enough piece of evidence to suggest the narrator had once been male is less certain. The Second Nun herself is not referred to in the text, being only mentioned in manuscript rubrics.¹¹ Regardless, the presence of this line draws attention to the narrator’s gender, and the possibility of an earlier version of the tale. Certainly, for the story to be part of *The Canterbury Tales*, there is no doubt that Chaucer had to have translated it. What is striking is that Chaucer then used the very concept of translation as a vehicle for engaging with the topic of women’s participation in literature. It could be a happy coincidence that the error of the narrator’s altered gender occurred, because even without this, Chaucer certainly uses the inclusion of *The Second Nun's Tale* to draw attention to translation as a political statement. If the altered gender is indeed a deliberate inclusion, this focuses the reader’s attention on the translation process. Even without the altered gender, the Second Nun significantly states that she has translated the tale from Latin, a detail that highlights the intention of the framing.

Both Chaucer’s and the Second Nun’s translations remind us that *The Second Nun's Tale* is the result of two translations. David Raybin notes that

¹⁰ Chaucer, ‘The Legend of Good Women’, F. 462–472.

¹¹ Benson, ‘The Canterbury Tales’, p. 19.

The Second Nun's Tale is a “work translated twice, first into English and later into the frame of *The Canterbury Tales*.”¹² If we accept that the Second Nun is the intended narrator of this tale, we can conclude this fictional individual was a creation of Chaucer-the-poet specifically made for inclusion into *The Canterbury Tales*. In the politically-charged environment in which he was writing, this cannot be insignificant. As Olson points out:

The chronicler Henry Knighton condemned Wycliffite English Bible translations as casting pearls before swine, for it took what was previously available only to learned clergy and made it open to lay people, including specifically women who were able to read. Lollard doctrine allowed at least theoretically for the possibility of women teachers and even women priests, and in the 1390s debate and rumours circulated around that issue. Translation, because it circumvents traditional educational and religious strictures, thus becomes a mechanism for circumventing and then perhaps questioning established authority.¹³

We can therefore see *The Second Nun's Tale* as having developed out of this political environment, and that it is in many respects a response to it. For Chaucer to have created the Second Nun as his fictional narrator and translator of the *Life of St Cecilia* demonstrates an awareness of the political implications of a woman translator of a religious text.

Chaucer-the-Pilgrim

The fictional presence of Chaucer-the-pilgrim has a greater impact on some texts than others in *The Canterbury Tales*. Within *The Second Nun's Tale*, he does not appear to make his presence known at all. However, this does not mean his presence is not felt. The narrative always unfolds through his selective method of storytelling, and each tale is Chaucer-the-pilgrim's best recollection of the tale told by each pilgrim. In the *General Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer-the-pilgrim says,

Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan
Everiche a word, if it be in his charge,
Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,

¹² David Raybin, ‘Chaucer’s Creation and Recreation of the Lyf of Seynt Cecillie’, *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 32 (1997), p. 196.

¹³ Glending Olson, ‘Geoffrey Chaucer’, in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 584-585.

Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,
Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe.
He may nat spare, althogh he were his brother;
He moot as wel seye o word as another.¹⁴

Of course, the modesty is familiar, but it seems significant that Chaucer-the-pilgrim should give such a weighty commentary on the importance of the storyteller, and follow it immediately with an apology for not placing the tales in order of rank, saying:

Also I prey yow to foryeve it me,
Al have I nat set folk in hir degree
Heere in this tale, as that they sholde stonde.
My wit is short, ye may wel understonde.¹⁵

Chaucer-the-pilgrim suggests that it is the storyteller's responsibility to give an accurate rendition of the tales, but that he, himself, will not be doing this. His excuse is: "My wit is short, ye may wel understonde." Throwing doubt on the competency of the narrator is familiar territory in Chaucer's works, and its importance is not something to be overlooked.

It seems significant that Chaucer-the-pilgrim is so obviously unobtrusive in *The Second Nun's Tale*, as if he is deliberately allowing the Second Nun to take centre stage as the narrator and translator of the tale. In this level of narrative, Chaucer-the-pilgrim behaves as a linking device between Chaucer-the-poet and the Second Nun, where he becomes as silent as possible, highlighting their roles.¹⁶ This creates a link between Chaucer-the-poet's actual translation of *The Life of St Cecilia*, and the Second Nun's fictional translation of *The Life of St Cecilia*, revealing translation as an act worthy of recognition in the writing process.

Yet Chaucer-the-pilgrim makes his thoughts about *The Second Nun's Tale* known in other ways. While he may remain unobtrusive within *The Second Nun's Tale*, his presence returns immediately afterwards in *The*

¹⁴ Geoffrey Chaucer, 'General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales', in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), lines 731-738.

¹⁵ Chaucer, 'General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales', lines 743-746.

¹⁶ This might be akin to Elizabeth Robertson's suggestion that "Chaucer's representations of stark and dramatic choices crystallise...his interest in the transformative and irrevocable power of this human capacity". Robertson's interest lies more with how Chaucer reveals human nature, and I would suggest the mechanics of this lies in the invisibility of the narrator, who allows Chaucer-the-Poet and the Second Nun to come to the fore. See Elizabeth Robertson, 'Apprehending the Divine and Choosing to Believe: Voluntarist Free Will in Chaucer's Second Nun's Tale', *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 46, no.1 (2011), p. 112.

Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale, and recalls his apology for not placing the tales in their correct order. The two tales have long been regarded as a complementary pair and are placed together in every extant manuscript. Previous scholarship has noted this relationship, and has also made the connection between translation in *The Second Nun's Tale* and transmutation in *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale* (the latter regarded as a corrupt understanding of the former).¹⁷ Virtually every positive point the Second Nun raises about the benefits of prayer, faith, and religion is undercut, point for point, by the alchemist of *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, who demonstrates the financial benefits of deceiving his customers. It is easy to equate the corruption of the alchemist with the corruption of the church. Lynn Staley Johnston suggests that:

By pairing [The Second Nun's Tale] with the Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale, Chaucer points up the differences between the primitive church and its contemporary incarnation. The clarity, the coolness, the clear-cut choices depicted in the Second Nun's Tale contrast sharply to the murky colors, the heat and sweat, and the ill-defined conclusions described in the Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale.¹⁸

The implication here is that no matter how valuable the Second Nun's translation of the Life of St Cecilia is, the corruption of the contemporary medieval church, like that of the alchemist, overshadows her translation process, both literary and spiritual. The corruption of the church effectively stops the possibility of spiritual translation, and, in particular, disempowers women from participating in the church.

In light of the current discussion, however, we can see *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale* as operating in a slightly different manner than simply as a comparison point to *The Second Nun's Tale*. *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale* contributes to the complexity of the translation topic, and acts as a clear link between the fictional world of the pilgrims, and the circumstances in which Chaucer-the-poet was operated. Raybin states,

Chaucer does not allow the Second Nun's voice to maintain the authority of closure for even a single line after the tale's end...Chaucer immediately undercuts the authority of the closely translated *Second*

¹⁷ See the discussion of scholarship concerning *The Second Nun's Tale* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, pp. 19-20.

¹⁸ Lynn Staley Johnson, 'Chaucer's Tales of the Second Nun and the Strategies of Dissent', *Studies in Philology*, vol. 3 (1992), p. 331.

Nun's Tale by matching it with that rare thing in the *Canterbury Tales*, an original tale apparently written uniquely for the occasion.¹⁹

The very first line of *The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue* is: "Whan ended was the lyf of Seinte Cecile..." (1). The ambiguity of the expression "lyf of Seinte Cecile" deliberately conveys both that the Second Nun has finished her tale, and that St Cecilie is dead. With this ambiguous meaning, Chaucer-the-pilgrim returns to the narration, reminding us that he was there all along. The Canon's Yeoman interrupts the pilgrimage, and similarly, his tale interrupts *The Second Nun's Tale*. *The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue* hurriedly cuts off the Second Nun, announcing that her tale is finished, and is then followed by *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, which clearly negates *The Second Nun's Tale*.

The effect is to remind us of the process of translation in which he, Chaucer-the-pilgrim, is involved; that of recollecting and recounting the tales of the pilgrims. By setting *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale* immediately after *The Second Nun's Tale*, Chaucer-the-pilgrim reminds us of the political implications of translation, particularly in relation to the medieval church, which seems to be the object of derision by setting the two tales side by side. Chaucer-the-pilgrim silently connects the translation of both the Second Nun and Chaucer-the-poet.

The Second Nun as Translator

The third level of narration, which has received very little critical attention, concerns the translation performed by the Second Nun. I regard this level of narration as the focal point for all other levels of narration, as the Second Nun's entire existence links the other levels of narration together.

In the Prologue, the Second Nun describes her tale as one she has translated from Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea*: "I have heer doon my feithful bisynesse / After the legende in translacioun" (24-25). Later, she reminds us of this: "For bothe have I the wordes and sentence / Of hym that at the seintes reverence / The storie wroot, and folwen hire legend" (81-83). That the Second Nun mentions the process of translation twice draws her audience's attention to this feature. She consciously aligns herself within the literary tradition of translation, placing herself within the chain of receiving and transmitting knowledge. It is also notable that she twice states her source text, Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea*, which proves to be spurious.

¹⁹ Raybin, 'Chaucer's Creation and Recreation of the Lyf of Seynt Cecilie', p. 199.

Another point of significance is that we know almost nothing about the Second Nun, which is unusual. *General Prologue* states: “Another Nonne with hire hadde she, / That was hir chapeleyne...” (163-164). Here, the Second Nun’s character is entirely determined by her relationship with the Prioress; she is the second of the two nuns on the pilgrimage, and she is the Prioress’ amanuensis. Such a brief character sketch seems conspicuous, but serves to heighten her position as a woman translator by giving her no other characteristic traits.

It is also conspicuous that the Second Nun is not named in *The Canterbury Tales*. This is true for most of the pilgrims, only eight being named, but it is notable that of the three women, only the Second Nun is unnamed. The Prioress, Eglantine, and the Wife of Bath, Alice, are caricatures in *The Canterbury Tales*, as demonstrated by their names. The Second Nun, by contrast, is almost invisible.²⁰ This may be a deliberate act. Without a name, all identification turns to her gender and her actions as a translator. Similarly, Sanok notes: “Given no portrait on the General Prologue, the Second Nun has no ‘body’ or personal history to ground her performance, and in the absence of a clearly distinguished voice in her tale ... no distinct personality emerges.”²¹

Alexandra Barratt says, “authority, and therefore authorship, were incompatible with femininity”,²² and that in order for women to participate in the medieval literary world, they,

...evolved a range of strategies. They could substitute an alternative for earthly authority, derived from their own religious experience; they could give up the unequal struggle altogether and lapse into silence; or they could appropriate authority as translators, adaptors and compilers.²³

This latter state is where we find the Second Nun: appropriating masculine literary authority through the translation process. While the Second Nun demonstrates that she is an extremely good translator, she also demonstrates

²⁰ Robert Sturges examines the three women narrators in *The Canterbury Tales*, showing that they “are concerned with the kinds of power or authority women can attain”. See Robert S. Sturges, “‘The Canterbury Tales’” Women Narrators: Three Traditions of Female Authority’, *Modern Language Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2 (1983), p. 41.

²¹ Sanok, ‘Performing Feminine Sanctity in Late Medieval England’, p. 289.

²² Alexandra Barratt, *Women’s Writing in Middle English* (London: Longman, 1992), p. 7.

²³ Barratt, *Women’s Writing in Middle English*, p. 8.

that, no matter how good she is at her task, politically she remains stifled, confined to translating; she does not have the standing to be an author.

By realising the centrality of the issue of translation, it is now possible to understand why the Second Nun has selected this particular saint's life for her audience. The Second Nun aligns her own act of literary translation with the spiritual translation of St Cecilia, demonstrating the manner in which a woman claiming authority is treated by the establishment. The Second Nun, according to Sanok, "Implicitly maps the narrative paradigm of the legend onto the social context of her performance."²⁴ Aligning her own circumstances with Cecilia's, the Second Nun's presentation of Cecilia's martyrdom leaves us unsure: does her martyrdom show her transcending the establishment, or falling victim to it? It is this ambiguity surrounding the meaning of Cecilia's death that the Second Nun alludes to in her tale, and which reflects upon her own literary translation. In choosing the Life of St Cecilia to translate, the Second Nun asks her audience whether she, herself, should be allowed to transcend the literary establishment through her accurate translation, or if she should still be limited to it. Mary Beth Long notes Cecilia's "potential as a rhetorical model to late medieval readers who wanted to emulate her persuasive talent"; my assertion here is that the Second Nun does exactly this.²⁵

Sherry Reames' 1990 article identifying the additional source that Chaucer likely used to translate the Life of St Cecilia has significantly transformed all subsequent scholarship on the subject. It seems likely Chaucer did indeed use the *Legenda Aurea* as a source up until approximately line 349, and thereafter used a later version of the *Legenda*, which Reames entitles 'the Franciscan abridgement.'²⁶ Joseph Grossi examines Chaucer's translation of these sources in some detail, asserting that the switch in exemplars shows that "...the English poet wished to enhance Cecillie's strength and the prefect Almachius' weakness even more obviously

²⁴ Sanok, 'Performing Feminine Sanctity in Late Medieval England', p. 293.

²⁵ Mary Beth Long, "'O sweete and wel biloved spouse deere': A Pastoral Reading of Cecilia's Post-Nuptial Persuasion on The Second Nun's Tale", *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, vol. 39 (2017), p. 159.

²⁶ Sherry Reames, 'A Recent Discovery concerning the Sources of Chaucer's "Second Nun's Tale"', *Modern Philology*, vol. 87 (1990), pp. 3493-56.

than Jacobus had done.”²⁷ Johnson also assesses the standard of Chaucer’s translation, concurring with its accuracy:

If we compare Chaucer’s version of her life with any of the Middle English versions, or with his Latin sources, it is clear that Chaucer succeeds so brilliantly, not by adding to the tale, but by editing what is superfluous to the point he wishes to make. Both his choice of source-texts and his editing are acts of interpretation and refiguration designed to provide an image of the holy that points up the emptiness of imperial systems that locate value in power.²⁸

Neither Grossi nor Johnson give much consideration to the Second Nun as the translator of the tale. Grossi briefly considers why *The Second Nun’s Tale* is so devout, compared with other *Canterbury Tales*, but does not pay particular attention to the Second Nun as a translator. I believe that the accuracy of the Second Nun’s translation turns the reader’s attention to specifically female translator and its potential implications.

Reames identifies eleven points where the translation of the second part of the Tale far more closely matches the Franciscan abridgement than the *Legenda*. The following extract, from the baptism of Tiburce, shows this:

And after this Tiburce in good entente
With Valerian to Pope Urban he wente,
That thanked God, and with glad herte and light
He cristned hym and made hym in that place
Parfit in his lernynge, Goddes knyght.
And after this Tiburce gat swich grace
That every day he saugh in tyme and space
The aungel of God..²⁹

The *Legenda* reduces this entire section to one single line: “Ductus igitur et purificatus angelos Dei [Tiburce] saepe videbat.”³⁰ The Franciscan abridgement, however, agrees with Chaucer’s text almost line for line:

Tunc Valerianus perduxit eum ad Papam Urbanum. Qui gratias referens Deo, cum omni gaudio baptizavit eum, et perfectum in doctrina sua Christo militem consecravit. Tantam quoque Tyburtius

²⁷ Joseph Grossi, Jr., ‘The Unhidden Piety of Chaucer’s “Seint Cecilie”’, *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 36, no.3 (2002), p. 298.

²⁸ Johnson, ‘Chaucer’s Tales of the Second Nun and the Strategies of Dissent’, p. 327.

²⁹ Sherry Reames, ‘A Recent Discovery concerning the Sources of Chaucer’s “Second Nun’s Tale”’, *Modern Philology*, vol. 87 (1990), pp. 349-356.

³⁰ *Legenda Aurea: vulgo historia Lombardica dicta*, ed. Theodor Grasse (Lipsiae, impensis librariae Arnoldianae, 1850), p. 774.

deinceps gratiam consecutus est Domini, ut et angelos Dei videret cotidie.³¹

This indicates that the Franciscan abridgement is indeed a more likely exemplar for the second half of *The Second Nun's Tale*. However, it also shows a discrepancy between what the Second Nun says she has done, and what she actually has done. Why might the Second Nun claim to have translated Jacobus' text but fail to mention she switches to a different version part way through? It may be that she (and Chaucer) were unaware they did this, using an exemplar in which both versions were already combined, though Reames did not find any manuscripts with this combination of the texts.³² It seems to me more interesting to speculate about why the Second Nun has chosen to reveal only one source and not the other.

Reames examines the final part of *The Second Nun's Tale*, showing how closely it compares with the Franciscan abridgement. In her analysis, she notes the particular use of *consecrarem* in the Franciscan abridgement, as opposed to *consecraret* in all other Latin versions, and how the Franciscan abridgement agrees with Chaucer's translation: "Heere of myn hous perpetually a cherche" (546). *Consecrarem*, the first-person singular form, refers to Cecilia, as it is her house that is turned into a church. In Jacobus' and other Latin versions, *consecraret* is second-person and refers to Pope Urban. The difference is significant. Reames explains what this might mean for a medieval audience:

...there was some concern in the later Middle Ages about the inconsistency between established church practice and the implication that Cecilia, who although a saint was merely a laywoman, had the ability to consecrate a church. The polemical use that could be made of such details is shown by John Wyclif, who cited Cecilia's example as proof that the laity could perform minor sacraments like consecrations. When the old legends were abridged and revised by late medieval guardians of orthodoxy, however – notably Jacobus de Voragine and other Dominican compilers – the potentially dangerous reading *consecrarem* was nearly always omitted.³³

³¹ Reames, 'A Recent Discovery concerning the Sources of Chaucer's "Second Nun's Tale"', p. 359.

³² Reames, 'A Recent Discovery concerning the Sources of Chaucer's "Second Nun's Tale"', p. 347.

³³ Reames, 'A Recent Discovery concerning the Sources of Chaucer's "Second Nun's Tale"', p. 344.

Reames sees the potentially volatile political circumstances in which Chaucer was writing, and that this might have been his veiled effort in support of Wycliffism.³⁴ Reames does not, however, consider what this might mean for the Second Nun. The Franciscan abridgement seems to me to offer a very clear reason why the Second Nun would find this exemplar so attractive. Cecilia's request that her house be consecrated is a bold statement. With it, she takes charge of her story and how it will proceed in the future, after her death. The simultaneously assertive and subversive quality to this penultimate moment in the story would be immediately appealing to the Second Nun, who shows the same two qualities in her translation.

These examples show that both Chaucer and the Second Nun have made choices in their translation processes that reveal their motivations and interests. We hear Chaucer defend himself in *The Legend of Good Women* as merely a translator with no responsibility, but of course this is never the entire truth. If we transfer these choices onto the Second Nun, her possible motivations become clearer. As noted already, the readers' attention is directed towards the Second Nun as a woman translator, so we must recall this as we consider her reasons for selecting these source texts. Johnson suggests Chaucer's choice of source texts reveals "an image of the holy that points up the emptiness of imperial systems that locate value in power."³⁵ This may be correct. When we consider the Second Nun as translator, then we must consider how imperial systems and power often marginalise women. As a woman translator, the role itself infers that for women to participate in political systems, they must do so surreptitiously, in ways that have the potential to generate change, but which do not draw attention or appear to threaten established hierarchies.

Cecilia Preaches to the Masses

Significant to the content of the *Life of St Cecilia* is the fact that Cecilia actively engages in preaching Christianity. Initially she preaches the benefits of Christianity to Valerian and Tiburce, convincing them to convert, and then all three of them take to preaching publicly, converting many more. It is this action that results in their ultimate demise, for it arouses the notice of the Roman prefect Almachius.

³⁴ Sanok, 'Performing Feminine Sanctity in Late Medieval England', p. 289.

³⁵ Johnson, 'Chaucer's Tales of the Second Nun and the Strategies of Dissent', p. 327.

Perhaps one of the most dramatic scenes of *The Second Nun's Tale* is the trial of Cecilia before Almachius. It is a crucial scene in which the emboldened Cecilia confidently refutes every charge made against her. It is Cecilia's ability to speak in this public manner, to effectively preach Christianity to the Roman prefect, that eventually results in her martyrdom, an ending which she fully expects and invites. Cecilia's act of preaching is essentially an act of translation. She translates the word of God for the benefit of the masses whom she converts to Christianity, and she does so without any apology. Cecilia is fully aware of the consequences of her actions; she expects to die for doing so. Thus, Cecilia demonstrates the political implications of the translation process within the fiction of her tale, but it speaks to, and informs, all the other levels of translation mentioned in this study. Sanok describes this as authorising "a woman's public voice."³⁶

In her 1990 article, Susan K. Hagen notes the fact that Cecilia preaches Christianity, but when she links this back to the historical figure of Cecilia, alive in the third century CE, she erroneously believes that inserting such a woman into the political context of the 1390s may have been an error on Chaucer's part:

Tellingly, even in Chaucer's late medieval version of the saint's life we find the rhyming couplet "preche" and "teche" twice used to describe Cecilia's activities (VIII 342-43, 538-39), words that would hardly be used to describe the activities of any proper fourteenth-century religious woman.³⁷

Hagen refers to the early Christian period where it is possible women were able to preach and teach the word of God, but certainly in the late medieval period, she suggests, this was not possible. However, far from being an error on Chaucer's part, it seems more likely that this is a political statement highlighting that the church did once allow women a greater opportunity to participate. This point is further emphasised by the fact that the immediate narrator is a woman, who causes the reader to contemplate women preachers, or at least that a woman translator may well be discretely preaching through her translation choices.

³⁶ Sanok, 'Performing Feminine Sanctity in Late Medieval England', p. 291.

³⁷ Susan K. Hagen, 'Feminist Theology and "The Second Nun's Tale": or St Cecilia Laughs at the Judge', *Medieval Perspectives*, vols. 4-5 (1990), p. 44.

Cecilia's Spiritual Translation

Cecilia's spiritual translation is that which occurs through her martyrdom. It is the translation from the physical world into the heavenly world, and it occurs as a process, rather than in a single moment in time. David Raybin identifies clearly the significant moments in the *Tale* that indicate that Cecilia is no longer operating within the physical world, and has begun the process of translating herself into the spiritual world. He says:

The living Cecilie is in a very basic respect dead to the world...Concerned exclusively for her soul, Cecilie responds to marriage and trial by embracing both literal and figurative disembodiment. Rejecting sex and reproduction, the activities that most characterize the body, and welcoming death, the abandonment of the body.³⁸

In response to Cecilia being placed in the bath of boiling water, Raybin suggests that: "Her senses dead already to the offerings of the world and body, the living saint feels no pain."³⁹ It seems that Cecilia, in translating herself from the earthly world to the spiritual world, has usurped the authority of the church. Her act of spiritual translation is at once in defiance of church authority, and yet simultaneously an act of reverence for the church. The ambiguity of this act allows numerous meanings to be drawn. At one end of the spectrum, Cecilia has succumbed to Roman authority, but, as Raybin suggests, she is effectively dead already, and thus has neutered the power of the Roman prefect by removing her own life. It is also possible to see this act of self-sacrifice mirrored by the immediate storyteller, the Second Nun; she, too, commits an act of self-sacrifice by claiming the role of translator of the tale, rather than admitting she has performed a role much more akin to an author.

Cecilia is clearly not a neutral choice of saint for the Second Nun. It may not be surprising that a nun would recount a saint's life, but this particular saint is clearly significant, as she embodies the process of defying the political and social order, but does so by adhering to a spiritual order. Additionally, Cecilia's most significant ability appears to be her persuasive communication skills: she defends herself in court, preaches and converts many Romans, and finally, while dying, preaches to her followers about how to sustain her teachings into the future. This seems a conspicuous choice for

³⁸ Raybin, 'Chaucer's Creation and Recreation of the Lyf of Seynt Cecilie', pp. 203-205.

³⁹ Raybin, 'Chaucer's Creation and Recreation of the Lyf of Seynt Cecilie', p. 260.

the Second Nun, whose own character is defined as a woman with equally persuasive communication skills.

Cecilia's bodily death takes three days to occur. After having her head partially severed in a botched execution attempt (itself occurring due to the boiling bath having no effect on her), Cecilia says:

“I axed this of hevne kyng,
To han respit thre dayes and namo
To recomende to yow, er that I go,
Thise soules, lo, and that I myghte do werche
Heere of myn hous perpetuelly a cherche.” (542-546)

At this point Cecilia exists in body only, her spirit already translated into heaven. That she asks for a respite of three days to complete her earthly work is significant, given what she does in that time. Not content with the impact she has had on the Christian church in her lifetime, asking that her house be consecrated as a church, she lifts the story out of its Roman context and projects it into the medieval context of Chaucer-the-poet.

Conclusion

As the translator of the Life of St Cecilia, the Second Nun draws our attention to the political overtones of the time period in which Chaucer-the-poet included it within *The Canterbury Tales*. The character of the Second Nun represents a superb creation on the part of Chaucer. As a woman translator, her act of translation behaves as a pivotal point around which the other levels of narration revolve. As each level of narration emphasises translation as a political process, this in turn draws attention to the character of the Second Nun, who encapsulates the diverse implications of translation.

The accuracy of the Second Nun's translation also serves to heighten the ambiguity of her position as a woman translator. On the one hand, her ability as a translator suggests that she has achieved a kind of personal translation. She has transposed herself to a higher position than that conventionally assigned to medieval women, and has risen above the restrictions around literary authority. By presenting an accurate translation of the Life of St Cecilia, the Second Nun demonstrates that she has been able to transcend the notion of translation as a neutral pastime, to show translation as a creative and empowering process for women. But, on the other hand, the Second Nun also demonstrates that whatever the level of her ability to translate, she will always be regarded as nothing more than a translator,

inferior to an author. The accuracy of her translation emphasises this inequitable situation.

The Second Nun urges the reader to consider each level of narration in terms of the theme of translation. So while she herself exists within the framework of the pilgrimage to Canterbury, it is as if her gaze reaches beyond this level of narration, she sees backwards to Chaucer-the-pilgrim, and even further to Chaucer-the-poet, yet she also sees forward into Cecilia's preaching and to Cecilia's spiritual translation. This non-linear view does not allow the reader to consider the tale as a simple progression from one level of narration to the next. It demands that the reader consider these levels of narration simultaneously, with each informing the others.