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Women and Betrayal

N'y sey nat this al oonly for thise men,
But moost for wommen that bitraised be
Thorugh false folk ...

(*Troilus and Criseyde* V 1779–81)

Woman betrayed, woman betraying – these were the alternative images of woman with which Chaucer engaged at the outset of his writing career. The image of woman betrayed was associated first and foremost with the series of examples that make up Ovid's *Heroides*, the collection of fictional letters supposedly addressed by the women of classical story and legend to communicate their anguish and despair to the men who had deceived, deserted or simply neglected them. The *Heroides*, like other works of Ovid, was read and commented on as a school-text throughout the Middle Ages,¹ and the names of these heroines – Dido, Phyllis, Ariadne, Penelope and the rest – became bywords for unhappy love in the writings of the period. But in uneasy contrast to this picture of woman as pathetic victim of male callousness and duplicity stands the picture of woman as temptress and destroyer of men. 'A young woman is fickle and desirous of many lovers' ('Giovane donna, e mobile e vogliosa/È negli amanti molti') is the warning that Boccaccio addresses to young men as the lesson to be learned from his story of Troilo and Criseida; 'she is immune to virtue and conscience, as perennially inconstant as a leaf in the wind' (*Filostrato* VIII.30).

The contradictory images of woman betrayed and woman betraying do not always stand in simple opposition to each other. Ovid himself brings them into interesting relationship at the opening of the third and final book of his *Ars Amatoria*. The first two books have taught men how to seduce women, and how to hold their affections once won. In the third book, Ovid announces his intention to give parallel instruction to women, so that they may go into battle on equal terms with men. To those who might object 'Why do you add poison to serpents, and open up the sheepfold to the ravenous she-wolf?' (III 7–8),

¹ See Hexter (1986); Bolgar (1954, 189) says of the eleventh and twelfth centuries that 'an analysis of the classical quotations of the literature of the time suggests that no works were more widely read and more lovingly remembered than the *Heroides*, the *Ars Amatoria* and the fourth book of the *Aeneid*'.

Ovid replies that not all women are bad, citing Penelope, Laodamia, Alcestis and Evadne as examples of selfless devotion to their husbands. What is more, he continues, men deceive women more often than women deceive men; he instances four of the women from his own *Heroides* – Medea, Ariadne, Phyllis and Dido – to make the point. So he urges women to make the most of their youth and beauty while they can: the day will come when no lovers will besiege their doors and they will lie cold and lonely through the night (15–76). He therefore sets about teaching them the arts by which they can manipulate men to their own ends. And ironically, one of his instructions is that they should allure men by reading aloud moving poetry such as his own *Amores* or *Heroides* (345). The pathetic pleadings of betrayed women are to become the instruments by which women ensnare men. Male betrayal and female deceit are set in a causal relationship.

This suggestion of a causal relationship between woman betrayed and woman betraying remains in Ovid merely implicit, an irony which the reader may privately relish. But it was an irony not lost on Jean de Meun, who repeated and reinforced it in his section of the *Romance of the Rose*. The lonely old woman conjured up as an imaginary figure in Ovid's warnings ('frigida deserta nocte iacebis anus': III 70) here takes on living form in the person of La Vieille, the crone set to guard Bel Acueil, personification of the Rose's good-will towards the Lover. La Vieille describes to Bel Acueil how the lovers who had battered down her door in the days when she was young and beautiful had all deserted her when she grew old (12731–826). Like Ovid, she concludes that a woman should play the field while her attractions last, squeezing as much money as possible out of her admirers before it is too late (12863–93). Women who do otherwise – who foolishly tie themselves in passionate fidelity to a single man – always come to a bad end (13008–9, 13120–42). She cites the familiar figures of the *Heroides* – Dido, Phyllis, Oenone, Medea – as examples, and concludes: 'In short, all men betray and deceive women; all are playboys, taking on all comers. And so women should deceive them in turn, and not fix their heart on one alone' (13143–239). She then proceeds to instruct Bel Acueil in the feminine arts of seduction with a thoroughness and a cynicism worthy of Ovid's *Ars*. As in Ovid, so in Jean de Meun, betrayal becomes the justification for deceit.² La Vieille preaches betrayal because she feels she has been betrayed. The causal relationship implied by Ovid is vividly realized in terms of an individual existence: experience is turned into motive.

This is one way in which the two stereotyped images of woman could be brought into meaningful relationship with each other – and even more important, could be imaginatively realized in an individual female life. In this respect as well as in more obvious ones, La Vieille provided an important model for the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, as we shall see. But in dealing with betrayal Chaucer chose not to follow Jean de Meun's example directly. A superficial inspection

² Cf. Richard Green's observation (1988, 11) that La Vieille's advice to deceive men is 'a witty reversal of Ovid's exhortation to male seducers, "Fallite fallentes" ("Deceive the deceivers!")'.

of his works might imply that he simply oscillated between the two alternatives. The *Legend of Good Women*, which follows the *Heroides* model in presenting women as betrayed victims, answers the picture of woman as betrayer in *Troilus and Criseyde*. The treacherous male falcon in the *Squire's Tale* is matched by the adulterous wife of Phoebus in the *Manciple's Tale*. *Anelida and Arcite*, which climaxes (at least in its present fragmentary form) in a *Heroides*-style letter from Anelida lamenting her betrayal by Arcite, is inverted in the *Complaint of Mars*, where narrative similarly leads into a lyric lament, uttered this time by a betrayed male lover. Yet this even-handedness between the sexes is only apparent, as a closer examination at once shows. I shall begin such an examination with the figure of Dido in the *House of Fame*, because it will demonstrate not only Chaucer's sympathy with the *Heroides* tradition, but also his acute sensitivity to his own responsibilities as a poet towards women.

In unsympathetic hands, even the female victims of the *Heroides* could become the targets of antifeminist sneers. Jehan le Fèvre's translation of the *Lamentations* of Matheolus lists Phyllis and Dido as examples of the excessive sexual passion characteristic of the female sex. Phyllis, mad with unsatisfied lust, was unable to wait patiently for Demophoon's return, and hanged herself from 'luxure desordenée' (II 1635–46). Dido's suicide is likewise treated as an act of 'trop grant outrage', committed out of 'fole amour' (II 1647–60).³ It is, indeed, with the same brusque refusal of sympathy that the *Heroides* women make their first appearance in Chaucer's poetry, as the dreamer-narrator of the *Book of the Duchess* tries to persuade the Black Knight that his grief for his lost 'chess queen' is exaggerated:

'Ne say noght soo, for trewely,
 Thogh ye had lost the ferses twelve,
 And ye for sorwe mordred yourselve,
 Ye sholde be dampned in this cas
 By as good ryght as Medea was,
 That slough hir children for Jasoun;
 And Phyllis also for Demophoun
 Heng himself – so weylaway! –
 For he had broke his terme-day
 To come to hir. Another rage
 Had Dydo, the quene eke of Cartage,
 That slough herself for Eneas
 Was fals – which a fool she was!' (722–34)⁴

³ According to Leube (1969, 52–4), Jehan le Fèvre was here influenced by the *Ovide moralisé*, which likewise attributes Dido's death to 'sa folie et ... sa rage/D'amours' (XIV 598–9).

⁴ The examples of Echo and Samson which follow (735–9) are possibly due to the influence of the *Romance of the Rose* (see n. to 710–58 in *The Riverside Chaucer*), which also includes references to Medea, Phyllis and Dido (see above, p. 6); the Ovidian character of the list remains however recognisable.

The forced heartiness of the tone in these lines suggests that the lack of sympathy here results from the dreamer's attempt at a therapeutic cheerfulness rather than settled disapproval, but it shows Chaucer's awareness that Ovidian pathos was not the only mode available for dealing with these heroines.

When Dido reappears in the *House of Fame*, however, this Ovidian mode uncompromisingly reasserts itself – and it does so all the more powerfully in that it grows with a quasi-spontaneous momentum out of a Vergilian narrative. Chaucer dreams he finds himself in a temple, on whose wall is 'a table of bras' inscribed with the following words:

'I wol now synge, yif I kan,
The armes and also the man
That first cam, thurgh his destinee,
Fugityf of Troy contree,
In Itayle, with ful moche pyne
Unto the strondes of Lavyne.' (143–8)

To an educated fourteenth-century reader, this inscription would have been easily recognisable as an English rendering of the opening lines of Vergil's *Aeneid*, and it is duly followed by a lengthy résumé of the rest of the poem, which Chaucer claims he 'sawgh' on the wall – in what form, it is not entirely clear, since with dream-like vagueness, the words give way to pictures; the story is at one moment engraved (157, 193), at another 'peynted on the wal' (211), and shortly afterwards 'grave' again (256). Already, that is, the secondhand summary is assuming independent life; the words refashion themselves into mental pictures, on which attention may linger or focus in greater detail. And this is indeed what happens. Chaucer's résumé relates at an even pace the events described in the first three books of the *Aeneid*: the fall of Troy, Aeneas's flight with his father and son, the storm that scattered his ships, and his eventual arrival in Carthage. But as he relates the love-affair between Aeneas and Dido, 'quene of that contree', the narrative gradually dilates and lingers over this one episode, so that it becomes the focus and the climax of the whole. The pressure towards this dilation is Chaucer's discovery of a *general* significance in this episode; he is provoked to respond to and to comment on his own narrative summary by his recognition of its conformity with an eternally repeated pattern of human experience: the pattern of male treachery and female suffering.

Allas! what harm doth apparence,
Whan hit is fals in existence!
For he to hir a traytour was;
Wherefore she slow hirself, allas!
Loo, how a woman doth amys
To love hym that unknowen ys!
For, be Cryste, lo, thus yt fareth:
'Hyt is not al gold that glareth.'

For also browke I wel myn hed,
 Ther may be under godlyhed
 Kevered many a shrewed vice.
 Therfore be no wyght so nyce
 To take a love oonly for chere,
 Or speche, or for frendly manere,
 For this shal every woman fynde,
 That som man, of his pure kynde,
 Wol shewen outward the fayreste,
 Tyl he have caught that what him leste;
 And thanne wol he causes fynde
 And swere how that she ys unkynde,
 Or fals, or privy, or double was.
 Al this seye I be Eneas
 And Dido, and hir nyce lest,
 That loved al to sone a gest;
 Therfore I wol seye a proverbe,
 That 'he that fully knoweth th'erbe
 May saufly leye hyt to his yë' –
 Withoute drede, this ys no lye. (265–92)

I have quoted this passage at length because it is precisely its length that is surprising – even more so in the light of Chaucer's immediately preceding insistence that he cannot stop to recount the 'long proces' of the burgeoning love-affair because it would be 'over-long for yow to dwelle' (251–2). Although not itself based on the *Heroides*, this passage prepares us to interpret Dido's long lament over Aeneas's desertion of her, which follows immediately afterwards, in Ovidian rather than Vergilian terms. Chaucer's own comments, that is, encourage us to identify with Dido's perspective on the desertion, instead of seeing it, as we do in the *Aeneid*, framed and qualified within the dictates of Aeneas's historic destiny. When the long lament is over, Chaucer underlines this intrusion of an Ovidian perspective on the Vergilian narrative by directing his readers to 'Rede Virgile in Eneydos/Or the Epistle of Ovyde' if they want to know 'What that she wrot or that she dyde' (375–80).⁵ And he reinforces the Ovidian terms of reference even further by interpolating a long passage rehearsing the similar fates of the other *Heroides* women – Phyllis, Briseida, Oenone, Hypsipyle, Medea, Deianira, Ariadne (388–426).

Dido's own lament harmonizes fully with Chaucer's conception of her as an exemplary victim of male deceitfulness. Leaving his literary models, Chaucer writes a quite new monologue, which consists almost entirely of generalisations

⁵ The early fourteenth-century *Ovide moralisé* similarly combines Vergil and Ovid (Leube, 1969, 43–4, 64–5), but the concluding moralisation takes Aeneas's side, allegorizing Dido as Heresy, which attempts to divert Holy Church from the true path of faith (XIV 302–596; cf. Leube, 1969, 45).

on male deceitfulness.⁶ Gone are the specifics of the situation rehearsed by both Vergil's Dido and by Ovid's – her vulnerability to enemies and to other suitors, the opprobrium she has suffered for protecting and assisting Aeneas, the possibility of her pregnancy. Instead, Dido sees Aeneas's falsehood, as Chaucer has just done, as an instance of generalized male fickleness.⁷

'Allas, is every man thus trewe,
That every yer wolde have a newe,
Yf hit so longe tyme dure,
Or elles three, peraventure?
As thus: of oon he wolde have fame
In magnyfyinge of hys name;
Another for frendshippe, seyth he;
And yet ther shal the thridde be
That shal be take for delyt,
Loo, or for synguler profit.' (301–10)

Her bewildered anguish is not directed to Aeneas alone, but to 'ye men' in general, just as she generalizes herself into 'we wrechched wymmen'.

'O, have ye men such godlyhede
In speche, and never a del of trouthe?
Allas, that ever hadde routhe
Any woman on any man!
Now see I wel, and telle kan,
We wrechched wymmen konne noon art;
For certeyn, for the more part,
Thus we be served everychone.
How sore that ye men konne groone,
Anoon as we have yow receyved,
Certaynly we ben deceyved!
For, though your love laste a seson,
Wayte upon the conclusyon,
And eke how that ye determynen,
And for the more part diffynen.' (330–44)

The prominence given here to the Dido episode is thus grounded in a general rather than an individual sympathy; Chaucer dramatizes his response to her

⁶ See Norton-Smith, 1974, 50. Fyler (1979, 36–40) comments on the way that the dreamer's 'progressively more subjective response to the *Aeneid*' leads to his 'increasing participation in his experience' in this section of the poem.

⁷ As Clemen points out (1963, 84, n. 3), 'this conception of Aeneas as a deceiver was supported by a tradition going back to Dares Phrygius and Dictys Cretensis, whereby the Greeks owed their capture of Troy to the treachery of Aeneas and Antenor'; for Chaucer, however, Aeneas's deceit is manifested only in the amatory sphere.

story as a response that arises out of a perception of its significance in illustrating and confirming the common lot of women.⁸ It is at the point where her story makes contact with the everyday realities recorded and stored up in proverbial utterance (265–6, 269–72) that it moves away from its literary source and takes on its own independent life.⁹ Once this moment of imaginative identification with woman's plight is over, Chaucer returns to his bald summary, disposing of the last eight books of the *Aeneid* in a mere thirty lines. No other event holds his interest or provokes him into spontaneous involvement. In Chaucer's retelling, Dido, and not Aeneas, is the centre of the *Aeneid*.

In creating Dido's lament, Chaucer is doing more than dramatize his sympathy for woman betrayed: he is also dramatizing his sense of the writer's responsibilities towards women as literary subjects. For his Dido not only contemplates her betrayal by Aeneas, she also contemplates her own humiliation as a figure of story and legend.

‘O wel-away that I was born!
For thorgh yow is my name lorn,
And alle myn actes red and songe
Over al thys lond, on every tonge.
O wikke Fame! – for ther nys
Nothing so swift, lo, as she is!
O soth ys, every thing ys wyst,
Though hit be kevered with the myst.
Eke, though I myghte duren ever,
That I have don rekever I never,
That I ne shal be seyde, allas,
Yshamed be thourgh Eneas,
And that I shal thus juged be:
“Loo, ryght as she hath don, now she
Wol doo eft-sones, hardely” –
Thus seyth the peple prively.’ (345–60)

It is in her role as victim of ‘wikke Fame’ that Dido claims entrance to Chaucer's *House of Fame*; she is the suffering human subject who must bear to be represented by the accounts of others – accounts that are circulated not only in oral form (‘songe’) but also in writing (‘red’). At the head of this written tradition stands Book IV of the *Aeneid*. Vergil's account is not devoid of

⁸ Dronke ([1986] 1992, 451) comments on ‘the wider, exemplary dimension’ that Chaucer gives to Aeneas's treachery in Dido's lament; her story becomes meaningful ‘insofar as the magnificent but remote queen of Carthage is seen to have an experience no different from that of any woman betrayed by any man’ (452).

⁹ The possible source for one of these proverbs (269–70) in Dido's lament in the *Ovide moralisé* XIV 354–7 (‘L'on selt dire un mot veritable:/Que feme a le cuer trop braidif/Qui d'ome d'estrange pais/Fait son acointe ne son dru’) seems to have escaped notice so far.

sympathy for Dido; she is given a tragic stature that makes her suicide probably the emotional climax of the whole poem. Berlioz found this book of the *Aeneid* so moving that it determined his whole conception of *Les Troyens*: for him, Italy is founded on the bodies of dying women – Cassandra and the Trojan women at the end of Act I, Dido at the end of the opera. But however sympathetic Vergil's narrative is to Dido, it cannot allow her point of view to predominate; the harsh necessities of masculine duty must have superior claims. It is only from the firm security of this masculine point of view that Vergil can allow himself (or fail to notice?) the glaring irony in Mercury's exhortation to Aeneas to hasten his departure because 'woman is ever fickle and changeable' (569–70). *Varium et mutabile semper/Femina*: the phrase that became a proverbial expression of woman's fickleness has its origin at the heart of the classic story of male betrayal.¹⁰

In reversing the balance of sympathies from Aeneas to Dido, Ovid brings out a latent potential in Vergil's narrative, but he also prises the story loose from Vergil's authoritative grasp. And in later centuries there were even stronger challenges to the authority of the Vergilian account. Augustine, when recalling with contempt his own boyhood tears over the death of Dido, points out that the learned will admit that Aeneas never went to Carthage (*Confessions* I.xiii.21–2). St Jerome, in his treatise *Against Jovinian*, lists Dido among the chaste widows, attributing her suicide, not to despair at Aeneas's betrayal, but to her desire to avoid marriage to her suitor Iarbas and to remain faithful to her dead husband Sychaeus (I.43). This scepticism in the face of Vergil's account passed on into the Middle Ages: John Ridevall, one of the fourteenth-century 'classicizing' friars studied by Beryl Smalley (1960, 130, 320–1), proclaimed Vergil's story to be evidently false, since Aeneas lived three hundred years earlier than Dido, whose dates are fixed by the foundation of Carthage. The fourteenth-century chronicler Ranulph Higden took the same view, citing Augustine as his authority. While Dante followed his master Vergil, Petrarch and Boccaccio agreed with St Jerome in seeing Dido as a virtuous widow, whose suicide was the final act of devotion to her husband's memory.¹¹

What is at issue in these competing narrative versions is not only Dido herself, but the nature of poetic truth. St Augustine's aim in mentioning Dido in the *Confessions* is the scornful dismissal of poetic fictions ('poetica figmenta'). Ironically, he himself is taken to task by Ridevall's commentary on the *City of God* (I.2), for treating Aeneas's description of the fall of Troy as if it were a reliable historical account ('veritatem historie') rather than a poetical fiction ('fictionem poete') (Smalley, 1960, 360). It is likewise in the context of

¹⁰ Walther (1963–9) no. 32906.

¹¹ Petrarch, *Familiars* IX. 15; *Seniles* I.4, IV.5; *Triumphus Pudicitiae* 10–12, 154–9; Boccaccio, *De Mulieribus Claris* XLII; Higden, *Polychronicon* I.xxi; II.xxvi. Cf. also Macrobius, *Saturnalia* V.xvii.5–6. This version of Dido's suicide goes back to Justinus's *Epitome* of the *Historiae Philippicae* of Pompeius Trogus (XVIII.4–6), which Higden cites as an authority alongside Augustine.

a discussion of the nature of poetic truth that Boccaccio refers to those who adduce Vergil's story of Dido as evidence that the poets lie (*De Genealogia Deorum* XIV.13). The 'truth' of Dido's story was traditionally bound up with the question of literary authority, with the kind of belief that is to be accorded to literature. Attitudes to women are determined by the endorsement or rejection of literary authority: when Jehan le Fèvre answered Matheolus's antifeminist accusations in his *Livre de Leesce*, it was on the grounds that his *literary* evidence was no evidence at all,

Car de mençoingnes y a maintes
En ces ystoires qui sont faintes. (754–5)

He points out that many of Matheolus's stories illustrate male treachery rather than female folly; but in any case, he says, writers such as Homer and Ovid are unworthy of belief because they are pagans.

Leurs fables et leurs poësies
En nostre loy sont heresies,
Et pour ce ne font pas a croire,
Ne ceulx qui suivent leur ystoire,
Principalement quant il parlerent
Des femmes et qu'il les blasmerent. (2697–702)

The question of literary authority is the central concern of the *House of Fame*, as critics have long agreed. In Book II, Chaucer comically protests a faith in bookish authority so extreme that it can entirely dispense with experiential proof: to the Eagle's offer to show him the stellar constellations so that he will be able to confirm what the books say from first-hand experience, Chaucer replies that he believes what he reads about them just as firmly as if he had seen it with his own eyes – and in any case, his eyesight wouldn't stand the glare (993–1017). The vision of the *House of Fame* in Book III shows the problems attendant on credulity of this sort: the medley of truths and falsehoods, of obliterating silences and unsubstantiated reputations, renders the recovery of historical truth effectively impossible. As in the *Livre de Leesce*, so here too Homer is accused of writing 'lyes,/Feynynge in hys poetries', which are to be dismissed as 'fable' (1477–80). Chaucer's vision of the true source of poetic authority is to be found not in Book III, but at the very outset of his dream, in the presentation of Dido. It is located, not in a rigorous historical accuracy, but in the liberating ability of the imagination to invest the two-dimensional outlines of a text with their own autonomous life and movement. If Chaucer's Dido visualizes herself shrinking to the two-dimensional figure of gossip and literary *exemplum*, then in imagining that moment of anguished anticipation Chaucer has reversed the process: he has in imagination gone behind the literary sources to recuperate the living individual from whom they take their origin. It is his own act of imaginative retrieval that Chaucer

emphasizes at the very heart of Dido's lament, intervening to make the point that here he has left his literary sources behind:

In suche wordes gan to pleyne
 Dydo of hir grete peyne,
 As me mette redely –
 Non other auctour alegge I. (311–14)

Ovid's importance to this passage is not that he creates a Dido more acceptable to Chaucer; on the contrary, it is that his response to Vergil is the model for Chaucer's similarly independent act of imaginative retrieval. Just as Ovid could isolate a female perspective from Vergil's story of male destiny, so Chaucer can reconstruct Dido afresh from the point where her story makes contact with common human experience as he knows it.

The significance of this early work of Chaucer's, therefore, is not simply that he takes the 'woman's side' in the Dido-and-Aeneas story; it is rather that he dramatizes the adoption of this standpoint as *an act of retrieval*: the woman's viewpoint is rediscovered in the story of male heroism. Chaucer's Dido represents an affirmation of faith that such a retrieval is a permanent possibility – that the writ of literary authority runs no further than the point at which it meets the reader's own corrective or confirmatory experience.

To come to *Troilus and Criseyde* from the *House of Fame* is to see with full clarity how surprising – indeed, how apparently inexplicable – is Chaucer's choice of subject here. After his fervent identification with the victims of male deceit, he chooses to tell the classic story of female betrayal. Like Dido, Criseyde anticipates her own afterlife in story and song, but in her case there is the added pain of knowing that her tale will fan the flames of antifeminism.

'Allas, of me, unto the worldes ende,
 Shal neyther ben ywriten nor ysonge
 No good word, for thise bokes wol me shende.
 O, rolled shal I ben on many a tonge!
 Thorughout the world my belle shal be ronge!
 And wommen moost wol haten me of alle.
 Allas, that swich a cas me sholde falle!

Thei wol seyn, in as muche as in me is,
 I have hem don dishonour, weylaway!
 Al be I nat the first that dide amys,
 What helpeth that to don my blame away?' (V 1058–68)

Criseyde's lament has a source in Benoît, whose Briseida similarly envisages with dismay her own future disgrace in story and song ('De mei n'iert ja fait bon escrit/Ne chantee bone chançon': *Roman de Troie* 20238–9), but his imagination of her distress does not prevent him (as it does Chaucer) from drawing the

usual antifeminist moral (13438–56, 13471–91); for him, Briseida's prophetic vision of the meaning that will be given to her story simply repeats and endorses the meaning that he himself assigns to it – that women are inconstant and emotionally shallow (cf. Mieszkowski, 1971, 81–7, 103–4). The greater prominence that Chaucer gives to his own role as narrator of Criseyde's story invests the passage with a quite different significance: it becomes an accusation of his own role in adding to the 'bokes' that chronicle her shame. The responsibility is all the greater since Criseyde's very existence is a literary fiction; the poets invent the female inconstancy that they purportedly record. And whereas the *House of Fame* represents Dido's story as having painful consequences for herself alone, Criseyde's story is here represented as impinging on the real lives of other women, present and future. Chaucer here vividly realizes one of the special burdens that women have to bear: the knowledge that they cannot escape the burden of meaning. Whether good or bad, their actions will always be interpreted by reference to a model of 'woman', and will share willy-nilly in the responsibility for the nature of that model. The possible repercussions of this story on the lives of women are brought to the foreground again in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, where the God of Love upbraids Chaucer for having written *Troilus* precisely on the ground that women will be the sufferers from it.

'And of Creseyde thou hast seyde as the lyste,
That maketh men to wommen lasse triste,
That ben as trewe as ever was any steel.' (F 332–4)

Given this sensitivity to its antifeminist effects, why *did* Chaucer decide to tell this story? Are his expressions of sympathy for betrayed women to be seen as mere conventional gallantries, replaced at will by an equally conventional readiness to see women as fickle deceivers? That this is not the case is suggested by the fact that on two of the three occasions when Chaucer depicts female betrayal, he deliberately – even, it might seem, perversely – reverses the exemplary direction of his story when he comes to summarize its import. At the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, he not only apologizes for his story to the female members of his audience¹² –

Bysechyng every lady bright of hewe,
And every gentil womman, what she be,
That al be that Criseyde was untrew,
That for that gilt she be nat wroth with me.
Ye may hire gilt in other bokes se;

¹² The audience addressed may be the implied rather than the actual audience, since Richard Green (1983–4) has shown that the number of women at court was probably small. Such apologies to women for anti-feminist material are frequent enough in medieval literature to be regarded as conventional (Mann, 1991); but Chaucer's use of the convention is differentiated from that of other writers by his immediate addition of remarks critical of men.

And gladlier I wol write, yif yow leste,
 Penelopeës trouthe and good Alceste. (V 1772–8)

– he also, astonishingly, represents it as a warning to beware of falsehood in *men*:

N’y sey nat this al oonly for thise men,
 But moost for wommen that bitraised be
 Thorough false folk – God yeve hem sorwe, amen! –
 That with hire grete wit and subtilte
 Bytraise yow. And this commeveth me
 To speke, and in effect yow alle I preye,
 Beth war of men, and herkneth what I seye! (V 1779–85)

The same reversal of direction occurs in similar circumstances in the *Manciple’s Tale*. Having reached the point where he has to relate the adultery of Phoebus’s wife, Chaucer swerves aside into a long digression on the impossibility of eradicating natural characteristics, illustrating this point with the Boethian example of the bird who flies off to the wood the moment its cage door is left open. Similarly, he continues, a cat’s appetite for mice will never disappear, no matter how well fed it is, and a she-wolf characteristically expresses her ‘vileyns kynde’ by choosing the ‘lewedeste wolf that she may fynde’ (160–86). This last example was a favourite with antifeminist writers,¹³ and one awaits – given the nature of the story Chaucer is telling – the inevitable conclusion on female lustfulness. But the trait that Chaucer identifies as naturally implanted in human beings is not lust, but ‘newfangelnesse’, and it is not women whom he identifies as most tainted with it, but *men*.

Alle thise ensamples speke I by thise men
 That been untrewes, and nothyng by wommen.
 For men han evere a likerous appetit
 On lower thyng to parfournen hire delit
 Than on hire wyves, be they never so faire,
 Ne never so trewe, ne so debonaire.
 Flessh is so newfangel, with meschaunce,
 That we ne konne in nothyng han plesaunce
 That sowneth into vertu any while. (187–95)

The ‘we’ is significant: not ‘men’, but ‘we men’. With these at first baffling contradictions between story and moral, Chaucer delicately negotiates the problems of a male author telling a story of female betrayal. He acknowledges his own masculinity, rather than dissolving it in the impersonal authority of the invisible author, and deflects the moral of his story on to the sex of which he can speak

¹³ See Reid (1955); *Romance of the Rose* 7761–6; Matheolus, *Lamentations* I 904–6.

with personal authority. There are no such contradictory frameworks to complicate his stories of male betrayal; his exclamations against male deceit endorse and amplify the natural implications of the narrative rather than running against its grain. Setting the story at odds with the comment on it in the cases of female betrayal is thus not an instance of the 'ambivalence' so often invoked in Chaucer criticism as a convenient way of halting further analysis, but rather an overt recognition of the need for a male author to *situate himself* in relation to these tales, and thereby to redress the asymmetrical balance created by the alignment of the male author and the male victim in the story.

The *Manciple's Tale* has yet more light to shed on *Troilus and Criseyde*. For it shows us that the male author not only has a general responsibility for telling or not telling a story, he also has a specific responsibility for *how* he tells it. It is he who chooses the style that will determine whether we see sexual congress as romantic passion or as a bestial coupling. No sooner has Chaucer turned back to the story of Phoebus's wife than he digresses from it again, this time to comment on his own use of the word 'lemman' to denote her lover.

Hir lemman? Certes, this is a knavyssh speche!
 Foryeveth it me, and that I yow biseche.
 The wise Plato seith, as ye may rede,
 The word moot nede accorde with the dede.
 If men shal telle proprely a thyng,
 The word moot cosyn be to the werkyng.
 I am a boystous man, right thus seye I:
 Ther nys no difference, trewely,
 Bitwixe a wyf that is of heigh degree,
 If of hir body dishonest she bee,
 And a povre wenche, oother than this –
 If it so be they werke bothe amys –
 But that the gentile, in estaat above,
 She shal be cleped his lady, as in love;
 And for that oother is a povre womman,
 She shal be cleped his wenche or his lemman.
 And, God it woot, myn owene deere brother,
 Men leyn that oon as lowe as lith that oother. (205–22)

The story-teller determines attitudes to women by the style he chooses for his story; it is he who makes woman an Isolde or a whore. The power of rhetoric to re-create women in its own mould is depressingly illustrated in Phoebus's sentimental reconstruction of his wife after he has murdered her in jealous rage:

'O deere wyf! O gemme of lustiheed!
 That were to me so sad and eek so trewe,
 Now listow deed, with face pale of hewe,
 Ful giltelees, that dorste I swere, ywys!' (274–7)

Phoebus's wife is not only the victim of male violence, but also the victim of male rhetoric (Mann, 1991c, 222). We never penetrate behind this rhetoric to an intimate knowledge of her, her lover, or the nature of the relationship between them; we see only the various stereotyped models in terms of which she might be presented.

It is style that is crucial in Chaucer's telling of the story of Criseyde. It is his style, rather than his final protestations of good intentions, that prevents this story, against all probability, from being read as a classic example of feminine fickleness and deceit. So successfully did Chaucer fend off this apparently inevitable interpretation that scholars were long convinced that the hostile stereotyping of Criseyde came only *after* Chaucer, and was largely attributable to Henryson and Shakespeare. Gretchen Mieszkowski's exhaustive documentation of the Cressida story from its inception in Benoît de Sainte-Maure shows however that she was already a byword for female mutability (and worse) when Chaucer came to write. It is Chaucer who not only abandons Boccaccio's moral on the fickleness of women, but who also creates a Criseyde to whom this moral seems entirely inappropriate. Despite the fact that Chaucer makes clear from the outset that the story will tell how Criseyde 'forsook' Troilus 'er she deyde' (I 56), this inevitable ending fades from the reader's consciousness in the moment-by-moment excitements of the love-affair. When in Book III Criseyde exclaims, in response to Pandarus's trumped-up story of Troilus's jealousy, 'Horaste! Allas, and falsen Troilus?' (806), the idea of her being unfaithful to Troilus is as unthinkable to us as it is to her. The character of betrayer is one with which events invest her, not one we are persuaded is hers from the beginning, whether by virtue of her sex or by virtue of her individual character. The final moment when Criseyde visualizes her own entrapment within the bounds of this stereotyped character thus reveals to us the full extent of the living indeterminacy which Chaucer has recuperated from its unpromising outline. No less than Chaucer's Dido, Chaucer's Criseyde represents an act of imaginative retrieval. Yet the very success of this act of retrieval raises even more acutely the question of how the betrayal comes about. If it is *not* due to female fickleness, what is its cause?

In answering this question, we come near to the heart of Chaucer's continual concern with betrayal. For it is, in his eyes, the bitterest manifestation of the most fundamental characteristic of human nature: the capacity for change. On two occasions in the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer adapted the Boethian metre on the ineradicability of natural impulses, complete with its illustrative image of the bird in the cage (*Consolation of Philosophy*, III m.2). The passage from the *Manciple's Tale* which I have already discussed is one of these instances; the other is in the *Squire's Tale*, where it forms part of the lament of the female falcon, deserted by her lover, and thus accounting for his betrayal of her:

'I trowe he hadde thilke text in mynde,
That "alle thyng, repeiryng to his kynde,

Gladeth hymself;" thus seyn men, as I gesse.
 Men loven of propre kynde newefangelnesse,
 As briddes doon that men in cages fede.
 For though thou nyght and day take of hem hede,
 And strawe hir cage faire and softe as silk,
 And yeve hem sugre, hony, breed and milk,
 Yet right anon as that his dore is uppe
 He with his feet wol spurne adoun his cuppe,
 And to the wode he wole and wormes ete;
 So newefangel been they of hire mete,
 And loven novelries of propre kynde,
 No gentillesse of blood ne may hem bynde.' (607–20)

In both cases what Chaucer adds to his Boethian source is an identification of man's 'propre kynde' as 'newefangelnesse', the ineradicable movement towards change and 'novelries'. It is this same impulse towards 'a newe' that Dido had identified as the source of men's betrayal (*House of Fame* 302). Neither lust, nor greed, nor vanity, is necessary to account for betrayal: it is the simple and inevitable reflex of the changeability that is the very life of human beings.

Troilus and Criseyde is Chaucer's most extended and most profound exploration of human changeability, and it is worth investigating this in some detail in order to see how it can give rise to, and yet resist being reduced to, female betrayal. The long and complex narrative allows us to see change not only as the sudden reversal it appears to be in the condensed summaries of *exemplum* or lament, but also as a series of minute adjustments to the changing pressures of daily living. To this end, the first three books of the poem are even more important than the last two. For it is in the slow process of Criseyde's acceptance of Troilus that we learn to understand how, when the time comes, she will gradually abandon him for Diomedes. Between the Criseyde who rejects Pandarus's first overtures with distress and indignation, and the Criseyde who in joyous ecstasy entwines her body round Troilus's as tightly as honeysuckle round a tree, there lies a linked sequence of shifts and adjustments so small that they pass almost unnoticed at the time; yet the change they effect is as major, when we stand back to take the long view of it, as the one effected in the betrayal. It is the comparability of the two processes that cleanses the betrayal of its antifeminist implications, and it is to the earlier process that we should look if we want to understand how Chaucer rescues the betrayal from an antifeminist meaning.

The pressure towards change in Criseyde comes from without – from Pandarus's revelation of Troilus's love in the first case, and from the exchange with Antenor and Diomedes's wooing in the second – but these external stimuli would fail of their effect were it not for the internal mutability they find to work on – the capacity of the mind to adapt, to absorb the overturning of the status quo into its own processes until it becomes a new status quo, a point of new departure. Chaucer's first indication of this capacity for absorption comes

in the carefully casual question Criseyde addresses to Pandarus when all the first agitations over his announcement of Troilus's love have died down, and the subject appears to have been dropped: 'Kan he wel speke of love?' (II 503). The threatening aspect of Pandarus's startling news is, we see, wearing off; fear is replaced by curiosity, rejection by a readiness to admit at least the hypothesis of a hypothesis. The knowledge of Troilus's love has become part of Criseyde's 'mental furniture'; tossed into the ceaseless play of her thoughts and emotions, it causes them to shift, to rearrange themselves around it, to regroup into new formations to take account of it (Mann, 1989, 223–6).

This process of rearrangement can be seen in all its subtlety of detail in Chaucer's account of Criseyde's private thoughts when Pandarus has left her and she sits down to reflect on the 'newe cas'. She has barely got beyond reassuring herself that no woman is obliged to love a man however passionately he is in love with her (II 603–9), when she is distracted by shouts outside hailing Troilus's return from the battlefield. Watching this young hero ride by, she sees him with new eyes in the light of Pandarus's revelation, and blushes with consciousness of the thought that this is the man whose life, according to Pandarus, depends on her mercy. The serene detachment of which she has just been assuring herself evaporates at its first test; the secret excitement that arises spontaneously with the thought that this brave and modest hero is dying with love for *her* creates an embarrassment that of itself constitutes an implicating relationship with Troilus, despite his obliviousness to her gaze or her blush. It is not – as Chaucer hastens to make plain – that 'she so sodeynly/Yaf hym hire love', but that the pressure of the moment creates a pull towards him: 'she gan enclyne/To like hym first' (II 673–5).

And after that, his manhod and hys pyne
 Made love withinne hire [herte] for to myne,
 For which by proces and by good serveyse
 He gat hire love, and in no sodeyn wyse. (II 676–9)

As Chaucer turns back to his account of Criseyde's thoughts, we can see this 'proces' getting itself under way, as her mind accommodates itself to the new fact of Troilus's love. In contrast to the deliberate calculations of Boccaccio's Criseida, who weighs pros against cons and allows Troiolo's handsome person to tip the balance (*Filostrato* II 69–78, 83), Criseyde's reflections proceed in a random, spontaneous, disorganized manner. Their zig-zagging movement is conveyed in the loose, additive nature of the phrases that introduce each new idea: 'Ek wel woot I ... Ek sith I woot ... And eke I knowe ... Now sette a caas ... I thenke ek ...' (II 708–36). The self-conscious organisation of thought at the opening, as Criseyde decorously addresses herself to questions of 'worthynesse' and 'honour', and attempts worldly wisdom ('better not to make an enemy of the king's son') dissolves into spontaneous wonder that this dazzling personage, who could claim the noblest lady in Troy as his love, has chosen *her*; equally spontaneous is the immediately succeeding thought that this is

not, after all, so odd, since – as everyone says – she is the most beautiful woman in Troy. It would be a mistake to interpret this last reflection as revealing vanity in Criseyde; an outstandingly beautiful woman can hardly be unaware of her own beauty, although social decorum obliges her to conceal her knowledge, as Criseyde recognises ('Al wolde I that noon wiste of this thought': II 745). Criseyde's private awareness of her own beauty escapes being vanity precisely because the vigilant supervision of her more public self brings it under scrutiny and control. What is revealed by this most private of thoughts is the level of intimate reflection to which we have penetrated: we have moved from the level of thought that is prepared for public scrutiny – that would translate itself without difficulty into speech – to a level of instinctive reaction that could hardly be made public without changing its entire character. What it is not vanity to know, it is vanity to speak. This sense of *levels* of thought is the result of our perception of the constant movement between them; the self-conscious aspect of the mind (in our terms, the super-ego) constantly doubles back on what has been spontaneously thought, correcting and criticizing. As her awareness of her beauty is 'corrected' by the self-reminder that no one else must know of this awareness, the prudential consideration that Troilus is no boaster is immediately 'corrected' by the reflection that he will of course have nothing to boast of.

So it is that the possibility of loving Troilus, which first appears only as a hypothesis to be rejected ('although it is out of the question to grant him my love ...'; 'and he won't have anything to boast of ...') finally appears as a positive without any *logical* preparation for the change. Having begun to contemplate her own beauty – to look at herself, that is, with Troilus's eyes – she is led quite naturally into fashioning a new image of herself: the picture of sober widowhood which has been the model for her behaviour hitherto (II 113–19) gives way to a new conception of herself as her 'owene womman', in comfortable circumstances, 'Right yong', and free from obligations to a husband (II 750–6). For such a person love seems not only permissible but desirable.

'What shal I doon? To what fyn lyve I thus?
Shal I nat love, in cas if that me leste?
What, pardieux! I am naught religious.' (II 757–9)

So she admits the possibility of loving Troilus as one that is, indeed, open for her to choose.

What is important in this long sequence of thought is not so much its representation of *what* Criseyde thinks as its representation of *how* she thinks (Howard, 1970). Her mind moves of its own accord, flitting from one aspect of the situation to another, animated by the sudden emotional impulses that thwart the attempt at a logical progression by starting off in an unrelated direction. It is not surprising, then, to find that one of these impulses causes her thoughts suddenly to reverse themselves completely, the corrective agent here being not the super-ego but simple fear: *since* she is free, should she jeopardize

this freedom by subjecting herself to the anxieties, quarrels, jealousies and betrayals so frequent in love? The spontaneous nature of this reversal in mood is emphasized by the natural image Chaucer chooses to express it:

But right as when the sonne shyneth brighte
 In March, that chaungeth ofte tyme his face,
 And that a cloude is put with wynd to flighte,
 Which oversprat the sonne as for a space,
 A cloudy thought gan thorough hire soule pace,
 That overspradde hire brighte thoughtes alle,
 So that for feere almost she gan to falle. (II 764–70)

Sun and shade alternate within the human mind as inevitably as in a March day; the mind too ‘chaungeth ofte tyme his face’. So this reversal in turn eventually reverses itself.

And after that, hire thought gan for to clere,
 And seide, ‘He which that nothing undertaketh,
 Nothyng n’acheveth, be hym looth or deere.’
 And with an other thought hire herte quaketh;
 Than slepeth hope, and after drede awaketh;
 Now hoot, now cold; but thus, bitwixen tweye,
 She rist hire up, and wente hire for to pleye. (II 806–12)

‘Now hoot, now cold’: here is change working at its most fundamental and ineradicable level. The bold outlines of observable change are formed out of the *pointilliste* minutiae of this ceaseless movement of thought and emotion, absorbing and responding to external stimuli. In the sequence that follows we see how a new set of external stimuli gradually transforms the continual to-ing and fro-ing into a single directional flow: Antigone sings her song in praise of love which answers Criseyde’s fears of ‘thraldom’; the nightingale sings under Criseyde’s window as she falls asleep; she dreams of the eagle who tears her heart out without pain. The current of events is pulling her towards love, but it could not do so without the existing presence in her mind of the thoughts and emotions which it can endorse and bring into the foreground. The seething possibilities in Criseyde’s mind are the seed-bed for new developments; chance determines which of these possibilities – the attraction to nobility, openness to adventure – will realize themselves in the immediate sequence of events, but the other possibilities – cautious timidity, prudent self-interest – do not disappear; they remain, to be called into play by the new set of external pressures created by Criseyde’s isolation in the Greek camp and Diomedes’s insistent wooing.

It is the slow process by which Criseyde’s thoughts and feelings adapt themselves to the fact of Troilus’s love until it becomes part of her own being that teaches us to understand how they can equally adapt to his loss and set

Diomede in his place. This time Chaucer does not show us her thoughts in detail, but his summary indicates with beautiful subtlety the way that this process mirrors that in Book II. After Diomede's first visit, Criseyde goes to bed in her father's tent,

Retornyng in hire soule ay up and down
The wordes of this sodeyn Diomede,
His grete estat, and perel of the town,
And that she was allone and hadde nede
Of frendes help; and thus bygan to brede
The cause whi, the sothe for to telle,
That she took fully purpos for to dwelle. (V 1023–9)

The betrayal dissolves itself in the invisible flux of Criseyde's thoughts; the stanza concludes, not with a decision, but with the mere germination of the *cause* of a *purpose* – and a purpose that realizes itself not as action, but simply as the will's endorsement of a status quo, so that the moment of that endorsement is inaccessible to outward observation.

And yet, having shown us Criseyde's change of heart as a slow process of incremental adjustment, in the very next stanza Chaucer re-presents it with a brutal abruptness of style that becomes a characterisation of the deed itself:

The morwen com, and gostly for to speke,
This Diomede is come unto Criseyde;
And shortly, lest that ye my tale breke,
So wel he for hymselfen spak and seyde
That alle hire sikes soore adown he leyde;
And finally, the sothe for to seyne,
He reft hire of the grete of al hire peyne. (V 1030–6)

The shift in narrative perspective effects a shift in emotional attitude. The first stanza takes a 'long view' of Criseyde's change of heart, seeing it as a gentle and quasi-inevitable process of reorientation; the second 'shortly' summarizes this process until its outlines appear in cruel clarity. Taken together, they answer the question of how betrayal comes about: the bewildering volte-faces castigated in the denunciations of 'newefangelnesse' spin themselves out into the subtle filaments of fluctuating mood and thought. We do not see Criseyde deciding to betray – we do not even see her betraying – we see her realizing, at the end of the almost invisible process, that she has betrayed (Mann, 1986, 82). Just as she never formally decides to yield to Troilus, but comes to realize that she has yielded ('Ne hadde I er now, my swete herte deere,/Ben yolde, ywis, I were now nought heere!': III 1210–11), so her betrayal too is a matter of retrospective acknowledgement ('I have falsed oon the gentileste/That evere was': V 1056–7) rather than present decision. In neither case is there a single moment of choice, but rather a gradual and spontaneous movement through a series of finely discriminated stages leading from common civility to declared

love, each stage providing not only the basis for the next but also its *raison d'être*: 'since *that* has been granted, surely it obliges you to *this*'.

Criseyde's yielding to Diomedes thus ironically repeats and mirrors her yielding to Troilus. The reorientation of the self which is applauded and welcomed when it leads to her ecstatic union with Troilus is bitterly parodied in her supine capitulation to Diomedes. In the formal portraits of Criseyde and her two lovers which Chaucer interpolates into the narrative action of Book V, as if to freeze their outlines before they finally recede from us into history, the two manifestations of her capacity for change appear as two versions of her character:

Ne nevere mo ne lakked hire pite,
Tendre-herted, slydyng of corage. (V 824–5)

'Slydyng' is the adjective used to characterize Fortune in Chaucer's translation of Boethius's *Consolation* (I m.5.34); applied to Criseyde's mind, it underlines with brilliant economy Chaucer's profound perception that Fortune exists not only in external vicissitudes – the exchange of Antenor for Criseyde – but also as an ineradicable part of the human mind, as the constant variability which forms itself into the larger evolutions of an individual story. But if Criseyde's 'slydyng corage' is the ugly face of human changeability, its benign face is 'pite', the quality in the beloved on which the lover pins his hopes, as innumerable medieval love-poems – among them Chaucer's *Complaint unto Pity* – make clear. Criseyde's 'pite' leads to Troilus's happiness, her 'slydyng corage' to his betrayal.

It is at this point that we are ready to see how this story of betrayal both is and is not, in Chaucer's mind, appropriately told of a woman rather than a man. It is *not*, in the sense that changeability, as Chaucer shows it to us, is not specifically female but is simply a human condition. If Troilus remains faithful, that is not only because of his own stability, but also because his social context remains unaltered. For him, Criseyde's departure creates an absence, a vacuum into which his whole being strains; for her, it creates a new set of presences, obliterating the structure of relationships in which Troilus held the central place. The external change, not her own fickleness, precipitates her betrayal. Yet there is at the same time a special appropriateness in mediating the tragic experience of mutability through a woman, since it is in women that the capacity for change, for adaptation and graceful responsiveness, has been traditionally most admired. So in the *Knight's Tale* it is Emily's 'wommanly pitee' to which Theseus appeals in order to transform the grief at Arcite's death into rejoicing over her marriage to Palamon (3083). It is this womanly responsiveness which Chaucer surely has in mind in his generally misunderstood comment on Emily's 'freendlich' reciprocation of Arcite's happy gaze after he has won her in the tournament:

(For wommen, as to speken in comune,
Thei folwen alle the favour of Fortune). (2681–2)

The ready changeability which gives women a special affinity with Fortune can manifest itself as treacherous instability or as a blessed (from the male lover's point of view) susceptibility to external pressure; in Criseyde we see it in both its forms. Its role as part of an ideal of womanhood is manifest in Criseyde's graceful adaptations of her tone and manner to her companions and her situation: relaxed, poised and witty in her verbal fencing with Pandarus, she is dignified, open and passionate with Troilus. This is how men would have their women be, instinctively adapting to the contours of their personalities and moods. But if this is what they want, they must accept that women can be equally chameleon-like with *other* men, until they are changed beyond recognition.¹⁴ The real tragedy of *Troilus and Criseyde* is not simply that Troilus is separated from Criseyde, it is that she ceases to exist as the Criseyde he has known and loved; she has become, in Shakespeare's words, 'Diomed's Cressid'. Troilus's fidelity is enslavement to a ghost.

To say that Chaucer roots Criseyde's betrayal in the fundamentally human capacity for change is to say that there is no reason why we should not take his final protestations against an antifeminist interpretation of his story at face value. But it is not to say that Criseyde's betrayal thereby becomes excusable or acceptable or a 'realistic compromise'. If Chaucer professes 'routhe' for Criseyde and an inclination to 'excuse' her in order to deflect *our* inclination to blame the tragedy on female weakness, this does not prevent him from narrating her betrayal in terms that make it far uglier than it is in Boccaccio's story. For one thing, Boccaccio's Diomede is a far nicer person, who has genuinely fallen in love with Criseida, and who has all the attractiveness and nobility of Troilo. Chaucer's Diomede, in contrast, is a calculating seducer who seems simply to want another female scalp for his collection – and will even, it is suggested, boast about it afterwards ('som men seyn he was of tonge large': V 804). It is likewise Chaucer who displays in full the cheap dishonesty of Criseyde's letter to Troilus (V 1590–1631; cf. *Filostrato* VII 105; VIII 5), and who imports from Benoît (*Roman de Troie* 20275–8) the pathetic protestation of fidelity to her new lover with which she tries to cover over the implications of what she has done. Yet if we read the story aright, we understand how Chaucer can make these changes without incurring the charge of antifeminism. His aim is not to blacken women, but to show human change in its fully tragic dimensions, and for this Criseyde's loss is not enough: we need to see the deformation of her personality. But if antifeminism is not the aim of Chaucer's story, it may still be its unintended *effect*, as Chaucer himself acknowledges in the God of Love's accusations in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*. It is to Chaucer's attempt to meet these accusations in the *Legend* that we must now turn.

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¹⁴ Cf. Saintonge (1954, 313): 'the same qualities that made [Criseyde] desirable brought about her fall from grace'.

In the *Legend of Good Women* there are no warnings against generalizing about a whole sex on the basis of an individual case; on the contrary, the falsehood and treachery of men is reiterated with a vigorous monotony that fully matches the unrelenting misogyny conventional in so much medieval literature. What I shall argue here is that the *Legend* can only be understood as a riposte to misogyny – as adopting a single-mindedness and refusal of compromise which mirrors its own intransigence. In one sense, then, it is not fully ‘serious’; it has the self-conscious extremism of polemic, an extremism which could be abandoned with a rapprochement from the opposite camp. But it is by no means frivolous or flippant in its indictment of men or its sympathy for women, and I shall try also to show the groundswell of seriousness beneath its mannered surface.

The tirades of medieval antifeminism are accepted without demur by modern scholars; the one-sidedness of the *Legend*, on the other hand, has provoked critics (especially in recent years) to question the seriousness of Chaucer’s involvement with the work. Its (apparent) incompleteness has been ascribed to his boredom with what was probably a commission from the Queen or some other aristocratic patron.¹⁵ Its strange variegations in tone have been read as signs of a deeply ironic detachment from its subject-matter.¹⁶ Its ‘real’ concern has been identified as the search for ‘a way of transforming courtly making into philosophical poetry’ (Rowe, 1988, 51), or the affirmation ‘that classical literature is important to Christians despite its lack of explicit Christian morality’ (Kiser, 1983, 152). The poem’s overt and obvious subject-matter – women – is usually disregarded, as if self-evidently too trivial to merit serious consideration. Lisa Kiser’s comment is revealing:

And if the poem was originally commissioned by Queen Anne (as many believe) merely to amuse or placate the ladies at court who wanted to read love stories that corrected the antifeminist clerical tradition, then Chaucer has certainly managed to convey more significant themes than one might ever think possible in a poem with such an undistinguished origin. (1983, 151–2)

I shall assume that the poem really is about what it says it is about, and moreover that correction of the antifeminist clerical tradition is an enterprise quite

¹⁵ See R. W. Frank’s excursus, ‘The Legend of Chaucer’s Boredom’ (1972, 189–210), for the history of this view and the case against it. For a recent restatement (where, however, the boredom is attributed to the narrator, who ‘makes his heroines and the fables boring because they would otherwise terrify’), see Dinshaw, 1989, 84–7.

¹⁶ For sides taken in the question of whether the *Legend* is ironical or not, see the references given by Kiser (1983, 21, n. 6). See also the books by Delany (1994) and Percival (1998), whose position is briefly summarized in my Preface (2001), pp. ix, xi above. R. W. Frank (1972) gives due allowance to the local playfulness in the poem without taking it as the sign of a general scepticism towards women (see, e.g., 84).

as significant as any represented by the alternative themes that modern critics have 'discovered' in the work. On the issue of Chaucer's supposed 'boredom' with the *Legend*, it is worth noting that we do not know for certain that Chaucer *did* leave it unfinished, and indeed we have several indications to the contrary: the work as we have it contains only ten legends, but Chaucer's own *Retractions* refer to it as 'the book of the xxv. ladies', and the *Man of Law's Prologue*, in rehearsing its contents, lists legends of eight more Ovidian heroines (Deianira, Hermione, Hero, Helen, Briseida, Laodamia, Penelope, Alcestis herself) than we actually have.¹⁷ As for the work's being commissioned, to see it as a *poème de circonstance* would go a long way to account for the self-conscious playfulness evident especially in the Prologue; the *Parliament of Fowls*, which is almost certainly an occasional poem, similarly transposes weighty subjects into graceful play. But that is no reason for supposing that the commission was not to Chaucer's taste, or that it did not harmonize with his own concerns. The playfulness of the *Legend* ripples over a serious subject – the subject that had occupied Chaucer in the *House of Fame* and that hovers in the background of *Troilus and Criseyde*: what is the poet's responsibility towards women (cf. Dinshaw, 1989, 68)? How can he control the *effects* of what he writes on individual human existences?

The playfulness and the seriousness are both evident in the accusations that the God of Love levels against Chaucer. Chaucer must have known perfectly well that *Troilus and Criseyde*, for the reasons I have already outlined, is not an antifeminist work. Yet he also knew (as his picture of Jankin's use of his 'book of wikked wyves' makes clear) that the subtleties of authorial intention are all too often submerged in the crude interpretations of the reading public. This being so, he both is and is not contributing to the antifeminist tradition in telling of Criseyde. He therefore avails himself of the conventional polarities of the 'woman debate' in order to make an equivalent contribution to the opposing stereotype of the suffering 'good woman'. It is in his consciousness of the intermediary role of literature in creating and nourishing these stereotyped interpretative patterns, rather than in the detailed exploration of female lives, that the real sophistication of the *Legend* lies.

Chaucer was not alone in this consciousness of literary responsibility. The relationship between *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Legend of Good Women* has an illuminating analogue in the relationship between Jehan le Fèvre's translation of Matheolus's *Lamentations* and his own *Livre de Leesce*, written to answer and atone for the misogynist attacks of the earlier work. Already in the *Lamentations* itself, Jehan had intervened to express his unease with the material he was translating, and to assure his readers that he has no hatred for women

¹⁷ In addition, Stephen Hawes (writing in the early sixteenth century) referred to this work as 'the tragedydes so pytous/Of the nyntene ladyes' (*Pastime of Pleasure* 1326–7). He perhaps, however, takes the number from Lydgate, who ponderously jokes that Chaucer could not find so many examples of good women, and thus implies that the *Legend* as he knew it had a lesser number (*Fall of Princes* I 330–6).

(‘envers femme je n’ay haïne’: II 1547); some women, he admits, may be cruel, but others are ‘bonnes’ and ‘vertueuses’ (1551). The violent exaggerations he is transmitting are not motivated by malice, but by the desire to ‘colour’ his discourse, to give it raciness and excitement (1548–9; cf. also II 2589–608). Jehan’s rather naive attempt to marshal the principles of literary criticism in his own defence is somewhat undermined by the fact that – as far as we can tell – he freely expands and elaborates the material contained in his source. And the plea he makes for himself as ‘only a translator’ (*Leesce* 1–11), paralleling Alceste’s excuses for Chaucer (*Legend of Good Women* F 369–72), will take him only so far: if he were really as embarrassed by his material as he claims, he could of course translate something else.

Nevertheless, there are no indications that the defence of women in the *Livre de Leesce* is to be read ironically; and the fact that so much of its material has to be freshly thought up, in contrast with the tired old antifeminist commonplaces, gives it an extra ring of sincerity. Jehan does not content himself with citing the usual counter-examples of good women, he appeals to daily experience for evidence that women are more pious than men (3740ff.), and that they are better at growing plants and caring for children (3694ff.). His picture of women slaving away at their weaving and cheese-pressing while their husbands drink in the tavern or waste their time in blood-sports (3763–75) would fit comfortably into the pages of today’s *Guardian*. What is most interesting for the *Legend of Good Women*, however, is that Jehan does not simply counter claim with claim: he bases his argument on literary-critical grounds, rejecting Matheolus’s case as supported by purely literary authorities. Fabliau-tales of women’s lust and trickery are nothing but ‘truffles’ and ‘frivoles’ (787, 797–8); Ovid’s story of Scylla is nothing but ‘mençonge’ and ‘fable’ (1517–21). Matheolus’s selectivity distorts the evidence: he cites Vashti but omits to mention Esther – and so on.

Chaucer similarly opens his own poem in defence of women by raising the question of literary authority:

A thousand tymes have I herd men telle
That ther ys joy in hevene and peyne in helle,
And I acorde wel that it ys so;
But, natheles, yet wot I wel also
That ther nis noon dwellyng in this contree
That eyther hath in hevene or helle ybe,
Ne may of hit noon other weyes witen
But as he hath herd seyde or founde it writen;
For by assay ther may no man it preve.
But God forbode but men shulde leve
Wel more thing then men han seen with ye!
Men shal nat wenen every thing a lye
But yif himself yt seeth or elles dooth;
For, God wot, thing is never the lasse sooth,

Thogh every wight ne may it nat ysee.
Bernard the monk ne saugh nat all, pardee! (F 1–16)

The comfortable blandness of Chaucer's assurances here is reminiscent of the contented credulity with which he refuses the Eagle's offer to show him the stars in the *House of Fame*; the good-humoured irony becomes even more apparent as he goes on to claim for the writer the poetic equivalent of a licence to print money.

Than mote we to bokes that we fynde,
Thurgh whiche that olde thynges ben in mynde,
And to the doctrine of these olde wyse
Yeve credence, in every skylful wise,
That tellen of these olde apprevd stories
Of holynesse, of regnes, of victories,
Of love, of hate, of other sondry thynges,
Of whiche I may not maken rehersynges.
And yf that olde bokes were aweye,
Yloren were of remembraunce the keye.
Wel ought us thanne honouren and beleve
These bokes, there we han noon other preve. (F 17–28)

What cannot be proved is precisely what we must believe, on the authority of 'olde bokes', when 'other preve' is lacking. But among the 'sondry thynges' which books treat of are women, and here we not only have 'other preve', but we find the books themselves at variance; in opposition to the antifeminist tradition which is represented in the *Legend's* Prologue by the *Troilus*, there are the 'sixty bokes olde and newe' in Chaucer's possession which the God of Love cites as containing innumerable stories of women who chose to die rather than be unfaithful (G 273–310). How can the notion of literary authority survive such contradictions?

The question has a contemporary relevance, as the blindness of contemporary critics to the radical nature of this question and its implications for the legends that follow amply demonstrates. Where Jehan le Fèvre insists with clear-sighted accuracy that the classical legends are nothing more than poetic fictions, modern Chaucer critics speak unthinkingly of these stories in terms of 'objective truth' (Rowe, 1988, 58). Chaucer is said to have falsified the legends in his collection by omitting, for example, Medea's murder of her children or Philomel and Procne's grisly revenge on Tereus, or by presenting Cleopatra as a willing martyr for love or (once again) taking the Ovidian rather than the Vergilian view of Dido and Aeneas. Fyler (1979, 98–115) argues that 'what Chaucer deletes from his source is often as much a part of the poem's meaning as what he includes'; the informed reader, recognizing 'a consistent pattern of censorship', will be prompted to read Chaucer's versions in an ironic light. Recognisable distortion is likewise assumed by Donald Rowe when he scornfully

dismisses the narrative stance of the Dido legend as due to the sentimentality of the narrator-persona he distinguishes from Chaucer himself:

he pities Dido as victim and scorns Aeneas as victimizer. But of course he is the author of Dido as victim, Aeneas as victimizer. The pathos in which he revels is enabled by his misperception and misrepresentation.
(1988, 138)

What this comment ignores is precisely what the Prologue's questioning of literary authority has encouraged us to perceive: that Vergil is *equally* the author of his Dido and his Aeneas. There is no truth to be 'misrepresented', only a series of poetic fictions, each with its own claims to authority. Chaucer has the same liberty to represent Aeneas as victimizer that Vergil had to represent him as a dutiful hero.

Nothing is more characteristic of the Middle Ages than the constant refashioning of old stories, and this refashioning depends precisely on the reader's willingness to suppress the details of the older versions and accept the new one on its own terms as a valid account. Matheolus's *Lamentations* provide one example of this refashioning which is particularly instructive when compared with the *Legend*. Among the stream of *exempla* which Matheolus uses to 'prove' women's failings, there appears the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, offered as illustration of women's disobedience; they are incapable of obeying any command. So Eurydice, Matheolus says, was released from hell on condition that she did not look back as she left; her husband enjoined her not to do so, but 'la fole' disobeyed him and was promptly reclaimed by hell (II 1315–36). Now, in all the classical versions of this story it is of course Orpheus and not Eurydice who disobeys the command not to look back, and so loses his wife. Although this version of the story was often moralized in ways unflattering to Orpheus (Friedman, 1970, Chapter IV), no writer in either classical or medieval times, so far as I know, interpreted it as illustrative of the innate unruliness of *men* – although this would be an entirely plausible conclusion to draw from it – because there was no pre-existing stereotype to prompt such a reading. Matheolus however fundamentally alters the story in order to read it across the grain as 'evidence' of female refractoriness. The learned (male) editor of the *Lamentations*, who usually comments in detail on Matheolus's sources and their transformations in his handling, does not appear to have noticed this startling alteration to the story and has no comment to make on the passage; nor has anyone in this instance proposed that Matheolus's readers would read the story as heavy irony, correcting it in the light of their knowledge of the 'true' version. Indeed, when Jehan le Fèvre gives his critique of Matheolus's *exempla* in the *Livre de Leesce*, his objections to this one are founded not on its falsification of the original version, but rather on the grounds that it is 'against nature' for a dead person to be brought back to life, and the story should therefore be rejected root and branch as a self-evident 'fable' (2089–102).

Chaucer has the same licence to refashion the story of Medea or Cleopatra as Matheolus has to refashion the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, without eliciting suspicions of irony (cf. Ames, 1986, 69). Elaborate efforts to 'prove' irony by appealing to the traditionally hostile presentations of these heroines (e.g., Taylor, 1977) are thus beside the point. It is against exactly this sort of literary background that the one-sidedness of the legends finds its justification: it represents the weight of insistence necessary to redress the balance of male-oriented literature. Jehan le Fèvre answers the possible objection against his *Livre de Leesce* that it cites only good women and ignores the bad, by saying that this is only fair, since men are equally silent about such male villains as Nero or Herod (3794–819). He then gives a long list of good women which sets 'Cleopatre, qui fu bonne' (3821) – the only one to be dignified with this epithet – alongside such figures as Ruth, Rachel, Sarah, Octavia and Lucretia, without any hint of incongruity or irony.¹⁸

If the Prologue to the *Legend* raises the question of how much 'feyth and credence' (F 31) should be given to books, it is not because Chaucer wishes to undermine the credibility of his own legends, but rather the authority of the 'olde bokes' which slander women. The legends do not need 'correcting'; they are themselves corrective of the antifeminist thrust of earlier writings, as the Prologue makes plain.¹⁹ This corrective role is evident, for example, when Chaucer changes his source and transfers from Medea to Jason the comparison between sexual desire and the appetite of matter to form so that it refers to male rather than female promiscuity (Frank, 1972, 84). It is equally evident in his alteration of Aeneas's reaction to the depiction of the fall of Troy on the wall of the temple at Carthage: whereas in the *Aeneid* Aeneas takes comfort from this evidence that the sorrows of the Trojans arouse general sympathy, in Chaucer he reacts with distress at the publicisation of their disgrace – a distress that is clearly meant to mirror the distress of Chaucer's Dido as she visualizes the publicisation of her own shame.

'Allas, that I was born!' quod Eneas;
Thourghout the world oure shame is kid so wyde,
Now it is peynted upon every syde.
We, that weren in prosperite,
Been now desclandred, and in swich degre,
No lenger for to lyven I ne kepe.' (1027–32)

The fate that Phyllis wishes on Demophoon is similarly that he should be 'peynted' so that 'folk may rede forby as they go' and deride him for his

¹⁸ Lowes (1909, 547–65) provides other examples of the women of the *Legend* being presented in a positive light by medieval poets.

¹⁹ Delany ([1986] 1990, 84–5) argues a similar case with respect to Christine de Pisan's *City of Ladies*, and cites the *Livre de Leesce* as a precedent, but since she interprets the *Legend* as ironic, she does not connect it with these examples. Ames (1986) argues on lines similar to my own here.

treachery (2538–42). The legends are to bring shame on men in the same way that the antifeminist *exempla* bring shame on women.²⁰

But Chaucer does not simply slant the old stories so that they favour women; he also makes them into expressions of a peculiarly female ethos, based on the ‘pite’ to which Criseyde had given such a bad name. The word ‘pite’, together with its cognates and synonyms, is a leitmotiv in the *Legend*; ‘pite’ is the quality that dominates in the women, and the quality that is totally lacking from the men. The ‘pite’ which prohibits Hypermnestra from murdering her husband is presented as characteristic of her sex:

Pyëtous, sad, wis, and trewe as stel,
As to these wemen it acordeth wel. (2582–3)

Wherever the story makes it possible, Chaucer emphasizes that it is pity, rather than sexual attraction, which draws these women to love.²¹ Ariadne and Phaedra have ‘compassioun’ for the imprisoned Theseus and think his fate ‘gret pite’ (1974–6); when he is brought before them he begs for ‘mercy’ and looks so pitiable that anyone seeing him would have wept for ‘routhe’ (2073, 2076–7). Dido’s relationship with Aeneas is paradigmatic in this respect. At their first meeting Aeneas’s misfortunes elicit her ‘routhe and wo’, and by an inevitable progression, her love.

Anon hire herte hath pite of his wo,
And with that pite love com in also;
And thus, for pite and for gentillesse,
Refreshed moste he been of his distresse. (1078–81)

Alone with Dido in the cave, Aeneas pleads on his knees for her love until she takes pity on him (‘rewede on his peyne’: 1237). Her pity is generalized to her sex in Chaucer’s wondering lament:

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 beforn?
Se ye nat alle how they ben forsworn? (1254–9)

As in the *House of Fame*, Dido’s story is the wand that conjures up a larger vision of women’s trusting generosity and its abuse by men. The men call forth

²⁰ Green (1988, 15) sees Chaucer’s willingness to call these male lovers ‘traitors’ as an ‘indication of the underlying seriousness’ with which Chaucer treats the heroines of the *Legend of Good Women*.

²¹ Frank (1972, 68) comments on Dido’s pity for Aeneas that it ‘is not the pity of the lady for the beseeching lover but a more general, humane quality of heart’.

the women's pity, but they do not reciprocate it: the abandoned Dido's plea to Aeneas – 'Mercy, lord! Have pite in youre thought!' (1324) – falls on deaf ears. Ariadne futilely begs Theseus to 'turn ageyn, for routhe and synne' (2200). The men cynically milk women's pity for their own ends, without being touched by it: Jason 'loketh pitously' to win Hypsipyle's love (1549); Tereus weeps 'pitously' while relating his false tale of Philomel's death (2344). The power of weakness – the power on which women are taught to rely – is in the *Legend* something to be exploited not by them, but by men.

The masculine imperviousness to pity may be seen not only in the *Legend* itself, but also in its modern critics. Donald Rowe's summary of his reading of the poem is a classic example of the way its emotional claims may be resisted:

Our pity for the heroines is now a response to their frailty, not a participation in their feelings of innocent victimization. At extreme moments the narrator's pity is virtually transformed into its opposite – as when we respond with contempt and scorn to the narrator's pity for Ariadne. Similarly, our participation in the narrator's anger at the legends' villains is often tempered by our perception that they are victimized as well as victimizing. Thus the narrator's pity and scorn are transformed into the poet's sympathy and satire, which are directed not least of all at his own persona. (1988, 139)

Such comments are reminiscent of the medieval commentators on the *Heroides* who turn Dido's epistle to Aeneas into a moral warning against *stultus amor* (Hexter, 1986, 183), and are as little sympathetic to Chaucer's tone and style as these commentators are to Ovid's. This rejection of pity is the more serious in that it is through pity, and not through historical veracity, that the legends achieve authenticity. It is in the chord they strike in the reader, the point at which the individual story makes contact with knowledge of a general human experience, as Dido's story spreads itself into the innumerable lives of 'sely wemen', that they establish themselves as 'truth'. Pity, that is, is not only a quality exhibited within the narrative, it is also the emotion it elicits from the reader.²² The pity the men withhold, the reader is to supply, with Chaucer leading the way. 'Allas, for thee myn herte hath now pite!' (2184) is his response to Ariadne; his 'routhe' is too great for him to bring himself to transcribe Dido's lament to her sister Anna (1345). The womanly ethos of pity extends to envelop the reader: the reader is feminized, as it were, by the process of reading. The 'olde ensaumplers' are not in themselves the goal of the reading process; its aim is to permeate the reader with the female responses that are crushed and set aside in the male-centred narratives of heroic legend.

Chaucer marks his intentions in the Prologue to the *Legend* by embodying the ethos of pity in the figure of Alceste, who defends Chaucer against the

²² Cf. Frank's comment that Dido's passionate plea for pity 'is aimed as much at the audience as at Aeneas' (1972, 72).

God of Love's anger, and urges him to practise 'compassyoun' in place of 'tyranny' (F 390, 375). Alceste's 'pitee' is the very mark of her identity:

The god of Love gan smyle, and than he sayde:
 'Wostow,' quod he, 'wher this be wyf or mayde,
 Or queene, or countesse, or of what degre,
 That hath so lytel penance yiven thee,
 That hast deserved sorer for to smerte?
 But pite renneth soone in gentil herte;
 That maistow seen; she kytheth what she ys.' (F 498–504)

The 'wommanly pitee' that in Criseyde's case had become tainted by its kinship with her 'slydyng corage' is here renewed as a positive force. Changeability manifests itself only in the benign form of an open responsiveness, symbolized in the heliotropism of the daisy, Alceste's flower, opening and closing in harmony with the changing rhythms of day and night (F 60–5).²³ Change, that is, becomes the essence of constancy. So in the legends 'pite' is intimately linked with 'trouthe'; Hypermnestra is feminine not only in being 'Pyetous' but also in being 'trewe as stel'. The commitment prompted by pity endures through all subsequent vicissitudes because it meets them with the same open responsiveness that brought it into being. Cleopatra's 'routhe' for Antony's death leads her to replicate it in her suicide, as the daisy replicates the motions of the sun; it is the inevitable culmination of her passionate identification with his being.

'And in myself this covenant made I tho,
 That ryght swich as ye felten, wel or wo,
 As fer forth as it in my power lay,
 Unreprovable unto my wyfhod ay,
 The same wolde I fele, lyf or deth –
 And thilke covenant whil me lasteth breth
 I wol fulfille; and that shal ben wel sene,
 Was nevere unto hire love a trewer quene.'
 And with that word, naked, with ful good herte,
 Among the serpents in the pit she sterte,
 And there she ches to have hire buryinge. (688–98)

In this passionate identification with their lovers, the women demonstrate the courage they share with men: imbued with 'strengthe and hardynesse' by her love, Thisbe repeats Piramus's suicide, smiting herself with the same sword, 'That warm was of hire loves blod, and hot' (914) to show that a woman can be 'as trewe in lovyng as a man' (911). As two souls entwine themselves into a single sentient entity, male courage and female courage become indistinguishable.

²³ This feature of the daisy is frequently mentioned in French Marguerite poetry; see Wimsatt, 1970, 30–1.

The corollary of this *ought* to be that 'wommanly pitee' manifests itself in men, and indeed it does so in the idyllic world of the *Legend's* Prologue: the pity Alceste shows to Chaucer is replicated in the God of Love. The Prologue also has importance as the place where Chaucer begins to develop a vision of male subjection to 'wommanly pitee' in contexts quite outside the erotic. Pity here is independent of love, and as a result its own power appears more clearly. What is important is that this power originates not in the stronger but in the weaker: it is not the God of Love who magnanimously decides to take pity on Chaucer, but Alceste who pleads with him on Chaucer's behalf. His pity manifests itself as a subjection to her pleas. And this subjection does not lie in his arbitrary will but is the spontaneous result of his nature: his 'gentil kynde' makes him *inevitably* responsive to pity's claims (F 384–96); like Alceste, he 'kytheth what he is' in his capacity for pity. In the God of Love we can see an outline sketch for the ideal of feminized masculinity more fully represented in the Theseus of the *Knight's Tale*.

If the God of Love represents the ideal, the men of the legends represent its antithesis. Even Piramus is made to contrast the 'mercy' he asks from Thisbe with his own mercilessness in sending her into danger (835–9). Tarquin, 'a kynges eyr', ought 'by lynage and by ryght' to show his nobility as the God of Love does in his responsiveness to pity (1819–24); instead he exemplifies the male 'tirannye' that the God renounces (1883) in its most extreme form, the crime of rape.

It is with the two stories of rape that I want to end discussion of the *Legend*, because they constitute in my view the clearest indications of the seriousness underlying Chaucer's defence of women, whatever its occasional digressions into playful gallantry. The stories of Lucretia and Philomel are two of the four in the *Legend* (as we have it) that have no parallel in the *Heroides*.²⁴ The other two – the stories of Cleopatra and Thisbe – are, like the Lucretia legend, stories of female suicides. No critic seems to have addressed the question of what dictated Chaucer's choice of these legends, but for me the fact that they contain three suicides and two rapes between them is in itself indicative of Chaucer's wish to give emotional seriousness to his work by representing female suffering in its most extreme forms. The violence that women are unable to turn against men (as the legend of Hypermnestra shows), they turn against themselves. The deaths of Cleopatra and Thisbe repeat the suicides of Dido and Phyllis but in a more positive form: suicide appears less as the response of emotional frustration and more as an impassioned expression of emotional union. Lucretia's death is in quite another category. Suicide here takes on an entirely different significance by virtue of its link with rape. It is neither the climax and consecration of romantic passion nor the catharsis of a romantic agony; that is to say, it expresses no previous surrender of the self to

²⁴ The story of Lucretia is based on Ovid's *Fasti* (II 685–852), that of Philomel on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (VI 424–674), as is the Thisbe-legend (IV 55–166). The Cleopatra-legend has no single obvious source; for discussion of possible secondary influences, see Frank (1972).

a lover which can find satisfaction in the mimetic surrender of the self to death. There is nothing of willed surrender here, as Lucretia's swoon during the rape symbolically underlines; what her death mimetically repeats is the simple obliteration of the female by male 'tirannye'. Her suicide realizes in public and demonstrable form the brutal extinction of personality that constitutes the invisible horror of rape:

And openly the tale he tolde hem alle,
And openly let cary her on a bere
Thurgh al the toun, that men may see and here
The horryble dede of hir oppressyoun. (1865–8)

The emphasis on male 'tirannye' protects Chaucer's Lucretia legend from the dangers inherent in a story that represents female heroism in the form of suicide – dangers that are intensified when the suicide is a response to the fact or threat of rape. For suicide seems merely to confirm and lend approval to the notion that female virtue should express itself only in passivity; moreover, when it follows rape, it doubles the crime by visiting its penalties on the victim rather than the perpetrator. 'If she was an adulteress, why is she praised? and if she was chaste, why was she put to death?', as St Augustine puts it in the *City of God* (I.19). Chaucer stresses the 'gret compassioun' that 'the grete Austyn' expresses for Lucretia (1690); he omits Augustine's suggestion that her suicide is a boastful demonstration of her purity: 'she intended to show this punishment to the eyes of men as a witness to her state of mind for those to whom she could not show her conscience' (ibid.). For Chaucer, what Lucretia's suicide makes manifest is not her mind but Tarquin's deed, 'the horryble dede of hir oppressyoun'. Female martyrdom manifests male aggression, and it is this that justifies the telling of the story. The stories of rape move the *Legend's* indictment of male cruelty on to a level of seriousness that the recriminations of slighted love can never reach. Charges of falsehood and betrayal can be bandied back and forth between the sexes interminably, but rape is a crime that only men can commit. 'I see no woman who wounds her lover nor who takes him by force' says Jehan le Fèvre (*Leesce* 3927–8), though he makes nothing more of this point. For Chaucer, on the contrary, rape remains a constant touchstone for determining justice between the sexes; in the *Canterbury Tales* as in the *Legend* it appears as the definitive form of male tyranny, representing a fundamental imbalance between the sexes which human relationships must seek to redress.

In the Philomel legend the indictment of men threatens to become an indictment of God. The opening launches without warning into metaphysical questioning:

Thow yevere of the formes, that hast wrought
This fayre world and bar it in thy thought
Eternaly er thow thy werk began,
Why madest thow, unto the slaunder of man,

Or, al be that it was nat thy doing,
 As for that fyn, to make swich a thyng,
 Whi sufferest thou that Tereus was bore,
 That is in love so fals and so forswore,
 That fro this world up to the firste hevene
 Corrupeth whan that folk his name nevene?
 And, as to me, so grisely was his dede
 That, whan that I his foule storye rede,
 Myne eyen wexe foule and sore also.
 Yit last the venym of so longe ago,
 That it enfeteth hym that wol beholde
 The storye of Tereus, of which I tolde. (2228–43)

The passage echoes Boethius's interrogation of God's justice in the *Consolation* ('Why suffrestow that slydyng Fortune turneth so grete enterchaungynges of thynges? So that anoyous peyne, that scholde duweliche punysche felons, punysscheth innocentz...'), and Tereus may be counted among the 'schrewes' who are guilty of 'fraude covered and kembd with a false colour' (I m. 5.34–7, 44–6). The God whom Chaucer addresses is also recognisably the Platonic Father of Forms hymned by Boethius:²⁵

Thow, that art althir-fayrest, berynge the faire world in thy thought,
 formedest this world to the lyknesse semblable of that faire world in thy
 thought. Thou drawest alle thyng of thy sovereyn ensaumpler and
 comaundest that this world, parfyte ymakid, have frely and absolut hise
 parfyte parties. (III m.9.11–17)

The invocation of the Father of Forms seems on the face of it irrelevant, but taken together with the suggestion that the very telling of Tereus's story corrupts ('Corrupeth') the world, and infects those who behold it, it seems to imply that the divine thought itself is polluted by the presence of this story within it. At any rate, he suggests, the reader of the story is so polluted. Chaucer here throws into question his own relationship – as reader, as writer – to the story of rape; if to read it is to be infected by its 'venym', what is the responsibility of the writer who tells it? It is perhaps for this reason that he emblemizes it so that its horror is muted into pathos. It both describes and enacts a process of silencing; her tongue torn out, Philomel can tell her story only by writing it (not picturing it) in the dumb 'letters' of her tapestry (2358, 2364). Her writing speaks only her mutilation. Procne's response to the tapestry is a replication of her sister's muteness: 'No word she spak,

²⁵ Young (1944) discusses other ways in which this Platonic notion could have been mediated to Chaucer, including a passage in the *Romance of the Rose*; its connection with the Boethian question on the origin of evil shows however that the *Consolation* was the primary impetus behind this passage.

for sorwe and ek for rage' (2374). Participating in their grief, the tale itself falls silent:

The remenaunt is no charge for to telle,
For this is al and som: thus was she served,
That never harm agilte ne deserved
Unto this crewel man, that she of wiste. (2383–6)

When woman is thus silenced, to speak on her behalf seems like another kind of violation.

Chaucer's pondering of his own role as reader and as writer here takes up in deeply serious form the Prologue's dramatisation of his sense of his responsibilities to his subject-matter. And it is to the Prologue that we return for the last time to consider some aspects of these responsibilities still not mentioned. For his relationship to the *Legend* offers almost as many problems as his relationship to *Troilus and Criseyde*. The first difficulty is how he can exculpate *himself* from his relentless accusations of male duplicity – a difficulty he acknowledges with his little joke at the end of the Phyllis legend:

Be war, ye wemen, of youre subtyl fo,
Syn yit this day men may ensaumple se;
And trusteth, as in love, no man but me. (2559–61)

More important, there is the difficulty of how to write of the pitiable sufferings of women without appearing to patronize them, to arrogate the right to 'rescue' them with a gallantry that assumes their inability to defend themselves. This is where Alceste's role becomes doubly important. If the legends represent Chaucer 'rescuing' women, the Prologue shows us Alceste 'rescuing' Chaucer; his pity for suffering woman is mirrored in her 'pite' for the accused poet. However playful the Prologue's mood, there is a serious point behind Chaucer's representation of his story-collection as written in obedience to a woman's command. Whether fact or fiction, the commissioning of the *Legend* by a woman is freighted with an essential significance: the male author signals his abnegation of his independent authority, and his subjection to women and the story they have to tell.

FEMINIZING CHAUCER

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