

# CHAUCER, THE “CORONES TWEYNE,” AND THE EVE OF SAINT AGNES

By JAMES H. MOREY

John Keats was one of the last English poets to lyricize a venerable tradition when, in his “The Eve of Saint Agnes,” the narrator describes

. . . one Lady there,  
Whose heart had brooded, all that wintry day,  
On love, and winged St. Agnes’ saintly care,  
As she had heard old dames full many times declare.

They told her how, upon St. Agnes’ Eve,  
Young virgins might have visions of delight,  
And soft adorings from their loves receive  
Upon the honey’d middle of the night,  
If ceremonies due they did aright.

(42–50)<sup>1</sup>

On 20 January, the Eve of Saint Agnes’s day, by various sorts of love-divination involving fasting, sticking pins, or the preparation of a “dumb cake” (a cake prepared in silence, usually with large quantities of salt) one could secure a vision of a future beloved. In the earliest practice both young men and women could have such visions, and they were almost always associated with unhappy outcomes. The tradition is documented in England, France, and Germany, and one can find numerous poetic treatments and descriptions in miscellanies of folklore.<sup>2</sup> The earliest attestation known to me is

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from *The Complete Poems*, ed. John Barnard, 3rd ed. (Harmondsworth, 1988), 312–23, at 313. For much of his short life, Keats was an avid reader of Chaucer. See F. E. L. Priestly, “Keats and Chaucer,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 5 (1944): 439–47, where he notes several verbal echoes between “The Eve of St. Agnes” and *Troilus and Criseyde*, though none relate directly to the subject matter of this paper. On 17 November 1819, Keats wrote to his publisher John Taylor of his desire to read Chaucer instead of Ariosto, and to “diffuse the colouring of St. Agnes eve throughout a Poem in which Character and Sentiment would be figures to such drapery” (*The Letters of John Keats: 1814–1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols. [Cambridge, 1958] 2:234).

<sup>2</sup> See, among many sources which document the various rituals associated with the occasion, John Brand, *Observations on Popular Antiquities, Including the Whole of Mr. Bourne’s Antiquitates vulgares, With Addenda to Every Chapter of That Work: As Also an Appendix Containing Such Articles on the Subject as Have Been Omitted by That Author* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1777), 386–87; see alternatively John Brand, *Observations on Popular Antiquities*, 3 vols. (London, 1849; repr., Detroit, 1969), 1:34–38; Robert Chambers, *The Book of Days: A Miscellany of Popular Antiquities*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1863)

from Ben Jonson's *The Entertainment at Althorp*, performed before Queen Anne, queen of James I, in 1603. The Satyr speaks of Queen Mab:

She can start our Franklin's daughters  
In their sleep, with shrieks and laughters;

And on sweet St. Anne's night  
Feed them with a promised sight,  
Some of husbands, some of lovers,  
Which an empty dream discovers.<sup>3</sup>

Other early attestations are by Robert Burton in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* in 1621 and by Wye Saltonstall in 1631.<sup>4</sup>

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1:140–41; Arthur Robinson Wright, *British Calendar Customs*, ed. T. E. Lones, 3 vols. (London, 1936–40), 2:106–110; Jacques E. Merceron, *Dictionnaire thématique et géographique des saints imaginaires, facétieux et substitués* (Paris, 2002), 962–63; Eduard von Hoffman-Krayer and Hanns Bächtold-Stäubli, *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, 10 vols. (Berlin, 1927–42), 1:214. Josiah Relph wrote a poem on “Saint Agnes Fast” in his *Miscellany of Poems: Consisting of Original Poems, Translations, Pastorals in the Cumberland Dialect, Familiar Epistles, Fables, Songs, and Epigrams* (Glasgow, 1747), 144–47; and J. Robertson collects another version in *Poems: Consisting of Tales, Fables, Epigrams, &c. &c. By Nobody* (London, 1770), 100–101. John Gay, in an imitation of Virgil's eighth eclogue, gathered several traditions of love-divination and conjuration in “Thursday” of *The Shepherd's Week* (1714), though none deals specifically with Agnes (*John Gay: Poetry and Prose*, ed. Vinton A. Dearing, 2 vols. [Oxford, 1974], 1:109–13). For the practices themselves, see Susan M. Drury, “English Love-Divinations Using Plants: An Aspect,” *Folklore* 97 (1986): 210–14; Samuel P. Menefee, “‘Master and Servant’: A Divinatory Class Dream,” *Folklore* 99 (1988): 88–97; and Alice La Plante and Clare La Plante, *Dear Saint Anne, Send Me a Man (And Other Time-honored Prayers for Love)* (New York, 2001), 12–18.

<sup>3</sup> *Ben Jonson*, ed. Ian Donaldson (Oxford, 1985), 485 and his note on page 729. For the full text of the masque, see *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford, Percy Simpson, and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford, 1941), 7:119–31. The relevant lines are 72–77 on page 123. For the circumstances of the 1603 masque, see Thomas Keightley, *The Fairy Mythology*, 2 vols. (London, 1833), 2:141–43. “Anne,” “Annes,” “Anneis,” and “Anneys” were variant spellings of “Agnes” as for example in the *South English Legendary*, ed. Carl Horstmann, EETS o. s. 87 (London, 1887), 181–84; also ed. Charlotte D'Evelyn and Anna J. Mill, EETS o. s. 235 (London, 1956), 19; and Osborn Bokenham's *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, ed. Mary S. Serjeantson, EETS o. s. 206 (London, 1938), 111–29. The spelling “Annes” is also common on pieces of early Christian glass that represent Agnes (see n. 16 below).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. A. R. Shilleto, 3 vols. (London, 1893; repr., New York, 1973), 3:207. Wye Saltonstall, *Picturae Loquentes*, reprinted from the editions of 1631 and 1635 (Oxford, 1946). He recounts (*ibid.*, 46, emphasis in original) the following concerning his nineteenth character, a maid: “If she keepe a Chambermaide, she lyes at her bedds feete, and they two say no Paternosters, but in the morning tell one another all their wanton dreames, talke all night long of young men, and will be both sure to faste on St. Agnes night to know who shall bee their first husbands.”

Dating the genesis of any folkloric tradition is often impossible, except to say that it almost always predates the documentary record. It is likewise difficult to ascertain whether the tradition of love-divination surrounding Saint Agnes's Eve was current in fourteenth-century England, but there is no question that Agnes was well known in England at least from the time of Ælfric (late tenth century), who included her in his *Lives of Saints*.<sup>5</sup> The constitutions of Walter of Cantilupe, Bishop of Worcester (1240) designate the feast of Saint Agnes (along with the feast days of Margaret, Lucy, and Agatha) as holidays for women only.<sup>6</sup> At least five churches in England were dedicated to Agnes before the Reformation; she was often represented in pre-Reformation English rood screens; and her life appears in the Proper of Saints of the Sarum, York, and Hereford Breviaries.<sup>7</sup>

I wish to argue that Chaucer provides his own version of Saint Agnes's Eve at the end of book 2 of *Troilus and Criseyde*. The recovery of this tradition in a Chaucerian context resolves the cryptic “corones tweyne” invoked by Pandarus; it provides a firm date in an often obscure chronology for the first face to face meeting between Troilus and Criseyde; and it illuminates even as it makes more complex a vexed issue in the interpretation of Chaucer's life and work: his relationship to women, including his mother, Agnes de Copton.

<sup>5</sup> Ed. Walter W. Skeat, EETS o. s. 76, 82, 94, 114 (London, 1881–90). Agnes's life is in vol. 76, no. 7.

<sup>6</sup> “Haec [feast days] sunt ferianda ab operibus mulierum tantum” (*Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae, A Synodo Verolamiensi A.D. CCCXLVI ad Londinensem A.D. [MDCCXVII]. Accedunt constitutiones et alia ad historiam Ecclesiae Anglicanae spectantia*, ed. David Wilkins, 4 vols. [London, 1737] 1:678).

<sup>7</sup> See Francis Bond, *Dedications and Patron Saints of English Churches* (London, 1914), 19; Eamon Duffy, “Holy Maydens, Holy Wyfes: The Cult of Women Saints in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century England,” *Women in the Church*, ed. W. J. Shields and Diana Wood, *Studies in Church History* 27 (Oxford, 1990), 175–96. For the Sarum Breviary, see *Breviarium ad usum insignis ecclesiae Sarum*, ed. Francis Procter and Christopher Wordsworth, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1879–86; repr., Farnborough, 1970), 3:86–95. For the York Breviary see *Breviarium ad usum insignis ecclesie Eboracensis*, ed. Stephen W. Lawley, *Surtees Society* vols. 71 and 75 (Durham, 1880–83); and for Hereford see *The Hereford Breviary*, ed. Walter Howard Frere and Langton E. G. Brown, *Bradshaw Society* vols. 26, 40, 46 (London, 1904–15). These lives were read in church: “Who can amend the life of Saynt Kateryne / Or be bolde to make a newe descripcyon / Of Holy Agnes, martyre and virgyne, / After the noble doctours tradicyon, / Saynt Ambrose, which with gode eloquencyon / Wryten hath her life sufficiently, / That in the chirche is redd openly?” (*Die mittelenlische Umdichtung von Boccaccios De claris mulieribus*, ed. Gustav Schleich, *Palaestra* 144 [Leipzig, 1924], lines 197–203).

## THE TWO CROWNS OF SAINT AGNES

The allusion to the “two crowns” appears immediately before Troilus and Criseyde meet in person for the first time, after the contrived dinner party at the house of Deiphebus. Pandarus is speaking to Criseyde before they enter the “chaumbre” (2.1646)<sup>8</sup> where Troilus lies indisposed and, notably, fasting:

“Avyseth yow what folk ben hire withinne,  
 And in what plit oon is, God hym amende!”  
 And inward thus, “Ful softly bygynne,  
 Nece, I conjure and heighly yow defende,  
 On his half which that soule us alle sende,  
 And in the vertu of corones tweyne,  
 Sle naught this man, that hath for yow this peyne.”  
 (2.1730–36)

These two crowns, sometimes construed as a double crown, have been variously interpreted: as an emblem of the intersection of spiritual and temporal power, recollecting the papal tiara (Malarkey); as a variant spelling of the semi-precious stone “ceraunius” (Doob); as the twin boys, “coronae,” in *Metamorphoses* 13 who emerge from the funeral pyre of the daughters of Orion (Wetherbee); as the “duplicem coronam” in Matheolus’s *Lamentationes* awarded to husbands who are chaste within marriage and who suffer the martyrdom of marriage itself (Thundy); as pity and bounty or justice and mercy (Root) and, as numerous critics have noted, as the crown of roses and lilies — martyrdom and virginity — awarded to, among other virgin martyrs, Saint Cecilia, the subject of the *Second Nun’s Tale*.<sup>9</sup> Cecilia, with Agnes, Agatha, Margaret, Catherine, and Lucia, were the six most celebrated early Christian virgin martyrs. Saint Agnes, however, is most often

<sup>8</sup> All Chaucerian quotations are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> Stoddard Malarkey, “The ‘Corones Tweyne’: An Interpretation,” *Speculum* 38 (1963): 473–78; Penelope B. R. Doob, “Chaucer’s ‘Corones Tweyne’ and the Lapidaries,” *Chaucer Review* 7 (1972–73): 85–96; Winthrop Wetherbee, *Chaucer and the Poets* (Ithaca, 1984), 94 n. 6; Zacharias P. Thundy, “Chaucer’s *Corones Tweyne* and Matheolus,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 86 (1985): 343–47; Robert Kilburn Root, note to line 2.1735 in *The Book of Troilus and Criseyde* (Princeton, 1926). See also Barry Windeatt’s note to the same line in his edition (London, 1984; 2nd ed., 1990). The relevant lines in the *Second Nun’s Tale* are 218–80. In Ælfric’s life of Saint Cecilia an angel presents her with “twam cyne-helmas” (see n. 5 above, vol. 114, life no. 34, line 75). Other interpretations cited by the note to line 1735 in the Riverside edition suggest allusions to “la corona dell’honesta mia” in Boccaccio’s *Filistrato* (2.134, proposed by Howard Patch in *Modern Language Notes* 70 [1955]: 8–12), to the “diadem” of Canticles 3:11 (R. E. Kaske in a talk to the New Chaucer Society, 16 April 1982), to the practice of swearing by one’s “crown” (head), to the crowns of Priam and Hecuba, to the “crounes tweyne” of Henry VI mentioned by John Lydgate in 1432, and to the “stevning” ceremony in the nuptial rites of the Greek Orthodox Church.

associated with two crowns in texts and artwork spanning centuries; because of these associations and because of the dramatic convergence between the Eve of Saint Agnes and the scene in the house of Deiphebus, Agnes is the most relevant figure with regard to the “corones tweyne” in *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Ambrose refers to the “duplex martyrium, pudoris et religionis” of Agnes in his *De virginibus*, written ca. 380, some seventy or eighty years after her martyrdom ca. 305.<sup>10</sup> Ambrose’s account became the basis for all later treatments, including the one in the *Legenda Aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine (thirteenth century). Connections between Agnes and the two crowns themselves can be found in the hymns of Prudentius (ca. 420), in one of Abelard’s letters to Heloise (ca. 1115), in the early thirteenth-century *Hali Meidhad*, and in an early fourteenth-century life of Saint Agnes in Old French. Iconographic links may be observed on late-Roman glassware, in the apse of the basilica built in her memory in Rome on the Via Nomentana (ca. 635) where she is buried, in a drawing of Saint Agnes in a manuscript of the *South English Legendary* (Oxford, Bodleian Tanner 17), in a gold cup dating from Chaucer’s lifetime, and in several fifteenth- and sixteenth-century paintings.

In his *Peristephanon* (“concerning crowns”), a collection of hymns celebrating martyrs, Prudentius makes the image explicit at the beginning of Hymn 14: “The grave of Agnes is in the home of Romulus; a brave lass she, and a glorious martyr. Laid within the sight of their palaces this maiden watches over the well-being of Rome’s citizens, and she protects strangers too when they pray with pure and faithful heart. A double crown [*duplex corona*] of martyrdom was vouchsafed to her.”<sup>11</sup> The imagery recurs at the end of the Hymn: “Meanwhile with two crowns [*coronis . . . duabus*] God circles the unwedded martyr’s brow” (lines 119–20) and “On our gathered impurities turn thy face with thy twin diadems [*gemello . . . diademate*]” (lines 126–27).

In one of his letters to Heloise (ca. 1115), Abelard writes as follows: “Who, lastly, does not know that women embraced the exhortation of Christ and the counsel of the Apostles with so great zeal of chastity that, to preserve the integrity of flesh and mind alike they offered themselves as a holocaust to God in martyrdom, and triumphant in the twofold crown, sought

<sup>10</sup> *De virginibus* 1.2 (PL 16:191B). See also the hymns by Pope Damasus to Agnes and Agatha, where Agatha wears a “diadema duplex” (ca. 380; PL 13:404A).

<sup>11</sup> *Peristephanon*, trans. H. J. Thomson, 2 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, 1979), 2:339, Hymn 14, lines 1–7. For the sources of the Agnes legend, see Anne-Marie Palmer, *Prudentius on the Martyrs* (Oxford, 1989), 240, 250–53, 261.

to follow the Lamb.”<sup>12</sup> Agatha and Agnes are mentioned in the same passage as martyrs who meet this standard.

The double crown appears again in the early thirteenth-century *Hali Meidhad* — “Holy Virginity” — the last of five works in the “Katherine group” of Middle English devotional prose:

Ant alle ha beoð icrunet þe blissid in heouene wið kempene crune; ah þe meidnes habbeð upo þeo þe is to alle iliche imeane a gerlondesche schenre þen þe sunne, *aureola* ihaten o Latines ledene. Ðe flurs þe beoð idrahe þron, ne þe zimmes þrin, te tellen of hare euene nis na monnes speche . . .<sup>13</sup>

[And all the saints who rejoice in heaven are crowned with the crown of champions, but the maidens have upon that [crown] which is common to all alike a garland brighter than the sun, called an *aureola* in the Latin language. It is in the power of no man’s speech to tell the quality of the flowers which are placed thereon, nor the gems therein.]

According to the Old French *Le Martyre de sainte Agnes* (early fourteenth century),

et se je le martire i avoie ajoste  
doble corone aroie el celestre regne.<sup>14</sup>

[And as I have here reported the martyrdom,  
The celestial queen shall have a double crown.]

This idea of a double crown, the second of which is called an “aureole,” is common in patristic literature. The *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* has an extended entry citing, among other verses, Exodus 25:25, where the Lord instructs Moses concerning the construction of the tabernacle: “And to the ledge itself a polished crown, four inches high: and over the same another little golden crown.” Bede, in his *De tabernaculo et vasis eius* (PL 91:409–10), and later Aquinas, discuss this double crown in terms of balancing the equality of the heavenly reward with measures to identify those who are more perfect — or at least specially distinguished — in heaven.<sup>15</sup> Virgin martyrs, of course, fit this category, and since everyone in heaven, or at

<sup>12</sup> *The Letters of Abelard and Eloise*, trans. C. K. Scott-Moncrieff (New York, 1926), 166–67.

<sup>13</sup> *Hali Meidhad*, ed. Bella Millett, EETS o. s. 284 (London, 1982), 11, lines 17–21. Translations are my own.

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Joseph Denomy, *The Old French Lives of St. Agnes and Other Vernacular Versions of the Middle Ages*, Harvard Studies in Romance Languages (Cambridge, MA, 1938), 199. These are lines 249–50 from version B of the Old French life. Neither version A nor the Latin *Gesta* (printed in parallel by Denomy) contains this reference. Version A does note how the crowning of Jerusalem in Ezek. 16:8–13 is like the preparation of Agnes for her espousal with Christ (lines 97–120).

<sup>15</sup> Th. Ortolan, “auréole” in DThC 1:2571–75.

# PLATES





Figure 1: Roman glass (ca. 400).  
Two doves bestow two crowns upon Saint Agnes. From P. Raffaele Garrucci,  
*Storia della Arte Cristiana*, 6 vols. (Prato, 1872-81), vol. 3, tav. 191.1.



Figure 2: Pope Honorius I, Saint Agnes, Pope Gregory I (or Symmachus).  
Apse mosaic, Sant'Agnese, Via Nomentana, Rome (seventh century).  
Photo by Arnaldo Vescovo. Used with permission.

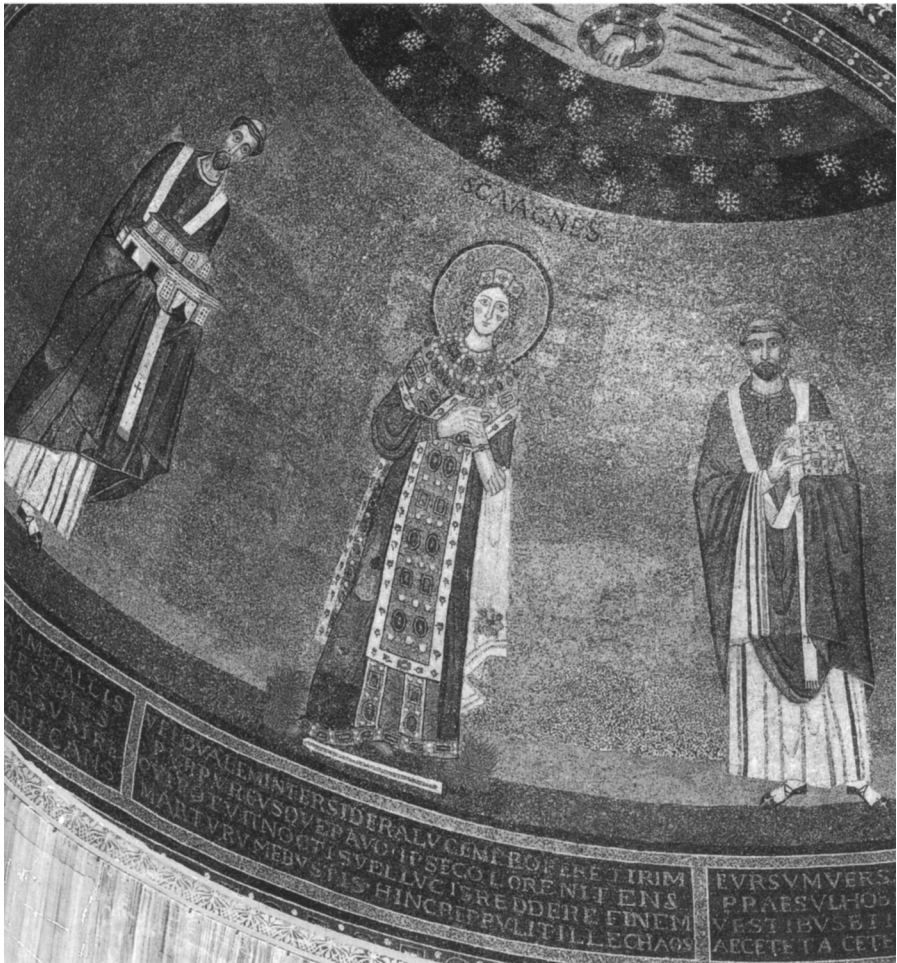


Figure 3: Saint Agnes surrounded by an aureole.  
 Bodleian Library, MS. Tanner 17, fol. 7r. (fifteenth century).  
 Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

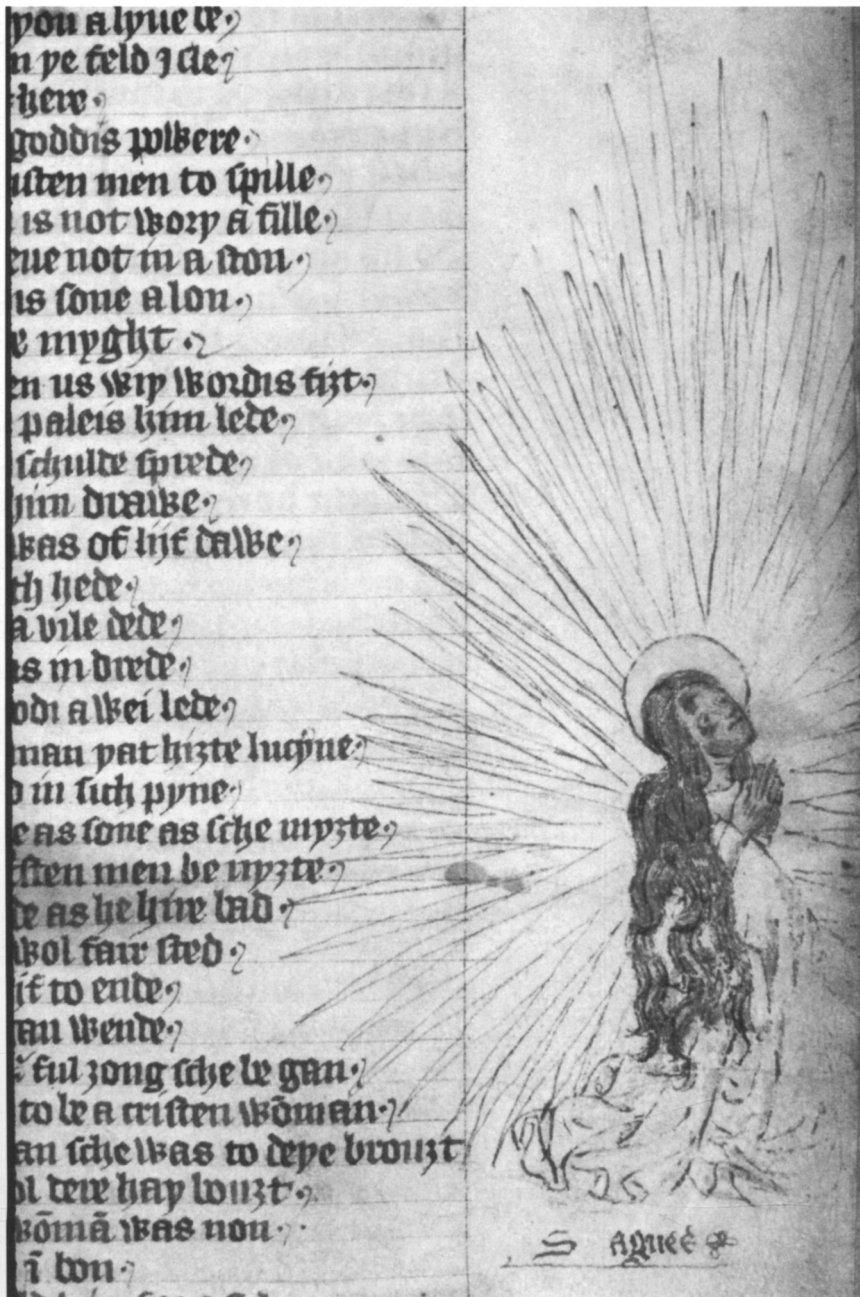


Figure 4: Saints Agnes, Bartholomew, and Cecilia (sixteenth-century).  
Courtesy of Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, Munich.



Figure 5: Cup of Saint Agnes (hanap of Jean, Duc de Berry, ca. 1370-80).  
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least every saint, wears a crown, only those with an extra crown would stand out.

Artwork establishes the double crown as one of Agnes’s proprietary marks. Roman glass found in the catacombs (ca. 400 and later), on which two doves each present Agnes with a crown, are the earliest representation of the association (figure 1).<sup>16</sup> In the apse of the gallery basilica of Sant’Agnese on the Via Nomentana in Rome, Agnes appears as the central figure in a seventh-century mosaic, flanked by two male figures, Popes Honorius and Gregory (or Symmachus; figure 2). Agnes is the only virgin martyr to have had two basilicas raised in her memory.<sup>17</sup> The hand of God descends from heaven, holding a crown. But Agnes is crowned already, and thus we see not a redundant crown, or a sequential before and after scene, but a double crown.

In fifteenth-century illustrations added to Bodleian Tanner 17 (figure 3; a manuscript of the *South English Legendary*), Saint Agnes does not appear with a double crown, but in addition to her halo she is encircled by a spectacular aureole, reminiscent of the “bright garland” that the author of *Hali Meidhad* describes.<sup>18</sup> In the Latin life by Saint Ambrose, and in many other retellings, the aureole surrounds Agnes and makes her invisible in the brothel. The luxurious hair, another common motif for Agnes, serves a similar purpose by spontaneously growing to shield her naked body from the lustful eyes of her rejected suitor.

Agnes is frequently represented, especially on altarpieces and in the genre of painting known as the *sacra conversazione* where various saints and

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<sup>16</sup> From P. Raffaele Garrucci, *Storia della Arte Cristiana*, 6 vols. (Prato, 1872–81), 3, tav. 191.1. This type of glass is quite common, though the two doves do not always hold crowns. See Giuseppe Bovini, *Monumenti Figurati Paleocristiani Conservati a Firenze*, series 2 (Rome, 1950), 6:33–35; and Charles Rufus Morey, *The Gold-Glass Collection of the Vatican Library*, ed. Guy Ferrari (Vatican City, 1959), references on p. 77.

<sup>17</sup> At the request of his daughter, the Emperor Constantine built the first, ambulatory basilica (fourth century; now in ruins) as Bede notes in the *Greater Chronicle*, part of his *De temporum ratione*. See the translation included in *The Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Judith McClure and Roger Collins (Oxford, 1994), 320. Margaret Visser provides a detailed examination of the later gallery basilica (seventh century) and of ceremonies involving the crowning of two lambs still performed today in *The Geometry of Love: Space, Time, Mystery, and Meaning in an Ordinary Church* (New York, 2000), 119–20. Excellent photographs of both structures can be found in Hugo Brandenburg, *Ancient Churches of Rome from the Fourth to the Seventh Century* (Turnhout, 2004), 69–73, 240–47, 320–22.

<sup>18</sup> Karen Winstead reproduces this drawing in her *Chaste Passions: Medieval English Virgin Martyr Legends* (Ithaca, 2000), 101, and she also includes Osbern Bokenham’s account of the “bright light” and “glorious brightness” surrounding Agnes (*ibid.*, 106). See also Winstead’s discussion of the drawings of Saints Agatha and Juliana from Tanner 17 in *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Medieval England* (Ithaca, 1997), 112–17. Neither is surrounded by any such aureole. I wish to thank Professor Winstead for her help with Agnes lore and legend.

patrons assemble around the Madonna and Child. In the altar of the Three Kings by Hans Baldung (d. 1545) Agnes appears with Saint Catherine, who is bareheaded. Agnes, however, wears a headpiece with a double fillet, true to the etymological sense of “diadem” as “a band or fillet of cloth, plain or adorned with jewels, worn round the head.”<sup>19</sup> In a painting of her martyrdom (Prado, Madrid, ca. 1540), Vicente Masip shows two angels descending from a cloud, each bearing a crown.

In the altarpiece (figure 4) by the Master of Saint Bartholomew (late fifteenth century) Agnes stands to Bartholomew’s right and her crown bears a curious double horn, which I surmise derives from a pun (or confusion) between *corona* and *cornu*. Cecilia, to Bartholomew’s left, is uncrowned. The evolution or evocation of the double crown can be seen in a painting by Paolo Veronese (d. 1588) now in the New Orleans Museum of Art. Agnes appears with Saint Lawrence and Saint Anthony the Abbot as she kneels before Mary and the Christ child. The lamb at her feet repeats the most common iconographic sign for Agnes (due to the pun on *agnus*), but her hair has been bound into a double braid circling her head. Though iconographic motifs evolve over time, little is left to chance in artwork of this type; every detail counts. An examination of the over 286 plates in Joachim Ott’s extensive treatment of crowns reveals that Agnes figures in two of them: the mosaic on the Via Nomentana and another apse mosaic from Saint Mark’s, also in Rome, where she wears more of a headdress than a crown (plate 57 in Ott).<sup>20</sup>

Several other figures appear to be presented with or to be wearing two crowns, though it is often difficult to differentiate among crowns, garlands, and hairpieces (see plates 31a, 35, 51, 141, 275). In a scene reminiscent of the crowning of Agnes in her basilica, Saint Cecilia wears a crown as an angel descends with two more, one for Valerian and a second one for Cecilia (plate 164, a bronze door from San Michele in Monte San Angelo, made in Constantinople in 1076). Whereas as a virgin martyr she qualifies for two, her martyred husband must be content with one. Similarly, in San Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna (late fifth century), the procession of twenty-two Virgin Martyrs (Agnes among them) on the north wall of the nave shows each woman both wearing and carrying a crown.<sup>21</sup> Each man in the corresponding procession of male martyrs on the south wall carries a single

<sup>19</sup> See OED “diadem,” 1.b. For the altar, see Gert von der Osten, *Hans Baldung Grein: Gemälde und Dokumente* (Berlin, 1983), plate 5.

<sup>20</sup> Joachim Ott, *Krone und Krönung: Die Verheissung und Verleihung von Kronen in der Kunst von der Spätantike bis um 1200 und die geistige Auslegung der Krone* (Mainz, 1998).

<sup>21</sup> Images of the martyrs in San Apollinare Nuovo can be found in Otto G. von Simson, *Sacred Fortress: Byzantine Art and Statecraft in Ravenna* (Chicago, 1948), plates 38, 39, 42, 43, and 44.



crown. In the *Second Nun's Tale* the angel gives one crown each to Valerian and Cecilia (lines 220–24), but because each crown is made of roses (martyrdom) and lilies (virginity) the traditions fuse.

It is impossible to tell where exactly Chaucer would have read of or perhaps seen the association between Agnes and her two crowns. Chaucer may have seen artwork featuring Agnes of the types already described on one of his trips to Italy. There is a more tangible connection, however, in the “Cup of Saint Agnes” (a hanap, now in the British Museum) that was produced in Paris circa 1370–80 (figure 5).<sup>22</sup> The earliest record of its existence dates from 1391, when Jean, Duc de Berry presented the cup to Charles VI of France. The quality of the cup is characteristic of other treasures that Jean collected or commissioned after his exile in England, the most famous being his *Très Riches Heures* (ca. 1411–16). In that work, the calendar illustration for January shows Jean himself sitting at a sumptuous feast as servants bear a crowned hanap.<sup>23</sup> Jean was in England from 1360 to 1367 to secure the ransom of his father John II of France according to the terms of the Peace of Bretigny. The departure of Jean for England prompted Machaut to write *Le Dit de la Fonteinne Amoreuse*, one of the models for *The Book of the Duchess*.<sup>24</sup> The cup is not recorded in England until 1449, however, when it was pawned by Henry VI for the defense of Normandy.

The cover and bowl of the hanap reproduce scenes from the life of Saint Agnes, and while she is not crowned in any of the scenes, the original cup bore two crowns set with pearls, one at the base, and one at the rim of the bowl. The record from 1391 reads in part:

Item, un hanap d'or a tout son couvescle esmaillé bien et richement par dehors de la vie madame sainte Agnes et est le souaige de la pate de des-soubz garny de xxvj perles de compte, et la couronne dessus le couvescle garnie de xxxvj perles.<sup>25</sup>

[Item, a hanap of gold well and richly enamelled everywhere on the outside of the cover with the life of madam Saint Agnes, and the molding of the

<sup>22</sup> See Jenny Stratford, *The Bedford Inventories: The Worldly Goods of John, Duke of Bedford, Regent of France (1389–1435)*. Report of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London No. 49 (London, 1993), 319–25, plates 6, 7, 30–35. Stratford prints all of the documentation relevant to the cup's known history.

<sup>23</sup> An image of the calendar illustration for January in the *Tres Riches Heures* can be found in Jean Longnon et al., *The Très Riches Heures of Jean, Duke of Berry* (New York, 1969), plate of folio 2 recto.

<sup>24</sup> See Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford, 1992), 67. “Jean, Duc de Berry, was at the English court for long spells between 1360 and 1367, and no doubt Chaucer got to know him too” (ibid., 70). Born in 1340, Jean was either the same age as Chaucer or two or three years older.

<sup>25</sup> Stratford, *Bedford Inventories*, 321. Translation is my own.

foot below is decorated with 26 pearls of price, and the crown on the cover is decorated with 36 pearls.]

The upper crown has since been lost, and individual pearls were lost and replaced over time. As late as 1521, however, “King Henry VIII’s Jewel Book” records both that each crown exists and that the total number of pearls was intact: “aboute the bordre of the cover and foote a crowne garnished with lxij garnisshing perlis.”<sup>26</sup> The history of the cup’s production, ownership, and alteration is complex and sometimes obscure, but in this treasure we have an example of the esteem in which Agnes was held in Chaucer’s lifetime, in the same kind of courtly context that Chaucer inhabited. We also have an item that Chaucer himself could have seen on one of his several visits to Paris on royal business between 1377 and 1381, some years before the time associated with the composition of *Troilus* in the later 1380s.<sup>27</sup> On one or more of these trips it is likely that he visited his old acquaintance, Jean, Duc de Berry, who may have been pleased to show his old friend his new cup.

Plausible arguments for the significances of the crowns — whether they represent modesty and religion, as in Ambrose, flesh and mind, as in Abelard, or virginity and martyrdom — can be made for the various pairs, and the significances obviously overlap. My main point is that the iconography of two crowns points overwhelmingly to virgin martyrs, and in particular to Agnes. The invocation by Pandarus of the “corones tweyne,” when the future lovers Troilus and Criseyde behold each other in person for the first time, makes the connection between that meeting and the Eve of Saint Agnes dramatically apt.

Establishing this date clarifies an otherwise obscure time sequence in the poem. Working backwards, in order to accommodate the three springs that pass from the beginning of the love affair at the Festival of the Palladium in April (book 1.155–56) to the departure of Criseyde for the Greek camp at the beginning of book 5 (see lines 8–14), it appears that each book covers roughly equal durations, although the passage of time becomes more vague in books 3, 4, and 5.<sup>28</sup>

book 1: April to 3 May of the next year (book 2.56; first spring).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 324.

<sup>27</sup> Pearsall, *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 105–6.

<sup>28</sup> See Barry Windeatt, *The Oxford Guides to Chaucer: Troilus and Criseyde* (Oxford, 1992), 198–204 for an analysis of the time-sequence of the poem. Windeatt presumes that the May referred to at the beginning of bk. 2 is the same May as in bk. 3 at lines 624–26, and that “Chaucer has not defined the duration of the unnarrated intervals in Books 2 and 3 so as to suggest a period of years before the lovers’ union” (ibid., 200). But if the dinner at the house of Deiphobus takes place on the Eve of Saint Agnes, Chaucer has in fact defined a time period in excess of one year.

book 2: 3 May to 20 January, the Eve of Saint Agnes, of the next year.

book 3: January to at least May or June of that year (see below, n. 29), and then to some unspecified time in the spring of the next year (see 3.1062, but the passage of time here is only implied; second spring).

books 4 and 5: From that time to the spring of the next year (book 5.8–14; third spring).

The action of book 2 — the “day to day” of 2.1343 — spans over eight months, beginning with Pandarus’s visits to Criseyde in her “paved parlour” (2.82), to Troilus in his palace (2.939), then back to Criseyde (2.1094) on May 3 and 4, and ending “on the morwe” (2.1488) — the Eve of Saint Agnes (20 January) — when Deiphebus hosts his party. When Pandarus refers to the “taried tyde” that Criseyde has taken to respond to Troilus (2.1739), he designates this eight-, almost nine-month period from May to January. The likely date of the consummation scene in the house of Pandarus in book 3 is either 13 May, 8 June, or 9 June, and thus it is important to note that this is the May or June of the *next* year.<sup>29</sup>

An exchange between Pandarus and Criseyde earlier in book 2 helps to establish this chronology.

“Wel,” quod Pandare, “as I have told yow thrie,  
 Lat be youre nyce shame and youre folie,  
 And spek with hym in esying of his herte;  
 Lat nycete nat do yow bothe smerte.”

But theron was to heven and to doone.  
 Considered al thing it may nat be;  
 And whi? For speche; and it were ek to soone  
 To graunten hym so gret a libertee.  
 For pleynly hire entente, as seyde she,  
 Was for to love hym unwist, if she myghte,  
 And guerdon hym with nothing but with sighte.

But Pandarus thought, “It shal nought be so,  
 Yif that I may; this nyce opynyoun  
 Shal nought be holden fully yeres two.”  
 (2.1285–98)

Pandarus has asked Criseyde three times to speak with Troilus (2.1285–87), but the narrator reports that Criseyde has maintained her intention to reward Troilus “with nothing but with sight” (2.1295). When Pandarus predicts that Criseyde’s “nyce opynyoun [only to be seen, and not to speak] / shal not be holden fully yeres two” (2.1297–98), he is right on target, with two months to spare. When they finally meet at the end of

<sup>29</sup> See the Riverside note to lines 624–26, where the reference to a planetary conjunction in Cancer has been used to date the composition of the poem to May or June of 1385.

book 2 Criseyde has indeed rewarded Troilus with her sight alone for twenty-two months, from April of year one until January of year three, on the Eve of Saint Agnes.

#### CRISEYDE THE WIDOW AND AGNES THE VIRGIN

*Troilus and Criseyde*, as a book of sight, is structured around a sequence of visions. The hero and heroine enjoy a mutual vision of their future beloved on the Eve of Saint Agnes, and if anything it is more the bed-ridden, fasting, presumably virginal Troilus who has the vision, while the more experienced and autonomous Criseyde assumes the role of supernatural visitor. The roles switch again in book 3 at Pandarus's house in the mystically charged "smoky reyn" (3.628) when Troilus materializes out of nowhere and Criseyde is the timorous female.

The chameleon-like character of Criseyde is a critical commonplace, and the difficulty of definition extends to her sexual status. Criseyde may not be a virgin, but she is the next best thing: a widow. Consider the passage from *Hali Meidhad* which immediately follows the one quoted above (p. 124):

Pus feole priuileges schawið ful sutelliche hwucche beoð þer meidnes, ant sundrið ham from þe oðre wið þus feole mensken world buten ende.

ʒef of þes þreo hat, meidhad ant widewehad ant wedlachad, wedlac is þe þridde, þu maht bi þe degrez of hare blisse icnawen hwuch ant bi hu muchel þe an passed þe oðre. (Lines 21–27.)

[Thus many privileges show full clearly who the maidens are there, and distinguish them from the others in this way with many honors, world without end.

Of these three states, maidenhood, and widowhood and marriage, marriage is the third, [and] you might by the degree of their bliss know who surpasses the others and by how much.]

Much patristic and later literature having to do with virginity and the status of women features these "three states." In life-course order they are virginity, marriage, and widowhood, but in degree of blessedness the sequence is virginity, widowhood, and marriage. That Criseyde is a widow is the first and last thing Chaucer chooses to tell us when she first appears in the temple:

Now hadde Calkas left in this meschaunce,  
 Al vnwist of this false and wikked dede,  
 His doughter, which that was in gret penaunce,  
 For of hire lif she was ful sore in drede,  
 As she that nyste what was best to rede;  
 For bothe a widewe was she and allone  
 Of any frend to whom she dorste hir mone.

Criseyde was this lady name al right.  
 As to my doom, in al Troies cite  
 Nas non so fair, forpassynge every wight,  
 So aungelik was hir natif beaute,  
 That lik a thing inmortal semed she,  
 As doth an hevenysssh perfit creature,  
 That down were sent in scornynge of nature.

This lady, which that alday herd at ere  
 Hire fadres shame, his falsnesse and tresoun,  
 Wel neigh out of hir wit for sorwe and fere  
 In widewes habit large of samyt broun,  
 On knees she fil biforn Ector adown  
 With pitous vois, and tendrely wepynge,  
 His mercy bad, hir selven excusynge.

(1.92–112)

These lines are so familiar, and our impressions of this complex character as a traitress are so fixed, that one should consider the impression they produce at the beginning of the poem. First, as we are twice reminded, she is a widow, a detail Chaucer has largely invented: the French translation of the *Filostrato*, the *Roman de Troilus* — but not Boccaccio in the *Filostrato* itself — also describes her clothing as “de veufvage” without actually calling her a widow. Benoit de Saint Maure, in his *Roman de Troie*, describes her as a “pucele,” a virgin. Just a few lines after the passage quoted, Chaucer, in his typically sly use of authorities, tells us “But wheither that she children hadde or noon, / I rede it naught, ther-fore I late it goon” (1.132–33). Boccaccio tells us outright that Criseyde was childless, and whenever Chaucer so ostentatiously cites a source which he has been reading we can be sure that he intends something by the ambiguity over her status as a widow and whether or not she had children. The existence of children would, of course, compromise any claim to virginity, and I can see little point in calling her a widow and then expressing doubt over her having children, if not to suggest that the marriage was not consummated and that she may indeed still be a virgin. In her extensive discussion of other examples of female saints who elide categories, Jocelyn Wogan-Browne speaks of an “honorary virgin.”<sup>30</sup> Crisedye’s husband and the history of their marriage remain a mystery; she inhabits an ambiguous space between widowhood and virginity such that,

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<sup>30</sup> Wogan-Browne, *Saints’ Lives and Women’s Literary Culture c. 1150–1300: Virginity and Its Authorizations* (Oxford, 2001). “The gradations between all the estates of the flesh, then, are more nuanced and more unstable than at first appears. . . . Virginity does indeed seem to have been too powerful and prestigious a cultural ideal to be ignored or discarded: rather, women negotiated with and redefined it so as to allow wives and mothers status as honorary virgins. But this is not of itself new: virginity is *always* recouped, *always* extended so as not to exclude wives and widows” (*ibid.*, 48, emphases in original).

just as one can speak of a married virgin (e.g. Cecilia), one can admit the category of virgin widow.

Another detail in the three stanzas is significant. Criseyde is a “hevenyssh, perfit creature” (line 104) and in line 102 she is described as “aungelik,” a word Chaucer uses only one other time in his works, when describing Cupid in the *Legend of Good Women*. These references to her spiritual, otherworldly status connect to another commonplace in patristic and medieval ascetic literature that virgins came closest to the ideal of the “vita angelica” since there is no marrying or giving of marriage in heaven: “And Jesus answering, said to them: You err, not knowing the Scriptures, nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they shall neither marry nor be married; but shall be as the angels of God in heaven” (Matthew 22:29–30). Ambrose in his *De virginibus* and Augustine in his *De sancta virginitate* both expatiate upon this idea, as do many others in both Latin and vernacular works.<sup>31</sup>

Criseyde’s character thus does more than simply assume a trajectory from innocent and true in books 1 and 2 to faithless and unstable in books 3, 4, and 5, the crucial turn coming in the consummation scene in book 3 in the house of Pandarus, a scene which resolves any doubt about her virginity. Criseyde begins at the exalted level of angel or demi-goddess and then becomes increasingly enfleshed as the story unfolds. Robert Henryson’s *Testament of Cresseid* takes the process to its carnal endpoint with a gross and leprous Criseyde. She is the woman in whom Chaucer invested most of his poetic energies (rivaled only by another famous widow, Alison of Bath), and her roles as angel, virgin widow, and lover make particular sense in the context of the literature of virginity and sainthood. In his depiction of these women, Chaucer gives special point to the tension between flesh and spirit that defines the female predicament.

In invoking the “corones tweyne,” Pandarus must be as oblivious to their significances as he is to his anachronistic adjuration by Christ that Criseyde have mercy. As Troilus endures the first of his double sorrows (“will I get Criseyde?”), we must read above the heads of the characters and apply the significances of the double crown: virginity and martyrdom. At the moment of her entry into the chamber at the end of book 2 Criseyde has the power of life or death over Troilus, but unluckily for the lovers their fates are crossed and incompatible. If she chooses to continue to live as a virgin, Troilus dies; if she yields to the flesh and grants Troilus’s wishes, she becomes a martyr. Criseyde’s life-course reverses from widowhood back to an ambiguous marriage and she becomes an ironic, secular martyr to the God of Love.

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<sup>31</sup> Ambrose of Milan, *Verginità e vendovanza*, ed. Franco Gori, 2 vols., Biblioteca Ambrosiana 14 (Rome, 1989), 100–240; and Augustine of Hippo, *De sancta uirginitate*, ed. J. Zycha, CSEL 41 (Vienna, 1900), 235–302.

The relationship between the sexes is obviously one of Chaucer's great themes, and readings of Chaucer's gendered poetics are necessarily complex. The veiled but deep knowledge of female saints influences his portrayal of women in his poetry, and may also connect to Chaucer's family history. We know that the name of Chaucer's mother was Agnes, and there is the possibility that one of the two daughters Chaucer may have had was also called Agnes.<sup>32</sup> Agnes de Copton, mother of Chaucer, was married at least twice, and there is evidence to suggest three times: first to a kinsman of William de Northwell, the Keeper of the King's Wardrobe, then to John Chaucer, and for the third time in 1366 in a speedy marriage to Bartholomew Chappel just weeks after the death of John.<sup>33</sup> She died in 1381, the year after Cecily Champain released Chaucer from the charge of *raptus* and shortly before the six-year period assigned to the composition of *Troilus and Criseyde*. Just as Agnes had three men in her life — Northwell, John Chaucer, and Bartholomew Chappel — so does Criseyde: husband number one, then Troilus, then Diomedes. In each case the first inhabits a distant past beyond personal contact or memory, the third is the wicked supplanter, and the central figure — John Chaucer and Troilus — is the sympathetic, rightful claimant upon the woman's affections. Chaucer as narrator is clearly conflicted over Criseyde's conduct, and we may be able to extend these mixed feelings to Chaucer the man. In refusing to blame Criseyde she becomes an Everywoman, a cipher upon which spiritual aspirations and secular exigencies can be coded.

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<sup>32</sup> See Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olson, *Chaucer Life-Records* (Oxford, 1966), 546 n. 4, citing Manly's suggestion that "the Agnes Chaucer who with Joan Swynford was one of the 'damsels' in waiting at the coronation of Henry IV" may have been a daughter of the poet. Pearsall, *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, doubts the claim, saying that the connection of Elizabeth and Agnes Chaucer to the poet "rests on no more than the coincidence of a common surname" (*ibid.*, n. on 204). Chaucer's great aunt on his father's side was another memorable Agnes, Agnes de Westhale, who abducted Chaucer's father John in 1324 to marry her daughter, Joan, to secure an inheritance. See Pearsall, *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 12–14, and Crow and Olson, *Life-Records*, 3. Fortunately for the unborn Chaucer, the scheme failed.

<sup>33</sup> See Pearsall, *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 11–14. "Agnes survived John, marrying Bartholomew Chappel within weeks of her husband's death in 1366" (*ibid.*, 14). The first marriage to Northwell can be inferred by a bequest made by William de Northwell to his mother and to "Johanni de Northwell filio Agnetis Chaucer de Londinia" (Crow and Olsen, *Life-Records*, 8 n. 4). If this is the same Agnes, presumably John is her son from a previous marriage. Chaucer's grandmother Mary Heyron was also married three times, her second marriage being to Robert Malyn, alias Robert le Chaucer, grandfather of the poet. See Lister Matheson, "Chaucer's Ancestry: Historical and Philological Reassessments," *Chaucer Review* 25 (1991): 171–89, at 175.