

Introductory material for Dinshaw's essay "'Glose/bele chose': The Wife of Bath and Her Glossators"

On the first page of the chapter you're reading from Carolyn Dinshaw's *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (1989), she refers the reader back to a discussion in her Introduction to the book of what is known as "Pauline exegesis": she writes, "In . . . [the] introduction to the Wife of Bath's Prologue, woman is associated with the body and the text—as in the Pauline exegetical assimilation of literality and carnality to femininity I discussed in the introduction" (113).

There's quite a lot here that you're probably not sure what to do with: take a look at "Pauline exegetical assimilation . . ." for starters. First, it helps to know that "Pauline" is not a woman's name but simply an adjective to describe something as being "of St. Paul." [Dinshaw also uses the term "Hieronymian," which is similarly an adjective, this time referring to St. Jerome—the Wife of Bath's other nemesis, along with St. Paul—as in "of St. Jerome."] So "Pauline exegetical assimilation" refers to an assimilation that is exegetical. Simple. OK, so, not exactly.

Exegesis is, simply put, the interpretation of texts. Other forms of the word are "exegetical" (adjective), as we see in the quote above; there is also "exegete" (one who performs exegesis).

This would make "Pauline exegetical assimilation of literality and carnality to femininity" mean: the assimilation ("making two or more things similar or equivalent") of literalness and sensualness with femaleness—an assimilation that is performed through interpretation in the fashion of St. Paul. In her introduction to the book (that we're not reading), Dinshaw demonstrates how St. Paul encouraged a form of textual interpretation that sees the text itself as the body that needs to be worked through and cast aside in order for the spirit of the text (in this case, of sacred scripture) to be revealed. That text to be cast aside is literal and sensual and feminine, and it distracts and misleads the reader from the spiritual truth that is beyond the mere body of the text.

So instead of requiring you to read the entire Introduction to her book in order to be ready to read this particular chapter on the Wife of Bath, I offer you a brief introduction to the concept of exegesis followed by some quotes from Dinshaw's Introduction as background for the chapter on the Wife of Bath that you will be reading.

As you may know, in the Western tradition such interpretation originated as the interpretation of one particular text: Scripture. This interpretation was performed by the few literate and educated members of Christian society, who had been trained in particular traditions of interpretation as part of their education in/by the Church. The aim of such interpretation was to provide an explanation of the text—not a translation (because Scripture was forbidden from being translated), but an explanation of its significance. That significance was understood to be spiritual. The process of interpretation was seen as a process of peeling away layers of potentially misleading and distracting material to get to the heart of the matter. Only those specially trained in this method by the Church were seen as authorized to perform such interpretation. This is why, in the Middle Ages, the bible wasn't unavailable in the vernacular (in the case of England: English) but only in Latin: so that those who weren't trained and thus authorized to properly interpret the valuable, sacred text wouldn't be able even to try, since they also wouldn't be trained in Latin. A few different possible methods for interpretation were available to the exegete (the trained interpreter), one of which was the method based on passages from St. Paul's epistles in the New Testament, which Dinshaw explains in passages I've excerpted on the next page.

From Carolyn Dinshaw's Introduction (all of the following are direct quotes—anything in brackets is there because I thought it might help you better understand the quote, out of context):

[Modern anthropologist Claude] Levi-Strauss contends (as explicated by [feminist theorist] Gayle Rubin) that society as we know it – patriarchal society – is constituted by “traffic in women,” the exchange of women between groups of men that is motivated by the prohibition of incest, and that women function therein, as do empty linguistic signs [that is, as letters to which no meaning has been attached], in forming bonds between men. (16)

[In the Middle Ages, the] representation of the allegorical text as a veiled or clothed woman, and the concomitant representation of various literary acts – reading, translating, glossing, creating a literary tradition – as masculine acts performed on this feminine body recur across narratives . . . (17) [Here you can see very clearly the carnality and femininity associated with the text in the Pauline exegetical process.]

A defining characteristic of the female, in both classical and Christian exegetical traditions, is her corporeality, her association with matter and the physical body as opposed to the male's association with form and soul. (19) [This is longstanding and, if you're not familiar with it, note that it is part of the Christian tradition and also extending long before that in the period BCE.]

So allegorical interpretation is, in this sense, undressing the text – unveiling the truth, revealing a body figuratively represented as female. (21)

Woman, in this Pauline model of reading, is not the “hidden truth” but is dangerous cupidity [that is, excessive desire]: she is what must be passed through, gone beyond, left, discarded, to get to the truth, the spirit of the text. (22)

To follow out this Pauline model of reading would mean to discard altogether the model of woman as central, naked truth of the text, to rigorously pass through the text's female body on the way to its spirit – its male spirit . . . (22)

[Father of the Church St.] Jerome addresses [in the 4-5th centuries CE] the problem of reading classical fable [by likening] the classical text to the beautiful captive woman in Deuteronomy 21: 10-13. The biblical passage reads:

If thou go out to fight against thy enemies, and the Lord thy God deliver them into thy hand, and thou lead them away captives, And seest in the number of the captives a beautiful woman, and lovest her and wilt have her to wife, Thou shalt bring her into thy house: and she shall shave her hair, and pare her nails, And shall put off the raiment, wherein she was taken: and shall remain in thy house, and mourn for her father and mother one month: and after that thou shalt go in unto her, and shalt sleep with her, and she shall be thy wife. (22-23)

The Pauline model *would* discard the female when the male spirit has been uncovered. But Jerome's captive woman is instead betrothed and married [. . .]; she begets servants for God. (23)

In Jerome's example of the captive woman, the pleasure is one-way: the woman's desires are not consulted or recognized. (24)