

The *Legend of Good Women*

Like much of Chaucer's *œuvre*, Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* cannot be certainly dated and survives only in an incomplete form. Both factors bear on the larger issues of the poem's interpretation.

Certain references in the text provide evidence for the date of the poem's composition. The chief of these is in the F version of the Prologue to the *Legend*, where the narrator/poet is directed by the God of Love: 'whan this book ys maad, yive it the quene, / On my byhalf, at Eltham or at Sheene' (F 496–7). Since Eltham and Sheen were actual royal palaces, the 'quene' can only be Anne of Bohemia, wife of Richard II. Anne died in 1394 and the palace at Sheen was then destroyed. In the unique G version of the Prologue, these lines are omitted. The general scholarly assumption has been that G is the later of the two versions, and postdates Anne's death. The most obvious alternative to explain the omission of any mention of Anne in the G version is to assume it predates Richard's marriage to her in 1382. This is not impossible, but since the work involves an experiment with a related series of short narratives, it is tempting to suppose it is close in chronological sequence to the *Canterbury Tales*, which seems largely to date from the second half of the 1380s. The question, like so much else in Chaucerian chronology, remains unresolvable in any final way.

Although the allusion to the queen indicates that the F Prologue must have been completed some time before Anne's death, a more precise dating is difficult. We know from the list of Chaucer's writings in the Prologue that *Troilus* was completed before the *Legend* was composed (see F 332–5, 441, 469, etc.). And it is generally accepted that *Troilus* was written in the period 1380–5 (it was certainly completed before 1388). Near the end of the poem, the narrator announces 'gladlier I wol write, yif yow leste, / Penelope's trouthe and good Alceste' (v, 1777–8). Some scholars have seen this passage in *Troilus* as an adumbration of the idea of the *Legend*. 'Alceste' is the name of the God of Love's consort in the Prologue to the *Legend* (F 518). And while there is no narrative of Penelope in the *Legend* as it survives, she is invoked

in the 'Balade' in the Prologue (F 249–69), which has often been seen as an outline of the contents of the projected legends. Whether or not Chaucer had already conceived the idea of writing the histories of good women while finishing *Troilus*, the close sequence of the two poems seems highly probable. The question of the dating of the unique G Prologue is a separate issue and is discussed below.

In its fullest form, the *Legend of Good Women* comprises the Prologue and the nine legends (in order) of Cleopatra, Thisbe, Dido, Hypsipyle and Medea, Lucretia, Ariadne, Philomela, Phyllis, and Hypermnestra (the last incomplete). All but two of these (Medea and Philomela) are invoked in the Ballade in the Prologue (F 249–69), which mentions another eleven virtuous women: Esther, Penelope, 'Marcia Catoun' (252), Isolde, Helen of Troy, Lavinia, Polyxena, Hero, Laodamia, Canace, and Ariadne. This gives a total of twenty or twenty-one legends (depending on how one counts Hypsipyle and Medea who appear as a single legend). Even if we assume that the 'Ballade' is a valid guide to the work's design there is a large gap between what survives of the *Legend* and the apparent design that informed it.

The extent of this gap is confirmed by the manuscripts of the Retraction to the *Canterbury Tales*, which usually refer to the *Legend* as 'the booke of the xxv. Ladies' (x, 1086–7) – although some manuscripts give the number of legends as either fifteen or nineteen. The latter number may have been influenced by the Prologue to the *Legend*, which depicts the God of Love as accompanied by 'ladyes nyntene' (F 283). The former may reflect the description of the 'Seintes Legende of Cupide', mentioned among Chaucer's works in the Prologue to the *Man of Law's Tale*, which lists fifteen, including some who appear in surviving parts of the *Legend*: Lucretia, Thisbe, Dido, Phyllis, Medea, and Hypermnestra (II, 60–75). Only two manuscripts of the *Legend* itself correctly record the surviving number of legends in describing it as 'the boke of the .ix. goode women'; the rest do not specify a number. In addition, there is a very early reference to the work, by Edward, duke of York, in the Prologue to his translation of Gaston de Foix's hunting treatise, *The Master of Game*, made in the first decade of the fifteenth century, where he speaks of Chaucer's 'prologe of the xxv good wymmen' and confirms his direct acquaintance with the work by quoting a version of a line from the Prologue ('for writynge is þe keye of alle good remembraunce'; cf. F 26).

These various claims for the scope of the work cannot be reconciled with the surviving manuscript evidence. Some of the manuscripts suggest that the poem may have existed, or, at least, was once believed by Chaucer's near contemporaries to have existed, in a much fuller form at an early point in its textual history. If so, we can only speculate about what was lost. What

can be said is that the assertion of some critics that the surviving work is somehow 'incomplete but finished'¹ does not gain much support from manuscript evidence. A number of manuscripts of the work do have concluding rubrics, which, unsurprisingly, do not draw attention to the work's incomplete state; they take the form either of a simple 'Explicit' ('here ends') as in Cambridge, Trinity College, R. 3. 19, or 'here endyth the legend of ladyes' in British Library, Add. 12524 and Bodleian Library, Arch. Selden. B. 24. But other manuscripts offer no indication of formal closure, and some even leave space after the end of the surviving text, possibly because they had some hope of more of it turning up.

The surviving manuscripts also point to the quite wide-ranging appeal of the *Legend of Good Women*, as well as to its appearance in a variety of forms and contexts. Twelve manuscripts survive. Two of these (Bodleian Library, Rawlinson C. 86 and Cambridge, University Library, Ff. 1. 6), contain only single legends, of Dido and Thisbe respectively. The earliest of the manuscripts that contain the full range of surviving legends is Cambridge, University Library, Gg. 4. 27, which is the earliest attempt at a 'collected' Chaucer (it contains the *Canterbury Tales*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, the *Parliament of Fowls*, and other short works, in addition to the *Legend*), and was probably copied at some point in the first quarter of the fifteenth century. What is generally regarded as the best text is that preserved in Bodleian Library, Fairfax 16 (probably written in the 1440s), which contains all of Chaucer's dream visions and a number of his lyrics, together with poems by other fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English poets.

Some of the later copies are of interest for what they reveal about the reception of the *Legend*. For example, in Cambridge, Trinity College, R. 3. 19 it occurs with a number of poems to do with women, such as *The Assembly of Ladies* and *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, as well as a verse translation, by Gilbert Bannister, of the *Tale of Guiscard and Sigismonda*, which derives ultimately from Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Interestingly, another version of this last appears in two other manuscripts containing parts of the *Legend*, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson C. 86 and British Library, Add. 12524. Such collocations provide some indication of the way in which the *Legend* became linked in manuscript form with other related poems to do with wronged women.

Something of the same tendency can be found in Bodleian Library, Arch. Selden. B. 24, which is another large, late collection of Chaucer's works and other materials. This manuscript was copied in Scotland in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century and combines the *Legend* with Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, *Parliament of Fowls*, and various of his shorter poems, and with a number of Scottish love poems, some of which seem to reflect a

careful reading of Chaucer's *Legend*. In this manuscript Chaucer's poems have all been 'translated' into Scots. The manuscript provides testimony to the steadily widening appeal of Chaucer's works at the end of the Middle Ages and confirms that the *Legend* formed part of the appeal.

The manuscripts show, however, that this appeal was rarely of a kind that singled out the work itself but rather saw it in relation to other works of Chaucer or to poems related in subject-matter. This remained the case with the advent of print. Unlike many of Chaucer's works, the *Legend* never achieved any separate identity in printed form. It was not printed at all until 1532, in the first compendious collected edition of Chaucer's writings by William Thynne. (In contrast, the *Canterbury Tales* was among the earliest books printed in England, c.1476.) But henceforward the *Legend* was included in all such editions.² It may be that its evident incompleteness militated against separate publication, although Thynne and later sixteenth-century editors give the reader no indication of its state. In Thynne's edition, for example, there is an (ungrammatical) full stop after the final word 'conclusyon' and a rubric 'Thus endeth the legends of good women'. It is largely modern editions of the poem that think it necessary to specify, as the standard Riverside edition does, that it is '[Unfinished.]'.

One other aspect of the manuscript history of the *Legend* requires mention. As we have already observed, there are two versions of the Prologue: the F version survives in the majority of the manuscripts, while the G version survives only in Cambridge, University Library, Gg. 4. 27. The G Prologue is unique in Chaucer's *œuvre*: it is the only clear evidence we have of revision by Chaucer of any of his longer works. What is also clear is that revision was limited to the Prologue; it did not extend to any of the separate legends. What is less clear is the effect of these revisions.³ Certainly G is shorter, 545 as opposed to 579 lines, and there are a number of transpositions, as well as deletions of passages in F. Quite a lot is added that insists on women's suffering and other writings about this suffering in 'storyes grete, / That bothe Romayns and ek Grekes trete' (G 274-5). The factors that may have led Chaucer to undertake such revision are unrecoverable, like much else to do with the poem's historical circumstances. Perhaps he hoped to receive the support of a different patron from the one for whom the work may originally have been commissioned.⁴

The question of a possible patron for the *Legend* is obviously linked to the question of the poem's occasion. The most recurrent indications of its occasional significance are provided by a cluster of the narrator's allusions. Early in his Prologue he requests the support of 'Ye lovers . . . / Whethir ye ben with the leef or with the flour' (F 69, 72) and defines himself as 'in service of the flour' (F 82). Later, he qualifies this:

But natheles, ne wene nat that I make
 In preysing of the flour agayn the leef,
 No more than of the corn agayn the sheef;
 For, as to me, nys lever noon ne lother. (F 188–91)

The casual allusiveness of such references to the flower and the leaf (see also line 2613), suggests that they would have been readily intelligible to Chaucer's audience. It is possible for a modern audience only partly to recover their force. They can be most profitably glossed in relation to other literary works of the late fourteenth or fifteenth century which contain similar allusions. These have been conveniently assembled⁵ and only their implications need concern us. They seem to imply the existence of some sort of courtly 'game' in which courtiers offered service to contending amorous factions represented by the flower and the leaf. Such games may have been linked to May Day celebrations of the kind mentioned in the Prologue (F 36, 45, 108, 176), which were a recurrent aspect of courtly activity during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and again often the subject of literary allusion.⁶ They remind us that court life was a form of shared intimacy, one in which poet and audience coexisted in a proximity that can infuse courtly works with a tone that is at the same time palpable yet historically unrecoverable in its precise implications.⁷

The idea of a courtly game offers a context that seems to accord with the tone of playfulness that forms an insistent aspect of the Prologue. The narrator's devotion to the daisy is presented in terms of such hyperbolic intensity as to prevent it being taken seriously, especially if we consider it as reflecting the activities of some courtly environment (F 40–211). The emphasis on the controlling roles of figures of paramount authority, and the clear links between these figures and those of a real world ('yive it the quene, / . . . at Eltham or at Sheene'), and between the narrator and an actual contemporary poet, a bibliography of whose works is rehearsed for us, suggests a close relationship between 'play' and actuality.

In such an environment it seems proper to assume a crucial element of game in which the poet-narrator becomes a comic figure through his relationship to those figures of power, and to assume that this relationship is, in some way, a reflection of that within the real world. The question of power is indeed given some prominence in the Prologue. There is a long disquisition on the authority of the king, which foregrounds the question (F 369–402), and the Prologue's action turns on the resolution of the offence against love of which Chaucer stands accused by the king, an offence mitigated by the queen's intervention. This offence creates the momentum for the larger strategy of the game: to validate Chaucer's poetic credentials and to establish the subsequent

structure of his poem. One of the most remarkable aspects of the Prologue is its inclusion of an enumeration of Chaucer's works (F 414–30), a listing that has no precedent in English and few parallels elsewhere in medieval European culture.⁸ This enumeration foregrounds the poet as a bibliographical entity just as the larger action of the Prologue foregrounds him as a comically muted voice, one to be argued over by those with 'real' (the word means 'royal' in Middle English) power, and denied sustained direct speech until his final praise of Alceste (F 517–34). His silencing as a character in the Prologue is one aspect of its playfulness; it objectifies him but in so doing makes him and his creative anxieties the central subjects of his own dream experience.

This sense of a direct relationship between poet and audience is sustained only intermittently beyond the Prologue. At one point the narrator does seem conscious of a connection between his narrative and an immediate, physical environment when he considers the possibility 'in this hous if any fals love be' (1554). And there are passages of *occupatio* that draw attention to the presence of the narrator (e.g., 616–23, 953–7, 2257–8, 2454–8, 2513–15).⁹ But inconsistency of tone throughout the narratives seems to be one of the *Legend's* larger critical problems, and is one to which we will return.

If the occasion of the poem seems linked to forms of courtly activity that can be, at best, imperfectly recovered, what of the larger narrative dimensions of the *Legend*? The narrator is charged by Alceste to undertake as a 'penance' (F 479, 491, 495) the composition of a specified form of narrative:

Thow shalt, while that thou lyvest, yer by yere,
The moste partye of thy tyme spende
In makynge of a glorious legende
Of goode wymmen, maydenes and wyves,
That weren trewe in lovyng al hire lyves;
And telle of false men that hem bytraien,
That al hir lyf ne don nat but assayen
How many women they may doon a shame;
For in youre world that is now holde a game.
And thogh the lyke nat a love be,
Speke wel of love . . .

(F 481–91)

The idea of a collection of narratives organized around principles related to gender has few precedents in medieval literature. The most obvious is Giovanni Boccaccio's *De Claris Mulieribus*, a collection of Latin prose lives of famous women, completed in 1361. This is a work that Chaucer clearly knew by the time he came to write his *Monk's Tale*, when he drew on it

for his account of Zenobia (VII, 2247–374). But its possible function as a model for Chaucer's *Legend* cannot be certainly established since there are no evident traces of its influence in this work.

More relevant may be the *Confessio Amantis*, the long collection of narratives by Chaucer's contemporary, John Gower. The Man of Law speaks in the Prologue to his tale of Chaucer's 'Seintes Legende of Cupide' (II, 61), mentioning, as we have said, a number of figures in the surviving part of the *Legend*, and contrasts these with tales of incest represented by Canace and Apollonius of Tyre, both of whom figure in the *Confessio*. The tone of this Prologue is not easy to assess, but it does seem to refer to Gower and to reflect some element of comparison between two different treatments of the same kind of narrative subject, the representation of women.

There are few other English collections of female lives that offer parallels of any relevance. Those that occur have to do with saints' lives.¹⁰ The separate lives in the *Legend* are often characterized in manuscript rubrics or running titles as lives of martyrs (*martyris*), a circumstance that suggests that at least Chaucer's copyists wanted to stress hagiographical parallels with the lives he narrates. But the stories in Chaucer's collection are, of course, stories of classical women and the 'religious' frame of reference is that of the secular religion of love, with Cupid as its God. It is quite likely that Chaucer adapted a number of the distinctive qualities of the genre of the medieval saint's life for his work, as has been sometimes argued.¹¹ One of the most significant differences seems to be that his 'good women' have an afterlife only insofar as the form of their stories evokes a distant pagan suffering intelligible in terms of the polarities of gender: good women and bad men. Such narratives lack the overarching Christian intelligibility of saints' lives, like Chaucer's own *Second Nun's Tale*, where past female suffering has a doctrinal significance for a contemporary audience.

Hence the general effect of his pagan legends tends toward pathos rather than piety, reminding the reader of male cruelty rather than making the suffering of such injustice intelligible or memorable in any exemplary way. Men are 'false loveres' (1236, 1368, 1385, 2180, 2226, 2565), whose treachery is typified in the account of Jason:

For as a *traytour* he is from hire go,
And with hire lafte his yonge children two,
And falsly hath *betrayed* hir, allas,
As evere in love a chef *traytour* he was. (1656–9)

The focus is not altogether coherent in the sequence of stories. The location of these stories in 'olde bokes' raises the question of Chaucer's sources for

the *Legend* and the extent to which they are of relevance to his treatment of individual ‘martyrs’. He names a few works in particular legends. The most recurrent is Ovid, whose *Heroides* are cited in several legends: at the end of Dido (1367), in Hypsipyle and Medea (1465, 1678), and in Ariadne (‘hire Epistel’, 2220); in addition, he is cited again in Dido in conjunction with Virgil (‘Eneyde and Naso’, 928), and with Livy in Lucretia (‘Ovyde and Titus Lyvius’, 1683), this last probably referring to Ovid’s *Fasti*. The only explicit mention of a medieval author is ‘Guido’ in Hypsipyle and Medea (1396, 1464), Guido delle Colonne (d. 1287), author of a Latin prose *Historia Destructionis Troiae*.

Although such citations broadly reflect Chaucer’s indebtedness, they do not give a full reflection of his use of various works of Ovid. The *Heroides* provide material as well for the legends of Phyllis and Hypermnestra, the *Fasti* for Lucretia, the *Metamorphoses* for Thisbe and Philomela, and both the *Metamorphoses* and the *Heroides* for Hypsipyle and Medea. In other respects the narrator’s citations of his sources are not wholly reliable. Although Livy is cited he does not seem to have been used. For some legends, those of Ariadne and Cleopatra, there is no certain source, although the former may draw on the medieval commentary on Ovid, the *Ovide Moralisé*. Cleopatra is the only legend not to draw on any classical material; once again, there is no certain source.

To this degree, at least, the legends reflect not just the injunction to the narrator to tell stories of virtuous, wronged women, but also his own initial ruminations on the crucial necessity of ‘olde bokes’ (F 25) or ‘olde apprevyd stories’ (F 21).¹² But in larger terms the separate narratives seem to afford a much larger destabilization of narrative expectations in relation to their ostensible purposes.

We see this in its most extreme form at the end of the penultimate legend, of Phyllis, where the narrator follows her long letter of complaint against Demophon’s cruelty (2496–554) with this conclusion:

And whan this letter was forth sent anon,
And knew how brotel and how fals he was,
She for dispeyr fordide hyreself, allas.
Swych sorwe hath she, for she besette hire so.
Be war, ye wemen, of youre subtyl fo,
Syn yit this day men may ensauple se;
And trusteth, as in love, no man but me. (2555–61)

The tonal shifts here seem bewilderingly abrupt, from the sustained indignation of Phyllis’s letter, presented in direct speech, to the narrator’s perfunctory

recounting of her suicide and his final apostrophe to 'ye wemen' in which he presents himself as the only model of male fidelity. The overall effect seems so egregiously discordant with the preceding narrative as to signal an apparent lack of tonal sense that lays Chaucer open to a charge of narrative ineptitude.

Destabilizing moments such as this must in part relate to the double imperative with which the narrator is faced: on the one hand to tell stories that fit a common template, and on the other to supply sufficient variety to keep the attention of a reading (even perhaps of a listening) audience. Similar double imperatives are posed in both the *Monk's Tale* and the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole, and it would be possible to argue that Chaucer found some positive creative challenge in the issues of narrative construction that they raise. Certainly the legends (whose order remains consistent in all the 'complete' manuscript copies) attempt different sorts of variation as they progress. At a most obvious level this has to do with the extent to which separate legends change their focus from individuals to pairs of people: from Cleopatra to both Pyramus and Thisbe, to Dido, to Hypsipyle and Medea, to Lucretia, then Ariadne, then to both Philomela and Procne, Phyllis, and finally to Hypermnestra. Such a pattern of narrative variety seems to gesture towards the possible variations in not just the form, but also the number of love's martyrs – even to the extent of including among them a man in Pyramus, who dies for his love of Thisbe, a circumstance which requires some finessing by the narrator: 'Of trewe men I fynde but fewe mo / In alle my bokes, save this Piramus, / And therefore have I spoken of hym thus' (917–19).

As they succeed each other, the separate narratives also contrive to create a network of relationships of different kinds. Some of these depend on shared sources, with the effect, for example, that the writing women of the *Heroides* (Dido, Medea, Ariadne, Hypermnestra, Phyllis) unite in a sorority across the separate legends to offer a common model of female complaint. While this model remains fairly consistent, though, the succession of legends contrives steadily to intensify the blackening of men and to draw them together more deliberately into an indivisible body of wrongdoers. If Antony's abandonment of Cleopatra, like Pyramus's of Thisbe, might be viewed as accidental, and even Aeneas's departure from Dido might be explicable to readers of Virgil as the promptings of a divinely ordained destiny, Jason's perfidy is made to seem greedily boundless – 'There othere falsen oon, thow falsest two' (1377) – and Tarquin's rape of Lucretia incontestably 'a vileyns dede' (1824). Theseus and Demophon, linking as father and son the separate legends of Ariadne and Phyllis, illustrate a congenital male propensity for

falseness which is confirmed by Hypermnestra's experience at the hands of a family network in which both father and cousin/husband turn out to be 'crewel' and 'unkynde' (2715–16). Even Mynos, not strictly a betrayer of Ariadne, is implicated in Theseus's perfidy (1886–90).

Whatever dreary sameness comes to characterize male behaviour in the legends, variety is retained in the ways in which women confront it, and in the voicing of their responses. Cleopatra and Thisbe actively choose their deaths, and meet them with asseverations of steadfastness (695–8, 910–11); Lucretia, similarly determined, takes the knife with a terse rejection of any gesture of forgiveness (1852–5). The deaths of Dido, Ariadne, and Phyllis follow on the completion of Ovidian letters, and in the stories of Hypsipyle and Medea letters are briefly summarized, although in these legends (perhaps strategically, given the difficulties of turning Medea's story into one of martyrdom) Chaucer omits any details of the women's deaths. 'The wo, the compleynt and the mone' (2378) takes in the legend of Philomela a poignantly non-verbal shape, with the sisters locked in embrace after the mute Philomela's story has come to light in its woven form, and Hypermnestra, as her legend breaks off, remains forever 'fetered in prysoun' (2722), denied death or truth to her own womanly nature.

Variation of this kind may be useful in the context of the larger narrative structure, and it clearly opens a range of possibilities in the *Legend* both for the ventriloquizing of women's voices and for their suppression. Thisbe, for example, who does not speak on her own at all through the course of her story, finds a voice only when Pyramus's apparent death persuades her to take her own life (until this point all we hear is that she speaks in unison with Pyramus at 756–66, and thinks to herself at 855–61); Lucretia's words are limited to her worries over her husband (1724–31), her sleepy questioning and then imploring of Tarquin (1788, 1804), and the resolute statement with which she dies (1852–3). But the range of women's utterance elsewhere in the narratives is comparatively wide: women speak freely to their sisters (Dido and Anna, 1170–85, 1343–5; Ariadne and Phaedra, 1978–2024, 2126–35) or their fathers (Hypermnestra, 2650–2; Philomela 2329), and both speak and write, quite extensively, to their lovers. These are not – unless for special effect – silent martyrs for love's cause, and their legends offer varied examples of women's modes of discourse, just as they do of women's stratagems, women's actions.¹³ They offer, too, an accommodating sense of women's understanding of their own natures, in such a way that Thisbe's capacity to take her life ('My woful hand . . . / Is strong ynogh in swich a werk to me', 890–1) can sit alongside Hypermnestra's determination to spare that of her husband:

'Allas! and shal myne hondes bloody be?
 I am a mayde, and, as by my nature,
 And bi my semblaunt and by my vesture,
 Myne handes ben nat shapen for a knyf,
 As for to reve no man fro his lyf.' (2689-93)¹⁴

The sameness that a number of critics have claimed to detect in the succession of individual legends does not seem wholly easy to credit, at least in relation to the construction of individual women within them.¹⁵ Furthermore, although all the stories conform to a certain essential pattern and are all set in the pagan past, the variety in their sources, and hence in the location and nature of their actions, permits changes of focus and tone from legend to legend. There are notable differences, for example, between the sparsely constructed legends of Cleopatra and Thisbe and the much more elaborate account of Dido's history, which begins with an invocation of Virgil, compresses large swathes of the *Aeneid*, and yet still has space for rich descriptions of the attractions of Troy (1098-1125) and of the preparations for the hunting expedition (1188-1217). Similarly, there are obvious contrasts in both technique and tone between the silences in Lucretia's story and the prominence and amount of direct speech which follows in the legend of Ariadne.

At one level, nonetheless, reiteration is a quite deliberate aspect of the *Legend's* shaping. It is entirely appropriate to Alceste's instructions that the narrator should endlessly repeat patterns in which 'goode wymmen . . . / That weren trewe in lovyng al hire lyves' should be forever betrayed by 'false men . . . / That al hir lyf ne don nat but assayen / How many women they may doon a shame' (F 484-8, G 474-8). The awkwardly admirable behaviour of Pyramus, very early in the sequence, occasions some embarrassed backtracking on the narrator's part (917-23), while the obvious manipulation of source material observable in the account of Medea, where any reference to the infanticide which was a central part of her story has been omitted, serves as a still more stark demonstration of the demands of the template according to which the legends have been shaped. Many of the legends include some form of explicit invitation to dwell on the weakness or vileness of men, whether in the form of generalized command or statement: 'loke ye which tyrannye / They doon alday' (1883-4); 'Ful lytel while shal ye trewe hym have' (2391), or of the singling out of particular instances or exemplars of perfidy: 'Now herkneþ how he [Aeneas] shal his lady serve!' (1276); 'Thow rote of false lovers, Duc Jasoun!' (1368). The recurrent exclamatory mode signals a narrative apportioning of gender sympathy which sets implied female virtue against male vice.

The cumulative effect of these passages is an important feature of the *Legend's* construction, since in sequence they contribute to what may seem the narrator's growing impatience through the course of the work. Even as early as the legend of Dido, he asks whether the weight of evidence is not already sufficient to deter women from amorous involvement:

O sely wemen, ful of innocence,
Ful of pite, of trouthe and conscience,
What maketh yow to men to truste so?
Have ye swych routhe upon hyre feyned wo,
And han swich olde ensamples yow befor? (1254–8)

The increasing tone of frustration which is detectable as the work progresses seems a response to the ingrained, even innate characteristics of male and female behaviour which render possible the proliferation of stories about unhappy love. If men behave like this, what are women to do? And if women exist how can men not be men (as the legend of Lucretia seems powerfully to suggest)?

Such impatience is intensified and complicated by another aspect of the *Legend's* construction: the requirement that, in order to allow space for the citing of as many examples as possible, each legend should be pared down to its essence, often at the cost of large-scale abbreviation of the source material. The rhetorical ploys by which this abbreviation is effected sometimes sound excessively casual, at times almost as if the narrator is grateful to be able to omit certain details: 'forthy to th'effect thanne wol I skyppe, / And al the remenaunt, I wol lete it slippe' (622–3); 'What shulde I more telle hire compleynyng? / It is so long, it were an hevy thyng' (2218–19).¹⁶ And in combination with the expressions of frustration and impatience, they occasionally contrive to make the narrator sound weary of his material – irritated by the inevitable sameness of its patterns, grateful when the opportunity arises to compress information or to omit it altogether. The contrast between this use of *occupatio* and the notable achievement of contriving a series of miniature 'grete effectes' in narrative across a wide historical sweep seems one of the more significant tonal contradictions inherent in the *Legend's* processes.

Of a piece with such contradiction is the instability of tone which pervades much of the narrator's discourse, especially those parts which take the form of direct address to his audience. This sometimes results from asides which work against the direction established in a particular story, as, for example, Thisbe's credulity in agreeing to an assignation with Pyramus is questioned ('allas, and that is routhe / That evere woman wolde ben so trewe / To truste man, but she the bet hym knewe', 799–801), or the speed of Dido's attraction to Aeneas is remarked ('To som folk ofte newe thyng is sote',

1077). Especially ambiguous in their tone are the passages of direct address positioned at the end of individual legends, which contrive a series of slippery variations on the theme of men's untrustworthiness. Some of these seem straightforward enough, like the sombre warning which concludes the legend of Lucretia: 'And as of men, loke ye which tyrannye / They doon alday; assay hem whoso lyste, / The trewest ys ful brotel for to triste' (1883-5). Others, though, complicate their advice by drawing attention to the narrator's own gender bias:

For it is deynte to us men to fynde
 A man that can in love been trewe and kynde.
 Here may ye se, what lovere so he be,
 A woman dar and can as wel as he. (920-3)

Ye may be war of men, if that yow liste.
 For al be it that he wol nat, for shame,
 Don as Tereus . . .
 Ful lytel while shal ye trewe hym have –
 That wol I seyn, al were he now my brother –
 But it so be that he may have non other. (2387-93)

These questions of response and tone take us back to problems of the work as a whole.

'And yf that olde bokes were aweye, / Yloren were of remembraunce the keye' (25-6) the narrator insists near the beginning of the poem. 'Olde' is an important term in the Prologue: 'olde thinges' (F 18), 'these olde wyse' (F 19), 'these olde approved stories' (F 21), 'olde stories' (F 98), 'olde clerkes' (F 370), 'olde auctours' (F 575), as are books (F 17, 28, 30, 34, 39, 496, 510, 556, 578). Tradition and antiquity are linked to the act of creating a new book that is described in the narrative of the Prologue. We are reminded of the relationship between old and new books, between the materials Chaucer is going to be drawing on to create his 'new' book, as well as those he has himself already written. It is this attempt to create 'new' from 'old' that may lie at the heart of our difficulties as modern readers of the *Legend*. What its narratives expose are the often irresolvable situations thrown up by the disjunction between the classical worlds of these stories and the Christian world of Chaucer's audience.¹⁷ The intermittent, but often striking lack of tonal coherence in the work stems from a lack of ethical congruence between the arbitrary sufferings of virtuous pagan women and the capacity of Chaucer's audience to remind themselves of the difference between such suffering and that in their own Christian world, as celebrated by Chaucer in his life of another female martyr, Saint Cecilia. The nature of her martyrdom and its implications reflect the ethical and historical distance that

separates her world from the pagan one in terms of its moral intelligibility: in a Christian world it is possible to understand both why she is suffering and the benefits that she and those who read of her fate can gain from such suffering. The sufferings of Chaucer's good women afford no such solace; they are love's martyrs, not God's.¹⁸

NOTES

1. See Rosemarie P. McGerr, *Chaucer's Open Books: Resistance to Closure in Medieval Discourse* (Gainesville, Fla., 1998).
2. See Constance Wright, 'The Printed Editions of Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*: 1552-1889', *Chaucer Review*, 24 (1990), 312-19.
3. The differences are discussed by Michael St John, *Chaucer's Dream Visions: Courtliness and Individual Identity* (Aldershot, 2000), ch. 4: 'The alterations in G have the effect of making the narrator seem . . . a little more distanced from the conventions of courtly love poetry' (p. 177).
4. It may be worth noting here that the unique G version of the Prologue formally distinguishes the narratives themselves from the dream of the Prologue in its concluding lines: 'And with that word, of slep I gan awake, / And ryght thus on my Legende gan I make' (G 544-5), something not done in the F version.
5. See the introduction to Derek Pearsall's edition of *The Flower and the Leaf and the Assembly of Ladies* (Edinburgh, 1960), pp. 22-9.
6. See John Stevens, *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court* (London, 1961), pp. 184-8.
7. The playfulness of the *Legend* is stressed in the reading offered by A. J. Minnis, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Shorter Poems* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 322-454, and developed in William A. Quinn, *Chaucer's 'Rehersynges': The Performability of 'The Legend of Good Women'* (Washington, D.C., 1994).
8. For other fourteenth-century examples, see Florence Percival, *Chaucer's Legend of Good Women* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 143.
9. See the discussion in Robert Worth Frank, Jr, *Chaucer and 'The Legend of Good Women'* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), pp. 198-208.
10. See A. S. G. Edwards, 'Fifteenth-Century English Collections of Female Saints' Lives', *Yearbook of English Studies*, 33 (2002), 131-41.
11. Janet Cowen, 'Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*: Structure and Tone', *Studies in Philology*, 82 (1985), 416-36.
12. See the extensive consideration of this aspect of the work in Lisa J. Kiser, *Telling Classical Tales: Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1983).
13. With consequences that have persuaded some critics of the 'feminization' of the *Legend's* men; see Elaine Tuttle Hansen, 'Irony and the Antifeminist Narrator in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 82 (1983), 11-31, and the later reflections in *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley/Los Angeles, Calif., 1992).
14. The *Legend's* exploration of womanly characteristics, especially 'pitee', is discussed by Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 26-38.

15. See, for example, Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison, Wisc., 1989), p. 72: 'He edits his pagan tales . . . to conform to a single, closed, secure, and comforting narrative model.'
16. For a full list of these passages see Frank, *Chaucer and 'The Legend'*, p. 23.
17. See V. A. Kolve, 'From Cleopatra to Alceste: An Iconographic Study of *The Legend of Good Women*' in John P. Hermann and John P. Burke, eds., *Signs and Symbols in Chaucer's Poetry* (University of Alabama, 1981), pp. 130-78.
18. On the various possible implications of 'faith' for the *Legend*, see James Simpson, 'Ethics and Interpretation: Reading Wills in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 20 (1998), 73-100.

THE CAMBRIDGE
COMPANION TO
CHAUCER

Second edition

EDITED BY
PIERO BOITANI *and* JILL MANN



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521815567

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First published in print format 2004

ISBN-13 978-0-511-22149-1 eBook (Adobe Reader)

ISBN-10 0-511-22149-5 eBook (Adobe Reader)

ISBN-13 978-0-521-81556-7 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-81556-8 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-89467-8 paperback

ISBN-10 0-521-89467-0 paperback

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