Policing the Queer: Narratives of Dissent and Containment in Chaucer’s *The Knight’s Tale*

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In her extensive study of the representation and significance of gardens in Geoffrey Chaucer’s works, Laura Howes provides a succinct summary of her overarching argument:

In *The Canterbury Tales* . . . gardens function mainly as mechanisms of control, primarily by men over women. In *The Knight’s Tale, The Merchant’s Tale,* and *The Franklin’s Tale* enclosed gardens represent the way in which women, as wives or as prospective wives, are treated as the property of men.¹

It is her gendered reading of gardens as *loqui* of surveillance and ideological enclosure of women that I intend to push forward in my essay. Specifically, I shall contend that Geoffrey Chaucer’s texts, *The Knight’s Tale* in particular, foreground gardens as spaces in which desirable constructions of femininity are performed alongside acts of resistance that necessitate policing and containment. In other words, the text at once articulates and confines queer spaces of agency and transgression within the material and cultural space of the *hortus conclusus.* However, in the late Middle Ages, the burgeoning cult of the Virgin Mary and the coextensive development of affective piety repositioned femininity firmly at the center of devotional practices. Marian agency, therefore, creates theologically sanctioned spaces in which the queering of power structures and gender dynamics can be performed. These interstices and apertures in the ideological fabric of the *hortus conclusus* accommodate dissenting femininities that find cultural validation through the imitation of the paradoxical virginal maternity of Mary.

Queering the Space of the *Hortus conclusus*

In her analysis of *The General Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales*, Carolyn Dinshaw concludes that Chaucer inscribes his narrative in a heteronormative discourse founded on imperatives of reproduction and, consequently, on a conceptualization of femininity as a passive vessel assisting the preservation of patrilineal descent:

A penetrative act that fosters generation is imagined in the inaugural moment of the *Canterbury Tales*. . . . This fecundating masculine act [is] performed on the feminine surface. . . . This act is, I argue, heterosexual, and normative heterosexuality in Chaucer’s *Tales* is built up of this complex web of cultural relations that structures and locates individual subjectivity—as, conversely, these binary relations are “ineffaceably marked,” to use Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s elegant phrase, by normative heterosexuality in this work.²

These ineffaceable markers of heteronormativity are reiterated in Chaucer’s first *Tale* and continue to be addressed, in an interrogative mode, throughout Fragment 1, the initial and stable group of *Tales* found in the manuscript witnesses. The first twenty lines of *The Knight’s Tale* are indeed saturated with a rhetoric of male dominance that becomes apparent through the ubiquitous semantic field of military victory, chivalric prowess, and geopolitical conquest:

> Whilom, as olde stories tellen us,  
> Ther was a duc that highte Theseus;  
> Of Atthenes he was lord and governour,  
> And in his tyme swich a conquerour  
> That gretter was ther noon under the sonne.  
> Ful many a riche contree hadde he wonne;  
> What with his wysdom and his chivalrie,  
> He conquered al the regne of Femenye,  
> That whilom was ycleped Scithia,

And weddede the queene Ypolita,  
And broghte hire hoom with hym in his contree  
With muchel glorie and greet solempnytee,  
And eek hir yonge suster Emelye.  

This impressive catalogue of knightly excellence culminates in Theseus’s defeat of the Amazons, which, as the toponym “Femenye” suggests, equates to an act of domination of femininity. The stability of the duke’s political power is sanctioned through a strategy of heteronormativity, later articulated in the phrase “And how asseged was Ypolita” (1.881). The female body is represented as a geopolitical space to be conquered and whose agency is forcefully repressed. Theseus’s victorious masculinity is enacted through the containment of femininity within the confines (or the siege) of marriage.

As a number of recent commentators have argued, Chaucer radicalizes Theseus’s act of containment of the female masculinity of the Amazons by effacing almost entirely the account of their cultural practices of violent domination over men dramatized in Book 1 of Giovanni Boccaccio’s Teseida (1339-41?), one of his main sources. The textual castration of these mythical warriors, whose power is founded on parricide and mariticide, erases their narrative presence as the embodiment of a violent threat to patriarchal hegemony. In his gloss to the corresponding passage in the Teseida, Boccaccio explains the narrative function of his digression on Emily’s origins in terms of his broader engagement

3. Larry D. Benson, ed., The Knight’s Tale, in The Riverside Chaucer, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 1.859-71. All further references to Chaucer’s works are taken from this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text by fragment and line number.

4. Jamie Friedman, “Between Boccaccio and Chaucer: The Limits of Female Interiority in The Knight’s Tale,” in The Inner Life of Women in Medieval Romance Literature: Grief, Guilt, and Hypocrisy, ed. Jeff Rider and Jamie Friedman (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 204-22, 205-9. In note 11 (218) Friedman provides a comprehensive overview of critical responses to Chaucer’s drastic revisions to Book 1 of Teseida. She remarks that, until recently, dominant readings have tended to privilege sociopolitical or generic approaches over considerations informed by gender.
with the Amazons’ unfitting ferocity and Theseus’s repression of their feminine potency. In the wider context of Book 1, rather than a futile detail, a reflection on Amazonian authority brings into focus the power dynamics of mastery and servitude, alongside their policing, upon which Theseus’s dukedom is founded:

l’autore a niuno altro fine queste cose scrisse, se non per mostrare onde Emilia fosse venuta ad Attene; e perciò che la materia, cioè li costumi delle predette donne amazone, è alquanto pellegrina alle più genti, e perciò la più piacevole,

(For no other purpose than to show from what place Emilia came to Athens. And because the subject—that is the behaviour of these Amazon women—is rather strange to most people, and therefore more interesting.)

After detailing the Amazons’ maltreatment of the Greeks and, more broadly, the bold assertion of their military and physical dominance, Boccaccio denounces their queerness. Much like the pleading Theban women who “perturben” Theseus on his triumphant return to Athens (1.906), the Amazons, as the epitome of unruly femininity, are agents of chaos who threaten the heteronormative order predicated upon manly governance and female silencing. As I shall argue in more detail below, their resistance and therefore queerness are identified as unwillingness to acquiesce to an unmovable and unquestionable cultural role; “pellegrina,” “Emilia amazona” and her sisters are itinerant, alien, and other in a cultural space that they restlessly traverse and whose confines they call into question.

In The Knight’s Tale this imperative of containment, preempted by the representation of Hippolyta as a besieged land, is fully realized in the first narrative encounter with Emily, which occurs in Theseus’s “gardyn”

5. Giovanni Boccaccio, Teseida delle nozze d’Emilia, ed. Alberto Limentani (Milan: Arnaldo Mondadori Editore, 1992), 1.6, gloss. Further quotations from Boccaccio’s text will be given parenthetically in the body of the text by book and stanza number. All translations, unless otherwise stated, are taken from Chaucer’s Boccaccio: Sources of Troilus and the Knight’s and Franklin’s Tales, ed. and trans. Nick Havely (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer: 1980), 106.
as a space of ideological and physical confinement. Following a detailed account of the Duke's defeat of the cruel Creon, the introduction of Emily in the hortus conclusus serves the same purpose, that is positioning Theseus as formidable conqueror and agent of order:

The grete tour, that was so thikke and stroong,
Which of the castel was the chief dongeoun
(Ther as the knyghtes weren in prisoun
Of which I tolde yow and tellen shal),
Was evene joynant to the gardyn wal
Ther as this Emelye hadde hir pleyynge.

(1.1056-61)

As V. A. Kolve discusses at length in Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative, Emily's walled garden and the knights' prison-tower are both spaces of enclosure. Spatially adjacent and politically coterminous, they are mere appurtenances of Theseus's castle, the site of his power. Although Emily's presence in the hortus conclusus may appear to be ludic (“pleyynge”) in comparison to Palamon’s and Arcite’s permanent confinement, she is, in fact, enclosed and trapped on multiple levels and, most importantly, as I will discuss below, subjected to more radical policing. However, while Emily’s agency is obscured by the conspicuous presence of the phallic tower, the two young knights participate spatially and ideologically in its mechanisms of surveillance of the virginal female body. “Thikke and strong,” the tower is cast as an ineludible marker of phallic potency exerted over the passive physicality of the maiden:

And Palamoun, this woful prisoner,
As was his wone, by leve of his gayler,
Was risen and romed in a chambre an heigh,
In which he al the noble citee seigh,
And eek the gardyn, ful of braunches grene,

Although the limitations imposed on Palamon are clearly articulated in the parenthetic phrase “by leve of his gayler,” through his gaze and movement he has a degree of access to the private space of his lodgings and public space of the city. On the contrary, Emily inhabits an enclosed site in which she is inescapably rooted as the metonymic “braunches grene” growing in the hortus conclusus. The erosion of Emily’s identity in Chaucer’s text is signaled by the unavailability of a private space in which a female subject position free from the intrusive policing of the phallic tower and the walled garden can be, at least momentarily, imagined. Such erosion is rendered more apparent by Boccaccio’s positioning of Emilia’s garden next to her own private dwelling, which appears to allow her a degree of freedom, as she enters the hortus barefoot and covered only by a light tunic: “in un giardin se n’entrava soletta / ch’allato alla sua cam-era dimora / faceva, e ‘n giubba e scalza gia cantando” (3.8) (all alone she entered a garden that lay outside her chamber, and would amuse herself there wandering about barefoot and clad in a tunic). 7 In sum, Theseus’s phallic tower is Chaucer’s narrative accretion through which, arguably, the text radicalizes and exposes the effacement of Emily’s agency.

Emily cannot therefore escape public surveillance and is captured by the triple gaze of the narrator and the two knights. Echoing the hetero-normative trope of the reverdie, or the coming of spring, which opens The Canterbury Tales, she is gazed at while enacting the “observaunce” of May: that is, while conforming to a prescribed literary and cultural act of devotion that encases femininity in an inescapable natural cycle:

7. Havely, Chaucer’s Boccaccio, 112. The etymology of the word “giubba,” translated by Havely as “tunic,” enhances Emilia’s freedom and queerness, as, according to the Treccani Dictionary online, this term derives its original meaning from the Arabic word for undergarment. Such exoticism, eroticism, and cultural otherness, combined with the fact that from the twelfth to the seventeenth century “giubba” indicated clothing worn by both men and women, underpins her unorthodoxy and queerness: accessed 25 April 2014, http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/tag/giubba/.
This passeth yeer by yeer and day by day,
Till it fil ones, in a morwe of May,
That Emelye, that fairer was to sene
Than is the lylie upon his stalke grene,
And fressher than the May with floures newe –
For with the rose colour stroof hire hewe,
I noot which was the fyner of hem two –
Er it were day, as was hir won to do,
She was arisen and al redy dight,
For May wole have no slogardie anyght.
The sesoun priketh every gentil herte,
And maketh it out of his slep to sterte,
And seith “Arys, and do thyn observaunce.”
This maked Emelye have remembraunce
To doon honour to May, and for to ryse.
Yclothed was she fressh, for to devyse:
Hir yelow heer was broyded in a tresse
Bihynde hir bak, a yerde long, I gesse.

(1.1033-50)

As the noun “observaunce” suggests, Emily is trapped in the performance of a ritual act that textualizes and, therefore, fixes her femininity as a *locus* of fertility. Rather than representing the *femme sole* with a degree of independence, Emily’s solitary presence in the garden encases her in a discourse of reproduction.\(^8\) She is, of course, associated with the Marian purity of the rose and the lily, as identified by Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa in her essay in this issue, but here the passage is dominated by visual signifiers of fertility, sexual arousal, and penetration. To paraphrase Luce Irigaray’s essay “Women on the Market,” Emily is partaking in a ritual that marks her imminent entrance on the market and exchange

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8. Karma Lochrie provides a succinct account of the legal position of married and unmarried women in the Middle Ages; *femme sole* indicates the widow or the single woman, while *femme covert de baron* designates a married woman; see *Covert Operations: Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 139-40.
between men, thus acquiring social value by becoming a mother and ensuring the continuation of patrilineal genealogy:

Mothers are essential to its [social order’s] (re)production (particularly inasmuch as they are [re]productive of children and of the labor force: through maternity, child-rearing, and domestic maintenance in general). Their responsibility is to maintain social order without intervening so as to change it. Their products are legal tender in that order, moreover, only if they are marked with the name of the father.

The virginal woman, on the other hand, is pure exchange value. She is nothing but the possibility, the place, the sign of relations among men.⁹

In her theorization of queer time and space, Judith Halberstam defines heteronormative time in ways that resonate unequivocally with Emily’s enclosure in the patriarchal hortus conclusus and Irigaray’s reflections on women’s market value as the “sign” of reproduction; specifically, she talks about the “paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death.”¹⁰ It is this teleology that Emily cannot escape.

The linguistic and literary tropes of the reverdie encase her and function as a textual wall. Her grammatical agency is deferred in this passage. Syntactically, her voice is not heard (“She was arisen and al redy dight”) until the effictio, a hyperbolic catalogue of natural similes exalting her beauty, is exhausted. In other words, not only is she trapped spatially within the confines of the walled garden, a mere extension of Theseus’s power rather than a private space, but she is also confined ideologically within a desirable construct of virginal and reproductive femininity, while being fabricated textually as a literary trope. Chaucer’s text, therefore, exposes the artificiality of Emily’s enclosure. Alongside the conventional formulation that traps feminism in a natural life cycle

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of childrearing, Chaucer opens up the text to its own constructedness. The “gardyn” is a manmade structure (both cultured and cultivated), and, similarly, Emily weaves a garland of roses that speaks a discourse of order and crafted containment as natural elements are molded into an artificial structure. On a further level of textual enclosure, Emily’s walled garden is a palimpsested textual space, or a composite cultural locus that accommodates a number of literary topoi such as the classical locus amoenus, with its sensuous delights, and the biblical earthly paradise, which invokes medieval readings of the Virgin Mary as conclusa or virgo intacta (and discussed in detail by Liz Herbert McAvoy and Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa in their essays in this special issue).

It is the multiple restrictions of gendered enclosure that Emily wants to escape. In line with Marian iconography, in Boccaccio’s Teseida she is portrayed “sull’erbetta assettata” (3.10), or seated on the tender grass and immovable, a stable and permanent presence. For the Christian audience of Boccaccio’s and Chaucer’s works, Emilia/Emily’s ideological confinement is validated by her association with the Virgin Mary. Even a cursory comparison between the medieval iconography of Emilia and that of the Virgin in the bortus conclusus indicates the Christian valance of Emilia’s virginal figuration in the walled garden. For instance, the positioning and figuration of Emilia in the illumination (fig. 1) adorning fol. 53r of Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna Cod. 2617 (1466-67) and the image of the Virgin Mary in the painting “Little Garden of Paradise” (fig. 2) by the Upper Rhenish Master (ca. 1415) are strikingly similar. In the manuscript illumination, the maiden’s blue gown and golden hair, combed but loose, align her with the established Marian iconography exemplified in the Rhenish painting. Both seated alone on a grassy bench, Emilia and the Virgin are enclosed in a space overflowing with natural emblems of purity and suffering (e.g., the white rose and the iris). In other words, the blue garment signalling purity, the floral framing, and the stasis of the female body firmly inscribe Emilia’s enclosure in the fixed paradigm of Christian virginity. However (a point to which I shall return), both spaces are sites of queer entanglements in which secular and spiritual discourses are intertwined in a scene saturated with the signifiers of life, movement, and fertility. Perhaps paradoxically, the containment of “Emilia amazona” is represented as more radical and
Fig. 1: ÖNB/Vienna Codex 2617, fol. 53r, “Emelia in the garden” (1465). By kind permission of the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna.
incontrovertible. Her solitude and submissive stance act as visual markers of her enforced confinement, which appears more conspicuous when compared to the cornucopia of details and aesthetic indulgence animating the scene surrounding the Virgin. In fact, the numerous varieties of plants and species of birds endow the Upper Rhenish Master’s painting with the uncontainable flourishing of life. Although in both images femininity is encased in the heteronormative frame of reproduction that is configured as immutable and natural, the architecture of Emilia’s garden polices the Derridean jouissance of the Upper Rhenish Master’s work within a geometrically defined double perimeter consisting of the perfectly trimmed turf bench and the neatly designed trellis. More than the Virgin Mary herself, Emilia is cast, therefore, as the hyperbole of the Marian trope of virginity harbored within the sealed space of the hortus conclusus.

However, in The Knight’s Tale she resists such boundaries by being
repeatedly portrayed as restlessly pacing the garden. An apparent act of discontent and dissent, this movement is haphazard, nondirectional, and, therefore, utterly queer. Indeed, Halberstam’s definition of queer spatiality echoes very closely Emily’s attempt at self-dislocation in Chaucer’s text:

Queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality and reproduction. . . .

. . . Within the life cycle of the Western human subject, long periods of stability are considered to be desirable, and people who live in rapid bursts . . . are characterized as immature and even dangerous.11

Instead of pursuing a teleological and biblically sanctioned linear trajectory from virginity to reproduction, Emily inhabits a disjointed temporality and spatiality that, at least provisionally, allow her to deviate from a preordained heteronormative narrative. Emily’s queering of the hortus conclusus counteracts, again in Halberstam’s terms, “the inexorable march of narrative time towards marriage” and “a desired process of maturation” in order to claim agency over her future.12 Instead of acquiescing to a future determined by the unquestionable authority of the First Mover, as Theseus explains in the final part of the Tale, Emily imagines what for Halberstam is “the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing.”13 This dissent against a scripted, or textual and ideological entrapment manifests itself in Emily’s prayer to Diana, the goddess of chastity, in which she rejects the acquiescent immobility of the Marian paradigm of femininity in favor of the self-fashioning of a dislocated time and space. In Part 3 Emily imagines “for to walken in the wodes wilde” (1.2309), woods whose unstructured architecture can accommodate her queer desire to define her identity beyond the walls of heteronormativity, in perpetual virginal sisterhood with the chaste Diana:14

11. Halberstam, In a Queer Time and Place, 1 and 4-5.
12. Ibid., 3 and 4.
13. Ibid., 2.

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http://ir.uiowa.edu/mff/vol50/iss1/
Chaste goddesse, wel wostow that I
Desire to ben a mayden al my lyf,
Ne nevere wol I be no love ne wyf.
I am, thow woost, yet of thy compaignye,
A mayde, and love huntynge and venerye,
And for to walken in the wodes wilde,
And noght to ben a wyf and be with childe.
Noght wol I knowe compaignye of man.
(1.2304-11)

What Emily envisages is a queer space, an anti-garden or, to use Halberstam’s terminology, a “counterpublic.”¹⁵ In this queer locus, dissent, resistance, agency, and movement are not just allowed (as this presupposes a set of scripted norms), but they are part of its constitutive elements. Here, Emily is appropriating traditional constructs of relations between genders based on reproduction as she recasts the idea of “compaignye” from a scripted heterosexual future of forced maternity to an unscripted self-determined chastity.

As Friedman and Lochrie argue, Emily’s claim for subjectivity is profoundly imbricated in a recuperation of the vestiges of her Amazonian potency.¹⁶ Such recuperation is founded on a dual queering strategy: hunting and perpetual virginity. By identifying with Diana, Emily wishes to participate in female masculinity, since, as H. D. Brumble points out, medieval romance and summarizes her argument in this terse sentence: “The madness of the forest is replaced by the finality of order, but within this order life is replaced by death” (160). As I shall discuss shortly, Saunders’s argument chimes with my discussion of the forest as a queer space of flourishing as opposed to the deadly policing of patriarchal order. The forest or grove as signifier of the fundamental instability of Theseus’s political governance is explored in Robert Emmett Finnegan, “A Curious Condition of Being: The City and the Grove in Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale,” Studies in Philology 106, no. 3 (2009): 285–98, doi:10.1353/sip.0.0026.

¹⁵. Halberstam, In a Queer Time and Place, 6.
in classical culture “huntynge and venerye” were considered a virtuous and virile pursuit that eschewed the sinfulness of idleness normally associated with femininity.\textsuperscript{17} As well as co-opting masculinity through hunting, Emily queers heteronormativity through chastity; this allows her to imagine a subjectivity beyond the traditional constructs of female subservience and male hegemony. As I will argue more concertedly in the final sections of this essay, which will focus on Mary’s virginal and maternal potency, the radical quality of Emily’s queer subject position can be understood more clearly if inscribed in Christian discourse. As Sarah Salih explains in her discussion of the female virgin martyr as \textit{femina virilis} or \textit{miles}, the woman who extricates herself from the constraints of reproduction reinvents femininity as masculine and virile while usurping male authority:

Virgins can be said to be distinct from women, and quite possibly to escape the inferiority of women. . . .

. . . Defying their fathers, they opt out of heterosexuality demanding the right to choose the disposal of their own bodies. The authorities against which they rebel are usually clearly marked as masculine; they are fathers, fiancés, priests, judges.\textsuperscript{18}

This eschewing of the “compaignye of man” and, consequently, of his authority over female sexuality has a queer valence because, much like Halberstam’s theoretical manifesto in \textit{Female Masculinity}, it is “the enterprise of conceptualizing masculinity without men.”\textsuperscript{19} Furthermore, Emily’s queer subjectivity defies the heteronormativity of time, as she imagines herself a “mayden.” Alongside the principal connotation of “mayden” as virgin, the term positions Emily in the ludic queer temporality of adolescence, a nondirectional and unscripted time divorced from

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the teleology of heterosexual adulthood.\textsuperscript{20} Halberstam encapsulates this “epistemology of youth” very effectively:

I will . . . propose that we rethink the adult/youth binary in relation to an “epistemology of youth” that disrupts conventional accounts of youth culture, adulthood and maturity. . . .

. . . in Western cultures, we chart the emergence of the adult from the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence as a desired process of maturation.\textsuperscript{21}

Her prayer to the queer goddess can therefore be read as a plea to enter a dislocated temporality and spatiality in which a female agency outside the confines of reproduction can be imagined.

By queering heteronormativity through hunting and chastity, Emily rewrites the conventional tropes of courtly literature, something that is further substantiated by the fact that, while joining Theseus’s hunt, she is described as wearing green:

Cleer was the day, as I have toold er this,
And Theseus with alle joye and blis,
With his Ypolita, the faire queene,
And Emelye, clothed al in grene,
On huntyng be they riden roially.

(1.1683–87)

Moreover, in line with Emily’s unusual attire, other formidable women in the \textit{Tale} are also clad in green. Even Venus, seductively naked, has a “garment” of green waves draped around her lower body:

The statue of Venus, glorious for to se,
Was naked, fletynge in the large see,
And fro the navele doun al covered was
With wawes grene, and brighte as any glas.

(1.1955–58)

\textsuperscript{20} The \textit{MED} glosses the term “mayden” as virgin, unmarried woman, but also as young girl, accessed 15 August 2014, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED26501.

\textsuperscript{21} Halberstam, \textit{In A Queer Time and Place}, 2 and 4.
Equally, Diana’s dominance in the woodlands through her skillful hunting is signified by her “gaude grene” (1.2079) clothing. Through the viridity of her attire, Emily sheds the association with white and red, or the signifiers of her imminent entrance into the economy of exchange as fertile virgin, in favor of the color green, symbol of feminine potency and agency. According to the courtly literary tradition concerning the love debate between the company of the flower and the company of the leaf, which Chaucer mentions in the Prologue to The Legend of Good Women, white attire unsurprisingly indicates purity, but it also signifies fidelity in love and honor in battle. Furthermore, in Jean de Meun’s Le Roman de la Rose (ca. 1260), the lover/dreamer is greeted at the gates of the walled pleasure garden by the Oiseuse clad in green garments. In Chaucer’s translation of the French romance, the extensive effectio introducing Idleness culminates in a detailed appraisal of her attire: “And she hadde on a cote of grene / Of cloth of Gaunt” (573-74). The iconography of the locus amoenus in the Roman pushes the Oiseuse’s agency even further, as in the illumination accompanying this section of the narrative in London, British Library MS Harley 4425, fol. 12v: a green-clad Idleness is depicted while leading the lover/dreamer into the garden rather than simply assisting his entrance by opening the gate as she does in the text (fig. 3). I would, therefore, contend that she functions as a queering agent, since she performs acts of agency that reroute traditional femininity from subservience to authority, while positioning the male lover/dreamer in the asynchronic, non-teleological space of the garden. Its queer temporality and spatiality are signified by the lover’s simultaneous presence inside and outside the confines of the hortus while traversing sections of the garden whose directionality is unclear and leads the gaze of the onlooker beyond the strict confines of the enclosure. It is this sort of feminine potency, I would argue, that Emily metonymically reclaims by appropriating the color green.

Fig. 3: British Library, London MS Harley 4425, fol. 12v, “The Garden of Pleasure” (ca. 1490). By kind permission of the British Library.
While the company of the leaf’s purity is signaled by their white garments, the green clothing worn by the ludic company of the flower signals fickleness and idleness. In a queer act of dissent and dislocation, therefore, Emily recasts this trope from a female (sisterly) perspective: now the color green is appropriated as a feminine signifier of virginal sisterhood and flourishing. The fertility of viridity is embraced not as a heteronormative confinement within reproductive imperatives, but as agency and freedom—as, indeed, it is in the writing of female mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1179) and Mechtild of Hackeborn (d. 1298), demonstrated by McAvoy in her essay in this issue. As Hildegard and Mechtild recuperate the feminine valence of greening, in Emily’s female narrative of self-fashioning, Diana is reconfigured as the “chaste goddesse of the wodes grene” (1.2297), a formulation that dislocates male (clerical) constructions of desirable femininity as white (that is pure and submissive) into the freedom granted by the queer fickleness and nondirectionality of the color green.

Resisting Heteronormative Containment

The Temple of Diana, as a “counterpublic space,” remains, however, a fantasy, since it is yet another appurtenance of Theseus’s power and is crafted as a symbol of his political and economic potency. It is an artificial and textual space (a theatre) in which Diana’s queer power as the chaste huntress is a mere narrative inscribed on a wall. Confirmation of Emily’s illusory dissent is articulated with a finality that is utterly shocking, radical, and unequivocal because it is delivered by the queer goddess herself:

Among the goddes hye it is affermed,
And by eterne word writen and confermed,
Thou shalt ben wedded unto oon of tho
That han for thee so muchel care and wo.

(1.2349–52)

In fact, instead of facilitating Emily’s queering of the hortus conclusus, Diana ventriloquizes male authority and cryptically decrees that the fires will prophesize Emily’s future. As Friedman, Lochrie, and Barrie
Ruth Straus have convincingly argued, the ultimate policing of Emily’s attempted dislocation then manifests itself in an infernal vision of fire and bleeding tree branches that echoes the hypermasculine red world of the Temple of Mars rather than the empowered feminine green realm of Venus and Diana: 23

The fires brenne upon the auter cleere,  
Whil Emelye was thus in hir preyere.  
But sodeynly she saugh a sighte queynte,  
For right anon oon of the fyres queynte  
And quyked agayn, and after that anon  
That oother fyr was queynt and al agon;  
And as it queynte it made a whistelynge,  
As doon thise wete brondes in hir brenynge,  
And at the brondes ende out ran anon  
As it were blody dropes many oon.  
(1.2331-40)

Here, Emily’s queering of the walled garden vanishes in a vision of burning and bleeding twigs, which can be read as a presage of her inescapable fate, or the loss of her virginity. The rhetorical figure of antanaclasis applied to the term “queynte” firmly associates this vision with female genitalia and sexuality in general (one of the multiple meanings of “queynte” explored here) and glosses it as alien, infernal, and deceptive. 24 Emily’s desire for feminine potency is therefore reduced to


24. For a discussion of the unstable meaning of the term “queynte” in Chaucer’s works, see Timothy D. O’Brien, “Fire and Blood: Queynte Imaginings in Diana’s Temple,” Chaucer Review 33, no. 2 (1998), 157-67, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25096046. Although in this passage the term “queynte” is used predominantly as a verb, according to the MED the adjective “queinte” has a variety of meanings ranging from sly and deceitful, to
the glaring image of virginal femininity entering the market symbolized by the “uneffaceble” mark of the violent and autocratic imperatives of heteronormativity, that is, a vagina oozing blood as a consequence of menstruation or of the breaking of the hymeneal membrane. In sum, such a construct of reproduction polices and contains once more Emily’s queer vision of the anti-garden.

As this reading has been informed, in part, by the commentaries recently offered by Lochrie, Friedman, and Straus, who engage with Emily’s subjectivity and her Amazonian claim for agency in the Temple of Diana, I acknowledge, as they do, the strategies of patriarchal containment operating in the text. Nonetheless, and this is where my argument departs from theirs and hopes to offer a new interpretative framework for the Tale’s figurations of female agency, I propose a reading of the vision of the burning and bleeding branches that unveils the possibility of further acts of queer resistance. By attempting a largely unprecedented framing of Diana’s prophecy within theological (specifically Marian) discourse, I will argue that it opens up a space of feminine potency through the Christian doctrine of maternal flourishing associated with the Virgin Mary. Indeed, Chaucer’s porous, unfixed hermeneutics invites queer interpretations of the vision of the bleeding branches. The classical and medieval sources of this passage (Virgil, Dante, and Boccaccio) are overtly male coded, adhering to Grace M. Jantzen’s claim that “the masculinist necrophilic bias of western theology” is deeply “imbricated in an imaginary of death.”

As discussed by McAvoy in her essay, in Becoming Divine Jantzen unpacks the Christian theology of salvation as inherently male, founded as it is on the principle of a salvific male agent (Christ) rescuing a corrupt and passive humankind from the hellish jaws of death. The masculinity of salvation resonates with the chivalric ethos of Chaucer’s Knight and the heroic generic conventions


of Boccaccio’s *Teseida*. Specifically, Boccaccio’s glosses enclose this passage within an inescapable hermeneutic frame that configures the vision as exclusively male and necrophilic. To an unequivocal pronouncement on the masculine valence of the allegory of the burning and bleeding branches, which Emilia herself ventroloquizes in her prayer to Diana (“che per Arcita ci si pone l’una, / e l’altra poi per Palemone”; 7.86), Boccaccio later adds the following annotation:

Qui dimostra l’auctore in questi due fuochi quale dovesse essere il fine de’ due amanti, cioè di Palemone e d’Arcita; e dice che il primo, cioè quello che in nome di Palemone era stato acceso, dice che si spense e poi si raccese, dove intende Palemone perdendo dovere perdere la speranza d’Emilia, e poi per lo traccendersi mostra lui riprendere la perduta speranza per lo caso mortale il quale avvenne ad Arcita; per lo secondo fuoco acceso a nome d’Arcita, dimostra il miserabile e lagrimoso accidente e la morte d’Arcita.

(7.91.4)

(Here the author [Statius] shows the fate of the two lovers, that is Palamone and Arcita, through the two fires; he says that the first, the one lit in the name of Palamone, extinguished itself and then, he said, was rekindled, which means that at first Palamone loses hope to have Emilia and then, as it rekindles, his lost hope is found again because of the deadly fate of Arcita; the second fire lit in the name of Arcita shows the terrible and lamentable accident and death of Arcita.)

Unlike Boccaccio’s strict policing through his glossarial apparatus, the corresponding passage in Chaucer’s *The Knight’s Tale* is predicated upon an open or queer interpretative framework that deliberately renders Diana’s prophetic vision malleable to multiple readings. As well as lacking an explanatory annotation, Chaucer’s *Tale* presents Emily in a position of hermeneutic uncertainty, since she appears unable to assign

27. “One fire is lit for Arcita and the other for Palamone” (my translation).
an incontrovertible meaning to the prophecy, as opposed to Emilia’s lucid assessment (“For she ne wiste what is signyfied”; 1.2343; “What amounteth this, alas?”; 1.2362). In brief, while Chaucer’s text queers the meaning of the bleeding and burning branches, Boccaccio’s textuality fixes it. In particular, the Italian writer redirects Emilia’s plea towards a dominant discourse of masculinity whereby her claim for agency at the Temple of Diana is cast as a vision of exclusive significance to the male characters and whose hermeneutics is securely sanctioned through a patrilineal line of authorial authority descending from Statius to Boccaccio. The repetition of phrases such as “the author shows,” “he said,” and “he says” demonstrates Boccaccio’s anxiety about legitimizing his text by punctuating the passage with validating references to Statius, his source. Also, the purity, green flourishing, and sweet scents of Emilia/Emily’s sacrificial ritual are replaced by infernal imagery of punishment and death.

Similarly, Dante’s contrapasso entrapments of Piero della Vigna (Inferno 13.31-108) and Ulysses (Inferno 26.49-142) in monstrous and deformed bodies that assume the semblance of branches that burn and bleed signify a necrophilic punishment for their sins against the absolute power of God (i.e., suicide and the excessive pursuit of knowledge):

Allor porsi la mano un poco avante,
e colsi un ramicel da un gran pruno;
e ‘l tronco suo gridò: “Perché mi schiante?”
Da che fatto fu di sangue Bruno,
Ricominciò a dir: “perché mi scerpi?”29

(Then I stretched out my hand a little way
and from a great thornbush snapped off a branch,
at which its trunk cried out: “Why do you tear me?”
And then, when it had grown more dark with blood,
It asked again: “Why do you break me off?”)30

29. Dante Alighieri, La Divina Commedia: Inferno, ed. Natalino Sapegno, 3rd ed. (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1988), 13.31-35. All further quotations will be to this edition and given in parentheses in the text by canto and line numbers.

Lo maggior corno de la fiamma antica
cominciò a crolarsi mormorando
pur come quella cui vento affatica;
indo la cima qua e là menando,
come fosse la lingua che parlasse,
gittò voce di fuori e disse:

(26.85-90)

(The greater horn within that ancient flame
began to sway and tremble, murmuring
just like a fire that struggles in the wind;
and then he waved his flame-tip back and forth
as if it were a tongue that tried to speak,
and flung toward us a voice that answered:)

(172)

Equally necrophilic, the description of Polydorus’s metamorphosis into
a bleeding tree in Virgil’s *Aeneid* (3.19–68) is a physical manifestation of
the violence and monstrosity of the attack he suffered at the hands of
the Trojan army. Betrayed for greed like Christ, Polydorus is an icon of
suffering, as the weapons used to kill him will torment him eternally
in the shape of thorny, piercing brands. In other words, by imposing a
masculinist and infernal hermeneutic on Diana’s prophecy, Boccaccio
contains Emilia’s unorthodox femininity in a textual patriarchal line of
male-authored narratives engaged with male characters and, therefore,
within the confines of heteronormative and phallocentric practices.
Emilia will indeed know her fate, but only vicariously in a vision that
reinforces the ancillary quality of femininity and traps her in the nec-
rophilic theology of salvation according to which, as the daughter of
Eve, her body is figured as an unruly instrument of sin and death that
requires perpetual containment.

Chaucer’s open hermeneutics, on the contrary, allows for a reading
that queers the pathways of heteronormativity. While Boccaccio closes

(London: Everyman’s Library, 1995), 112. All further translations of *The
Divine Comedy* will be taken from this edition and references will be given
parenthetically in the text.
the text to the very possibility of female agency by imposing an autocratic interpretative framework on the text, *The Knight’s Tale* offers a polysemous and multivalent set of gendered tropes in which masculinity and femininity are queerly entangled. As Karen Barad explains in her essay “Nature’s Queer Performativity,” scientific observations of the natural world suggest that phenomena emerge from the “mutual ontological dependence of ‘relata,’” that is their constitutive parts. Such “relata,” including masculinity and femininity, “do not pre-exist relations; rather, relata–within–phenomena emerge through specific intra-actions.”31 As I intend to demonstrate in the remainder of this essay, Chaucer’s *Tale* allows for such queer and fluid intra-actions to occur in his version of the vision of the bleeding branches.

**Chaucer’s Queer Hermeneutics and the Entangled Vision of the Burning and Bleeding Branches**

Unlike its Italian source, *The Knight’s Tale* provides no fixed hermeneutic framework through which to read this passage. While I argue that Chaucer destabilizes heteronormativity in the queer space of Diana’s Temple, I do not contend that the *Tale* obliterates masculinity: quite the opposite, in fact, as it is reimagined through queer entanglements. As Straus has already convincingly observed, the rekindling of the burning branches, which temporarily subside, only to ignite again, can function as a signifier of male sexual potency.32 The phallic connotation of the rising flames becomes apparent in the iconography of the Virgin Mary and her association with Moses’s burning bush. In particular, a medieval German painting (fig. 4), to which I shall return later, entitled “The Virgin and Child in the Hortus Conclusus” (ca. 1410) and held at the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid, encloses Mary in a space punctuated by allegorical biblical symbols. The one that attracts Christ’s attention is an image of the perpetually burning bush through which God appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai in order to unveil the fate of


Fig. 4: Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid. Anonymous German artist active in Westphalia (ca. 1410). “The Virgin and Child in the Hortus Conclusus.” By kind permission of the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza.
the Israelites (Exod. 3:1-22). This biblical emblem is here overtly coded as male, since it features the authorizing presence (face) of God, the ultimate patriarch, and the depiction of the perennial flames is arguably phallic, as they rise, high and red, amid the green foliage.

Moreover, in The Knight’s Tale blood is a signifier of masculinity and, more specifically, of the violence of chivalric and military masculinity. The Temple of Mars, the classical god of war, is the metaphoric space where maleness and blood are intertwined through a network of necrophilic and monstrous images of death, deformity, and corruption:

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Ther saugh I first the derke ymaginyng
Of Fenolye, and al the compassyng;
The cruel Ire, reed as any gleede;
The pykepurs, and eek the pale Drede;
The smylere with the knyf under the cloke;
The shepne brennynge with the blake smoke;
The tresoun of the mordrynge in the bedde;
The open werre, with woundes al bibledde;
Contek, with blody knyf and sharp manace.
Al ful of chirkyng was that sory place.
The sleere of hymself yet saugh I ther –
His herte-blood hath bathed al his heer –
The nayl ydryven in the shode anyght;
The colde deeth, with mouth gapyng upright.
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(1.1995-2008)

The decorative program in Mars’s Temple defines masculinity as a site of terror, moral malady, and brutality cloaked in an ominous darkness and steeped in the blood oozing from mortal wounds. Of course, “gentil blood” (1.2539) also signifies the young knights’ noble patrilineal descent, whose heteronormative and homosocial value Theseus attempts to protect by imposing restrictions on the tournament. However, these masculine figurations of blood speak of crisis, corruption, and death in Part 4 of the Tale. In fact, despite Theseus’s decree and meticulous policing, the tournament degenerates in an infernal arena in which the precious blood of noble knights flows uncontrollably: “Out brest the blood with stierne stremes rede” (1.2610) and “Out renneth blood on..."
bothe hir sydes rede” (1.2635). Nonetheless, I would suggest that the masculinity of these allegorical figures is profoundly entangled with, and therefore redefined by, a hermeneutic open to the possibility of feminine valence. As I will explain in more detail below, the Tale’s figuration of blood and tears as complex cultural cyphers positions them as sites in which such entanglements can occur. It is in the interstices of this crisis of maleness that female identity can be imagined and the rigid structures of heteronormativity debunked. As the wounded Arcite dies because of the incurable corruption of his blood (“The clothered blood . . . / Corrupteth”; 1.2745-46), the system of male dominance in the Tale clearly shows irresolvable ruptures.

In contrast to the necrophilic stasis that the patriarch Theseus displays at the tournament and during his speech on the Chain of Love (“at a wyndow set, / Arrayed right as he were a god in trone”; 1.2528-29), the vision of the burning branches is hermeneutically open to the feminine reappropriation of blood and the agential greening of Emily’s plea—and therefore to an alternative, queer, fluid theology of Love. As I pointed out earlier, the repetition of the word “queynte” saturates the vision of the burning and bleeding branches with the markers of female sexuality. In Chaucer’s text, Statius’s and Boccaccio’s male-coded and necrophilic brands are therefore open to being rerouted as a figurative site of feminine potency. Instead of being configured as exclusively male and as serving heteronormativity, “red blood,” in Irigaray’s words, can here be reclaimed as feminine: in The Knight’s Tale, the blood dripping from the burning twigs is “queynted” and as such it “remains on the mother’s side” as a sign of a woman’s potential mastery over her sexuality outside patriarchal policing.33 Furthermore, as Jantzen posits, “flourishing is not once-for-all, but is growth and process, never static. The model of flourishing is therefore a model of amor mundi, love of the world and care of all within.”34 In the “whistelynge” of the bleeding twigs, the voice of the virginal and “fresshe” Amazon can still be heard. In other words, the “braunches grene,” with which she is metonymically identified in the walled garden, are entangled in the necrophilic vision of the

34. Jantzen, Becoming Divine, 165.
burning branches and thus reroute them towards a figuration of life, regeneration, and *amor mundi*. In turn, this rerouting serves to queer the immobility of heteronormativity, which culminates in Theseus’s speech on the Chain of Love, and exposes it to the movements of growth and maternal flourishing.

It is, then, possible to posit that the goddess Diana has indeed listened to Emily’s plea for a chaste female agency that reconfigures and co-opts the dominance of masculinity upon which reproduction is founded. Although her fate does not realize her initial Amazonian fantasy, Diana’s prophecy discloses the creative and agential potential of the flourishing, and metaphorical greening, of maternity and nativity. Emily’s prophesied fate to marry one of the knights, and therefore to bleed while losing her virginity and through menstruation as a sign of fertility, no longer indicates solely the ineluctable subjugation of the female subject to the imperatives of patriarchy, but it also speaks of the possibility of her appropriation of the “red blood” through maternal agency and the subsequent fulfillment of Jantzen’s theology of nativity. The masculine policing articulated in Statius’s and Boccaccio’s visions has here encountered the feminine and, in the intra-action of masculinity and femininity, a hybrid or queer hermeneutics emerges. This queering of patriarchal structures and the contiguous refocusing of Emily’s desire for a virginal self-fashioning ultimately emerge from the intra-action of masculinity and femininity as well as of Christianity and paganism. In fact, in the queer temporality of Chaucer’s *Tale* the two cultures do not just coexist, but define and transform each other. In particular, the iconography associated with the goddess Diana saturates the *Tale* with metamorphic and queer subject positions and glosses her as a polymorphous divinity (“thre formes”; I.2313) with a threefold power through which she presides over chastity, childbirth, and Pluto’s realm of death. This paradoxical entanglement of nativity, mortality, and chastity, which the goddess embodies, is foregrounded in the early stages of Emily’s prayer and will acquire increasing (Christian, specifically Marian) significance as the narrative progresses. The iconography embellishing Diana’s Temple is entangled with Emily’s vision of the burning and bleeding branches, and the intra-action of these two passages is key to a critical rereading of the goddess’s prophecy.
As a number of critics have noted, while the descriptions of the Temples of Venus and Mars are indebted to Boccaccio’s *Teseida*, the Temple of Diana is largely Chaucer’s narrative accretion. Such creative focus on Diana merits further investigation. It is the entangled hybridity of some of the mythical figures adorning this space that is of particular relevance to my reading of Chaucer’s queer hermeneutics. An iconographic continuity can be observed in the relation between the metamorphosed subjects depicted on these walls, Daphne, in particular, and the transformation of the Heliades into trees in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (2.454–95), one of the likely sources of the passage describing the burning and bleeding branches. The Heliades are, for instance, forever rooted in the shape of poplar trees next to the grave of their hubristic brother, for whom they cannot stop grieving:

Now the third sister, tearing at her hair, grasps foliage; now this one grieves to find her ankles sealed in wood, that one to feel her slender arms becoming lengthy branches; as they marvel at these happenings, their private parts are wrapped in sheathes of bark, which, from their loins, move upward to surround their bellies, breasts and shoulders, arms and hands—

The metamorphic movement woven into the fabric of this passage is punctuated by images of entrapment directed specifically at female sexuality. Of course, the Heliades’ “shoulders, arms and hands” are perennially fixed in arboreal form, but the gaze of the narrator lustfully indulges in a detailed catalogue of overtly sexually-coded parts of the sisters’ bodies: “private parts,” “loins,” “bellies,” and “breasts.” Their excessive, unorthodox, and therefore queer femininity, articulated in


their uncontrollable crying for the violent death of their brother, as well as in their self-removal from Irigaray’s exchange between men in order to dedicate themselves exclusively to mourning, is aggressively policed; their normalized sexuality is then rendered perpetually accessible to the necrophilic male gaze as they are trapped in an unchangeable form.

Similarly, in order to preserve her chastity, Daphne, victim of Apollo’s unsolicited lust, is condemned to endure an existence fixed in the form of the laurel tree:

\begin{quote}
Ther saugh I Dane, yturned til a tree—
I mene nat the goddesse Diane,
But Penneus doghter, which that heighte Dane.
\end{quote}

\hspace{1em}(1.2062-64)

In the Knight’s brief account of the myth, Daphne’s subjectivity goes through a double process of erosion. Not only is she dehumanized, but her identity becomes blurred as the tentative intrusion of the narrative voice discloses her name’s failure to identify her unequivocally; in this despoiling of agency, the only firm trait of her subjectivity is her filial relation to masculinity and patriarchy. In sum, the shared arboreal and dehumanized identity of these mythical figures results from and exposes the violence and necrophilic stance of patriarchy. Much like the masculine arboreal images found in the works of Virgil, Dante, and Boccaccio analyzed above, these examples of female metamorphosis undergo a punishment that has the connotations of the infernal Dantean contrapasso.

Yet, their new identities are endowed with transformative potency, which is empowering because it is predicated upon the liberation of femininity from the necrophilic gaze of patriarchy. Much like Emily, domesticated within the confines of the hortus conclusus, the Heliades are perpetually and violently situated in the space and time of masculine dominance; in other words, through their physicality and arboreal roots, they are forced to continually mourn their brother, that is, to inhabit a construct of assistive femininity from which, like Emily in the garden, they cannot escape. However, the text also dramatizes the possibility of acts of resistance; specifically, the tears shed by the Heliades turn the necrophilic gaze into a principle of life and regeneration:
Their tears continue flowing, and, sun-hardened, 
fall from their trees; borne onward by the Po, 
they will one day adorn the brides of Rome. 
[And so, in myth, mourning becomes electrum; 
the sister’s tears are, now and forever, amber.]

(2.491–95)

As they harden, the Heliades’ tears co-opt the phallic virility of the sun and metamorphose into amber, a symbol of maternal and creative agency that was gifted to Roman brides. In a comparable act of resistance, Diana endows Daphne with leaves designed to shield her from the predatory gaze of the sun governed by the lusty god Apollo.37 The masculinist connotations of branches as infernal figures of eternal suffering are recast by the virginal viridity of Daphne’s arboreal metamorphosis. Not only is she the pagan figure of life-giving femininity, but also, as I will discuss in the final section of my essay, the entangled signifier of Mary’s chaste motherhood. According to L’Ovide moralisé (ca. 1320), a Christian rereading of the Latin poet’s works, Daphne’s viridity is positioned as incontrovertibly Marian because of its chiasmic and paradoxical nature:

By Daphne I can understand and gloss that glorious Maiden, pure, attractive, beautiful Virgin, whom God chose above all others. . . . This blessed Mary, Virgin Mother in whom are married virgin plenitude and plenteous virginity, she who without corruption was virgin in her conception, virgin in her childbearing and virgin afterwards perpetually this maiden, virgin and pure is the laurel, full of greenness, with which the son of God crowned himself.38

In line with Jantzen’s concept of flourishing, then, Daphne’s and the Heliades’ green and fertile branches reimagine the female body not as the passive, static, repressed object of exchange between men on which heteronormativity is founded, but as the empowered agent of a maternal theology. Such textual framing of the prophecy of the bleeding branches

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37. Brumble, Classical Myths and Legends in the Middle Ages, 94–96.
alters the male potency symbolized by their phallic fires and military associations with blood into a vision through which Emily can begin to embrace her future motherhood, not as mortification or loss of agency, but as the opportunity to fulfill her desire to dwell in the green, queer, and unpoliced space of the woods, or non-cultured nature. Thanks to Diana’s prophecy, much like Daphne and the Heliades, Emily is able to push her desire for agential greening forward by exploring, in Jantzen’s words, “the possibility of flourishing as a part of a symbolic of natality. . . . The concept of flourishing is one which involves thriving, luxuriant growth, diversity, obvious and exuberant good health.”


alongside Daphne’s perennial greenness and Diana’s queer identity, are entangled with the paradoxical and chiasmic subjectivity of the Virgin that Chaucer so tersely defines in The Prioress’s Prologue: “O mooder Mayde, O mayde Mooder free! / O bussh unbrent, brennynge in Moyses sighte” (7.467-68). In The Knight’s Tale, Chaucer’s open hermeneutics allows Diana’s prophecy to accommodate Marian femininity, a form of creative, maternal agency that the pagan Emily is only able to capture through the entangled imagery of the burning and bleeding branches.

Indeed, as the glosses appended to this passage in Oxford Bodleian Library MS Laud 600 indicate, in the period between 1430 and 1450, the scribe in charge of the annotative program was able to detect the complex resonances of this entanglement.41 The marginal notes “ignis castitatis” and “ignis virginitatis” [the fire of chastity and the fire of virginity] establish a clear link between Diana’s revelatory vision and Mary’s perennial virginity, which, paradoxically, burns continually without consuming itself. Through an iconography that gestures towards imitatio Mariae, Emily is therefore aligned with Mary in the biblical metaphor of the perpetually burning bush; in the burning and bleeding branches on Diana’s altar, the possibility of perennial chastity in motherhood is presented to her. Rather than the destructive, necrophilic infernal fire found in Boccaccio’s and Dante’s texts, here Chaucer’s queer hermeneutics presents a fire that is both generative and regenerative, much like Moses’s non-extinguishable brands, which came to signify Mary’s undefiled chastity. As E. Harris points out in his essay on Nicolas Froment’s triptych at Aix-en-Provence, “[I]terary analogies of the ‘Burning Bush’ with the Immaculate Conception are already frequent in the works of the Church Fathers.”42 Furthermore, the triptych is framed by an inscription that is a direct quotation from the Breviarium Romanum on the Feast of the Circumcision: “Rubum quem viderat Moyses incombustum conservatum agnovimus tuam laudabilem virginitatem sancta Dei genetrix”


(In the bush which Moses saw burning but unconsumed, we recognize your laudable virginity, O Mother of God). The arboreal prophecy manifested on Diana’s altar aligns, therefore, Emily’s wish for virginal agency with the Marian trope of the virgo/virga as coterminous concepts in mystical writing. According to Chaucer’s queer hermeneutics, while the masculine potency of the phallic fires is not erased, it ceases to be a necrophilic signifier and is redefined as a symbol of the queer authority and virtue of the chastity of Mary’s maternity.

A pictorial representation of such feminine and queer power is offered in one of the examples of medieval iconography of the hortus conclusus that I discussed earlier. In “The Virgin and Child in the Hortus Conclusus” (fig. 4), the Mother of Christ is framed by signifiers of containment of her chastity, such as the locked gate and the circular fencing, and also by icons of patriarchal biblical authority. As Harris observes, “[i]n the Biblia Pauperum, the scenes of ‘Moses and the burning Bush’ and ‘Aaron’s Rod’—another Old Testament symbol of virginity—flank the ‘Nativity’ of Christ.” In line with the theological and iconographic tradition represented in the Biblia pauperum, the Madrid painting features the burning bush encountered by Moses on Mount Sinai (Exod. 3:1-22), which voices God’s plan for the Israelites: by positioning his head in the branches, God’s authority is made apparent. Similarly, Aaron’s rod flourishing in the tabernacle of testimony (Num. 17:1-13) is a symbol of his wisdom and power, while the Ark of the Covenant (Deut. 31:21-26), harbors the most important marker of male authority, that is the Tablets of stone, or God’s Law. Finally, the framing is completed by the closed door of Ezechiel’s vision (Ezek. 49:1-31), which acts as agent of surveillance against sin and corruption. These images of theological truth appear to reinforce the heteronormative confinement of the female body within the superiority of male intellectual authority.

However, by virtue of her maternal agency, the Virgin challenges male clerical authority. In the painting, she towers over the garden, inverting the pattern of male surveillance also dramatized by Chaucer

43. My translation.
44. Harris, “Mary in the Burning Bush,” 282-83.
45. Ibid., 281.
in Emily’s “gardyn,” and is firmly positioned at the center of a maternal and creational discourse in which the flourishing linked to Aaron’s rod or the burning bush are claimed by Mary’s feminine agency. Theologically and iconographically, the male-coded authority of the Old Testament serves Mary’s chaste maternity and acquires meaning as a metaphor of virginal viridity and maternal potency. In this painting, and in Mariology in general, the signification of this biblical imagery comes to fruition in the incarnate divine authority of the paradoxical figure of the Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus, clad in red. As testified by Simone dei Crocefissi’s painting discussed by Yoshikawa in her essay (this issue, fig. 2), Mary’s womb, as the harbinger of flourishing, transforms the necrophilic quality of the dead wood of the Cross into the blooming tree of life, marker of the Incarnation and Resurrection. By virtue of Mary’s physicality, God becomes incarnate through Christ as her maternal potency reifies the divine and his Word. The phallocentric images framing her body are recast as principles of truth and flourishing that culminate in the nativity. As the iconography in the painting reminds the audience, Mary is the well of life. In sum, through the complex entanglements of masculinity and femininity and of pagan and Marian potency, Emily is presented with a prophecy that, albeit not in the exact terms she first envisioned, allows for a queering of heteronormativity as male-coded necrophilic practices through the viridity of femininity, and, therefore, enables the performance of queer agency outside the strict confines of reproductive time and place. In other words, it is in the queer apertures of the hortus conclusus that Emily can imagine her agency. Although “The Virgin and Child in the Hortus conclusus” (fig. 4) and “The Little Garden of Paradise” (fig. 2) configure the walled garden as a space of containment of the queer potential of female sexuality, the Virgin’s viridity, the indulgent cornucopia of images of fertility, the queer entanglements of sacred and profane, secular and spiritual, alongside Mary’s intellectual agency (in the Frankfurt piece she is captured while reading), reveal queer interstices in which female subjectivity can be performed.

In the same way, Emily’s profuse crying—one of Chaucer’s narrative accretions—provides an affective response to the prophetic vision that seals her fate; it, too, is a strategy of imitatio Mariae that, via an
entangled intra-action with Daphne and the Heliades, is also an act of life:

> For which so soore agast was Emelye  
> That she was wel ny mad and gan to crye,  
> For she ne wiste what it signyfied,  
> But oonly for the feere thus hath she cried,  
> And weep that it was pitee for to heere.

(1.2341-45)

In *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion*, Sarah McNamer investigates the feminization of lay and religious piety in the later Middle Ages. As McNamer intimates, in order to cultivate compassion, the Christian devout is necessarily queered:

A wide range of feminine subject positions, including not only the spouse or mother of Christ but also that of feminized man, are drawn into service in the Middle English tradition as roles productive of compassion.46

McNamer also argues for the function of the Virgin’s tears as “a vehicle for protest” and as a dissenting strategy against the violence of patriarchy perpetrated on her Son.47 As we have seen, Emily’s specifically feminine spiritual authority is not intellectual, discursive, and male, as it is in Boccaccio’s absolutist hermeneutics and coercive glossing. Instead, it is signified by the quality of her response to the vision of the burning and bleeding branches; purely emotive, it nevertheless has generative powers that become apparent in Part 4 of the *Tale*. Although we do not hear her voice again, her divinely sanctioned and flourishing maternity creates an affective community in the text that counteracts the necrophilic images of bareness and death that underpin the masculine investment in heteronormativity. Emily’s crying, like Mary’s curative and life-giving tears, stem from the well of life, and its transformative, queering effect reroutes the narrative trope of the assistive and plaintive woman who, in

47. Ibid., 155–59.
traditional heroic literature, serves the political and cultural dominance of the hero:

Shrighte Emelye, and howleth Palamon,
And Theseus his suster took anon
Swonynge, and baar hire fro the corps away. . . .
For hym [Arcite] ther wepeth bothe child and man;
So greet wepyng was there noon, certayn,
Whan Ector was ybroght, al freshs yslayn,
To Troye. . . .
No man myghte gladen Theseus,
(1.2817-19; 30-33; 37)

While the widows who “perturben” Theseus at the beginning of the Tale allow him to perform and reiterate his authority as leader, in the final part of the narrative, following Emily’s nourishing tears, an affective response to the death of Arcite becomes a shared experience for the mixed community of Thebans who, including the hypermasculine Theseus, cannot stop their crying.

The cultural landscape created in the queer entanglement of traditional constructs of masculinity and femininity, and of paganism and Christianity, allows Emily the Amazon to imagine an empowered devotional femininity in which chastity and motherhood can create an alternative to the necrophilic containment of patriarchy. The *hortus conclusus* in *The Knight’s Tale* can therefore be reconfigured as a site, not solely of female containment and policing, but as a space that, once subjected to the dislocations of queer femininity, offers apertures in which both masculinity and femininity can be imagined as agentially creative. As the narrative framework of *The Canterbury Tales* develops, the Wife of Bath and “al hire secte” (4.1171), including the sexually inhibited Alison in *The Miller’s Tale*, May and her pleasure garden in *The Merchant’s Tale*, and the authoritative Mary in *The Physician’s Tale*, will all join Emily in the exploration of these apertures and will push forward her initial queering of the *hortus conclusus*.

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