

spendid in . . . releuyng of the pore comouns that the peple of oure lond be not brought to maumetrie [*idolatry*] . . . ne almes drawn fro pore nedy men bought with cristis precious blood'.⁶⁴ The 'Twelfth Conclusion' attacks the crafts responsible for forging the idolatrous 'dede ymagis' that mislead the people and dispossess the poor: 'the multitude of craftis nout nedful, usid in oure chirche, norsschith michil synne in wast, curiosite & disgyng. . . nature with a few craftis sufficeth to nede of man'.⁶⁵ That we need, but need so little, defines us as creatures subject to the law of death and capable of the *jouissance* of mortification. 'Need' supplies the baseline that enables calculation of the enjoyment to be got rid of by mortification, and secures mortification as (fantasmatically) *not* luxurious.

These are some of my conclusions. The first is that we make idols in part to make them tumble down. In building the object, in other words, we build a critique of its rights to power. This is an instance of the enjoyment we find in absurdity and in our subjection to it. The corollary of this is that, insofar as reformist discourse demystifies its objects, it is in fact interior to the principle of submission that underlies whatever form of the law it is critiquing. This means that image-breaking is not a form of sacrifice but a sacrificial form of enjoyment in which we break the images we have made and for which we are therefore responsible.

⁶⁴ *Of Poor Preaching Priests*, in *English Works of Wyclif*, ed. Matthew, 279.

⁶⁵ *English Wycliffite Writings*, ed. Hudson, 28.

3

The Idol of the Text

NICOLETTE ZEEMAN

But as I slepte, me mette I was
 Withyn a temple ymad of glas,
 In which ther were moo ymages
 Of gold, stondyng in sondry stages,
 And moo ryche tabernacles,
 And with perre moo pynacles,
 And moo curiouse portreytures,
 And queynte maner of figures
 Of olde werk, then I saugh ever.
 Chaucer, *House of Fame* (ll. 119–27)

'Seeing' is a characteristic mode of the medieval 'imaginative'—that is, rhetorical, 'inventive', or 'poetical'—text.¹ In the later Middle Ages the metaphor of sight is used to characterize a number of kinds of understanding,² but it is particularly prevalent in the context of the 'imaginative' text. This text is often described as an image, 'seen' in the mind.

The term *imaginativus*, in fact, bridges later medieval theories of sensation, knowledge, and textuality. The 'imaginative power' (*vis imaginativa*) is part of most schemas of the 'inner senses', the semi-rational and hypothetical powers that mediate between sensory and intellectual understanding and do preliminary comparative and combinative mental work. These powers receive and use data from all the senses, but the inner 'images' they use and produce tend to be described in visual terms.³ It is to these powers that 'imaginative' texts appeal. It is not surprising, therefore, that the figure of sight is also widespread in descriptions

I would like here to mention John Smyth, who first alerted me to the importance of noses. My warm thanks also to Jonathan Burt, Helen Cooper, Rita Copeland, Simon Gaunt, David Wallace, and my co-editors.

¹ On this terminology, see Kelly, *Medieval Imagination*, chs. 1–3; Minnis and Scott (eds.), *Medieval Literary Theory*, chs. 1, 2, 4, and 7; Copeland, *Rhetoric*; Zeeman, 'Schools'.

² Both rational and sensory forms of understanding are characterized in terms of sight, see Armstrong (ed.), *Later Greek Philosophy*, 220–1, 506–8; Gregory, 'Idea', 32, 34; Courtenay, 'Nominalism', 57; Tachau, *Vision*; Zeeman, 'Trial by Desire', ch. 3.

³ See Wolfson, 'Internal Senses'; Minnis, 'Ymaginatif'; and Hanna, ch. 5, below.

of imaginative texts. Grammarians commonly use the term *imago* for the rhetorical trope.⁴ They are alert to the endemic drive of language towards figuration and, although they make distinctions between 'proper' and 'troped' usage, they describe many propositions and texts as making verbal 'images'.⁵ Glossatory practices in reading and in writing mean that medieval thinkers are aware that things can be said in many ways and that all commentary and textual 'retelling' involves refiguration.⁶ This emphasis on the visibility of troped language is even more apparent when writers discuss discourses that foreground their own figuration such as exemplary or 'poetic' texts.⁷ Commentators repeatedly refer to the imaged or narrated text as mentally 'seen'; Arab poetics systematically characterizes the 'poetic' text as image-using, *imaginativa*.⁸

In this chapter, I want to look at a particular figure or object 'seen' in the imaginative text: the idol. The idol is, I believe, the underside of the notion that the imaginative text is like an image. For a number of later medieval writers, including Chaucer, the figure of the idol is a means of focusing on problematic aspects of imaginative textuality and its contents. The idol articulates some of the difficulties of dealing with textual inheritance, the archive, and the 'authority'. It may also, however, allow writers to focus on a particular set of 'contents' prevalent in the later medieval imaginative text: the natural, the body, and sexuality. In this chapter I shall consider the idol as it appears in a number of influential moments of medieval textual theorization and self-reflexiveness. My end point is Chaucer, in whose poetry idols proliferate.

What is the idol in the Middle Ages? Contrasting idols with Christian signs in the semiotics of Augustine, John Freccero describes idols as 'reified signs devoid of significance', gods 'coextensive with their representations'.⁹ The idol refuses to be read as part of a larger sign system, drawing attention only to itself and to its own malleable materiality. In this sense, although it is highly material, it is 'nothing' (1 Corinthians 8: 4). It exists in the mutable world only for itself and to be worshipped for itself. Idolaters foolishly worship idols despite the fact that they have made them: idols, in turn, lure their worshippers in the direction of their own materiality, sometimes even rendering idolaters themselves inanimate.¹⁰

⁴ Lewis and Short, *Latin Dictionary*, 'imago' n., I and III; Kelly, *Medieval Imagination*, 29; Simpson, *Sciences and the Self* ch. 8.

⁵ On 'proper' and troped language, Bloch, *Etymologies*, 40–54, 115–19, 159–60; Zeeman, 'Schools', 157–61. On imaginative and 'visual' textuality, see above, n.1; also Minnis, 'Ymaginatif'; Allen, *Ethical Poetic*, esp. ch. 4; Kay, *Romance*, 72–4; Zeeman, 'Schools' and 'Trial by Desire', ch. 3.

⁶ Copeland, *Rhetoric*.

⁷ For *poetria*, see Olson, 'Making'; Minnis and Scott (eds.), *Medieval Literary Theory*, chs. 4 and 7; Zeeman, 'Schools'.

⁸ Allen, *Ethical Poetic*; Dahan, 'Poétique'; Minnis and Scott (eds.), *Medieval Literary Theory*, ch. 4; Zeeman, 'Alterations', 222–6.

⁹ 'Fig Tree', 37.

¹⁰ See Camille, *Gothic Idol*, 14, 94, 149, 183; also Dagon 'orans', *ibid.* 7 and fig. 140; but see also Fradenburg, ch. 2, above.

The illustrations of Michael Camille's *The Gothic Idol* reveal that idols are portrayed in a huge variety of shaped, painted, and sculpted substances. They are concrete artefacts, images, and statues; they are associated with temples, pillars, and architectural features; they frequently stand on pedestals or pillars; they are often multiple, clustering in groups. In chapter 2 of this volume, Fradenburg also points to the defining multiplicity of the idol. The idol is also malleable. Just as the idol is made out of stuff, it can be broken down into its elements again or formed into something new: the idolaters of medieval texts are always threatening them with just this.¹¹ The pagan idol is concrete and even monumental, but also on the verge of mutation or dissolution. In fact, in the illustrations, idols are frequently in a state of collapse: many images of idols, after all, occur in illustrations of the Fall of the Idols during the Flight to Egypt.¹² But there are also many faceless or defaced idols. Sometimes the evidence suggests that they were originally portrayed as disfigured; sometimes it suggests that the disfigurement has occurred later on.¹³ There is, in other words, an important coincidence between the idol's iconography of disintegration and the treatment that images of the idols received at the hands of medieval image-users. One central characteristic of the idol, we might say, is its 'brokenness'. Walter Benjamin's description of the allegorizing literature of Baroque Germany seems relevant here: 'self-sufficient and intent upon the display of its own substance', dead in 'its concrete tangibility', its meanings fragmentary and 'atomizing'.¹⁴ This is a mortificatory and broken multiplicity, one of inherited fragments.

The pagan idol is usually an artefact in the form of a body, sometimes devilish or monstrous, often anthropomorphic. Camille documents the close association of the idol with the pictorial and sculptural artefacts of antiquity. Although idols can be portrayed as grotesque, strange, and even comic, they also include the gods and mythological figures of pagan antiquity—indeed, some of the features I connect with the idol will in fact be features primarily associated with the pagan god. Many of them are nude or semi-nude; this nudity may have been read as beautiful or erotic but, Camille suggests, it may also have been disturbing, part of the shocking effect of the idol.¹⁵

On the one hand, then, medieval commentators and mythographers put much effort into circumscribing the idol by correct and discriminating 'reading'. On the other hand the idol remains frighteningly opaque. Unlike the Christian sign or the readable 'image', the idol defies the viewer fully to comprehend it. And yet medieval writers cannot repudiate it either. This is not just because of the

¹¹ See Jean Bodel, *Saint Nicolas*, 80–1; *Cleanliness*, ed. Anderson, ll. 1345–8; *Sowdone of Babylone*, ll. 308–11; 2431–54; 2493–522; Camille, *Gothic Idol*, 129.

¹² Camille, *Gothic Idol*, introd.; also figs. 51, 70, 96, 97, 117.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 19, 99, figs. 14, 54.

¹⁴ *Origin*, 201, 226, 208; also 178.

¹⁵ *Gothic Idol*, 77–101; Camille here argues against an exclusively erotic reading of the naked idol.

inevitable and recurrent problem of idolatry within an image-using religious culture. It is also because the idol is for medieval thinkers a component of what is for the Middle Ages the foundational inheritance of antique mythology, philosophy, and poetics. According to a common definition, for instance, gods and mythology are the defining matter of *poetria*.¹⁶ The idol is therefore something alien, but also an object of historical identification, something intimately part of medieval intellectual and writerly culture.

In *The Dream of the Moving Statue*, Kenneth Gross considers statues in the light of Freud's thinking on the introjected object in 'Mourning and Melancholia'. Just as the statue is associated with the memorial or mortuary monument, so the objects of introjection are 'bound up with a sense of distortion and loss, in which the ego is fragmented, fissured, and even poisoned by the very process that helps to constitute it'. According to Gross, this explains the intensity of the experience of the statue and recurrence of a desire to attribute life to it. This is 'why statues seem so well fitted to our mourning, why their strange opacity can make them seem at once so ghostly and so familiar'.¹⁷ The statue provides an intensely cathected link between the culture of the past, especially an institutional and public culture of the past, and the inner life of the present.

In the textual and poetic theory of the Middle Ages, I suggest, the idol has a similar function. The figure of the idol—the god, the mythological person, the naked body, or simply the concrete artefact—articulates the anxieties of a highly archival culture about its own textual inheritances, especially the non-Christian ones. Insofar as the idol has a communal and memorial status, it brings with it questions about the nature of institutions and relations with the past. In *De doctrina christiana* Augustine intimates that authoritative texts may be like pagan idols. He reads the 'spoils of the Egyptians' taken by the Israelites as the teachings of the classical philosophers appropriated by Christians. Although the Israelites took only 'vases and ornaments' ('vasa atque ornamenta') and left the 'idols and weighty burdens' ('idola . . . et onera gravia'), Augustine is aware that the precepts 'useful' to the Christians are to be found in the same philosophical texts as the 'simulated and superstitious imaginings' ('simulata et superstitiosa figmenta') and their burdens of superfluous labour. He points clearly to the difficulty of separating the bad idols from the good vases.¹⁸ Petrarch offers a different version of this problem, when he complains about scholars who 'decorate their rooms with furniture devised to decorate their minds and . . . use

¹⁶ See Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiarum libri*, v. 111. 7. 9; Olson, 'Making', 277–8; Zeeman, 'Schools',

153; ¹⁷ *Moving Statue*, 35–7; I thank Elizabeth Fowler for this ref.

¹⁸ Exod. 3:22, 11:2, and 12:35–6; Augustine, *De doctrina*, 11. 40. 60; trans. Robertson, *On Christian Doctrine*, 75 (altered). At *De doctrina*, 111. 7. 11 Augustine admits that idols can be read as euhemeristic 'signs'; see Gross, *Spenserian Poetics*, 71.

books as they use Corinthian vases or painted panels and statues'.¹⁹ In both cases, the antique art object figures the dangerous reification of even the most authoritative text.

What is more, the medieval archive is also like the idol in that its texts are dangerously manipulable and open to disfiguration. Notoriously, they can 'authorize' many things. But also like the medieval idol, especially, perhaps, the naked idol, texts have a certain irreducible materiality and even a disturbing 'bodiliness': they point back into the embodied world, and they will not go away. As we shall see, an important tradition of texts uses the figure of the naked idol to think about the materiality of the 'natural' world, the body, and sexuality. In these texts, the various and strange 'looking' associated with the idol—uncomprehending, fascinated, shocked, aggressive, voyeuristic—become metaphors for the difficult relations of medieval writers with the texts and materials that they have inherited. It is no coincidence that a disciple of Hermes Trismegistus found a new book 'containing all the secrets of the universe' under a statue of the master Hermes; or that the pseudo-Ovidian *De vetula* was authorized by its supposed discovery in the tomb of Ovid.²⁰

I shall begin by discussing a few very clear late medieval works in which the text is figured as a sculptural artefact or idol, most notably Chaucer's *House of Fame*. In the rest of the chapter I look at two tropological traditions which exploit the anthropomorphic body of the idol to signal some problematic aspects of medieval textual inheritances: first, the 'wax nose' of authority and, second, the 'naked body' of the poetic text.

I

Behind medieval figuration of the text as concrete artefact or idol lie a number of classical ekphrastic narratives, such as the painted temple and imaged shield in the *Aeneid*, or Philomela's tapestry in the *Metamorphoses*.²¹ Later medieval mythographic texts reveal that theorists conceived of the pagan gods in visual terms, as images, 'pictured' and 'seen'.²² The Latin and Italian 'fame' tradition traced by Piero Boitani is very clearly partly an 'idol' tradition. It includes the 'castle' of the philosophers in Dante, *Inferno* IV; the philosophers, poets, and their subject matters portrayed in the painted chamber and sculptural fountain of

¹⁹ *Four Dialogues*, ed. and trans. Rawski, 31.

²⁰ See note to *House of Fame*, 1273; all Chaucer refs. will be to *The Riverside Chaucer* unless otherwise stated and are usually given in the text. *De vetula*, praef. 10–14; saints' lives also often claim that their source was found in the saint's tomb (Vauchez, *Sainthood*, 19).

²¹ See Virgil, *Aeneid*, 1. 453–93; VIII. 626–731; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VI. 571–86.

²² 'They paint [*pingunt*] this one naked . . . they paint her swimming in the sea . . . a conch being carried is painted' (Fulgentius, cited in Tinkle, *Venus and Cupids*, 81, 235 n. 14; trans. altered; see also the artists' 'Notebook', cited *ibid.* 92, and Bersuire, cited *ibid.* 237 n. 61); see also Smalley, *English Friars*, 112–21, 165–83. On *poetria*, see above, n. 7.

Boccaccio's *Amorosa visione*, and the triumphal procession of authors of Petrarch's *Trionfi*. Several of these literary monuments and tableaux are characterized by obscurity and defacement, and are not at first recognized; all of them are ultimately associated with death and the passage of time.²³ In these texts it is possible to see writers using the figure of the idol to focus on the difficulties of dealing with the textual tradition and its somewhat intractable monuments of literary authority.

It is in relation to such texts that Chaucer composed the *House of Fame*. Here Chaucer's poetic authorities are all sculptures and idols, artefacts simultaneously challenging and opaque, both tempting and resisting interpretation. These are the 'yimages | Of gold', 'curiouse portreytures, | And queynte maner of figures | Of olde werke' in the temple of Venus. Singled out is the unglossed nude idol of Venus, 'Naked fletyng [floating] in a see' (ll. 121–2, 125–7, 133). All Chaucer's statues of Venus are drawn from the 'pictured' Venus found in medieval mythographic writings, an 'idol' tradition notable for its cultivation of ambiguity or openness of meaning.²⁴ But equally emblematic is Chaucer's narrative of the *Aeneid*, 'graven' 'on a table of bras', fixed in the very substance of the temple (ll. 212, 142). The notoriously ambiguous status of this narrative, both 'seen' and written, is an excellent instance of the text understood in imagistic terms—as a graven image or idol. Chaucer observes that the narrative can be interpreted in many ways but also recognizes in its many textual avatars the fact that its meaning cannot be controlled: 'Whoso to knowe hit hath purpos, | Rede Virgile in Eneydos | Or the Epistle of Ovyde' (ll. 377–9). Chaucer's refusal, both here and elsewhere, to provide his inherited tales with expected or satisfactory glosses—and sometimes any glosses at all—has been seen as part of his problematizing of the process of textual reception. But it is clearly also part of the problem of the idol and its dangerous 'openness'.

In the beryl castle of Fame, amongst the 'babewynnes [gargoyles]' and 'ymageries', the secular 'saints' under the 'pynacles' and 'habitacl'es' of the building are innumerable 'mynstralles | And gestiours' (ll. 1188–1200). These 'makers' are idols, as are their stories, songs, and images. Inside the castle—indeed, holding it up like the pillars of the temple of brass in the *Parliament of Fowls*²⁵—are the great Latin, and perhaps English, poetic authorities, each on their own idol's pillar.²⁶ The various dour metals and stones of these pillars are subject to some

²³ Dante, *Inferno*, 1v. 79–147; Boccaccio, *Amorosa visione*, cantos 4–29, 38–9; Petrarch, *Trionfi*, 'd'amore', 4 and 'della fama', 3; see also Alain de Lille, *Anticlaudianus*, 1. 107–86, trans. Sheridan 48–53; and Boitani, *World of Fame*.

²⁴ On the lack of 'interpretation' in the mythographic tradition in which Chaucer writes, Tinkle, *Venus and Cupids*, 92, 101, 113. On the artefact in Chaucer's *House of Fame*, see Minnis, 'Figures of Olde Werke'.

²⁵ This seems to be implied by *House of Fame*, 1490–6; see *Parliament of Fowls*, 230–1.

²⁶ Arguing that Chaucer refers to himself as 'Englyssh Gaufride' (l. 1470), see Cooper, 'Four Last Things', 58–9.

elaboration and emphasis. It is an odd inversion of the curved body of the traditional 'falling' idol that these idols' bodies are presumably curved like corbels as they hold up the subject matters they have made famous—the burden of fame.²⁷ Both authors and the content of their texts have taken on the substance and weight of the idol.

Chaucer's idols are not themselves marked by forms of defacement or 'brokenness'. However, their great number and apparent randomness suggests that their textual authority is a contingent and partial thing, and their meaning fragmentary and conflictual. And they stand on the mutating substance of water, an ice hill in continual process of dissolution:

wel unnethes koude I knowe scarcely
 Any lettres for to rede
 Hir names by; for, out of drede,
 They were almost ofthowed so thawed away
 That of the lettres oon or two
 Was molte away of every name.
 (ll. 1140–5)

In these disfigured names Chaucer is explicit that the poetic inheritance is marked by various forms of defacement, lability, lost words and names, and the perennial question, 'What may ever laste?' (l. 1147). Chaucer's idol figures all the burdens, fears, and desires elicited by the unpredictable authorities and strange texts of the past. When Geoffrey finally catches sight of the 'man of gret auctorite' (ll. 2155–8), he cannot be named.

Chaucer takes up similar themes at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, the text whose supposed *auctor*, Lollius, appears among the poetic idols of the *House of Fame* (l. 1468). Here Chaucer tells his poem to 'kis the steppes where as thow seest pace | Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace' (V. 1791–2). It is difficult not to recall in these brief lines the monumental tableaux in which Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio had envisaged their poets and philosophers. At Chaucer's temple, his own text is the worshipper; texts are, after all, acts of devotion to their predecessors. However, in this same passage Chaucer is also looking forward to new kinds of textuality, 'som comedye' (V. 1788). Again, in other words, we see Chaucer raising the spectre of textual idolatry, all the while also signalling disengagement from some of the textual traditions in which he has worked up to this point.

And for this reason the volte-face that follows is not perhaps entirely surprising: it is a volte-face highly characteristic of medieval attitudes to idolatry. Less than a hundred lines later, Chaucer again links together gods, idols, and poetry, but in order to repudiate them:

²⁷ On the carrying of this 'burden', see Simpson, 'Poetic Discretion', 14–15; Jeauneau, 'Nains et géants'; Ziolkowski, *Grammar*, 88–9 n. 45; for the corbel itself as a 'marmouset' or idol, see Camille, ch. 9, below.

Lo here, of payens corsed olde rites!
Lo here, what alle hire goddes may availle!

Lo here, the fyn and guerdoun for travaille
Of Jove, Appollo, of Mars, of swich rascaille!
Lo here, the forme of olde clerkis speche
In poetrie, if ye hire bokes seche.

(V. 1849–50, 1852–5)

The vexed conclusion of *Troilus* must surely be Chaucer's 'Fall of the Idols'.

11

In the rest of this chapter I turn to some rather more bodily idols. Writing his anti-heresy text *De fide catholica* in the late twelfth century, Alain de Lille influentially said: 'because authority has a wax nose, that is, it can be bent in diverse ways, it must be fortified with reasons' ('quia auctoritas cereum habet nasum, id est in diversum potest flecti sensum, rationibus roborandum est').²⁸ According to Alain, *auctoritas* lacks the cognitive certainty of rational knowledge. Handed down by an 'authoritative' person or text, *auctoritas* is a willed understanding accepted in an act of faith. Its surety derives not from anything inherent in it but from its mode or source of transmission.²⁹ Although *auctoritas* is not necessarily 'imaginative' understanding, it shares with imaginative understanding its rationally uncertain status. And when Alain de Lille describes this uncertain epistemological status, he uses an imaginative figure to do so: the 'wax nose'.

He may be playing on the commentators' view that the nose represents 'sagacity', 'discretion', or 'circumspection'.³⁰ Ovid's name Naso is related sometimes to his large nose, but more often to his intellectual and moral acuity.³¹ Leviticus 21: 18 instructs that nobody with a nose that is too small, large, or bent (*tortus*) should be part of the priesthood: this passage too is read in terms of the various misuses of the intellect.³² Alain's bendy nose of authority is just one of many noses under whose rubric commentators worry about their intellectual practices.

²⁸ *De fide catholica*, ch. 30 (col. 333); see Chenu, *Saint Thomas*, 144–5; Dronke (ed.), *Twelfth Century Philosophy*, 7; Minnis and Scott (eds.), *Medieval Literary Theory*, 323. On this text, see d'Alverny, in her edn. Alain de Lille, *Textes inédits*, 156–62.

²⁹ On *auctoritas*, see Chenu, 'Auctor' and 'Authentica et magistralia'; Minnis, *Theory of Authorship*, 10–15.

³⁰ *Novum glossarium* ed. Blatt, 'Nasus' n. 2; Alain de Lille, *Liber in distinctionibus*, under 'Nasus' (cols. 869–70); for possible classical origins, see Lewis and Short, *Latin Dictionary*, 'Nasus' n. I. B.

³¹ See *Accessus ad auctores*, 35; Ghisalberti, 'Biographies', 14, 27–8, 45, 52, 53, 58; for an earlier comment, see Lydus, *Magistracies*, 1. 23 (pp. 38–9). I have not found phallic readings of Ovid's nose before the early modern period (pace Curry, *Mediaeval Sciences*, ch. 4; also David, 'Noses').

³² Gregory the Great, *Regula pastoralia*, 1. 11 (col. 24); Peter of Celle, PL 202. 948.

However, I want to focus on the wax matter of Alain's nose.³³ Dronke has suggested that Alain is recalling the Neoplatonic view that primordial matter is flexible like wax.³⁴ The willed understanding of authority is thus malleable like matter. But Alain is also invoking an artefactual and perhaps idol-like 'wax nose'. It could be the artificial nose of an actor;³⁵ this view may be confirmed by another writer cited by Dronke, Adelard of Bath:

I affirm that reason must be sought out first, and when she is found, authority, if she lies near, can then be made to follow... For I am not one of those whom the painting of the skin [*pictura pellis*] can satisfy. Indeed, every written statement is a wanton, exposed now to these affections, now to those.³⁶

Adelard's 'painting on the skin' refers to writing on parchment; but it describes this writing as a made-up face, an anthropomorphic and erotic artefact.³⁷ If we are not quite in the realm of the idol here, we are nevertheless in the realm of the grotesque and artficed body.

However, Alain's wax nose could also be part of a statue. Although there is minimal evidence for substantial independent wax sculpture in the Middle Ages, it existed in the ancient world and in the early modern period. And wax talismans for purposes of devotion and magic certainly did exist in the Middle Ages. Perhaps most important, wax was a recognized component in many artefacts, employed not only for wax tablets, but also for moulding, stopping, sticking, filling, and supporting; it was used in enamels, glasswork, metalwork, and sculpture.³⁸ Pygmalion in the *Roman de la rose* works in wood, stone, metals, bone, and wax.³⁹ Alain's authority with a nose of wax seems to invoke the idea of a statue, a wax idol. Whether it is entirely made of wax or merely equipped with a wax nose, it is hard to tell: it is, after all, the noses of statues that are always the first to go.⁴⁰ The important point, however, is that Alain's wax nose of authority

³³ For wax as a common figure for moral weakness, see Lewis and Short, *Latin Dictionary*, 'Cereus' adj, 11. B and C; *Thesaurus linguae latinae*, 'Cereus' adj, 1b; Horace, *De arte poetica*, l. 163; Philip of Harvengt, PL 203.995. For the phrase 'doctus cereus', see Latham et al., *Dictionary*, 'Cereus' adj, 1e.

³⁴ Dronke cites Thierry of Chartres referring to Plato (*Twelfth Century Philosophy*, 7); on the 'facilis cera' out of which all things are stamped, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, xv. 169–72 (also Barkan, "'Living Sculptures"', 645).

³⁵ See Twycross and Carpenter, 'Masks' (esp. 8, 11, 12, 74, and illustrations); and 'Materials'. I thank Richard Beadle here.

³⁶ 'Quaestiones naturales', 11.

³⁷ This metaphor also invokes widespread medieval figuration of the text as a woman (see below, nn. 50 and 52); for a 13th-cent. writer on the made-up female face as like an idol, see Étienne Bourbon, cited in Twycross and Carpenter, 'Masks', 15.

³⁸ See Theophilus, *Divers Arts*, index, 'wax'; Newman, *Art Form*, 13 and *passim*; Gaborit and Ligoit (eds.), *Sculptures*, 17 and *passim*. On ancient sculptures and talismans, see Horace, *Satires*, 1. 8. 30; 43; *Epistles*, 11. 1. 265; *Epodes*, 17. 76.

³⁹ *Le Roman de la rose*, ed. Strubel, ll. 20822–3, also l. 16061 (all refs. are to this edn.); Leese has a nose so pretty you couldn't make a prettier one in wax (l. 849); 'warm wax' is also a figure of erotic manipulability and manipulation in Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* (ll. 1429–30, 2117).

⁴⁰ On the ubiquitous lost noses of ancient statuary, see Peter Greenaway's film *The Belly of an Architect* (1987).

is an artefactual nose and like an idol in that it is malleable, able to be 'bent' into new shapes.

The prologue to *De fide catholica* confirms this reading. Although the Fathers of the Church dealt with old heresies, Alain is writing because 'novi haeretici . . . ex diversis haeresibus, unam generalem haeresim compingunt . . . quasi ex diversis idolis unum idolum, ex diversis monstris unum monstrum' ('new heretics . . . have put together a general heresy out of various heresies . . . like one idol [made] out of various idols, one monstrous thing [made] out of various monstrous things'). The teachings of the heretics, based on distortions of authoritative texts, are figured as an all-encompassing idol or monstrous thing made out of smaller ones—perhaps like the imaginative chimera, which as medieval textual theorists often said, was made out of bits of other animals in the mind.⁴¹ In the first chapter, moreover, these heretical teachings are compared to the mutating or hybrid 'monsters' of mythology and 'poetry', such as Antaeus or the Minotaur—the mythological creatures (idols?) of literary antiquity.⁴² Heresy, in other words, shares with imaginative literature its inventive and combinative practices. In contrast to such distortions of authoritative matter, Alain wants his 'authorities' to be substantial artefacts of a different kind, 'ramparts' [*munimenta*], 'fixed', as he says, 'with strong words'.⁴³ But it is clear that the very materiality of the fortifications of authority means that they can all too easily become a deceiving idol, one whose meaning is spoken ambiguously and even 'imaginatively', 'in amphibologies'.⁴⁴

By the Reformation, Alain's figure of the 'wax nose' seems to be something of an academic proverb, often connected with Scripture itself. In his life of the Dutch religious Johannes Hatten (d. 1485), Petrus Traiecti, Johannes's disciple, speaks of how Hatten would not engage in polemical arguments, acknowledging placidly that 'Scripture has a wax nose and is read in different ways by different people'.⁴⁵ Tyndale uses the saying more aggressively and ironically, however, to allude to the 'idolatries' of the Catholic Church: 'if the scripture be contrary, then make it a nose of wax, and wrest it this way and that way, till it agree'.⁴⁶ It is human perversity that supplies Scripture with an anthropomorphic 'figure' or 'face'. In the religious thought of the Reformation, then, the malleable figure of the idol haunts the authoritative text.

⁴¹ *De fide catholica*, prologue (cols. 307–8); on the chimera, see Minnis, 'Ymaginatif', 73. See also Alain on the 'spoils of the Egyptians', *De arte praedicatoria*, ch. 36 (PL 210. 180–1); and Ziolkowski, *Grammar*, 96–7.

⁴² Col. 307; see also *Liber in Distinctionibus*, col. 815.

⁴³ *De fide catholica*, prologue (col. 308).

⁴⁴ *Troilus*, IV. 1406; on medieval views about the ambiguous and deceiving sayings of the pagan gods, Minnis, *Pagan Antiquity*, ch. 2.

⁴⁵ Petrus Traiecti, 'Vita'; ed. Dumber, I. 208.

⁴⁶ Tyndale, *Expositions*, 103; Calvin and Luther, cited in Evans, *Problems*, 76; also *OED*, 'nose' n, 4; Ghosh, 'Interpretation', I.

The figure is also central to medieval poetic tradition. It appears in one of the seminal theoretical texts of this tradition, Macrobius' fifth-century *Commentarium in somnium Scipionis*:

Sed quia sciunt inimicam esse naturae apertam nudamque expositionem sui, quae sicut vulgaribus hominum sensibus intellectum sui vario rerum tegmine operimentoque subtrahit, ita a prudentibus arcana sua voluit per fabulosa tractari.

(But because they realize that a frank, open exposition of herself is distasteful to Nature, who, just as she has withheld an understanding of herself from the uncouth senses of men by enveloping herself in variegated garments, has also desired to have her secrets handled by more prudent individuals through fabulous narratives.)⁴⁷

For Macrobius, Nature's fear of nakedness functions as a justification for the fabulaic writing of philosophers and poets. Nature requires the verbal and epistemological 'coverings'.⁴⁸ This also links Nature to the pagan gods and thus to idolatry: because Nature does not wish to show herself she allows people to worship her in the form of gods. These gods are in turn portrayed by means of idols, pictured and sculpted with bodies and bodily attributes:

In truth, divinities have always preferred to be known and worshipped in the fashion assigned to them by ancient popular tradition, which made images of beings that had no physical form, represented them as of different ages, though they were subject neither to growth nor decay, and gave them clothes and ornaments, though they had no bodies.⁴⁹

The gods and idols that mask Nature are also figures for the textuality that 'covers' her. According to the commentators and mythographers, as we noted above, the gods are the defining 'matter' of 'poetry'. Macrobius thus affirms the place of the pagan god and idol at the centre of medieval theory on 'poetry', myth, and fable.

However, in this passage the goddess Nature too is figured as a naked body or goddess, one whom poetical, philosophical, and glossatory discourses can 'uncover' by describing or explicating too 'openly'. Language, in other words, both 'covers' and 'uncovers'; it can mask but it can also, in the words of later medieval commentators, be 'naked'.⁵⁰ Although Nature here is not a statue or artefact, she

⁴⁷ *Commentarii*, I. 2. 17; ed. Willis, 7; *Commentary*, trans. Stahl, 86.

⁴⁸ On such 'integumental' thinking, Dronke, *Fabula*, ch. I; also Copeland and Melville, 'Allegory'.

⁴⁹ Macrobius, *Commentarii*, I. 2. 20; ed. Willis, 8; *Commentary*, trans. Stahl, 87.

⁵⁰ In the later Middle Ages a 'naked' text can be a text which is unglossed or one that is understood to be 'literal' or somehow rhetorically 'clear'; it can be the text under commentary or the commentary itself; see esp. Dinshaw on Jerome's influential description of the non-Christian text as the 'captive woman' of Deuteronomy (21: 10–13), to be stripped and reclothed by her Christian readers (Epistola 70, in *Epistulae*, ed. Hilberg, I. 702); see de Lubac, *Exégèse*, I. 290–304; Dinshaw, *Sexual Poetics*, 22–5). See also Dinshaw, *Sexual Poetics*, introd.; Delany, *Naked Text*, 117–23; Minnis, *Lifting the Veil*; Ellis, 'Choices', 25; and Chaucer, *Legend of Good Women*, prologue G. 85–8.

is a naked and ambiguously pagan deity. She is thus, I propose, reminiscent of the idol. Macrobius describes the risks of uncovering Nature, moreover, by recounting how the poet Numenius had revealed the secrets of the Eleusinian goddesses: as a result, he dreamed that he saw them at a brothel, where they angrily explain that he has 'prostituted' them.⁵¹ A similar idea appears in a later Latin poem, 'Nature talamos'. According to this, 'a poet entering and opening up the wedding chamber of Nature' ('Nature talamos intrans reseransque poeta') deserves what follows: he dreams that he finds himself in a wood full of howling wild animals and, seeing a little house containing a little light and 'what looks like an image of a naked virgin' ('quasi nude virginis instar'), he begs to be let in. But the virgin, who turns out to be Nature, refuses him entry, leaving him to his death among the wild animals. Once profaned—that is, once she is revealed to be the naked goddess—she is as violent as Diana to Actaeon.⁵²

For Macrobius, to 'unclothe' Nature is to reveal the supernatural forces immanent in the universe. Later commentators such as Abelard would suggest that the 'secrets' of Nature are philosophical and spiritual truths that cannot be fully conceptualized or articulated.⁵³ Other commentators, however, would explore Nature's 'secrets' in terms of the material functions of the physical world. William of Conches, for instance, 'reveals' Nature in euhemeristic readings of the gods: 'Ceres is nothing other than earth's natural power of growing into crops and multiplying them'.⁵⁴ A fourteenth-century *Metamorphoses* commentary claims that Ovid has in fact himself already revealed these natural processes: he 'opens up and lays bare [aperit et denudat] for us the divisions of the elements which lay closed in primordial matter'.⁵⁵ Alain de Lille and Jean de Meun offer even more tendentious versions of Nature's 'secrets'. In Alain's *De planctu Naturae*, Nature, as usual, has covered her face with 'figures [figuris] in order to protect [her] secret from being cheapened'; she refuses to most 'an intimate knowledge' ('familiarem . . . scientiam') of herself.⁵⁶ But her garments are torn, so that she is forced 'to go like a harlot to a brothel'. Partly an echo of the damaged clothes of Philosophy in Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, this tearing also has a more intriguing 'natural' meaning. For it is caused by homo-

⁵¹ *Commentarii*, I. 2. 19–20; ed. Willis, 7–8.

⁵² See Raby, 'Nuda natura', pp. 73–4, ll. 1, 12; also his *Secular Latin Poetry*, ii. 22–3; for other instances of the erotic, secret body of knowledge, see the epitaph for Thierry of Chartres, to whom Nature was 'semper pregnans' and Philosophy 'se detexit nudam' (Vernet, 'Épithaphe', ii. 669–70, ll. 17, 29); Richard of Bury speaks of the 'nuda veritas' and says that 'sub voluptatis iconio delicata Minerva delitesceret in occulto' (*Philobiblon*, ch. 13, cited in Dinshaw, *Sexual Poetics*, 21, 203 n. 58); also Raby, *Secular Latin Poetry*, ii. 14; Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Roman de la rose*, 7164–82.

⁵³ See *Theologia christiana*, 111. 47; ed. Buytaert, 213; also I. 106; ed. Buytaert, 116; I. 117; ed. Buytaert, 121–2; *Theologia scholarium*, I. 163–6; ed. Buytaert and Mews, 385–7; Dronke, *Fabula*, 55–67.

⁵⁴ William here understands 'Nature' as 'the nature of the gods' (Dronke, *Fabula*, 48; see also 13–55).

⁵⁵ Ghisalberti, 'Biographies', 53.

⁵⁶ See 'De planctu', pr. 3; ed. Häring, 828; *Plaint*, trans. Sheridan, 123–4; on the hidden body within, see also pr. 1, ed. Häring, 809; trans. Sheridan 75.

sexuality and other anti-procreative human actions within the order of nature. These too are presumably 'secrets' of nature, the 'natural' actions that tear her garments, revealing themselves and her (are they the same?) in the process.⁵⁷ In Jean de Meun's continuation of the *Roman de la rose*, by contrast, Nature actively reveals herself. This is the Nature so beautiful that no human artist can portray her (even Zeuxis was unable, though he used five naked maidens as models). But in her own 'dilatatory' discourse Jean's Nature tells all: 'I am a woman and cannot keep silent; from now on I want to reveal everything, for a woman can hide nothing'. Like indiscreet poets and commentators, Nature lays bare the moral and natural 'sins' of human beings.⁵⁸ She fulsomely complies, in other words, with Jean's avowed project of revealing the natural sexual and procreative activity that is 'hidden' by the courtly text of his predecessor, Guillaume de Lorris.⁵⁹

In his 'naked Nature' passage, then, Macrobius offers later writers a way of thinking about the problematic materials available in the very textual archive of medieval Nature. Like the nakedness of a pagan goddess or idol, the nakedness of Nature alludes to the dangers of textuality in general. The philosophical and poetical discourses of Nature are opaque, malleable, and tendentious. Macrobius's theories thus provide a justification for the tightly policed practices of medieval exegesis. And yet his idol-like 'naked Nature', and his implicit acknowledgement that textuality can reveal as well as cover, also offer later writers an articulation of the exotic allure of matters 'natural' and their texts.⁶⁰

Another set of naked idols appears in Jean de Meun's continuation of the *Roman de la rose*: the statue of Pygmalion and the sexual 'shrine'. In these pornographic narratives, Jean pursues his project of revealing the 'nakedness' of Nature; he also uses the figure of the idol to reflect on the textuality of *fin'amors* and on 'Macrobian' poetics.

In the first part of the *Roman de la rose*, Guillaume de Lorris may appear to repudiate idolatry by portraying those excluded from the garden as images on the outside of the wall of the garden. In fact, in the courtly love literature of which de Lorris's *Roman* is an example, desire is often described as idolatrous worship, and

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pr. 4; ed. Häring, 838; trans. Sheridan, 142–3; see also *Anticlaudianus*, I. 313–15; trans. Sheridan, 58. On homosexuality within the order of Nature in the *De planctu*, see Jordan, *Invention of Sodomy*, ch. 4. Later in *De planctu*, Alain figures all vices against nature as idolatry (pr. 6; ed. Häring, 852–7; trans. Sheridan, 170–80); on this connection between idolatry and homosexuality, see Camille, *Gothic Idol*, 90–2; Ziolkowski, *Grammar*, 74–6; Jordan, *Invention of Sodomy*, 36, 101.

⁵⁸ ll. 16189–236, 19222–4; *Romance of the Rose*, trans. Horgan, 250–1, 296.

⁵⁹ See Wetherbee, 'Literal', 286; Minnis, *Lifting the Veil*; Kay, *Romance*, 16–18 and ch. 6. I do not agree with Wetherbee and Minnis that Jean de Meun is for the great part 'unflinchingly literal' (Minnis, *Lifting the Veil*, 4; but see Kay, *Romance*, 28); on the tropological complexity of Jean's rhetoric, even as it works to demystify the courtly language of 'fin'amors', see Poirion, *Roman*; Kay, *Romance*; Gaunt, 'Bel Accueil', 85–93.

⁶⁰ In the passage cited above Abelard refers to the 'naked words' (*verba nuda*) that reveal the *archana* ('hidden things') of Philosophy (*Theologia scholarium*, I. 163; ed. Buytaert and Mews, 385); Alain de Lille describes how the poets 'expose [prostitute?] naked falsehood' ('nudam falsitatem prostituunt' (*De planctu*, pr. 4; ed. Häring, 837; my trans.).

the beloved as a sort of idol.⁶¹ This trope of idolatry acknowledges the way that such literature appropriates the language of religion—as well as its unstable relation to ecclesiastical and clerical value systems. The trope of idolatry may also signal the non-consummatory, dilatory, and often diverted desire of literary *fin'amors*, a desire often characterized in terms of deferral and fetishization.⁶² The figure of idolatry in courtly love texts is therefore almost certainly already wittily self-aware.

Jean de Meun, however, gives it new prominence, using it to parody amorous idolatry and comically to explore the excitements of half-satisfied masculine heterosexual desire. Pygmalion's statue is disturbingly concrete and cold; but it is also fetishistically erotic, even phallic: 'When I want to enjoy kisses and embraces, I find my mistress as rigid as a stake and so cold that when my kiss touches her, my lips are chilled.'⁶³ Manuscript illustrations make the statue look like the mythographers' descriptions of the image of Venus, sometimes naked and sometimes semi-naked, swathed with a veil below the waist. Pygmalion obsessively dresses and undresses the statue (Figs. 3 and 4)⁶⁴ and enacts a masturbatory ritual of talking, singing, and dancing to it. Even though he caresses it and takes it to bed, it remains unresponsive, reifying the impossible, 'stone' woman of the literary love text. Pygmalion laments, 'I love an image that is deaf and dumb, that cannot move or stir, and that will never have pity on me.' But he is also clear that, were he a proper 'courtly' lover, he would be satisfied with this: 'there are many countries where many men have loved many ladies and served them as well as they could without receiving a single kiss'. It would be enough, he adds, if the ivory lady were to smile at him.⁶⁵

It is, therefore, Jean's hilarious joke that this particular lover is not left to languish. The gods take pity on Pygmalion and turn the statue not into some other material artefact, but into a woman.⁶⁶ In the *Metamorphoses* at this point Ovid compares the change to that of wax in the hand of the sculptor, 'as

⁶¹ Robertson, *Preface*, 99–104, 112–13, 450–52, 499–500, and illustrations; Camille, *Gothic Idol*, 298–316; Freccero, 'Fig Tree'; Kolve, 'God-Denying Fools'.

⁶² See Zumthor, *Essai*, 211–19; Hult, *Self-Fulfilling Prophecies*; Huot, *Song to Book*, 96–7, 113, 136, 143, 161, and 'Medusa Interpolation'; Kay, *Romance*, 46–7.

⁶³ ll. 20905–10; trans. Horgan, 322. Camille notes the allusions to erotic imagery in the *Song of Songs* and cites Holcot on Pygmalion's statue as 'effigies sine anima' (*Gothic Idol*, 321–2, 327; see also id., 'Cistercian Exegesis'); see also Robertson, *Preface*, 100–3; Tuve, *Allegorical Imagery*, 262; Fleming, 'Roman', 228–38; Egbert, 'Pygmalion as Sculptor'. For the view that masculine medieval lovers do not wish the beloved to turn into a 'real' woman, Kay, *Romance*, 47; for a very different argument, that Pygmalion is not an idolater, see Camille, *Gothic Idol*, 316–37; Minnis, *Lifting the Veil*, 22–3.

⁶⁴ See also Tuve, *Allegorical Imagery*, figs. 97, 98; *Romance*, trans. Dahlberg, figs. 47–52; Twycross, *Anadyomene*, 88–96; Camille, *Gothic Idol*, figs. 174, 176, 178 (for other idols, naked and half-dressed, see figs. 57–8 and *passim*); Huot, *Romance*, pl. 10; also above, n. 22; on dressing and undressing, *Roman de la rose*, 20941–1017; on the body partly clothed, Barthes, *Mythologies*, 84.

⁶⁵ ll. 20855–7; 20893–6; 20913–18; trans. Horgan, 321–2.

⁶⁶ On a widespread MS interpolation exploring this inverse metamorphosis, see Huot, 'Medusa Interpolation'.

Hymettian wax grows soft under the sun and, moulded by the thumb, is easily shaped to many forms'. Pygmalion's fantasy woman is completely malleable, turning from matter to obedient flesh: 'she refused him nothing that he wanted'.⁶⁷ Jean's tale of Pygmalion looks back to Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman* and suggests that it is an empty, non-consummatory tale of desire transfixed by its own icons and objects. Jean also enacts a comic and 'naturalist' solution to the rituals of courtly love.

However, this metamorphosis (a softening of something that was hard?) may also be something of an anticlimax. There is, after all, a pornographic dimension to Jean's interest in the lures and frustrations of the idol. The arteficing, 'denaturing', or partial veiling of the body enhance it as a certain kind of sexual object: from this perspective, the naked idol is more erotic than a real body. Not in a moral and critical and 'Augustinian' sense, but in an erotic sense, pornography surely is idolatry.⁶⁸ Here again, perhaps, Jean alludes to the shocking, idol-like nakedness of Nature and her sexual artefacts. Perhaps this is the implication of the illumination in the *Roman de la rose* manuscript Oxford, Bodleian Douce 195, in which Nature gazes with benign satisfaction on a little cluster of naked idols (Fig. 5).

It may also be the case for the denatured and prosthetic female body that forms the sexual 'shrine' in the last moments of the poem.⁶⁹ In this section Jean continues to use tropes of unveiling and veiling. We hear about the 'little loophole' set in the tower by Nature within which 'there was a sanctuary, more fragrant than a pomander and covered with a precious cloth, the finest and most noble between here and Constantinople'. The pilgrim approaches the shrine:

I knelt down without delay, full of agility and vigour, between the two fair pillars, for I was consumed with desire to worship at that lovely and venerable shrine with devout and reverent heart . . . I partly raised the curtain that screened the relics and, drawing near to the image that I knew to be close to the sanctuary, I kissed it devoutly.⁷⁰

The absurd pornography of the passage relies partly on the language of covering and uncovering; but it also derives from the 'unnatural' sexual object behind the curtain, the idol. In fact, the artefactual 'equipment' of the lover is fetishized just as much as the shrine—his pilgrim's 'staff' is not only a tool to be used but also an end to be enjoyed:

Nature . . . had made me a gift of the staff, and gladly set to work to polish it before I was sent to school . . . I have never lost it, nor will I if I can help it, for I would not part with it for five hundred times a hundred thousand pounds . . . I am very glad when I look at it and I thank her for her present, being full of joy and happiness whenever I feel it.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, x. 284–6; *Roman de la rose*, 21181; trans. Horgan, 326.

⁶⁸ See ll. 21075–6; trans. Horgan, 325. My thanks to Jeremy Dimmick and Simon Gaunt at this point.

⁶⁹ Much recent erotic art has used the prosthetic body: see Kraus, *Cindy Sherman*.

⁷⁰ ll. 20796, 20810–14, 21593–8, 21603–7; trans. Horgan, 320–1, 332.

⁷¹ ll. 21381, 21385–8, 21393–6, 21398–400; trans. Horgan, 329.

In this onanistic passage there is again some hint that the secret idol of Nature is sometimes a non-procreative one. In Jean's *Roman*, then, both female and male bodies and body parts are described as fetish objects: the veiled but naked idol of Nature includes both sexes.⁷² In fact, in one manuscript illustration, the idol of the fountain of Nature does indeed seem to be a hermaphrodite (Fig. 6).⁷³

There is, of course, a textual dimension to all this. Jean has been engaged in a thoroughgoing critique of the literature of *fin'amors*, a demystification of its euphemistic and titillating rhetoric of desire.⁷⁴ In the exemplary story of Pygmalion Jean caricatures this tradition, with its cultivation of exquisite rhetoric and its verbal recursiveness and auto-eroticism. Jean's literary demystifications continue as the 'pilgrim' reaches the 'shrine'. Here Jean parodies not only the evasive language of *fin'amors* but also the occultist, integumental theories of Macrobius. In the penetration of the shrine Jean writes an 'allegory' whose 'hidden' meaning is in fact absurdly clear. At one level, then, he reveals the fetishized naked body and illustrates the non-functionality of literary evasions and *integumenta*; he confirms Reson's famous argument that to speak evasively of sexual matters, even of testicles, is 'improper'.⁷⁵ At another level, however, Jean continues to perpetuate the very textual forms he demystifies. His ironic play, both unveiling and veiling, does not entirely repudiate the witty obliquities of de Lorris or the integumentalism of Macrobius. On the contrary, it reveals that the literature of courtly love and the Macrobian poetics of a veiled Nature are the stuff of artficed eroticism and an absurdist comedy. They are Jean's literary monuments and idols, the objects of his textual iconoclasm but also foundational to his poetic practice.

IV

The motionless gods and personifications in the Temple of Venus of Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* are also idols. Stuck in their iconic poses in the still garden, they figure the mortificatory and endlessly deferred desire of courtly love. The effect is that of a visionary tableau, very similar to those of Boccaccio or Petrarch:

Under a tre, besyde a welle, I say
Cupide, oure lord, his arwes forge and file

Tho was I war of Plesaunce anon-ryght

⁷² Simon Gaunt has also made a powerful case for the homoerotic dimensions of the *Roman de la rose* ('Bel Accueil').

⁷³ See also Tinkle, *Venus and Cupids*, III; and Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, VII. 5. 5–9.

⁷⁴ See above, n. 59.

⁷⁵ *Roman de la rose*, 7033–186 (Reson concludes by discussing Macrobian poetics); Kay, *Romance*, 69–70.

I saw Beute withouten any atyr,
And Youthe, ful of game and jolyte . . .

(ll. 211–12, 218, 225–6)

The busy activity of the worshippers, 'in kertels, al dishevele' (l. 235), contrasts with the inactivity of the personified gods with their concrete attributes. This is even more the case in the hothouse 'temple of bras' founded 'upon pilers greete of jasper long'—pillars inevitably associated with ancient architecture, the place of worship, and the idol, so commonly placed on a pillar.

The prevalence of the temple in Chaucer's writings suggests that it had significance for him. In the *Knight's Tale*, for instance, Chaucer writes a new description of the temple of Venus to fill in for the one he has moved to the *Parliament of Fowls*: it is one of three massive amphitheatre temples, for which Theseus has employed every *portreyour* and 'kervere of ymages' in the land. Each temple contains an idol, such as the minimally interpreted (and half-covered) statue of Venus so characteristic of the mythographers: 'glorious for to se . . . naked, fletyng in the large see, | And fro the navel doun al covered was | With wawes grene, and brighte as any glas' (ll. 1899, 1955–8). The walls of each temple are covered with the *portreiture* and 'derke ymaginyng' of the various influences of the god. In Venus' temple, for instance, there are images of lovers, personifications, love actions, and objects such as Jalousye, 'a cokkow sittyng on hir hand' (ll. 1967, 1995, 1930). Here Chaucer points to the intractable and exotic 'stuff' of desire and its objects, its refusal to be read and circumscribed by 'meaning'. This is the numerous and ambiguous medieval idol.

Something similar is going on in the temple of the *Parliament of Fowls*. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the poem is Chaucer's reward for his 'labour' with Macrobius (ll. 109–12): he is now going to see the naked idol of Venus, perhaps also one of the idols of Nature. Here certainly is Priapus with his erection: 'sceptre in honde' (l. 256). This is not a Priapus engaged in sex, of course; once again this is deferred sexuality, for Priapus has been interrupted by the braying donkey and stands, tool in hand, like Jean de Meun's lover. But Priapus is also static because he is a statue. At this point Chaucer alters Boccaccio's Italian to this effect. Where Boccaccio describes Priapus and then simply remarks, 'she saw throughout the temple many garlands of diverse flowers', Chaucer adds: 'Ful besyly men gonne assaye and fonde | Upon his hed to sette, of sondry hewe | Garlondes ful of freshe floures newe' (ll. 257–9).⁷⁶ People are decorating Priapus. He is an object of worship, an obscene and phallic idol, one of the many idols of medieval love literature. It is of these that Pierre Bersuire must speak when he comments under the heading 'simulacrum' that lovers are the 'image of Priapus' ('imago Priapi'), worshipped by women and equipped with 'an

⁷⁶ See Boccaccio, *Teseida*, VII, stanza 60, trans. in Chaucer, *Parlement*, ed. Brewer, 139.

extremely virile and excessively large member' ('virile membrum valde et excessive magnum').⁷⁷

When we get to Venus in her darkened 'prive corner' she too is motionless: although there is a sense of anticipation about the scene, 'on a bed of gold she lay to reste | Til that the hote sonne gan to weste', she has a suspiciously idol-like fixity (ll. 260, 265–6). She is also being worshipped, again Chaucer's addition: 'on knees two yonge folk ther cryde | To ben here helpe . . .' (ll. 278–9). Most important, she is the image of Venus described by the mythographers and widely illustrated, swathed in a gauze, naked from the waist up. She is like Pygmalion's idol, sometimes shown upright and sometimes, as here, laid out on a bed.⁷⁸

And naked from the brest unto the hed
Men myght hire sen; and, sothly for to say,
The remenaunt was wel kevered to my pay,
Ryght with a subtyl coverchef of Valence—
Ther was no thikkere cloth of no defense.

(ll. 269–73)

This temple of idols thus stands in complete contrast to the active and sexually productive order of Nature that will follow. In this last section Nature appears as she likes to be seen, with all her 'covering' figures—and voices and noises—of procreative sexuality.⁷⁹ This contrast foregrounds the motionless idols of the temple. These are the shocking and now not-so-secret idols at the centre of so much medieval erotic literature. For Chaucer they emblemize the literature of *fin'amors*—its self-idolatry, its sterility, and perhaps also its phallic autoeroticism.

The idol of the text makes another, rather different, appearance in the last Chaucer text I shall discuss, the *Pardoner's Tale*. Here again Chaucer is thinking about the legacy of Jean de Meun and the bodily idol of the text, though this time the idol is enmeshed in a set of Christian religious discourses. As Dinshaw has shown, the Pardoner is a fetishist of goods, relics, and words.⁸⁰ He is an idolater, one whose avowed purpose is to make others participate in his idolatry: 'Com forth, sire Hoost, and offre first anon, | And thou shalt kisse the relikes everychon . . . Unbokele anon thy purs' (ll. 943–5). The comic homosexual innuendo of this invitation to the Host reinforces the dead-matter, that is, non-procreative, connotations of the Pardoner's idolatry. Equipped with his dubious relics, of course, he tells a tale about the pursuit of death in gold and describes all sin as the

idolatry of inanimate stuff. According to him, gluttons' 'wombe is hir god'; 'dronkenesse is verray sepulture | Of mannes wit' (ll. 533, 558–9).⁸¹

Once again, however, textuality is at issue. Rita Copeland has shown that rhetoric is the Pardoner's special object of cultivation. Indeed, she argues that the Pardoner himself figures this textuality: he is the unruly and dangerously 'empty' body of rhetoric.⁸² This is particularly important in view of the fact that the Pardoner is not merely an idolater: he is also macabrely like the idol itself, a figure of hollow, contradictory, and uninterpretable textuality. Readers have long observed the psychological inaccessibility of the Pardoner, a subject who denies any belief in what his words mean and yet goes on speaking them anyway. The Pardoner is a ventriloquist of the rhetoric that he fetishizes. He illustrates precisely how idols make their own worshippers like idols, not only destroying their reason and their power to read signs, but also turning the worshippers themselves into unreadable and meaningless signs: figures 'coextensive with their representations'.⁸³

However, Chaucer's suggestion that the Pardoner is either castrated or homosexual also links him to a number of other textual idols already discussed. Once again, homosexuality and non-procreativity seem to be associated with the idol. Just like Alain de Lille and Jean de Meun on the figure of Nature, Chaucer suggests that not all that lies under the covering of the Pardoner's clothes and words is 'proper'.⁸⁴ And, like Jean's Nature, the Pardoner cannot resist revealing it. The trope of castration is especially suggestive here, of course, because it also introduces the notion of bodily dismemberment and fragmentation.⁸⁵ The Pardoner and his empty textuality are not merely idols; they are broken idols, dispersed Christian relics, 'pigges bones'. It is this that makes the Host's castration 'replay' (with its inversion of Reson's discourse on 'coilles' and 'reliques' in the *Roman de la rose*) such a vicious rebuttal of the cleric. When the Pardoner gamefully invites him to 'worship' his relics, the Host replies:

I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond
In stide of relikes or of seintuarie.
Let kutte hem of, I wol thee helpe hem carie;
They shul be shryned in an hogges toord!

(ll. 952–5)

The Host's extraordinary joke proposes to turn the Pardoner into a dismembered sexual idol enshrined in excrement. The joke silences the Pardoner; but because

⁷⁷ *Repertorium*, pt. iii, fo. 178^v; see also Gregorius, *Narracio*, 7. On the antique tradition of Priapic statues, see Brown, 'Priapus', 258–65.

⁷⁸ See above, n. 64.

⁷⁹ Though here again, Nature is 'betrayed' by her favourite's refusal to procreate (ll. 372–8, 646–55). For another exploration of Nature (and Pygmalion), see the *Physician's Tale*.

⁸⁰ *Sexual Poetics*, ch. 6.

⁸¹ See also Alain de Lille, *De planctu*, pr. 6; ed. Häring, 853–5; trans. Sheridan, 170–7.

⁸² 'Pardoner's Body'.

⁸³ See above, nn. 9–10.

⁸⁴ *General Prologue*, 691; also McAlpine, 'Homosexuality'; Pearsall, *Canterbury Tales*, 91–104; Dinshaw, *Sexual Poetics*, ch. 6; Patterson, *Subject*, ch. 8; Kruger, 'Claiming the Pardoner'.

⁸⁵ Dinshaw argues that the Pardoner disrupts the production of meaning because a castrated body cannot participate in the medieval hermeneutics of text as body (*Sexual Poetics*, 158–9).

the Pardonner personifies a dynamic tradition of moral, satirical, and pastoral rhetoric, the homophobic joke also once again turns out to be a joke about texts and the very embodied things they can say and do.

In all the works I have looked at, the figure of the idol—whether it is the ‘made’ artefact, the malleable object, or the anthropomorphic body—figures a disturbing textual inheritance. Both mortificatory and incipiently alive, the wax nose of authority and the naked body of poetry point to an anxious fascination with textual reification, the heretical misuse of writing, the dangerous ‘matter’ of the imaginative text.

The Sacrament of the Altar in Piers Plowman and the Late Medieval Church in England

DAVID AERS

Signs are given to men [*hominibus*]. Now it is characteristic of men that they achieve awareness of things which they do not know through things which they do know. Hence the term ‘sacrament’ is properly applied to that which is a sign of some sacred reality pertaining to men; or—to define the special sense in which the term ‘sacrament’ is being used in our present discussion of the sacraments—it is applied to that which is a sign of a sacred reality inasmuch as it has the property of sanctifying men.

St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*

This chapter explores Langland’s understanding of sacramental signs, particularly of the sacrament of the altar. Scholars of *Piers Plowman* seem to have found such an enquiry rather irrelevant and the reason is probably the one given in the chapter on ‘Langland’s theology’ in *The Companion to Piers Plowman*. There Robert Adams writes that Langland’s theology of the sacraments is ‘ethical rather than sacramental’.¹ It is indicative that we have a massive and often informative work on *Piers Plowman* and the sacrament of penance, a substantial work on *Piers Plowman* and marriage, work on *Piers Plowman* and the liturgy, but nothing comparable, as far as I am aware, on the sacrament of the altar and *Piers Plowman*.² This is not surprising. The poem returns again and again to the sacrament of penance, depicting its troubles as symptomatic of those problems in the contemporary Church which most preoccupied its author. The sacrament of

I am happy to thank Sarah Beckwith for countless conversations relevant to the concerns of this chapter, for an illuminating reading of an earlier version which led to some substantial revisions and for sharing her own current work with me (‘Absent Presences’ and her forthcoming book, *Signifying God*).

¹ ‘Langland’s Theology’, 102; most recently and superficially, Green, *Crisis of Truth*, 363. Even Scase, *New Anticlericalism* and Clopper, *Songes of Rechelesnesse* have nothing to say on the sacrament of the altar.

² Respectively, Gray, ‘*Piers Plowman*’; Tavormina, *Kindly Similitude*; and Vaughan, ‘Liturgical Perspectives’; see too Adams, ‘Langland and the Liturgy’ and St Jacques, ‘Liturgical Associations’.