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ENRICO CASTRO

**SOURCES AND ANALOGUES: THE “INVOCATIO  
AD MARIAM” IN CHAUCER’S “THE SECOND  
NUN’S PROLOGUE”**

*The Second Nun’s Prologue* from Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* is an excellent example of sources and analogues: the story’s narrator – a nun – pronounces an *Invocatio ad Mariam* after four introductory stanzas, of which lines 36 to 74 are significantly allusive to other works.

1. “*The Second Nun’s Prologue*” and Dante’s “*Paradiso*”

The formal praise of the Virgin begins at the second stanza of the Invocation, at line 36. Critics have identified verses 36-56 as modelled on the prayer to the Virgin, which is at the very beginning of *Paradiso*, XXXIII. Lines 45-49, instead, are seen as a digression.<sup>1</sup> The praise, then,

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<sup>1</sup> See C. Brown, *The Prologue of Chaucer’s “Lyf of Seint Cecile”*, in “*Modern Philology*”, IX, 1911, p. 5.

starts with line 36 and shows a eulogistic pattern in the anaphoric form with *thou*, which had already been employed in the previous stanza. Here lies a stylistic difference between the two Invocations. The style of Chaucer's Invocation differs from Dante's as it employs an anaphorical *figura*, in which the same word or phrase is repeated at the beginning of consecutive tercets or clauses. It comes from early Christian hymns and from liturgical forms of prayer, which were influenced by classical and biblical patterns of style structured in an anaphorical form with *thou*.<sup>2</sup> But if on the one hand the style is different, on the other their meaning is similar and Chaucer's following line becomes remarkable in its rhetorical use of antithetic parallelism to set forth the basic paradox of the Virgin and the Passion of St. Cecile<sup>3</sup> ("Vergine madre, figlia del tuo figlio", "Thow Mayde and Mooder, doghter of thy Sone").<sup>4</sup>

The first main resemblance comes at line 36 of the *Prologue*, which is almost the same as the first line of St. Bernard's prayer (the one of Dante, attributed to the saint). It starts by aggregating two different nouns that are in both Chaucer and Dante: virgin and mother, daughter and mother of God. These words signal the Virgin's transcendence over human nature, while to the reader they seem contradictory. These dual attributes are antithetical and naturally opposite, but at the same time they remain supernaturally real and true. These antitheses would be used by Petrarch

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<sup>2</sup> See P. M. Clogon, *The Figural Style and Meaning of "The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale"*, in "Medievalia et Humanistica: an American Journal for the Middle Ages and Renaissance", III, 1972, p. 222.

<sup>3</sup> See *ibidem*, p. 224.

<sup>4</sup> *Paradiso*, XXXIII, 1 and G. Chaucer, *The Second Nun's Prologue*, in *Id.*, *The Canterbury Tales*, in *Id.*, *The Riverside Chaucer*, edited by L. D. Benson, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 262 (36).

too, as they already existed as a liturgical canon and module ("Dei genitrix Virgo, genuisti qui te fecit", "Del tuo parto gentil figliuola e madre").<sup>5</sup>

The verses collect centuries of theology and Marian devotion and tradition, together with some rhetorical and stylistic devices, such as alliterations of the consonants or the chiasmic sequence. These antitheses are a fact, as the actuality of Mary's mystery is within Christian faith: in both cases, this line shows the first three main features given theologically to Mary, defining an extraordinary factuality – Virgin, mother, daughter of her son (God). These prayers to the Virgin are intimately and profoundly felt by the tellers, the Nun and St. Bernard respectively, who try to juxtapose the finite to the infinite, knowing their personal worthlessness and Mary's depth and magnitude.<sup>6</sup> This antithetical theological meaning between human humbleness and Mary's magnificence becomes even clearer, as the comparison continues:

"Umile e alta più che creatura,  
termine fisso d'eterno consiglio,  
tu se' colei che l'umana natura  
nobilitasti sì, che'l suo fattore  
non disdegnò di farsi sua fattura."

"Thow welle of mercy, sinful soules cure,  
in whom that God for bountee chees to wone,  
thow humble, and heigh over every creature,  
thow nobledest so ferforth oure nature,  
that no desdeyn the Makere hadde of kynde  
his Sone in blood and flessch to clothe and wynde."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> R. A. Baltzer, *The Little Office of the Virgin and Mary's Role at Paris*, in *The Divine Office in the Latin Middle Ages*, edited by M. Fassler and R. Steiner, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 476 and *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta*, CCCLXVI, 28.

<sup>6</sup> See C. Pacelli, *Il canto XXXIII del Paradiso*, Torino, SEI, 1959, pp. 9-10.

<sup>7</sup> *Paradiso*, XXXIII, 2-6 and G. Chaucer, *The Second Nun's Prologue*, cit., p. 262 (37-42).

Both authors report the oxymoron *umile e alta* and *humble and high*, even if in two different places, echoing Mary's giving thanks to the Lord, as she does in the *Magnificat* canticle in the Gospel according to Luke.<sup>8</sup> This antithetical parallelism not only shows Mary's humbleness in her attitude – a very important feature in classical and Biblical eulogy – during the Annunciation, but also shows that Mary is high over every creature not only as being blessed – full of grace – among women, but also for her attitude. Mary's humility is the antithesis of Eve's pride, and as Mary is the prototype of all virgins and brides, humble and high over every creature will also be the attitude of St. Cecile later in the tale.<sup>9</sup> What is also clearly similar in these two passages, is the fact that both authors want to celebrate the concept of Mary as *theotokos* – in ancient Greek “God-bearer” – as they mention the choice of God to dwell in Mary.<sup>10</sup> Chaucer, in particular, affirms this concept twice, once more than Dante. He adds a couple of lines right before the oxymoron between the humbleness and height of Mary. This slight difference reflects a bigger difference: Chaucer allows himself to digress at will from Dante's tercets, creating longer verses, stating and restating the same idea and even adapting the words to the solemnity.<sup>11</sup> In these passages, the writers want to show that human nature reaches its height of nobility only in Mary, as its creator did not disdain to take human form into her and being then called “son of man”:

“Nel ventre tuo si raccese l'amore,

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<sup>8</sup> Luke 1, 46-49: “Magnificat anima mea dominum [...] quia respexit humilitatem ancillae suae ecce enim ex hoc beatam me dicent omnes generationes quia fecit mihi magna qui potens est”.

<sup>9</sup> See P. M. Clogan, *The Figural Style and Meaning of “The Second Nun’s Prologue and Tale”*, cit., p. 225.

<sup>10</sup> See G. Palmenta, *La Vergine Madre nella “Divina Commedia”*, Catania, Edizioni Paoline, 1971, p. 211.

<sup>11</sup> See C. Brown, *The Prologue of Chaucer’s “Lyf of Seint Cecile”*, cit., p. 12.



per lo cui caldo ne l'eterna pace  
così è germinato questo fiore.  
Qui se' a noi meridiana face  
di caritate, e giuso, intra' mortali,  
se' di speranza fontana vivace."

"Withinne the cloistre blissful of thy sydis  
took mannes shap the eterneel love and pees,  
that of the trine compass lord and gyde is,  
whom erthe and see an hevne out of relees  
ay heryen; and thou, Virgine wemmelees,  
baar of thy body – and dweltest mayden pure –  
the Creatour of every creature."<sup>12</sup>

The authors want to enlighten the audience as to the Incarnation of God, which could take place only due to the Immaculate Conception of Mary. They express differently the concept of the Incarnation as a product of God's love toward human kind. If Chaucer focuses on the carnal aspect of the Virgin, Dante goes beyond in order to add a theological notion: Mary's light shines above all the others.<sup>13</sup> In heaven, she enlivens the blessed people's charity and, on earth, she revives mortals' hope. In fact, Chaucer says that God, described as the eternal Love and Peace, whom all the creation praises without ceasing, became man-shaped within a spotless virgin's body, but preserving its virginity and leaving Mary a pure maiden. Dante, on the other hand, says that the flame of God's love, already switched off by sin and sinners, can now be reignited again in Mary only because, within her womb, the Love between God and man can be renewed and therein the celestial rose of the blessed people can flourish. If the meaning is similar, another stylistic difference can be seen in this comparison, which is how the writers refer to Mary's womb. Chaucer's way is the most interesting, since he uses a metaphoric periphrasis. Using a

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<sup>12</sup> *Paradiso*, XXXIII, 7-12 and G. Chaucer, *The Second Nun's Prologue*, cit., p. 262 (43-49).

<sup>13</sup> See G. Palmenta, *La Vergine Madre nella "Divina Commedia"*, cit., p. 211.

periphrasis, he makes the audience reflect a bit more on the miracle of the Incarnation. This metaphor actually was already present in the traditional Christian hymnology. This choice to use a metaphor instead of direct words is even more coherent if we think that the teller is a nun, a figure that must pay as much attention and reverence as possible while referring to Mary, to whom she mainly looks up.

This importance given to Mary becomes finally much stronger in the last comparison. Both poets use the following last passages in order to explain that Mary does not remain alone and inaccessible, but bends with love towards sorrowing humanity and from her merciful hands all blessings come down:

“Donna, se’ tanto grande e tanto vali,  
che qual vuol grazia e a te non ricorre,  
sua disianza vuol volar senz’ali.  
La tua benignità non pur soccorre  
a chi domanda, ma molte fiata  
liberamente al dimandar precorre.  
in te misericordia, in te pietate,  
in te magnificenza, in te s’aduna  
quantunque in creatura è di bontate.”

“Assembled is in thee magnificence  
with mercy, goodnesse, and with swich pitee  
that thou, that art the sonne of excellence  
nat oonly helpest hem that preyen thee,  
but often tyme of thy benygnytee,  
ful frely, er that men thyn help biseche,  
thou goost biforn and art hir lyves leche.”<sup>14</sup>

The Virgin’s heavenly attributes – as both poets say – are magnificence, mercy, goodness and pity. Above all Chaucer says that the Virgin is “the sonne of the excellence”, exactly as Dante says she is the force of a midday sun, an image inspired by St. Bernard’s commentary on

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<sup>14</sup> *Paradiso*, XXXIII, 13-21 and G. Chaucer, *The Second Nun’s Prologue*, cit., p. 262 (50-56).

the *Canticum Canticorum*.<sup>15</sup> The fourth stanza of the *Prologue* stresses the Virgin's heavenly function as mediator of all graces, emphasising Mary's benignity in not simply helping those who pray to her, but often interceding for the needy before they seek her aid. Both poets are providing the audience with a new image of Mary: according to Christian theology, in fact, they consider her as the heart of the triumphant, purgative and militant Church; there is no blessing, which does not pass through Mary and it would be folly to think to reach salvation without her help.<sup>16</sup> Both authors use a pressing excited rhythm of words and a mounting tone which direct the attention of the audience to the first prerogative of the powerful Queen, her benevolence in helping and relieving not only those who beg for it but also those who do not or cannot.<sup>17</sup> Just before the final imploration, like a resounding victory, the last verses seem to run toward the goal, which is the request for help.

The work done by Dante and Chaucer to write using theological allusions becomes very complicated in these final passages, as they try to concentrate in a few lines some very important themes, such as Mary's virtue, sum of all the virtues. If on the one hand they can create almost a majestic, triumphal ending which closes their laudatory part, on the other side the virtues – mercy, pity, magnificence and goodness – are borrowed by the poets from a wide theological and even lay tradition. Augustine, for instance, defines mercy as compassion created in our heart by someone else's misery,<sup>18</sup> and Dante says that mercy is the mother of benefit.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Bernard de Clairvaux, *Sermones super Cantica Canticorum*, edited by J. Leclercq, C. H. Talbot, H. M. Rochais, Romae, Editiones Cistercenses, 1957, vol. I, p. 238 (33, IV, 7): "Vultus tuus meridies est"; *Canticum Canticorum*, 1, 6: "Indica mihi quem diligit anima mea, ubi pascas, ubi cubes in meridie."

<sup>16</sup> See G. Palmenta, *La Vergine Madre nella "Divina Commedia"*, cit., p. 213.

<sup>17</sup> See B. Matteucci, *Mater Christi*, Roma, Edizioni Paoline, 1964, p. 718.

<sup>18</sup> Aurelius Augustinus, *De Civitate Dei. Libri I – X*, edited by B. Dombart and A. Kalb, Turnhout, Brepols, 1955, p. 254 (IX, 5): "Quid est autem misericordia nisi

According to the Italian poet, pity is a noble disposition of the soul ready to receive love, mercy and other charitable passions and it makes other gifts shine.<sup>20</sup> About magnificence, Thomas Aquinas notes that it is the wide and beautiful intention to do great and lofty things.<sup>21</sup> Finally, goodness embraces and includes all the virtues, reaching the summit of human dignity and, according to Dante, is the mother of all the other virtues.<sup>22</sup>

Not only are lines 36-56 of *The Second Nun's Prologue* a free translation of a passage in *Paradiso*, but also the meaning and aim of these parts are almost the same in Dante and Chaucer. This part is indeed a remarkable synthesis of the lauds of Mary and a universal praise, which will be followed by a special praise: it will be different between Dante and Chaucer, according to their context and goal. Some critics<sup>23</sup> are persuaded that Chaucer added those lines at a later period: being taken from Dante, they could hardly have been written when he was young, whereas the life of St. Cecile seems to have been quite a juvenile work.

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alienae miseriae quaedam in nostro corde compassio, qua utique si possumus subvenire compellimur?”

<sup>19</sup> D. Alighieri, *Convivio*, a cura di G. Garfagnini, Roma, Salerno, 1997, p. 5 (I, 1): “Misericordia è madre di beneficio”.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p. 105 (II, 11): “Una nobile disposizione d’animo, apparecchiata di ricevere amore, misericordia e altre caritative passioni [...] fa risplendere ogni altra bontade col lume suo”.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, vol. 42, edited by A. Ross & T. Gilby, London, Blackfriars, 1966, p. 174 (II, 134): “Magnificentia est rerum magnarum et excelsarum, cum animi quadam ampla et splendida propositione”.

<sup>22</sup> D. Alighieri, *Convivio*, cit., p. 41 (I, 10): “la grandezza de la bontà, la quale è madre conservatrice de l’altre grandezze”.

<sup>23</sup> See G. Chaucer, *The Complete Works*, edited by W. W. Skeat, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1926, vol. 5, p. 403.

## 2. *Marian Theology as a source*

The first main matter of Marian theology is the Immaculate Conception. Chaucer, in fact, refers to Mary as a spotless virgin ("Virgine wemmelees") and Dante as the lady who ennobled humanity ("l'umana natura nobilitasti"), being born without original sin. To become the mother of the Saviour, Mary was enriched by God with gifts appropriate to such a role: Dante probably was thinking of the angel Gabriel at the moment of the Annunciation, saluting her as full of grace.<sup>24</sup> This epithet given her by the angel can be read in two different, complementary ways. The first as Mary's capability to give the free assent of her faith to the announcement of her vocation, because it was necessary that she be wholly borne of God's grace. The second, adopted by Chaucer and Dante, that Mary, full of grace through God, was redeemed from the moment of her conception.

It is very interesting that two medieval authors were so convinced of the Immaculate Conception, since it is a recent theological dogma: the issue of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary was frequently debated and attracted much theological interest in the fourteenth century. Aquinas rejected the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, formulating, instead, a theory of sanctification which was bestowed either at birth in her mother's womb or occurred only at the moment of the Incarnation of Christ. The Dominicans Robert Holcot, Gregory of Rimini and Nicholas Triver defended Aquinas and became known as the Maculists. In the camp of the Franciscans, Scotus carried out an attack on Aquinas' theory of sanctification and argued that God actually preserved the Virgin Mary from original sin since the beginning of creation and that her preordained

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<sup>24</sup> *Luke*, 1, 28: "et ingressus angelus ad eam dixit ave gratia plena Dominus tecum".

Immaculate Conception exempted her at all time from the stain of original sin. Scotus' influence spread quickly in Oxford and Paris through the help of the Franciscans, who became known as the Immaculists, and in the second half of the fourteenth century they won many theologians over to their ranks. The doctrine was finally defined at the Counsel of Basel in 1439, but the battle continued until 1854, when Pope Pius IX proclaimed it a dogma, almost five centuries after Chaucer.

The other doctrine of Marian theology is the Incarnation of God, which is advocated four times by Chaucer and three times by Dante. Chaucer, indeed, refers to Mary as the lady in whom God chose to dwell ("in whom that God for bountee chees to wone"), as the lady thanks to whom God had no disdain to clothe and wrap His Son in flesh and blood ("that no desdeyn the Makere hadde of kynde his Sone in blood and flesh to clothe and wynde"), as the lady of which the blessed cloister of her body God took man's shape within ("withinne the cloistre blisful of thy sydis / took mannes shap the eterneel love and pees") and finally as the lady who bore from her body the Creator of every creature ("thou [...] / baar of thy body [...] / the Creator of every creature"). Dante, on the other hand, refers to Mary as a mother ("Vergine madre"), as the lady thanks to whom God decided to become flesh ("che'l suo fattore non disdegnò di farsi sua fattura") and he also says that it was in her womb that Love revived ("Nel ventre tuo si raccese l'amore"). Chaucer's Mariology, revealed mainly here in the Invocation, shows the influence of the Immaculists, though not as strong as in Dante's defence. In fact, Chaucer changes the meaning of Dante, which sets forth the idea that the Maker did not disdain to become his own creature, following the traditional theme of *factor factus creatura*. Perhaps, Chaucer's intention was to focus less on the Immaculist view, and

more on the nobility of Mary and on the very human act of nativity.<sup>25</sup> Referring to Mary in this way, the authors want to enlighten their audience about the basic Christian theological idea, which is that the Word became flesh, so that humanity might know God’s love. Dante and Chaucer must have known very well the Holy Scriptures, as the Incarnation is there affirmed (“et Verbum caro factum est et habitavit in nobis et vidimus gloriam eius gloriam quasi unigeniti a Patre plenum gratiae et veritatis”).<sup>26</sup> What the poets are doing here is just perpetuating what the Church has affirmed for centuries, namely, not only the true Incarnation of God’s Son come into flesh, but also (since the first Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325) that the Son of God is begotten, not made, of the same substance – in Greek *homousios* – as the Father. It is also clear that Chaucer and Dante embraced the doctrine of Mary’s predestination, since God wanted the free cooperation of a creature to prepare a body for his son. For this – they agree – since eternity God chose as the mother of his Son a daughter of Israel, Mary from Nazareth.

Finally, the third important theological doctrine present in the comparisons above is the doctrine of Mary’s Perpetual Virginity. Her everlasting virginal condition is due to her divine motherhood, as both poets underline, while referring to her as a maiden, a mother and a daughter of her son. Probably, both authors have in mind when Elizabeth salutes Mary at the prompting of the Spirit before the birth of her son, as *Mater Domini*.<sup>27</sup> However, this maternity has something spectacular, as the poets note. If on one hand Jesus was conceived only by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, on the other they also underline the corporeal aspect of this event. From the couples of adjectives used, it is

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<sup>25</sup> See *ibidem*, p. 226.

<sup>26</sup> *John*, 1, 14.

<sup>27</sup> *Luke*, 1, 43.

clear that the writers think of the virginal conception of Jesus as a divine work that surpasses all human understanding and possibility, exactly as Mary answers the angel.<sup>28</sup> The poets show Mary as an ever-virgin lady – *aeiparthenos* in Greek. In fact, the faith in the virginal motherhood led the Church to proclaim, during the second ecumenical council of Constantinople in 553, Mary’s real and perpetual virginity, even in the act of giving birth to the Son of God made man.

### 3. “*The Second Nun’s Prologue*” and medieval hymns

Though Chaucer appears to be imitating Dante’s prayer to the Virgin, a re-examination shows the existence of some resemblances with other medieval works.<sup>29</sup> As a matter of fact, the Invocation itself consists of an enumeration of Mary’s accomplishments and virtues and Chaucer – probably Dante too – was very likely following the popular hymns to the Virgin: the expression “Thow welle of mercy, sinful soules cure”, not found in Dante’s Invocation, describes the Virgin’s role as mediator and this is one of her principal virtues mentioned in medieval Latin hymn sequences to Mary. This kind of enumeration – called in Greek tradition aretology or eulogy, and in Christian usage doxology – was very popular during the Middle Ages and the consistent use of typological or figurative interpretation gave the hymn eulogies a very specific aspect. The history of salvation through Christ’s Incarnation in Mary’s womb became a *leitmotif* of the providential harmony of world history. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries – the flowering period of mediaeval Latin hymnology –

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<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, 1, 34: “Dixit autem Maria ad angelum quomodo fiet istud quoniam virum non cognosco”.

<sup>29</sup> See G. H. Gerould, “*The Second Nun’s Prologue and Tale*”, in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales*, edited by W. F. Bryan and G. Dempster, Atlantic Highlands, Humanities Press, 1958, pp. 664-684.



metaphors, such as the idea of a womb as a cloister, were associated with another kind of figures: plays on rhymes and sounds which also had a symbolic meaning.<sup>30</sup> We may think that some images and phrases in the Invocation might have simply been drawn from the common currency of medieval hymns to the Virgin and that Chaucer was drawing on a long tradition, rather than imitating any particular source, while writing *The Second Nun's Prologue*.<sup>31</sup>

On the other hand, it is possible to link lines 43-49 and lines 57-68 of *The Second Nun's Prologue* to two precise examples of this medieval tradition, that are the opening of Venantius Fortunatus' hymn *Quem Terra*<sup>32</sup> and the Marian antiphon *Salve Regina*. Chaucer could have found both texts, already translated into English, in the *Little Office of the Hours of the Virgin Mary*, a liturgical office that was made widely accessible to the members of the laity through its inclusion both in the Latin version of the Book of Hours and in the Middle English *Prymer, or Lay Folks' Prayer book*.<sup>33</sup> The third stanza of the Invocation re-uses the verses by Venantius Fortunatus:

“Withinne the cloistre blissful of thy sydis  
took mannes shap the eterneel love and pees,  
that of the trine compass lord and gyde is,  
whom erthe and see an hevne out of relees  
ay heryen; and thou, Virgine wemmelees,  
baar of thy body – and dweltest mayden pure –  
the Creatour of every creature.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See E. Auerbach, *Dante's Prayer to the Virgin and Earlier Eulogies*, in “Romance Philology”, III, 1949, pp. 10-11.

<sup>31</sup> See S. Reames, “*The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale*”, in *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, edited by R. M. Correale and M. Hamel, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2002, p. 492.

<sup>32</sup> See J. W. George, *Venantius Fortunatus, a Poet in Merovingian Gaul*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992, *passim*.

<sup>33</sup> See S. Reames, “*The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale*”, *cit.*, p. 492.

<sup>34</sup> G. Chaucer, *The Second Nun's Prologue*, *cit.*, p. 262 (43-49).

“The cloister of Marie berip̄ him whom þe erþe, watriſ and hevenes worschipeſ, louten, and prechen, þe which governeþ þe þre maner ſchap of þe world.”<sup>35</sup>

Continuing with the account of human salvation, this stanza interweaves dogmatic and historical details in a symbolic rhetoric. The opening figure of the “cloister blissful of thy sydis” is a symbolic expression of the union of history and dogma: the event of the Incarnation of a God-man who represents eternal love and peace and the dogma of human salvation through redemption are put forth here in a concrete and realistic way. There is a sort of spontaneous joy at both the natural and supernatural event of the Incarnation within Mary’s cloister, which is her womb: all nature (earth, sea and heavens) reacts in giving praise, echoing the incipit of *Psalms 96*.<sup>36</sup> These lines conceal this joyful activity as the reaction of the earth to its creator becoming flesh: the earth comes to life as Christ is born and will be resurrected. With this expression, the poets want to include humbly also themselves among those praising beings, as they are addressing their hymn of thanksgiving not only to Mary but also, through her, to Christ as Creator and Redeemer of the world. A fundamental idea in the passages is that the nature reacts to the divine act of Incarnation

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<sup>35</sup> *Impnus: Quem Terra*, in *Hours of the Blessed Virgin – I. Matins*, in *The Prymer, or Lay Folks’ Prayer book*, with several facsimiles, edited by H. Littlehales from the Ms. Dd. 11, 82 ab 1420-30 a. d., in the library of the University of Cambridge, London, Early English Text Society – Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1895, p. I, p. 2. The Latin version attributed to Venantius Fortunatus can be read in R. M. Moorsom, *A Historical Companion to Hymns Ancient and Modern*, London, Parker and Co., 1889, p. 65: “Quem terra, pontus, aethera / colunt, adorant, praedicant, / trinam regentem machinam / claustrum Mariae bajulat”.

<sup>36</sup> Nicholas of Hereford, J. Purvey, J. Forshall and F. Madden, *The Books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon according to the Wycliffite Version*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1881, p. 152. “Singe ye a newe song to the Lord; / all erthe, syngye ye to the Lord” Convergent adoration was a characteristic feature of both classical and biblical eulogies as found in Horace’s ode to Augustus and in the medieval hymn *Te Deum Laudamus*, both invocations. See P. M. Clogan, *The Figural Style and Meaning of “The Second Nun’s Prologue and Tale”*, cit., p. 227.

positively and autonomously, because man and nature are created in a parallel and complementary existence, both centred on God. But Chaucer adds something more to that, as he adds the image of Mary as immaculate and ever-virgin. This image is used not only to unify the thought of the poem but also to keep its direction as a hymn firstly to Mary: the passage, with its New Testament and theological overtones, appropriately summons up the idea of God's choice for the cloister of the woman to whom the Invocation is addressed. The final lines of the stanza refer again to the mystery of the "virgine wemmeles", and the expression "the creatour of every nature" repeats and comments upon the central paradox of the Incarnation. Though only a human creature, the Virgin possessed all the goodness that could be contained in a creature. This is not only a theological statement, but also an authorial statement, and it is on it that also the final supplication is based.

Another important source for the Invocation present in *The Second Nun's Prologue* is the celebrated Marian antiphon, *Salve Regina*.<sup>37</sup> In this case, we find a list of five borrowings from the antiphon, which probably circulated both in Latin and in Middle English:

"Now help, thow meeke and blissful faire mayde,  
me, flemed wrecche, in this desert of galle;  
think on the womman Cananee, that sayde  
that whelpes eten somme of the crommes alle  
that from hir lordes table been yfalle;  
and though that I, unworthy sone of Eve,  
be sinful, yet accepte my bileve.

And, for that feith is deed withouten werkis,  
so for to werken yif me wit and space,  
that I be quit fro thennes that most derk is!  
O thou, that art so fair and ful of grace,  
be myn advocate in that heighe place".<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> See C. Brown, *The Prologue of Chaucer's "Lyf of Seint Cecile"*, cit., p. 7.

<sup>38</sup> G. Chaucer, *The Second Nun's Prologue*, cit., p. 263 (57-68).

“Hail, queene, modir of merci, oure liyf, oure swetnesse & oure hope, hail! to þee we crien, exiles sones of eve; to þee we siȝen, gronyng in þis valey of teeris; þerfor turne tu usward þi merciful iȝen, & shewe to us ihesu, þe blessid fruyt of þi wombe, aftir þat we ben passid hennes. O þou deboner, O þou meke, O þou swete maide Marie, hail!”<sup>39</sup>

In the third line of the antiphon the expression “outlawid sones of Eve” refers to all humankind (sinful because of the original sin) and humankind’s destiny in this world as a pilgrimage towards the glorious afterlife. In Chaucer the phrase becomes “flemed wrecche [...] sone of Eve”,<sup>40</sup> referring to the author-teller himself as a banished exile (from the Saxon *wræcca*).<sup>41</sup> Likewise, the vocative expression “oure advocat”, in the fifth line of the antiphon, is changed by Chaucer into “be myn advocate”: again, what in the antiphon was of many, now is just of one, the teller himself. Another borrowing is taken from the fourth line of the antiphon, “in þis valey of teeris”, turned by Chaucer into “in this desert of galle”: the term means bitterness and indicates a sad place – the world – where humankind is forced to live, but it might also be an allusion to the name Mary, which has the same root as the Hebrew *mar*, bitter.<sup>42</sup> Finally, Mary’s invocative epithets are present in both texts: what on the one hand closes the antiphon (“O þou deboner, o þou meke, o þou swete maide”), on the

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<sup>39</sup> [*Antem*]: *Salve Regina!*, in *Hours of the Blessed Virgin – Concluding Devotions*, in *The Prymer, or Lay Folks’ Prayer book*, cit., p. 34.

<sup>40</sup> The phrase occurs also in G. Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, edited by S. A. Barney, London, Norton Critical Edition, 2006, p. 181 (III, 933): “Dulcarnoun called is ‘flemyng of wrecches’”. Thomas Raynesford Lounsbury has suggested as the source of Chaucer’s, a sentence in St. Bernard’s *Tractatus ad Laudem gloriosae Virginis Mariae*, (“Respice ergo, beatissima Virgo, ad nos proscriptos in exsilio filios Evae”). See T. R., Lounsbury, *The Learning of Chaucer*, in Id., *Studies in Chaucer*, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1892, vol. 2, p. 389.

<sup>41</sup> Walter William Skeat claimed that this expression is unsuitable for the supposed narrator, the Second Nun: she would have said “daughter”, just because she is a woman (see G. Chaucer, *The Complete Works*, cit., p. 404). In my opinion, Skeat here does not take into consideration the existence of the Biblical masculine-generic gender.

<sup>42</sup> See *ibidem*.

other opens the real appeal for help in Chaucer's Invocation ("thow meeke and blissful faire mayde").

#### 4. *Chaucer, Matthew and Dante*

In the fifth stanza, Chaucer digresses once more from Dante's eulogistic prayer in order to introduce the biblical figure of the Canaanite, a non-Jewish woman who worshipped Jesus in the pagan district of Tyre and Sidon where Jesus had retired to devote himself to the instruction of the apostles.<sup>43</sup> The term Canaanite underlines the importance of the miracle performed for a woman who belonged to the traditional enemies of Israel:

"And she came, and worshipped him, and said, Lord, help me. Which answered, and said, It is not good to take the bread of children, and cast to hounds. And she said, Yes, Lord; for whelps eat of the crumbs, that fall down from the board of their lords'. Then Jesus answered, and said to her, A! woman, thy faith is great; be it done to thee, as thou wilt. And her daughter was healed from that hour."<sup>44</sup>

In the Gospel account of the event, Jesus enlightens the apostles as to a new idea that would ultimately free the new Christians from the Jewish traditions regarding clean and unclean food ("Not that thing that entereth into the mouth, defouleth not a man; but that thing that cometh out of the mouth, defouleth a man").<sup>45</sup> Within this teachings, the Canaanite woman asking Jesus to drive the devil out of her daughter may highlight this principle. In fact, when Jesus answers her that her faith is great, he is restating the concept of ignoring the previous Mosaic Law, in order to embrace a genuine faith. This passage not only removes the absolute idea

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<sup>43</sup> See *Matthew*, 15, 1-30.

<sup>44</sup> Nicholas of Hereford, J. Purvey, J. Forshall and F. Madden, *The Books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon according to the Wycliffite Version*, cit., p. 33.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 32.

of contempt for the unclean and uncircumcised, but also adds some new meanings.

The idea of a sincere and pure faith is taken by the Second Nun, as she asks Mary not to look at her external appearance but at her heart:

“Now help, thow meeke and blisful faire mayde,  
me, flemed wrecche, in this desert of galle;  
think on the woman Cananee, that sayde  
that whelpes eten somme of the crommes alle  
that from hir lordes table been yfalle;  
and though that I, unworthy sone of Eve,  
be sinful, yet accepte my bileve.”<sup>46</sup>

If on the one hand, then, Chaucer totally embraces the doctrine inspired by this passage of the Gospel, on the other he also uses the exact literal translation. The term “whelpes” means puppies or pet-dogs, translating what in the Vulgate, in the same passage, is rendered with “catelli”.<sup>47</sup> Chaucer’s “whelpes”, indeed, is used correctly because in the early Christian era, until the time of Constantine, the Jews often referred to Christians as puppies or pet-dogs.<sup>48</sup> The touching and realistic figure of the Canaanite woman underlines, within the Invocation, the narrator’s unworthiness. Moreover, this mention not only anticipates for but also explains the phrase “unworthy sone of Eve”: only in the light of the biblical allusion may it become a meaningful compliment, as the Canaanite’s pure faith, together with her witty reply, brings about the miracle she is looking for. But this pure faith is tempered and made even practical in Chaucer’s sixth stanza by good deeds. The contrast of faith and deed extends and

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<sup>46</sup> G. Chaucer, *The Second Nun’s Prologue*, cit., p. 263 (57-63).

<sup>47</sup> *Matthaeus*, 15, 27.

<sup>48</sup> See P. M. Clogan, *The Figural Style and Meaning of “The Second Nun’s Prologue and Tale”*, cit., p. 229.

makes the antithesis of “ydelnesse” and “faithful bisynesse”<sup>49</sup> quite strong, echoing the difference between *passio* and *actio*, in order to signify, later in the Tale, the relation between Cecile’s chaste marriage and her triumphant martyrdom.

Moreover, some critics,<sup>50</sup> including additional texts to the list of actual sources for the whole *Second Nun’s Prologue*, claim that a more tenuous parallel may be discovered between Chaucer’s lines:

“Be myn advocat in that heghe place  
theras withouten ende is songe “Osanne”,  
thow Cristes mooder, doghter deere of Anne!”;<sup>51</sup>

and another passage (the description of the highest ranks of blessed people) from Dante’s *Paradiso* (XXXII, 133-135):

“Di contro a Pietro vedi sedere Anna,  
tanto contenta di mirar sua figlia,  
che non muove occhi per cantare Osanna.”

What both poets argue here is that Anne is the mother of Mary. The tradition of Anne as a happy mother proud of her daughter is originally apocryphal, based especially on James’ gospel, which had also been an important text for the early Christian Gnosticism. According to this tradition, Anne represents all biblical women, who after being barren, eventually become God-blessed mothers. Just as in the Old Testament Sarah became mother of Isaac in her old age and rejoiced for that, Anne first wept over her sterility and later rejoiced over her pregnancy. This theme of Anne’s happiness is a familiar feature in medieval Latin hymns,

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<sup>49</sup> G. Chaucer, *The Second Nun’s Prologue*, cit., p. 262 (22 and 24).

<sup>50</sup> See S. Reames, *The Second Nun’s Prologue and Tale*, cit., pp. 491-492.

<sup>51</sup> G. Chaucer, *The Second Nun’s Prologue*, cit., p. 262 (68-70).

as Anna is often presented as laughing. Although it is possible and even very probable that Dante's passage had functioned as a conscious source, we may also take into consideration that other things stored in Chaucer's memory might have affected what he wrote. This might be something like an often-read passage of the Gospel or, again, some medieval hymns.<sup>52</sup>

### 5. Conclusion

Skeat found, in fact, some difficulties in believing that Chaucer was familiar with Dante at the time of the composition of *The Second Nun's Tale*, as he considered this a work composed very early.<sup>53</sup> Actually, the influence of the prayer contained in the *Paradiso* may be extended over almost the whole Invocation and Dante provides Chaucer with the initial suggestion for its composition.<sup>54</sup> But, on the other hand, the date ordinarily assigned by Chaucer's chronologists to *The Second Nun's Tale* is 1373-1374. Then, the question which we are faced with is whether it is possible that Chaucer, within twelve months following his return from his first visit to Italy, had read Dante. There are two possible answers which show two different ways of escaping this chronological difficulty: *The Second Nun's Tale* must be dated to a later time, as the date usually adopted may be a little bit too early; or the *Invocacio ad Mariam* was composed at a later

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<sup>52</sup> See G. H. Gerould, "*The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale*", cit., p. 665.

<sup>53</sup> See G. Chaucer, *The Complete Works*, cit., p. 403.

<sup>54</sup> See C. Brown, *The Prologue of Chaucer's "Lyf of Seint Cecile"*, cit., p. 12. Skeat does not take into consideration the reference to St. Bernard, which implies that Chaucer already had the *Paradiso* in his mind (G. Chaucer, *The Second Nun's Prologue*, cit., p. 262, 30: "Of whom that Bernard list so wel to write"). If in fact *Paradiso*, XXXIII represents the Invocation as pronounced by Bernard, this occurrence of his name in both poems cannot be fortuitous. Chaucer's line may be explained supposing that this reference is actually a hidden delicate acknowledgment to Dante himself.



date and inserted in its present position.<sup>55</sup> There is nothing which prevents us from postponing the date of the *Prologue* and the *Tale*. Nothing except the literary workmanship of the poem itself: all critics agree that it is written in Chaucer's earlier manner.<sup>56</sup> The very fact, then, that the Invocation in comparison with the rest of the poem stands out for its originality suggests that it may be a new piece inserted in an old context, leading us to consider the suggestion that it may have been added some years afterwards.

It is also true that to give Dante the whole credit for the improvement of the style of the Invocation is not completely reasonable and fair towards Chaucer: his lines, as we have seen, are something more than a mere imitation and the Invocation is written weaving together materials from scattered sources. We have encountered not only Dante's *Paradiso* but also the medieval hymnology, which combines the dogma with the history of Christ or Mary and develops more and more a kind of symbolic rhetoric, based on both traditional and figurative interpretation. It may be considered obvious that both Dante's and Chaucer's Invocations present something entirely new and different from traditional hymns. They both use all the material of historical, dogmatic and figurative tradition, condensing and reorganising it. The result of their work is a conscious and rigorous lucidity, which can lie not only in an accurate planning but also in a very strong poetic effect. From that, we see that all the elements of the earlier Christian forms of eulogies and invocations are joined together by Dante and then by Chaucer, trying to preserve the original and, at the same time, trying to add a new significance. For instance, if in Dante's and in Chaucer's prayers there is the lack of an emotional element, it does not

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<sup>55</sup> See See C. Brown, *The Prologue of Chaucer's "Lyf of Seint Cecile"*, cit., p. 13.

<sup>56</sup> See *ibidem*, p.14.

mean that emotion itself is lacking too: it is rendered by the order of words and sounds, together with specific themes. Moreover, the leading motifs are clearly theological but they deserve to be emphasised. This accentuating is actually very possible, even though some theories still affirm that didactic subjects are incompatible with true poetry and so these texts are, in their basic structure, nothing more than a rigid composition of dogmatic statements.<sup>57</sup>

If we state that Dante's prayer to the Virgin actually differs from the austerity of earlier medieval eulogies, we have to do the same for Chaucer, saying that his *Invocacio ad Mariam* remains his own and personal hymn to the Virgin: Chaucer is sincere in his devotion and elevates his lyrical and poetic form therein. This Invocation is then very interesting, because it remains Chaucer's own hymn despite the sure, huge debt to Dante and his unique ability to play in a poem with human imagination. The highest example of Dante's capability to provide the tradition with new images is the one of Christ as the love enflamed in the body of the Virgin for the salvation of mankind, which is a symbol of a historical event. On the other hand, the parallel with *Paradiso*, XXXIII covers only 16 of the 49 lines in the Invocation: Chaucer might have borrowed also from the liturgy of the Church, which abounded in invocative hymns to the Virgin, very familiar to any learned person of the fourteenth century. The extent of Latin hymns' influence upon the text must be appreciated, though the parallel with Dante may put it in the shade. At the same time, it is also wrong to think that Chaucer made use of a hymnbook in order to assemble his hymnological material. The source from which he took the phrases may have become so familiar to him through the liturgy and manuals of devotion that, when he

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<sup>57</sup> See E. Auerbach, *Dante's Prayer to the Virgin and Earlier Eulogies*, cit., pp. 23-25.

started to write this prayer and Invocation to the Virgin, they came unconsciously into his mind.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> See C. Brown, *The Prologue of Chaucer's "Lyf of Seint Cecile"*, cit., p. 12.



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