

‘Many Words, Many Turds: Middle English Proverbial Wisdom and the Incontinence of Female Speech’

Ther wymmen arn, are many wordys.

(...) Ther ges syttyn are many tordys.

The Castle of Perseverance, 2649-51¹

Whether depicted as an asset or a failing, talkativeness is a particularly female quality in Middle English literature. The stereotype of the garrulous woman is widespread in satirical poems, exempla, plays, and a range of other texts. Numerous studies of transgressive speech in both medieval and early modern English literary, legal, and historical texts have drawn our attention to the ways that nagging, scolding, and idle gossip or ‘jangling’ are sharply gendered activities that invite the imposition of external, usually masculine, discipline on female speech.² The necessity for this discipline is often tacitly justified by the assumption that a woman with a loose tongue is likely to be sexually loose as well; as Gail Kern Paster

¹ *The Castle of Perseverance*, TEAMS, ed. by David N. Klausner (Kalamazoo, MI: The Medieval Institute, 2010).

² On gossip and deviant speech in medieval England, see in particular Edwin D. Craun, *Lies, Slander, and Obscenity in Medieval English Literature: Pastoral Rhetoric and the Deviant Speaker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Susan E. Phillips, *Transforming Talk: The Problem with Gossip in Late Medieval England* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007); Sandy Bardsley, *Venomous Tongues: Speech and Gender in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); and *The Hands of the Tongue: Essays on Deviant Speech*, ed. by Edwin D. Craun, Studies in Medieval Culture XLVII (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007). On scolding in early modern England, see Lynda E. Boose, ‘Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman’s Unruly Member’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42 (1991), 179-213.

has noted in her work on shame and gender in early modern drama, a woman's talkativeness is both the sign and product of her body's inherent 'leakiness' and penetrability, its lack of closed borders. A woman who talks freely may well be free with her body in countless other ways—'[a]ny point in the leakage may imply or abridge the rest'.³

This article revisits the familiar trope of the voluble woman in Middle English literature by exploring the implications of the link between women's open mouths and their open, undisciplined bodies in medieval English proverbial sayings. In these pithy nuggets of received wisdom, speech is an 'art' of the female body insofar as it is perceived to be an occupation in which women are believed to participate more frequently than men and to which women's bodies are particularly well adapted (or at least more susceptible). As Caroline Walker Bynum has pointed out in her discussion of female bodiliness in medieval devotional works, the openness of women's bodies was a frequent source of anxiety in medieval culture, in which 'the good female body' was believed to be 'closed and intact', and 'the bad woman's body' was perceived as 'open, windy and breachable'.⁴ Claire Sponsler has likewise noted that in medieval conduct texts '[o]pen female mouths...carry a double threat' by breaching 'corporeal boundaries, making the woman's body dangerously open, while also disrupting social relations by launching the dangerously open body into the social realm'.⁵ What must not be overlooked, however, is that Middle English proverbs concerning women's

³ Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 46.

⁴ Caroline Walker Bynum, 'The Female Body and Religious Practice', in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York, NY: Zone Books, 1991), p. 212, n. 98 (essay first published in *Zone 3: Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, Part 1 (New York, NY: Urzone, 1989), pp. 160-219).

⁵ Claire Sponsler, *Drama and Resistance: Bodies, Goods, and Theatricality in Late Medieval England* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 63.

volubility might also be read as evidence of anxiety concerning the power of women's speech. I argue that many of these proverbial sayings harness the image of the bad woman's open body in order to nullify perceived threats posed by female speech. My argument focuses on the proverb in my epigraph, a passage from the morality play *The Castle of Perseverance* in which one character compares women's words to goose turds. Whereas a verbally unrestrained woman might be characterized as sexually incontinent, such proverbial sayings regarding female loquacity also recast garrulous speech as a more general kind of perceived incontinence. My focus will be on how proverbs regarding women's talkativeness forge a link between the gendering of volubility and medieval conceptions of the female body as fundamentally porous, unclosed, and undisciplined. By reducing female mouths to the equivalent of shitting geese, I will argue, these sayings seek to divest women's words of any potential power they might have by depicting them as something the female body ultimately cannot control. At the same time, proverbs such as these contribute to a body of tenacious, diffuse 'common knowledge' about women that simultaneously receives and transmits the idea of women's volubility as established fact.

I. Many words

The idea that women talk more than men do is one that persists today, despite evidence to the contrary.⁶ Though the figure of the chatty or gossiping woman appears frequently in the

⁶ See for example Anne Cutler and Donia R. Scott, 'Speaker sex and perceived apportionment of talk', *Applied Psycholinguistics* 11 (1990), 253-72, which opens by citing an early English proverb concerning women's famously loose tongues. A recent survey of studies concerning male and female speech makes clear that the question of who speaks more (or better) is still very much open to debate: see David P. Schmitt, 'Sex Differences in Talkativeness? Women don't talk more than men do—well, a little more', *Psychology Today*, 17 March 2016, available online <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/sexual-personalities/201603/sex->

medieval canon, the stereotype is by no means a medieval invention. The loquacity of women is one of the targets of Juvenal’s sixth satire (written between the 1st and 2nd centuries AD), in which women are depicted as potentially so talkative that ‘the whole crowd is silenced...so torrential is [their] speech that you would think that all the pots and bells were being clashed together’.⁷ St John Chrysostom (c. 349-407) complained that ‘there tends to be a lot of noise’ among women who attend church, ‘much racket and talking’, particularly about ‘unfruitful matters’.⁸ Such comments on women’s inclination to speech depict this inclination as an uncontrollable outpouring of words that is so overwhelming to listeners that it is reduced to nothing more than a din, a ‘racket’—in short, mere noise. Under these circumstances, the tendency towards generalization that characterizes so much of antifeminism (both in the Middle Ages and in the present) works to effectively silence women by eliminating the sense of any individual words that may have been uttered, thereby reducing them to a uniform wall of sound without intelligible meaning. Even when one can make out what women are saying, it only concerns unimportant or ‘unfruitful matters’.

As one of the arts of the body most closely identified with the chief faults of womankind, volubility is a key site upon which the worth or blameworthiness of women is

differences-in-talkativeness> [accessed 5 February 2018].

⁷ ‘omnis turba tacet...verborum tanta cadit vis, tot pariter pelves ac tintinnabula dicas pulsari’; in *Juvenal and Persius*, The Loeb Classical Library, ed. and trans. by G. G. Ramsay (London: William Heinemann, 1928), Satire VI, pp. 118-19 (lines 438-42).

⁸ St John Chrysostom, in *Homily IX on St Paul’s Epistle to Timothy*, in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*, ed. by Alcuin Blamires with Karen Pratt and C. W. Marx (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 58-59 (p. 58). The English translation is adapted by Blamires from *The Homilies of S. John Chrysostom on the Epistles of St Paul to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, Library of Fathers of the Catholic Church (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1843), Homily IX, 69-72 (Greek text in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. by J.-P. Migne, 62.544).

determined in medieval writings. Out of the perception that women's bodies are naturally inclined to be open emerges the notion that women are therefore inclined to talk because of the nature of their bodies. In some contexts, this predisposition to speech is characterized as a special skill that women can employ to admirable ends. Medieval literature often depicts women as key figures of mediation and intercession, as compassionate beings capable of intervening on behalf of powerful men, or even on behalf of humanity. In Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee*, it is Melibee's aptly-named wife Prudence, rather than any of his male councilors, who functions as the intermediary between her husband and his enemies.⁹ Most familiar to medieval men and women as a figure of female intercession was, of course, the Virgin Mary, believed to mediate between sinful Christians and the Christian God. The Virgin's appeals for divine mercy on behalf of mankind were thought to be a particularly powerful tool for securing humanity's salvation. Women's natural talent for persuasive speech was also frequently depicted as a virtue in medieval saints' lives, which often depict female saints converting listeners with their words, or maintaining verbal defiance in the face of torture or interrogation. In the life of Saint Christina recounted in the *South English Legendary*, for example, the saint retains her ability to speak even after an evil justice has cut out her tongue, which then strikes him blind (a detail that simultaneously hints at the more destructive power of which women's speech was believed to be capable).¹⁰ Other saints, such as Saint Cecilia,

⁹ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Tale of Melibee*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 217-39. All citations from Chaucer's works will be taken from this edition and cited above by line number.

¹⁰ See St. Christina, in *The South English Legendary: Edited from Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS 145 and British Museum MS Harley 2277*, EETS OS 235, ed. by Charlotte D'Evelyn and Anna J. Mill, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), I, 315-27 (esp. p. 326). My thanks to Aline Stotzer for bringing this example to my attention.

are able to use their powers of persuasion to convince their husbands to permit them to keep their virginity intact, or even to live chastely alongside them.¹¹ It is this model of saintly female persuasiveness on which *The Book of Margery Kempe* draws when it describes Margery’s persistent and ultimately successful efforts to persuade her own husband to join her in abstaining from intercourse with her for the remainder of their marriage.¹²

But if medieval literature contains numerous examples of women who use artful speech to pursue commendable goals, these cases are vastly outnumbered by references to women who abuse their powers of persuasion in order to lead men astray, or who use the forcefulness of their speech to bully men into submission. St Jerome repeatedly warns against the dangers of ‘contentious’ wives in his writings. In *Adversus Jovinianum*, he cites Proverbs 27:15 (‘Roofs dripping through on a cold day, and a contentious woman are alike’; ‘[t]ecta perstillantia in die frigoris et litigiosa mulier comparantur’) before describing what life is like with a nagging woman:¹³

¹¹ See for example *The Second Nun’s Tale*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, pp. 264-69, which also recounts Cecilia’s verbal defiance in the face of persecution and torture, as well as her miraculous ability to continue preaching for three days after the prefect Almachius strikes her neck three times with a sword and leaves her for dead.

¹² See Chapter 11 of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, TEAMS, ed. by Lynn Staley (Kalamazoo, MI: The Medieval Institute, 1996), available online <<http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/staley-book-of-margery-kempe-book-i-part-i>> [accessed 26 January 2017].

¹³ English taken from online edition of the Douay-Rheims version of the Bible, *The Holy Bible Translated from the Latin Vulgate [Douay-Rheims]* (Baltimore, MD: John Murray, 1914), available online <<http://www.drbo.org/chapter/22027.htm>> [accessed 26 January 2017]; Latin from online edition of the Latin Vulgate, available online <<http://www.drbo.org/lvb/chapter/22027.htm>> [accessed 26 January 2017].

It is better to dwell in the corner of the housetop, than with a contentious woman in a shared house. ...She floods his house with her constant nagging and daily chatter, and ousts him from his own home.¹⁴

This image of the relentlessly nagging wife is perhaps most famously brought to life in medieval English literature by Chaucer’s Wife of Bath, who provides a lengthy demonstration (143 lines of verse) of the kind of rant she inflicts upon her first three husbands, inviting women to imitate her in order to gain control of their spouses:

Sire olde kaynard, is this thyn array?
 Why is my neighebores wyf so gay?
 She is honoured overal ther she gooth;
 I sitte at hoom; I have no thrifty clooth.
 What dostow at my neighebores hous?
 Is she so fair? Artow so amorous?
 What rowne ye with oure mayde? Benedicite!
 Sire olde lecchour, lat thy japes be!

(*Wife of Bath’s Prologue* 235-42)¹⁵

¹⁴ ‘*Melius est habitare in angulo tecti, quam cum uxore maledica in domo communi* (Prov. XXV, 24). ...Assiduis quippe jurgiis et quotodians garrulitate facit perfluere domum ejus, et ejiciit eum de aedibus suis’; *Adversus Jovinianum*, in *Patrologia cursus completus, series latina*, ed. by J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1844-64), vol. 23, 221-352 (columns 211-338) (261 (column 282)). English translation taken from Jerome, *Adversus Jovianianum*, in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, pp. 63-74 (p. 67). This is a revised version of the translation found in W. H. Fremantle, *The Principal Works of St Jerome*, Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vi (Oxford: James Parker & Co., 1893), 346-416 (revised by C. W. Marx).

¹⁵ The Wife of Bath’s own performance of female garrulousness draws significantly on treatments of the

The unending stream of interrogations and accusations seems to flow almost without need of more breath from Alison’s mouth. At one point, she accuses her husband of repeating a popular saying concerning how much men suffer on account of their shrewish wives:

Thow seyst that droppyng houses, and eek smoke,
 And chidyng wyves maken men to flee
 Out of hir owene houses; a, benedicitee!
 What eyleth swich an old man for to chide?

(*Wife of Bath’s Prologue* 278-81)¹⁶

A popular proverb recorded in many medieval English texts, the maxim with which the Wife of Bath accuses her husband of abusing her depicts female speech as something that pervades and pollutes an entire house, rendering it uninhabitable for innocent men.¹⁷ The comparison of women’s ‘chidyng’ with smoke suggests suffocation, a poisoning of the otherwise wholesome atmosphere, a pervasive stink, while the image of a leaky house suggests that, like a dripping roof, women’s nagging can irreparably damage a house’s contents. In this

theme found in the *Roman de la rose*, the writings of Jerome, and other sources.

¹⁶ The Riverside’s explanatory note concerning these lines remarks that several manuscripts identify the sources of this saying as Proverbs 9.13 and 27.15-16. This proverb is also repeated in *The Tale of Melibee*, at line 1086.

¹⁷ For citations of varied forms of this proverb, see Bartlett Jere Whiting, *Proverbs, Sentences, and Proverbial Phrases from English Writings Mainly before 1500* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1968), entry T187.

proverb, women’s speech is powerful insofar as it is capable of driving a man out of his own home.

Just as culpable as nagging, chiding, shrewish women are women who overindulge in idle speech, a theme that also resurfaces repeatedly in medieval references to women’s loquacity. Such women were likely in the mind of medieval authors of sermons and exempla concerning Tutivillus, the devil who eavesdrops on gossiping churchgoers (most frequently depicted as women) in order to record their sinful speech.¹⁸ Thus a mid-fifteenth-century lyric concerning Tutivillus warns readers not to emulate ‘[t]hes women that sitteth the church about’ and chatter during mass: ‘For his love that you der boght / Hold you still and jangle [chatter, gossip] noght’.¹⁹ Although other versions of the Tutivillus legend also depicted him eavesdropping on male religious too lazy to recite or pronounce their Latin prayers correctly, when the demon is depicted as policing idle chatter in church it is nearly always women who are depicted as the offenders.²⁰ Women’s proclivity for idle chatter also leaves them open to the accusation that they cannot be trusted with secrets, even (or even particularly) those of their husbands. Delilah is the most frequently cited example of this vice, having reported Samson’s vulnerability to the Philistines almost as soon as she learned of it. Thus in his *De Amore* (c. 1185), Andreas Capellanus warns men not to trust women too easily, lest they fall into the same trap:

¹⁸ On the figure of Tutivillus see Margaret Jennings, *Tutivillus: The Literary Career of the Recording Demon*, *Studies in Philology* 74.5, Texts and Studies (1977), 1-95.

¹⁹ ‘Tutivillus, the devil’, in *Medieval English Lyrics: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by R. T. Davies (London: Faber and Faber, 1963; repr. 1987), p. 198, lines 7, 15.

²⁰ Consequently, when Tutivillus is represented in medieval art and architecture, it is almost always as a demon perched between two chatting women. See for example M. D. Anderson, *Drama and Imagery in English Medieval Churches* (Cambridge, 1963), pp. 173-77, and Ernst Lehrer, *Demons, Death and Damnation* (New York, 1971), plates 16b, 21-22, and 25.

This is why you should never feel certain of a woman’s promise or oath, because there is no lasting loyalty in her. Ensure that you always keep your inner purpose hidden from her, and do not reveal to her your hidden thoughts, so that in this way you may cheat guile by guile and repel her deceit. Samson’s honest character all men know, but we read that because he could not conceal his inner thoughts from a woman he was beguiled by her deceitful heart, and so defeated by the army of his enemies, captured by them, and deprived of both bodily strength and eyesight.²¹

In *De Amore*’s satirical discussion of Samson and Delilah, the latter is cited as an example of how all womankind is naturally inclined to betray men’s confidences. As a consequence of this, when recounting the story of Samson and Delilah, Chaucer’s Monk warns readers to ‘Beth war by this ensample oold and playn / That no men telle hir conseil til hir wyves / Of swich thyng as they wolde han secree fayn, / If that it touche hir lymes or hir lyves’ (*The Monk’s Tale* 2091-94). Loose lips cost lives. Indeed, whether or not men actively shared their darkest secrets with their wives, medieval texts depict women as reveling in the publication of their husbands’ private affairs and shortcomings. William Dunbar’s *Tretis of the Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo* depicts a rather naïve male narrator eavesdropping on three

²¹ ‘Nunquam ergo te reddas in mulieris promissione vel iureiurando securum, quia nulla manet fides in muliere, sed tuae mentis propositum studeas mulieri semper servare occultum, et tua sibi noli aperire secreta, [et] ut sic artem arte deludas et eius valeas excludere fraudem. Samson enim, cuius cunctis satis probitas est manifesta, quia mulieri sua non novit celare secreta, ab ea in cordis duplicitate deceptus ab inimicorum legitur exercitu superatus, et ab eisdem captus corporis virtute et oculorum simul est visione privatus’; English and Latin from Andreas Capellanus, *Andreas Capellanus On Love*, ed. and trans. by P. G. Walsh (London: Duckworth, 1982), III.87-88 (pp. 312-13).

elegantly attired women, who swap bawdy and deliciously vicious accounts of their husbands’ failings in the bedroom (as well as their own lustful hopes of finding pleasure elsewhere) over a drink and a laugh.²² In a similar vein, the satirical poem *A Talk of Ten Wives on Their Husbands’ Ware* depicts not three, but *ten* women comparing notes on their husbands’ lackluster genitalia while enjoying a drink in a tavern.²³

As this rather brisk survey should make clear, the trope of the irrepressibly (or even maliciously) talkative woman was a commonplace in medieval literature. Although female volubility might sometimes be the same trait that enabled a woman to be a saint or a peacemaker, it was far more frequently the case that this presumed garrulousness enhanced women’s reputation as untrustworthy, noisy, annoying, or sinful. In the next section of this article, I will explore some of the ways in which this garrulousness might be linked to medieval narratives concerning geese, and the implications of this linking for our understanding of misogynistic treatments of female volubility in medieval literature.

II. Why geese?

In classical and medieval tradition, geese, like women, have a reputation for producing a lot of noise, but this volubility typically carries more positive associations than does human female talkativeness. This is in part due to a story claiming that geese were responsible for

²² William Dunbar, *The Tretis of the Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo*, TEAMS, ed. by Eve Salisbury, in *The Trials and Joys of Marriage* (Kalamazoo, MI: The Medieval Institute, 2002), available online <<http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/salisbury-trials-and-joys-dunbar-tretis-of-the-twa-mariit-wemen-and-the-wedo>> [accessed 16 January 2017].

²³ *A Talk of Ten Wives on Their Husbands’ Ware*, ed. by Eve Salisbury, in *The Trials and Joys of Marriage*, available online <<http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/salisbury-trials-and-joys-talk-of-ten-wives-on-their-husbands-ware>> [accessed 16 January 2017].

alerting Rome to an imminent attack, a story mentioned by Livy (64 or 59 BC-17 AD) in *Ad Urbe Condita* (V.XXXVII) and by Pliny the Elder (23-79 AD) in his *Natural History*, which describes the goose as capable of keeping ‘a careful watch, as is evidenced by its defence of the Capitol during the time when our fortunes were being betrayed by the silence of the dogs’.²⁴ Isidore of Seville (560-636) likewise makes mention of the same story in his *Etymologies*, when he observes that the goose ‘bears witness to its vigils at night with persistent honking. No other animal is as sensitive to the smell of humans as is the goose; whence the ascent of the Gauls to the Capitolium in Rome was discovered from the noise of the geese’.²⁵ In John Lydgate’s *The Debate of the Horse, Goose, and Sheep*, the goose also makes reference to this story to bolster the argument that geese are more valuable to humans than horses or sheep:

Bookis old remembren in sentence
Som tyme whan Rome bi his foon was take,
The Capitoile kept with gret deffence:

²⁴ Pliny, *Natural History*, Vol. III, The Loeb Classical Library, ed. H. Rackham (London: William Heinemann, 1956), X.XXVI (pp. 324-25). My thanks to Courtney E. Rydel for assistance with the ornithological research for this article.

²⁵ ‘Iste vigilias noctis assiduitate clangoris testatur. Nullum autem animal ita odorem hominis sentit ut anser; unde et clangore eius Gallorum ascensus in Capitolio deprehensus est.’ Latin from Isidore of Seville, *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum sive originum*, ed. by W. M. Lindsay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911), XII.7.52, available online <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/L/Roman/Texts/Isidore/12*.html#7> [accessed 25 January 2017]. English translation from Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. by Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, and Oliver Berghof, with Muriel Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; repr. 2007), XII.vii.52.

Noise of a gandr the Capteyn did awake;
Which thyng remembryd thei sett vp for his sake,
In her templis wondir wide & olde,
A large Gandr forgid of fyn golde.

His wakir noise was the savacioun
Bi which the Capteyn ran vp to the wall:
Thus, bi a gandr recured was the toun,
Callid of the world cite most roiall,
Cite of Citees that day most principall.²⁶

Notably, in each of these narratives, although the goose is a persistently disruptive figure—producing ‘noise’ and ‘persistent honking’—this noise is depicted as worthy of reverence, honor, and commemoration.

The same narrative may be seen at work in Chaucer’s *Parliament of Fowls*, in which a female goose is elected to represent the waterfowl in a debate concerning which of three tercelles should be awarded the hand of a female formel; however, the goose is quickly subjected to ridicule once she opens her mouth. The goose is apparently chosen on the grounds of her ‘facounde gent’ (558, glossed by *The Riverside Chaucer* as ‘genteel eloquence’), although this so-called eloquence still takes the form of ‘kakelynge’ (562). Chaucer introduces her as ‘[t]he waker goos’ (i.e. the watchful goose; 358) in a clear reference to the Roman story. But although this initial reference to the famed noisiness of

²⁶ John Lydgate, *The Debate of the Horse, Goose, and Sheep*, in *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate, Part II: Secular Poems*, EETS OS 192, ed. by Henry Noble McCracken (London: Oxford University Press, 1934; repr. 1961), pp. 539-66 (p. 549, lines 239-50).

geese is relatively solemn, the goose’s later words provoke considerable scorn from the other birds engaging in the debate. When the goose suggests that the rejected tercel should find other birds to love, the sparrow hawk rounds upon her sharply:

‘Lo, here a parfit resoun of a goos!’

Quod the sperhawk; ‘Nevere mot she thee!

Lo, swich it is to have a tonge loos!

Now parde, fol, yit were it bet for the

Han holde thy pes than shewed thy nycete.

It lyth nat in his wit, ne in his wille,

Bot soth is seyde, “a fol can not be stille”’.

(*Parliament of Fowls* 568-74)

Here, the sparrow hawk characterizes the goose as a source of mindless chatter, a fool who cannot keep her tongue in check.²⁷ Because she has neither the ‘wit’ nor the ‘wille’ to control her ‘tonge loos’, the goose has proven herself to be a fool. Chaucer is here perhaps picking up on a secondary definition of the Middle English word *gos* as ‘fool’, bringing it to life in his depiction of the chatty female bird.²⁸ The sparrow hawk’s putdown concerning her fellow

²⁷ In addition to that cited by Chaucer’s sparrow hawk, a number of other Middle English proverbs link foolishness with talkativeness; see e.g. Whiting, *Proverbs, Sentences, and Proverbial Phrases*, entries F379 (‘Folly shall be found in many words’), F401 (‘A Fool is known by his tongue’), F413 (‘A Fool’s tongue is the key of his secrets’), F414 (‘A Fool’s word is not to trow’), F426 (‘He is a Fool that discovers his counsel to his wife’), F436 (‘He is a Fool that thinks mickle and speaks more’), and, by contrast, F441 (‘If a Fool say nothing men ween him wise’).

²⁸ See *MED*, s. v. *gos*, whose entries indicate that geese were occasionally referenced in proverbial sayings concerning foolish behaviour.

bird’s perceived gabbiness reduces the goose to the most animalistic and least human creature in this crowd of debating, anthropomorphized birds. And when the goose (emboldened by her fellow waterfowl, the duck) speaks up once more in defense of her point, the tercelet responds disdainfully, ‘Now fy, cherl! ...Out of the donghil cam that word ful right!’ (*Parliament of Fowls* 596-97). To put it crudely, in the eyes of her fellow birds, the goose’s words are not worth shit.

The famous chattiness of geese is likened to the infamous chattiness of women in more than one Middle English proverbial saying. A short late medieval English lyric laments, ‘A yong wyf and an arvyst-gos / Moche gagil wiþ bope’.²⁹ Similarly, *Peter Idley’s Instructions to His Son* warns readers not to imitate those who chatter in church,

And specially þeis women, as I dare sey,
 Haue besy talkyng of huswyffrye;
 Gangle as a gosse and Iangyll as a Iey,
 And how þeir husbandes be full off Ielosye.
 Sum set þeir myndes galantes to asspye,
 Beyoldyng þe schort garmentes round all abouȝt
 And how þe stuffyng off þe codpece berys ouȝt.³⁰

²⁹ ‘The Tribulations of Marriage’, in *Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries*, ed. by Rossell Hope Robbins, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952; repr. 1961), p. 38 (lines 5-6). See also Whiting, *Proverbs, Sentences, and Proverbial Phrases*, entry W253.

³⁰ *Peter Idley’s Instructions to His Son*, ed. by Charlotte d’Evelyn (Boston, MA: D. C. Heath and Co., 1935; repr. 1975), 2C.414-20.

Although the poem goes on to acknowledge that men can be just as guilty as women of 'jangling' in church, only women are likened to chattering birds. The preferred subject of each gender's jangling is also noteworthy: whereas men 'chop and change and mak marchandysse' and focus on 'wynnyng' instead of attending to the church service, women are most interested in matters of the body, ogling the bulging codpieces of passing gallants.³¹ The words emitted from their open mouths concentrate on matters related to the appetites of their open, breachable bodies.

Despite (or even because of) its reputation as a noisy watchman, the goose is easily co-opted by such proverbs as a symbol of women's irrepressible speech. Both creatures are presented as noisy and uncontrollably talkative, and while this quality can be a virtue (making some women saints or peacemakers, and leading geese to raise the alarm during an attempted attack on Rome), it also casts both figures as creatures who produce more sound than sense, who are so filled with noise that it cannot help but erupt out of their mouths. The naturalness with which both women and geese are depicted as producing noise renders their speech an intangible bodily byproduct, something worthy of no better destination than the dunghill. The two proverbial sayings just discussed draw relatively straightforward parallels between geese and human women in terms of their allegedly comparable loquacity, suggesting that each species produces comparable amounts of noise. In the rest of this article, I will turn to the proverb from which I take my title and epigraph, a saying which goes beyond gesturing towards a parallel between the sound of geese and the sound of women talking by using the figure of the defecating goose as a symbol of women's inability to control their mouths and, by extension, their bodies.

³¹ Ibid., 2C.432-33.

III. Out of the mouths of women

The proverbial saying with which I conclude my discussion is taken from the morality play *The Castle of Perseverance*, which survives in a manuscript dating to c. 1440 but probably originates in the first quarter of the fifteenth century. There is no known performance record for this play, although the manuscript in which it survives includes the only copy of a stage plan to be found in any manuscript of medieval English plays. *The Castle of Perseverance* depicts the lifespan and, later, the divine judgment of its central character, Humanum Genus, as he is pulled in different directions by personifications of virtues and vices from his birth until his death. The proverb in question is uttered by Malus Angelus as he attempts to dismiss the arguments of Largitas and other virtues, who are hoping to keep Humanum Genus from following ‘Covetyse’ (Avaricia) for what remains of his life:

MALUS ANGELUS

Ya, go forthe and lete the qwenys cakle!

Ther wymmen arn, are many wordys.

Lete hem gon hoppyn wyth her hakle!

Ther ges syttyn are many tordys.

Wyth Covetyse thou renne on racle

And hange thyne hert upon hys hordys.³²

David N. Klausner, who has edited the text for The Medieval Institute, notes that this ‘misogynist rant is well known as a proverb’, citing the work of Morris Palmer Tilley on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century proverbs.³³ Neither Tilley nor Bartlett Jere Whiting cite

³² *The Castle of Perseverance*, lines 2648-53.

³³ *Ibid.*, note to lines 2649-51.

more than one or two surviving examples of this proverb from the Middle Ages, but the casualness with which Malus Angelus utters it here gives it the feel of a well-worn saying, and suggests that it might have been easily comprehensible to a fifteenth-century audience.³⁴ The use of the word ‘qwenys’ (‘lowborn women’, ‘crones’, or ‘harlots’), a common Middle English term of abuse for women, clearly signals the passage’s misogynist overtones: even before he raises the subject of women’s speech, Malus Angelus characterizes the female virtues as nothing more than undesirable or undisciplined bodies.³⁵ (One is reminded of the speech with which online trolls resort to similar insults against women on social media today.) The rhyming of *wordys* with *tordys* is particularly effective in suggesting that the former may be reduced to the equivalent of the latter, although it is important to note that the word ‘turd’ may not have had the same obscene status that it enjoys in modern English.³⁶ Malus Angelus clearly uses this comparison of speaking women to defecating geese in order to dismiss the persuasive arguments of the virtues and lure Humanum Genus to destruction.

³⁴ See Morris Palmer Tilley, *A dictionary of the proverbs in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: a collection of the proverbs found in English literature and the dictionaries of the period* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1950), entries W686 and W687; and Whiting, *Proverbs, Sentences, and Proverbial Phrases*, entry W497.

³⁵ See *MED*, s. v. *quene*.

³⁶ As Geoffrey Hughes observes in his brief summary of the word’s history, ‘turd’ is ‘first recorded in Anglo-Saxon times in a plain literal sense, leading to various metaphorical extensions of coarse abuse from the medieval period onward’ (‘Turd’, in *An Encyclopedia of Swearing: The Social History of Oaths, Profanity, Foul Language, and Ethnic Slurs in the English-Speaking World* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2006), p. 467). The citations noted in the *MED* indicate that the Middle English word most commonly referred to excrement or dung, particularly that produced by animals; it dates the earliest use of the word as a term of abuse to c. 1400 (*MED*, s. v. *tord*). For an overview of swearing in the medieval period, see Melissa Mohr, *Holy Sh*t: A Brief History of Swearing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 88-128.

Notably, however, he does not simply imagine speaking women as *like* geese, but in fact pictures them *as* geese who should ‘hoppyn with her hakle’ (hop with their feathers) rather than continue to bandy words with him. As nothing more than hopping geese, they are capable of producing nothing more valuable than gooseshit, which—though not a byproduct without its uses in medieval culture—characterizes women’s words as nothing more than the foul-smelling result of an animal body’s unconscious processes.³⁷

This is a striking image, and one whose implications go far beyond its scatological force. By comparing speaking women to defecating—rather than squawking—geese, this proverb activates a wide range of misogynist readings of the female body and its functions. This is in part the result of the specific reference to geese, rather than to any other chattering bird. Philip Slavin estimates that, in eastern England in the period between c. 1250 and 1400, ‘[w]ithin the domesticated bird sector, geese were the most numerous’, and despite fluctuations in the goose population ‘always constituted a significant portion of the total domesticated poultry’.³⁸ Geese were thus familiar animals in medieval England, and their habits of ‘speech’ and digestion were therefore likely to have been relatively familiar to medieval English men and women. The digestive process of geese is particularly rapid compared to those of other animals: food takes a mere two hours to pass through a goose’s

³⁷ Lydgate’s goose points out that goose droppings have medicinal uses: ‘The fyne [excrement] of Gees & greene Gos[e]lyngis...A-geyn brennyng, scaldyng, & many othir thynges, / Tempred with oile & buttir doth gret boote / Tasswage the peyn [that] perceth to the roote’ (*The Debate of the Horse, Goose, and Sheep*, p. 547, lines 197-201); see also *MED*, s. v. *fime*. Of course, Middle English literature contains other examples of characters whose words are likened to turds, perhaps the best known of these being Chaucer’s pilgrim avatar in *The Canterbury Tales*, whose *Tale of Sir Thopas* is so ill-received by the other pilgrims that it prompts the Host to interrupt him with the remark that his ‘drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord’ (*The Tale of Sir Thopas*, 930).

³⁸ Philip Slavin, ‘Goose management and rearing in late medieval eastern England, c. 1250-1400’, *Agricultural History Review* 58 (2010), 1-29 (p. 9).

digestive system (as opposed to the 6-8 hours required for human digestive processes, for example).³⁹ And despite the medicinal uses to which goose dung might be put, it could also ‘pollute the soil, damaging the fertility of arable fields’.⁴⁰

By suggesting that women produce words in the same way that geese produce excrement, Malus Angelus associates female speech with automatic, animalistic physical processes, processes that are largely beyond human control. Recast as animal turds, women’s words are no longer the mark of a skill unique to their gender, or a verbal art form, but are rather an involuntary emission. The proverb transforms female speech into logorrhea, an object of scorn or ridicule rather than of awe, reverence, or fear. It also incorporates women’s speech into the larger web of concerns regarding the dangerous mobility, pregnability, and leakiness of women’s bodies. As scholars such as Paster, Bynum, and Sponsler have made clear, medieval and early modern conceptions of the female body figure it as something in need of closing and enclosing, confinement and control. Women’s bodies tended to be viewed as *too* open, too likely to both invite (or indeed desire) penetration and to spill out of themselves, whether via a bodily fluid or via speech. What the proverbial saying concerning women’s words and goose turds reveals is the way in which anxieties related to the perceived artfulness and power of female speech are bound up with other discourses concerning women as leaky, porous vessels, vessels who *want* to be filled, emptied, and refilled, and who cannot control either this urge or when/whether/how this filling and emptying happens. This proverb reduces the artistry of women’s persuasive, deceitful, and even bullying speech to a

³⁹ See Chris Ashton, *Keeping Geese: Breeds and Management* (Ramsbury: The Crowood Press, 2012; e-book published 2015 p. 40. On human digestive processes, see ‘Digestion: How long does it take?’, <http://www.mayoclinic.org/digestive-system/expert-answers/faq-20058340> [accessed 19 January 2017].

⁴⁰ Slavin, ‘Goose management’, 4.

thoroughly artless, unconscious byproduct of that incontinent female body, further confirmation of its inability to exercise restraint over itself.

The image of a gaggle of women jabbering like geese and producing nothing more than the verbal equivalent of gooseshit intersects powerfully with medieval misogynous presumptions about the female body, as well as with other sayings that stress women’s inability to keep their mouths shut. Consequently, the proverb on which this article has focused suggests that talking in general is a matter of female incontinence, something that women cannot control about their own bodies. The image of an outpouring of goose turds transforms women’s speech from an example of bodily art to an example of the female body’s innate and rather embarrassing artlessness. Rendered mass-produced, unconscious, and foul, women’s words become an object for contempt rather than any kind of reverence or close attention. Ultimately, the proverb’s rhetorical reduction of a womanly art to the level of an animal’s bodily function inscribes women’s speech within the broader assumption that, in the end, women simply can’t help themselves.