

therein of Moorish local colour, as also for the creation of one or two memorable Spanish characters, Moorish and otherwise.

4. Such fictional writings familiarised the mediaeval English reader or listener with a number of Spanish place-names: Granada, Seville, Córdoba, Saragossa, Pamplona, Roncesvalles, although

5. The best known Spanish city in mediaeval England, and one of the most frequently referred to in Middle English texts, would undoubtedly be the famous pilgrim-centre at Compostela, the rallying point for Christian Spain.

6. A few scattered references to Spanish politics, to England's relations with Spain, and to the latter's characteristic products and exports are likewise to be found in Middle English writings.

7. Of the writer or works examined, perhaps not surprisingly, given the universality of his talent, the variety of his writings and the probability of his having actually visited Spain, Chaucer would seem to be the author who reflects the greatest and the most diverse knowledge of *las cosas de España*, quoting St. Isidore and Petrus Alphonsus, being familiar with hispano-Arabic scientific writing, showing himself to be acquainted with contemporary Spanish political and economic matters, and cognizant with the most characteristic features of Spanish geography. It can hardly be affirmed that Spanish themes play a significant role in his works, but they do, now and again, like the white wine of Lepe, creep subtly into his texts.

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Legends of Good Women in the European Middle Ages

Von Carol M. Meale (Bristol)

... of wymen / the which haue ben & are
Of noble actys in former 3erys & dayes
As gode as men or better if I durst compare
In wytt in werr in crafte & odyre assayes
Thies olde wryters / make but lytell prayes
ffor non autor wryteth synglerly
Of famouse wymen but of men many

Sawe oon I fynde / amonge thies wryters olde
John Bokase / so clepyde is his name
That wrote the fall of pryncys strange & bolde
And in to english / translate is the same
An odyre he wrote / vnto the laude & fame
Of ladyes noble in prayse of all wymen
But for the rareness / few folke do it ken

London, British Library, Additional MS 10304, f. 2v.

So, around the year 1440, wrote an anonymous English poet, as he speculated upon the possible audience for his partial translation of Boccaccio's *De Claris Mulieribus*, written seventy years before.¹ Little-known though Boccaccio's text may have been to a general lay readership, at least in England, it does in retrospect form the first of a series of works concerned with debating the nature and role of women in literature and history, a series to which some of the most eminent of contemporary European authors contributed. The *De Claris Mulieribus*, revised in several stages, probably between 1361 and 1375, may have been known to Chaucer when he began to compose his *Legend of Good Women* around 1386;²

¹ The text is edited by Gustav Schleich, *Die mittenglische Umdichtung von Boccaccios De claris mulieribus*, Palaestra, 144 (Leipzig, 1924); for discussions see J. Zupitza, "Über die mittenglische Bearbeitung von Boccaccios *De claris mulieribus*", in: *Festschrift zur Begrüßung des fünften allgemeinen Neuphilologentages in Berlin 1892*, pp. 93-120; Herbert G. Wright, *Boccaccio in England from Chaucer to Tennyson* (University of London, 1957), pp. 28-36; Janet Cowen, "Women as Exempla in Fifteenth-Century Verse of the Chaucerian Tradition", in: *Chaucer and Fifteenth-Century Poetry*, ed. Julia Boffey and Janet Cowen (King's College, London: Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies, 1991), pp. 51-65.

² Such is the assumption made by Peter Godman, "Chaucer and Boccaccio's Latin Works", in: *Chaucer and the Italian Trecento*, ed. Piero Boitani (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 269-95, and cf. Lisa J. Kiser, *Telling Classical Tales: Chaucer and the 'Legend of Good Women'* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1983), p. 103. The editors of the text in *The Riverside Chaucer*, general editor Larry D. Benson (Boston, 1987), p. 1059, express more caution on the point.

and it was the source of inspiration for Christine de Pizan in her re-writing of women's history, *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*, in 1405, shortly after the time of her active engagement in the so-called *querelle de la Rose*, in which she defended women against what she saw as their defamation by Jean de Meun.³ Indeed, in its anonymous French translation, dated 1401, it circulated in manuscripts with Christine's *Cité*, and the works together formed a uniquely powerful statement of the claims of women to be taken seriously as the subjects of literary representation.⁴ Chaucer's *Legend*, too, seems to have been read in the late Middle Ages as part of this *querelle des femmes*, if its presence in a volume belonging to John Paston II, which also contained the English translation of Chartier's *La Belle Dame sans Mercy*, may be taken as evidence.⁵ The intention behind this present paper is to offer a reading of this most problematic of Chaucer's poems within the context of the earlier part of this European debate, relating it to the problems and issues also raised by the *De Mulieribus* and the *Cité des Dames*. These three texts are linked not only by shared material and by their common preoccupation with the re-writing of women's history: in all three the content and structure of the narrative is shaped by the individual responses of their authors to the literary traditions within which they were working.

³ No modern edition of the French text of the *Cité* has been published. A facsimile of the 1521 edition by Henry Pepwell of the translation by Bryan Anslay is in Diane Bornstein (intro), *Distaves and Dames: Renaissance Treatises for and about Women* (New York, 1978). All quotations in the present article are taken from Earl Jeffrey Richards (trans.), *Christine de Pizan: The Book of the City of Ladies* (London, 1983). On Christine's use of Boccaccio see A. Jeanroy, "Boccace et Christine de Pisan: le *De claris mulieribus* principale source du *Livre de la Cité des Dames*" *Romania*, 48 (1922), 93–105. On the *querelle* see Eric Hicks, *Le Débat sur le Roman de la Rose*, Bibliothèque du XV^e siècle, xliii (Paris, 1977); Joseph L. Baird and John R. Kane (trans.), *'La Querelle de la Rose': Letters and Documents*, North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures, no. 199 (Chapel Hill, 1978); and *Poems of Cupid, God of Love*, ed. Thelma S. Fenster and Mary Carpenter Erler (Leiden, 1990). For a recent discussion see A. J. Minnis, "Theorizing the Rose: Commentary Tradition in the *Querelle de la Rose*", in: *Poetics: Theory and Practice in Medieval English Literature*, ed. Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 13–36.

⁴ See Ex-Phillipps MS 3648 (Paris, Collection Particulière) and Chantilly, Musée Condé MS 856 (562) in: Carla Bozzolo, *Manuscripts des Traductions Françaises D'Œuvres de Boccaccio: XV^e siècle*, Medioevo e Umanesimo, 15 (Padova, 1973), pp. 98–100. The earlier assumption that the French translation of Boccaccio was by Laurent de Premierfait is now regarded as erroneous.

⁵ *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, 2 vols., ed. Norman Davis (Oxford, 1971, 1976), I, 517. Cf. Ruth Ames, "The Feminist Connections of Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*", in: *Chaucer in the Eighties*, ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Robert J. Blanch (Syracuse, N.Y., 1986), pp. 57–74 and cf. Joan Kelly, "Early Feminist Theory and the *Querelle des Femmes*, 1400–1789", *Signs*, 8 (1982), pp. 4–28.

Literary authority, and the anxiety it can generate in a writer, is most clearly confronted by Christine de Pizan.⁶ The account with which the *Cité des Dames* opens, of Christine sitting in her study browsing through her books and becoming steadily more disoriented by the distorted images of women which were reflected back at her from their pages, is contrasted with her own experience of women, her own "character and conduct as a natural woman"; and that of "other women whose company (she) frequently kept, princesses, great ladies, women of the middle and lower classes" (p. 4). Christine the reader comes to the conclusion that all authors, "famous men — such solemn scholars, possessed of such deep and great understanding"; "speak from one and the same mouth. They all concur in one conclusion: that the behaviour of women is inclined to and full of every vice." The allegorical vision which follows on from this statement of despair, in which the female virtues of Reason, Rectitude and Justice appear to her and assist her in the building of the *Cité* from the achievements of historical and contemporary women, acts as a process of re-education: within this fictional frame Christine is taught to read as a woman, using her own experience as a yardstick against which to measure the authority, the truth, of male-authored books. She is taught to trust her judgements arrived at independently of the weight of tradition.⁷

In Chaucer's *Legend*, the discussion proceeds in a more oblique fashion. The Prologue opens with a profession of faith on the Narrator's part: books give us access to areas of experience which are otherwise closed to us, therefore "Wel oughte us thanne on olde bokes leve, / There as there is non other assay by preve".⁸ He goes on to state his own position unequivocally: "On bokes for to rede I me delyte, / And in myn herte have hem in reverence . . ." (G, 30–31). Yet subsequent events in the narrative only serve to undermine any confidence which this assertive opening — with its possible homage to Dante and his vision of the realms of Heaven and Hell⁹ — may have inspired in this persona. During the dream-vision encounter with Cupid the Dreamer/Narrator is castigated for having hindered devotion to the God's cult through his writing: Cupid declares that he has translated the *Romaunt de la Rose*, "That is an heresy ageyns my lawe" (G, 256), and that he has written of Criseyde "In shewynge how that

⁶ See Sheila Delany, "Rewriting woman good: gender and the anxiety of influence in two late-medieval texts", in: Delany, *Medieval Literary Politics: Shapes of Ideology* (Manchester, 1990), pp. 74–87, 172–173.

⁷ Cf. Susan Schibanoff, "Taking the Gold Out of Egypt: The Art of Reading as a Woman", in: *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, ed. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocínio P. Schweikart (Baltimore and London, 1986), pp. 83–106.

⁸ Lines 27–28. All quotations are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*. The version of the Prologue quoted is the revision (G), probably made after 1394.

⁹ Piero Boitani, "What Dante Meant to Chaucer", in: *Chaucer and the Italian Trecento*, ed. Piero Boitani, pp. 115–39, pp. 125–126.

wemen han don mis" (G, 266). What might here, to a late-twentieth-century audience, look to be a demonstration of Cupid's lack of critical sensitivity, may be more accurately characterised as a desire to approach texts as though they were exemplars — stories where meaning is constituted by a simple morality, good versus bad. And this is an aesthetic of reading to which the Dreamer himself hastens to subscribe, as he assures Alceste that "it was myn entente / To forthere trouthe in love and yt cheryce, / And to be war fro falsnesse and fro vice / By swich ensaumple; this was my menyng" (G, 461–464, my emphasis). But such an apparently simple-minded reduction of the complexities of *Troilus and Criseyde* to the level of an exemplar showing Criseyde as the type of fickle woman ill accords with what we know to have been Chaucer's methods of adapting his largely misogynistic sources.¹⁰ In short, we are alerted to the possibility that for Chaucer, as poet, the act of reading could not be accommodated within such a simplistic, and paradigmatic, formulation. Alceste's command that the Narrator should undertake to write "a glorious legende / Of goode women, maydenes and wyves, / That were trewe in lovyng al here lyves; / And ... of false men that hem betrayen" (G, 473–476), is therefore rendered problematic before he even begins his "penaunce" (G, 489), and the ambivalence of Chaucer's relation to literary authority and tradition is thereby established.

For Boccaccio, however, unlike Christine and Chaucer, the *author* is the locus of textual authority. In the letter of dedication to Andrea, countess of Altavilla, which prefaces *De Claris Mulieribus*, he presents himself as the impartial recorder of the deeds of women, stating that "accuracy" has "compelled" him to mingle accounts of wantonness with those of purity.¹¹ He not infrequently calls attention to his role in selecting, and elaborating upon, his material — a strategy which he most obviously sets out in his introduction, where he justifies his exclusion of Christian women from his roll-call of famous women, on the grounds that pagans could not be placed alongside Christians because "they did not strive for the same goal", and in any case, books had already been written about Christian saints.¹² And he compares, evaluates and sifts hitherto unexplored sources in a way which gives every appearance of scholarly objectivity.¹³ The high seriousness with which Boccaccio viewed this undertaking is signalled by his decision to write in Latin, as opposed to the vernaculars chosen by Chaucer and Christine. Despite the dedication to a woman, and his declared belief that it is

¹⁰ See *Chaucer's Boccaccio*, ed. and trans. N. R. Havelly (Cambridge, 1980).

¹¹ *Boccaccio: Concerning Famous Women*, trans. Guido A. Guarino (London, 1964), p. xxxiv. All subsequent quotations are from this edition. For the Latin see *Giovanni Boccaccio: Tutte le Opere*, 12 vols., ed. V. Branca (in progress), X (Milan, 1967), p. 708.

¹² p. xxxviii–ix; *Tutte le Opere*, X, p. 716.

¹³ Cf. Vittorio Branca, *Boccaccio: The Man and His Works*, trans. Richard Monges and Dennis J. McAuliffe (New York University, 1976), p. 110, who writes that in the "manifest moralism" of the *De Mulieribus* "there is a free and impartial narrative gusto".

"both useful and necessary that the accomplishments of these women please women no less than men", he closes the work with a plea that, "for the glory of honourable studies, ... wiser men tolerate with kindly spirit what has not been done properly".¹⁴ He is writing a learned book for a learned, humanist, and hence, by definition, largely male, audience, and it is surely significant that he invokes the Latin history, *De Viris Illustribus*, of his "master Petrarch" as an enterprise with which his own, lesser, effort may be compared.¹⁵ I may add here that these observations on the intended and actual audiences, to use Paul Strohm's terminology¹⁶, apply only to the original composition; once translated into French, the availability and accessibility of the text to a female audience is greatly increased, to the extent that even an English noblewoman, Margaret Beaufort, in all probability owned a copy.¹⁷

These very different authorial stances had a profound effect on the ways in which Boccaccio, Chaucer and Christine approached women as the subjects of their discourses, and I should like to use, as a focal point for discussion, the figure of Medea. The story of Medea, as we now know it, is a composite one, derived

¹⁴ pp. xxxviii, 251; *Tutte le Opere*, X, pp. 780, 782.

¹⁵ p. xxxvii. As far as I can ascertain there has been no systematic study of the audience for the original Latin text, but the information to be derived from Gianni Mombello, "I manoscritti di Dante, Petrarca e Boccaccio nelle principali librerie francesi del secolo XV" in: *Il Boccaccio nella Cultura Francese*, ed. Carlo Pellegrini (Firenze, 1971), pp. 81–209, would support my conclusion: owners (institutional and/or private) included the papal and other libraries at Avignon (pp. 91, 93, 94); the royal library of the Louvre (p. 99); Jean, duc de Berri (p. 100); Charles d'Orléans (p. 106); and French and Burgundian churchmen (p. 173, 183). See, for a list of manuscripts, Vittorio Branca, *Tradizione delle Opere di Giovanni Boccaccio* (Roma, 1958), pp. 92–98.

¹⁶ Strohm, "Chaucer's Audience(s): Fictional, Implied, Intended, Actual", *Chaucer Review*, 18 (1983), 137–145.

¹⁷ For evidence of readers of the French translation see Bozzolo, *Manuscripts des Traductions Françaises*, and Mombello, "I manoscritti di Dante, Petrarca e Boccaccio". Margaret Beaufort, in all likelihood, owned London, British Library, Royal MS 20.C.V; see G. F. Warner and J. Gilson, *Catalogue of the Western Manuscripts in the Old Royal and King's Collections*, 4 vols (London, 1921), 2, p. 372; Bozzolo, *Manuscripts des Traductions Françaises*, pp. 153–4, for descriptions. The manuscript has the badge of the Beaufort family inserted into the opening initial on f. 1r. Whilst there is no means of dating this badge, it is of significance that Margaret left to her son, Henry VII, "a greatte volume of velom named John Bokas lymned"; see C. H. Cooper, *Memoir of Margaret, Countess of Richmond and Derby* (Cambridge, 1874), p. 132. It is usually assumed that this is a reference to Lydgate's translation, *The Fall of Princes*, but the case for the book to be identified rather as the *De Mulieribus* would seem to be strengthened by the occurrence in the 1535 catalogue of the royal library at Richmond of an item described as "Bocace des nobles femmes"; see Henri Omont, "Les Manuscrits Français des Rois D'Angleterre au Château de Richmond", in: *Etudes Romanes dédiées à Gaston Paris ... par ses élèves français*, etc. (Paris, 1891), 1–13, p. 9, no. 77.

from a number of classical, and medieval, sources.¹⁸ The most complete version of Medea's "history", culled from this variety of texts, are that she fell in love with Jason when he arrived on her father's island of Colchis to win the Golden Fleece; that she enabled his success in this task through her learning and skills; that she subsequently eloped with him, scattering the dismembered body of her young brother as a ploy to prevent her father following them; that, at Jason's request she restored his father's youth and brought about his usurping uncle's death; and that when Jason tired of her and took another wife, Creusa, she killed both her and her own two children, whom she had borne by Jason. Boccaccio, in his version, exploits many of these details — which are never found in their entirety in any classical work — to the full. Medea is introduced as "the most cruel example of ancient wickedness"; she "was quite beautiful and by far the best trained woman in evil-doing"; "her soul was not in discord with her arts".¹⁹ The following narrative highlights her cruelty and unnaturalness as Boccaccio describes her cutting her ties with humanity one by one, as she kindles rebellion amongst the subjects in her father's kingdom, kills her brother, foments discord between Jason's uncle, Pelias, and his daughters, destroys Jason's new wife and her own sons, and, fleeing to Athens, marries King Aegeus and bears him a son. Boccaccio's brief concluding reference to the events of Medea's life, and her restoration "to Jason's good graces", delivered without authorial comment, sorts oddly with this catalogue of destruction.

oralisation The final third of the chapter Boccaccio devotes to a moralisation of the tale, which consists of a condemnation of lasciviousness, and the role of sight in encouraging this sin:

... if powerful Medea had closed her eyes or turned them elsewhere when she fixed them longingly on Jason, her father's power would have been preserved longer, as would her brother's life, and the honor of her virginity would have remained unblemished.

Whilst Boccaccio does include men in his warning against profligacy of sight, the point of his argument is that as men "perceive beauty", they "become envious, and are attracted to concubines", which in turn can lead to the shameful staining of the soul. In other words, although men may be guilty of moral laxity, it is still women who bring about their downfall, who are the active agents in their shame. It is also worth noting that Boccaccio here highlights the stereotypical association of women with the physical that had been prevalent since classical

¹⁸ See Howard Jacobson, *Ovid's 'Heroides'* (Princeton, N. J., 1974), pp. 109–123; Florence Verducci, *Ovid's Toyshop of the Heart: Epistulae Herodiae* (Princeton, N. J., 1985), pp. 59–62, 67–68, 71, 75–76; Guido delle Colonne: *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, (trans.) Mary E. Meek (Bloomington and London, 1974), Bks 1–3.

¹⁹ Guarino, *Concerning Famous Women*, Ch. XVI; Schleich, *Die mittenglische Um-dichtung von Boccaccios De claris mulieribus*, pp. 64–68.

times, an association which was reinforced in the writings of the church fathers, some of whom, for example, attributed the fall of man to Eve's wandering gaze, and her desire for the apple.²⁰ The misogyny which is evident here is not confined to the account of Medea: *De Claris Mulieribus*, making all allowance for its innovatory nature, in giving women a centrality in literature which they had rarely enjoyed before, is a deeply misogynistic work. From the preface, in which Boccaccio asks rhetorically how much more praise is due to women who achieve great deeds than to men, given the "tenderness, frail bodies, and sluggish minds" with which they are endowed by Nature, to the conclusion, in which he states that the number of "illustrious" "women of our time ... is so small" that he considers it "more suitable to come to an end here rather than proceed farther with the women of today"²¹, the text is permeated with references to the moral instability of the female sex. They are accused of fickleness, of lust, of pride, of lacking judgement and generosity. Medea's actions, though extreme, are thus in some sense interpreted as representative.²²

Chaucer's Medea, by comparison, is characterised by absence. Her legend is, in itself, brief (it consists of ninety-nine lines), and its impact is lessened by the fact that it is bracketed with another, that of Hypsipyle. The two women are viewed together as the victims of the "rote of false Lovers, Duc Jasoun" (1368) who, as has often been noted, receives more attention than either of them. Medea herself is not introduced until l. 19 of her story, and even then there is comparatively little emphasis placed upon her unusual degree of learning: the epithets of "wis and fayr" with which she is introduced (1599) could equally well apply to almost any heroine of romance. That said, it is made quite clear that it is only through Medea's aid that Jason will be successful, though the way in which she explains this to him is intimately related to his vows to her "as trewe knyght", "To ben hire husbonde whil he lyve may, / As she that from his deth hym saved here" (1636, 1641–1642). Aside from this there is only one reference to her skills, and this is to "the sleighte of hire enchauntement" which enables Jason to gain the name of "conquerour" (1649–1650). ("sleighte" itself is an ambiguous term to use here, with its range of meanings embracing cleverness and ingenuity, as well

²⁰ On ideas of the physicality of women see Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman* (Cambridge, 1980); and cf. the citation of St. Bernard of Clairvaux's discussion of Eve's fascination with the apple in Elizabeth Robertson, "The Rule of the Body: The Feminine Spirituality of the *Ancrene Wisse*", in: *Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writings: Essays in Feminist Contextual Criticism*, ed. Sheila Fischer and Janet E. Halley (Knoxville, 1989), 109–134, pp. 119–120.

²¹ pp. xxxvii, 251; *Tutte le Opere*, pp. 712, 780.

²² See, e.g., Guarino, *Concerning Famous Women*, Chs LIII (Veturia); LXXXVI (Cleopatra); LXV (Sulpicia); LXXIV (Sempronia); XCII (Pompeia Paulina); XCIII (Sabina Poppaea). The examples could be multiplied.

Ovid

as sorcery).²³ There is, in short, little indication in Chaucer's text of Medea's knowledge of natural magic, which is so powerful a feature of her representation within Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a text which is one of his primary sources.²⁴ Neither is there any of the passion which characterises Ovid's creation in the *Heroides*, a passion which is destructive, and self-destructive, to be sure, but through which she is delineated in all other versions of her story, including Boccaccio's.²⁵ There is no mention of any of the murders which she is reputed to have committed, motivated by her desire for Jason, and no mention of the madness into which several authors hint that she descended. And this despite Chaucer's evident knowledge of the tradition of her cruelty, revealed in the slightly later prologue to the "Man of Law's Tale".²⁶ Chaucer's Medea in the *Legend of Good Women* is more concerned with marriage and her honour.²⁷ Most significantly, Chaucer actually silences his heroine, by cutting short a section which he has taken straight from the *Heroides*: Medea's story ends for Chaucer when she laments

'Whi lykede me thy yel we her to se
More thon the boundes of myn honeste?
Why lykede me thy youthe and thy fayrnesse,
And of thy tonge, the infynyt graciousnesse?
O, haddest thou in thy conquest ded ybe,
Ful mikel untrouthe hadde ther deyde with the!' (1672—1677)

The source of these lines is the following quotation from Ovid:

And why did I take too much pleasure
in your golden hair, your fine ways and the lies
that fell so gracefully from your tongue?

²³ See *MED* (Ann Arbor, 1956—), vol. 9, S-SL (1986), pp. 1027—1029; the usage here is cited under (f), "subtlety; a subtlety, refinement; sorcery".

²⁴ Compare Gower's treatment of the material, *Confessio Amantis*, Bk V, in: *The English Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, 2 vols., EETS ES 81, 82 (1900, 1901), 2, pp. 42—62, and Bruce Harbert, "Lessons from the Great Clerk: Ovid and John Gower", in: *Ovid Renewed: Ovidian Influences on Literature and Art from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Charles Martindale (Cambridge, 1988), 83—97, pp. 93—95.

²⁵ Quotations from the *Heroides* in the text are taken from *Ovid: Heroides*, (trans.) Harold Isbell (Harmondsworth, 1990); cf. *Heroides and Amores*, ed. and trans. Grant Showerman, The Loeb Classical Library (London, 1914). See, especially, the discussion by Verducci, *Ovid's Toyshop of the Heart*, pp. 66—85.

²⁶ See ll. 72—74: "The crueltee of the, queene Medea, / Thy litel children hangynge by the hals, / For thy Jason, that was of love so fals!"

²⁷ Cf. Richard Firth Green's contention that, according to medieval canon law, many of the heroines of the *Legend*, and Medea pre-eminent among them, would have considered themselves married to their lovers: see "Chaucer's Victimized Women", *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 10 (1988), 3—21, pp. 14—15.

... What great treachery,
wretched man, would then have died with you and what
awful grief would have been turned from me.²⁸

Yet, rather than accept the challenge which these lines lay down, in the way they open up opportunities for exploring Medea's psychological state, Chaucer deliberately opts for closure:

Wel can Ovyde hire letter in vers endyte,
Which were as now to long for me to wryte. (1678—1679)

That this is closure, and not an invitation to peruse the classics is, I think, almost certain: the *Heroides* were not translated from Latin until the fifteenth century²⁹ and, given that Chaucer is unlikely to have been able to assume a knowledge of Latin amongst more than a small section of his intended audience (whether male or female)³⁰, it seems to me that the reference functions primarily as a traditional invocation of textual authority.

This clearly deliberate flattening of the contours of narrative and personality has led to the charge of censorship being levelled at Chaucer, but he is not alone in this: Christine's history has been criticised on the same grounds.³¹ Medea's story in the *Cité des Dames* has been divided in two. Her first appearance comes in Book One, in a section concerning learned women, where she takes her place alongside poets, painters, and other renowned figures from mythology. She is described as being "familiar with science and art"; as having "surpassed and exceeded all women" in learning; and as being the possessor of "a noble and upright heart and a pleasant face". Her mastery of the elements is given full weight in this description (p. 69). She later figures in Book Two, as an example of the faithfulness of women in love. As in Chaucer, there is no reference to any murder which she may have committed; the beginning of her love is described in terms of her pity for Jason, inspired by his "beauty, royal lineage and fame" and the belief that "she could not make better use of her love elsewhere". This pity overwhelms her when she thinks of how he will die if she does not help him. The emphasis in the passage is placed on Jason's perfidy, and on Medea's fidelity, Christine commenting that, because of Jason's breaking of his oath,

²⁸ p. 106; and cf. Showerman, *Heroides*, p. 142.

²⁹ The translation into French by Octavien de Saint-Gelais is now dated 1496; see Robert F. Lucas "Medieval French Translations of the Latin Classics to 1500", *Speculum*, 45 (1970), 225—253, p. 244, and cf. R. R. Bolgar, *The Classical Heritage and Its Beneficiaries* (Cambridge, 1958), Appendix II, 'The Translations of the Greek and Roman Classical Authors before 1600', p. 530. Julia Boffey notes the existence of another fifteenth-century French translation overlooked by these authorities in "Richard Pynson's *Book of Fame* and *The Letter of Dido*", *Viator*, 19 (1988), 339—353, p. 344 n. 19.

³⁰ See below, p. 67 and notes 41—43.

³¹ Cf. Sheila Delany's comments in "Rewriting woman good", p. 84.

translation
translation

censorship
Christine

Jason's
perfidy
Medea's
fidelity

Medea, who would rather have destroyed herself than do anything of this kind to him, turned despondent, nor did her heart ever again feel goodness or joy. (pp. 189–190)

Splitting of story
exemplar

The effect of the splitting of Medea's story is to give her a status independent of her relationship with Jason, and as such, is characteristic of the way in which Christine approached the re-structuring of the *De Mulieribus*, her principal source.³² Her account is indeed selective, as her critics have noted, but it is a selectivity based on her reading as a woman, and stems from a desire to produce a text as exemplar for women. The *Cité des Dames* is, in many ways, the logical outcome of the dissatisfaction with books and the patriarchal tradition of literature which Christine had first explicitly commented upon in the *Epistre au Dieu d'Amours* in 1399. Her observation here that

... les livres ne firent
Pas les femmes, ne les choses n'i mirent
Que l'en y list contre elles et leurs meurs ...
Mais se femmes eussent li livre fait,
Je scay de vray qu'aulturement fust du fait,
Car bien scevent qu'a tort sont encoulpees ... (409–411, 417–419)

[... books were not composed
By women, nor did they record the things
That we may read against them and their ways ...
If women, though, had written all those books,
I know that they would read quite differently,
For well do women know the blame is wrong ...]³³

provides the basis for a reading of the *Cité*. Christine's intention is, avowedly, propagandist, in that she is addressing her work to

Most excellent, revered, and honoured princesses of
France and of all lands, and all ladies and maidens, and ...
all women who have loved and do love and will love virtue
and morality, as well as all who have died or who are now
living or who are to come ... (p. 214)

and in the continuum she creates between the figures of pagan and mythological women, the saints of Christianity and women of the present and future, she is making quite clear the nature of her revisionist project. Medea's role within this project is, therefore, truly exemplary — most obviously so, perhaps, in the em-

³² See Patricia A. Phillippy, "Establishing Authority: Boccaccio's *De Claris Mulieribus* and Christine de Pizan's *Le Livre de la Cité Des Dames*", *Romanic Review*, 77 (1986), 167–193.

³³ Fenster and Erler, *Poems of Cupid, God of Love*, p. 54.

phasis which is laid upon her learning, for this comes in a section of the work which is devoted to promoting the cause of the education of women.

It is ironic to note that in her exemplary purpose Christine comes closer to Boccaccio, than to Chaucer, for Boccaccio, too, exhorts contemporary women to learn from the examples he sets before them, although his chief concern is that they should emulate those worthies of pagan times who did not have the benefit of Christian enlightenment.³⁴ Whereas, however, as I have previously suggested, the figure of authority in Boccaccio's text is the author himself, in Christine's *Cité* there is a subtle manipulation of the exemplary technique so that women are encouraged to look within themselves to find the truth which they can follow. Christine does this primarily through the allegorical figure of Reason. Reason's attribute is a mirror and, as she explains to Christine, she comes to those who have sufficient understanding to see her and shows them

women look in themselves for truth mirror

their error and how they have failed, I assign them the causes, and then I teach them what to do and what to avoid ... I would thus have you know truly that no one can look into (my) mirror, no matter what kind of creature, without achieving clear self-knowledge. (p. 9)

Although in the immediate context Reason represents an aspect of Christine's own personality, the overall effect of the allegory is to displace the authority of the text, through Christine's explicit identification of herself at the opening of the book with the whole community of women: the lesson which the text embodies is that through the application of intellectual principles — those of Reason, Rectitude and Justice — all women will be able to see the truth, and act upon it, for themselves.

Reason's part of Christine's personality

In Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, too, attention is shifted away from the writer as the locus of authority through the use of an allegorical framework — though where authority does lie is a matter for debate. I have already suggested the fallibility of the Narrator, and the God of Love fares no better in the estimation of most readers of the poem. Alceste, on the other hand, presents us with a different picture for, as Sheila Delany has observed, there is

Authority debate Alceste

³⁴ See, e.g., the story of Dido (Guarino, *Concerning Famous Women*, Ch. XL), where he uses the story of Dido's fidelity to her first husband, Sychaeus, and her refusal to capitulate to Aeneas, as a means of castigating Christian women for not being content to remain in widowhood. Indeed, here, and elsewhere in the book, he likens frequent remarriage to the entering of brothels. There is one strain of Chaucer criticism which sees the supposed irony of the *Legend* (on which see further, below, pp. 67–69) as exemplary, in that women are warned by the stories not to submit to the excesses of passion (see the comments on this by Janet M. Cowen, "Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*: Structure and Tone", *SR* 82 (1985), 416–436, pp. 433–434). As will become clear, I find the object of Chaucer's irony to lie elsewhere.

a rather interesting role reversal ... (which) gives us a male deity who is narrowminded, selfish and temperamental, with a female adviser who is balanced, objective and controlled.³⁵

In the context of the work as a whole, however, she is a far from unambiguous figure. As her story, and the Balade sung in her honour (G, 203–223) indicate, she is seen as a figure worthy of emulation, but the sphere of her potential influence is, nevertheless, restricted: she is the epitome of the courtly lady, and however much the imagery associated with her may invoke the Virgin, in her intercessory role, and Christ, in her self-sacrifice for her husband, the fact remains that she is primarily celebrated for her womanly "pitee".³⁶ Neither, as Carolyn Dinshaw has pointed out, do her techniques of reading inspire much confidence, for she asks the Dreamer/Narrator "for simplistic stories of women constantly duped and betrayed".³⁷

Much of the simplification of the legends themselves is achieved, as I remarked earlier, by a conscious flattening of their style, and narrative content.³⁸ This has led critics such as Lisa Kiser to talk of the "dishonest selectivity" of Chaucer's account of Medea, and John Fyler to write of the hilarious intractability of Chaucer's sources, and of the audience's recognition of a "consistent pattern of censorship".³⁹ These interpretations support an essentially ironic reading of the legends as a whole, and irony has also been seen as the informing critical stance of the *Legend* in feminist analysis.⁴⁰ But it seems to me that for an ironic reading of this sort to be sustained — that is, one which relies on the concept of censorship — there has to be an assumption that the intended and primary audiences would appreciate just what had been excised from the stories. (Unless, that is, one is willing to consider that the whole text is an extended private joke on the

author's part, which seems unlikely.) Now it is quite probable that some of Chaucer's immediate circle would have been in a position to grasp the details of how he had changed his sources.⁴¹ Not all of his anticipated readers and listeners, though, would have been similarly placed. That Chaucer intended a court audience, for example, and one which included women, would seem to be confirmed by the graceful compliment extended to Anne of Bohemia in the earlier version of the Prologue, where Alceste instructs the Dreamer "whan this book ys maad, yive it the quene, / On my byhalf, at Eltham or at Sheene" (F, 496–497).⁴² (That this reference to Anne does not, however, imply her direct patronage is strongly suggested by its placing at so late and inconspicuous a stage in the text.) The presence in this intended audience of women, who were in the main excluded from training in Latin and the classics, lends a certain urgency to the question of what kind of knowledge Chaucer was relying on individuals being able to bring to the *Legend*.⁴³ I would argue that, whilst he allows for multiple levels of interpretation of his work, at the most basic, he deliberately limits the responses which are open to his readers and listeners in a way that would be quite obvious to all of them. At this point I should like to appropriate a phrase used by Florence Verducci in her stimulating study of Ovid: she describes the *Heroides*, arguably the most influential of Chaucer's sources in the *Legend*, as "serious literary parody" in which he re-writes his own literary inheritance.⁴⁴ Chaucer, too, of course, questioned the nature of literary authority, as the Pro-

Court
audience
Anne of
Bohemia

Latin and
classics

limits
responses

⁴¹ See Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1989), Chs 2 and 3 for discussion of the Chaucer 'circle'.

⁴² Recent research has emphasised the extent to which the royal courts were composed of men, hence the reference to Anne of Bohemia is of vital importance in communicating the fact that women were intended recipients of the legends. See Chris Given-Wilson, *The Royal Household and the King's Affinity: Service, Politics and Finance in England 1360–1413* (New Haven and London, 1986), p. 60, for the remark that the king's court was "an almost exclusively male society" (and cf. pp. 39–41, 92–93); and Richard Firth Green, "The Familia Regis and the Familia Cupidinis", in: *English Court Culture in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. V. J. Scattergood and J. W. Sherborne (London, 1983), 87–108, p. 98, for the reminder that in 1368 the combined number of women at the courts of Edward III and Philippa of Hainault was thirty-one, out of a total of three hundred and seventy-five named individuals. See also Green's article, "Women in Chaucer's Audience", *Chaucer Review*, 18 (1983), 146–154.

⁴³ Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, p. 69, comments that the poem was "aimed at a very limited segment of his possible reading public", and on p. 208 n. 50 he writes of the "audience's restrictive demands", and of the "socially narrow" range of this audience, as it is fictionalized within the poem. But he does not, curiously, remark on the question of whether or not women are addressed, and neither does he confront the question of whether, in the broadest terms, this was a *commissioned* text.

⁴⁴ *Ovid's Toyshop of the Heart*, p. 85.

³⁵ 'Rewriting woman good', p. 79.

³⁶ See Jill Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (Hemel Hempstead, 1991), pp. 41–43, for a discussion of the positive aspects of female pity, or compassion, centering on Alceste.

³⁷ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Wisconsin, 1989), p. 72. She further characterises the *Legend* as a "masculine fantasy" in which "woman herself authorises the antifeminist work".

³⁸ The legend of Dido is an exception to this rule, in that the narrative is more expansive (it is the longest of the tales, with four hundred and forty-three lines), and there is deliberate rhetorical heightening in certain passages; see, e.g., lines 1061–1073, 1106–1124.

³⁹ Kiser, *Telling Classical Tales*, p. 100; John Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid* (New Haven and London, 1979), pp. 103, 99.

⁴⁰ See Elaine Tuttle Hansen, "Irony and the Antifeminist Narrator in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*", *JEGP* 82 (1983), 11–31, where the irony is seen to be directed at the narrator, and his limited conception of what constitutes a good woman. Hansen has since revised her opinion on Chaucer's stance as "pro-woman", in her article, "The Feminization of Men in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*", in: Fisher and Halley, *Seeking the Woman*, 51–70, pp. 64–68.

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logue to the *Legend* and the earlier *House of Fame* testify.⁴⁵ But the primary object of Chaucer's "serious literary parody", in the legends themselves is signalled unambiguously by the title he gave the work and by his own later reference to the text as "the Seintes Legende of Cupide": that is, the parody is primarily generic, directed at hagiography, and specifically, I would suggest, at the legends of the virgin saints.⁴⁶

It may be argued, for instance, that the prescriptive dictates of this genre are responsible for the overwhelming passivity of Chaucer's heroines, for their lack of initiative and autonomy. They are sinned against, just as much as any of the virgin martyrs of Christian tradition, and in the same way as saints Margaret and Catherine, Lucy, Barbara and Dorothea, Eufemia, Agnes and Juliana, are persecuted by men who attempt to subvert and exploit them, so the heroines of Chaucer's legendary are dominated and exploited by "false men that hem bytraien" (F, 486).⁴⁷ And, by definition, "bad men" are as much to the fore as "good women": for the saint's legend to succeed in its exemplary function — to act as a stimulus to faith and an encouragement to virtue — the horrors which Christian women underwent must be imaginatively recreated, and for this to be effective the perpetrators of the crimes inflicted against them must inevitably take a role centre-stage. The hagiographic comparison makes the legend of Lucrece, in particular, and the horrific rape which she suffers, resonate in a singularly compelling way.⁴⁸ A reading of the *Legend of Good Women* which centres upon this idea of literary parody clearly has the virtue of assuming the text to be accessible to all the members of Chaucer's medieval audiences, for saints' legends would be familiar to everyone from their repetition during church services.

⁴⁵ On the *House of Fame* see the fine discussion by Helen Cooper, "Chaucer and Ovid: A Question of Authority", in: *Ovid Renewed*, ed. Martindale, pp. 71–81; and on the legends themselves, Dieter Mehl, *Geoffrey Chaucer: an introduction to his narrative poetry* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 116, where he remarks that "by variations in tone, rhetorical artifice and point of view the reader is alerted to the arbitrary nature of literary tradition and fame".

⁴⁶ On Chaucer and hagiography, see especially Kiser, *Telling Classical Tales*, pp. 101–111; Cowen, "Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*"; and Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, pp. 72–74.

⁴⁷ See *Jacobus de Voragine, The golden legend; or, Lives of the saints, as Englished by William Caxton*, trans. F. S. Ellis, 7 vols. (London: 1900); *Jacobi a Voragine: Legenda Aurea*, ed. Thomas Graesse (Dresden and Leipzig, 1846; repr. Osnabrück, 1969). Cf. Christine de Pizan's accounts of virgin saints in Bk 3 of the *Cité*.

⁴⁸ See A. J. Minnis, "Repainting the Lion: Chaucer's Profeminist Narratives", in: *The Theory and Forms of Early Narrative*, ed. Roy P. Eriksen (Berlin, 1992) and Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, pp. 43–45, for powerful accounts of this rape. Minnis, in part, sees the hagiographic elements in the legend of Lucrece as contributing towards the idea of the worthy pagan (n. 21). I am grateful to Professor Minnis for allowing me to read his article prior to publication.

For an explanation of why Chaucer should have been impelled to undertake this kind of parody it is necessary to turn again to the Prologue, and to the issues of the reception of texts which it raises. That the early part of the Prologue is a patchwork of literary influences, drawn chiefly from contemporary French love poets, has long been recognised.⁴⁹ These borrowings act as a commentary on the finely-expressed homage to books with which the poem opens, and we are thus given a sense of the debt which Chaucer feels he owes to his inherited literary traditions. The central conceit around which the body of the work is organised, however — that of Chaucer's reputation as a poet and the hostile response accorded his *Troilus and Criseyde* — is less straightforwardly interpreted. Whatever the historical veracity of the criticism which the God of Love within this fictional framework levels against Chaucer, it is indisputable that the poet is here suggesting that Criseyde, despite the care with which he approached her re-writing, could still be read as a type of the unfaithful woman. (Chaucer had, of course, anticipated this response in the fears which Criseyde voices within the body of the poem.)⁵⁰ What the *Legend of Good Women* proceeds to show, as the Narrator fulfills his commission, is what happens when a writer produces representations of women which conform to the expectations fostered by the familiar medieval polarity of woman as saint or sinner — that is, by reading women as a series of exemplary texts.

In this sense, then, I believe that Chaucer's primary concern with women was a literary one, and revolved around his freedom to experiment with female narrative voices. His portrayal of Criseyde showed that he was as concerned as Christine de Pizan with the re-presentation, and not just the representation of women⁵¹, for she is, arguably, the first female literary character in Middle English to be shown as being aware of the moral choices open to her. Within the constraints of a society figured by male consciousness⁵² she strives for, even if she does not achieve, a degree of autonomy in her actions. By comparison with Criseyde, the women of the *Legend* — and this includes the courtly Alceste —

⁴⁹ Texts to which Chaucer was particularly indebted are translated by B. A. Windeatt, *Chaucer's Dream Poetry: Sources and Analogues* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 139–155.

⁵⁰ Bk V, lines 1058–1068. For additional confirmation that Criseyde was read stereotypically in the Middle Ages see Lydgate's *Troy Book*, ed. Henry Bergen, 4 vols, EETS ES 97, 103, 106, 126 (1906–1935), 2, lines 4441–4445; and the epilogue added to Wynkyn de Worde's 1517 edition of the poem, as printed in C. David Benson and David Rollmann, "Wynkyn de Worde and the Ending of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*", *MP*, 78 (1980–81), pp. 275–9.

⁵¹ The terminology is drawn from Gillian Beer, "Representing Women: Re-presenting the Past", in: *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (Basingstoke and London, 1989), pp. 63–80.

⁵² See David Aers, *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination* (London, 1980), pp. 117–142.

title

Parody to
hagiography
and virgin saints
passivity

stimulate faith

perpetrators
central role

Accessible to
all audience

Explanation

expectations
medieval
polarity

literary
concern
Criseyde:
re-representation
moral choices

Autonomy

women of legends:

conventions
and stereotypes

writing as
political
history as
fiction

represent a retreat into convention and stereotype. But where Chaucer differs from Christine is in the absence of a political dimension; their investment in their subject-matter is of a different order: for Christine, as her introduction makes clear, the act of writing itself is a political issue. Nevertheless, as writers they shared the perception that "history", as it manifests itself in literary tradition, is a fiction which has to be reconstructed in each retelling.

Non-sens et parodie dans la fatrasie

Contribution à la localisation du champ interférentiel

Von Patrice Uhl (Anvers)

Texte et contre-texte sont au moyen âge les faces complémentaires d'une même médaille. Il n'est aucune sub-tradition qui, à peine constituée, n'ait aussitôt été la proie des moqueurs: sermons, *Patenostres* et *Credos*, épopées, *cansos*/chansons, pastourelles, *tensos*, etc., rien n'y échappa. De véritables chaînes parodiques se mettent même parfois en place: parodies au x^{ième} degré (*devinalhs*)¹, parodies par "rebond" (*sottes chansons* → *jeux-partis*)², etc. Mais le jeu reste limité, car — observe Zumthor — "la tradition médiévale est assez puissante pour intégrer sa propre parodie"³. Tôt ou tard, la négation est à son tour niée, "traditionalisée". La loi est générale.

La poésie du non-sens, et plus spécialement la *fatrasie*, genre-clé du "non-sens absolu", se singularise par une exceptionnelle résistance à la loi de la réassimilation traditionnelle. Plusieurs étapes ont en effet été nécessaires avant que le processus n'atteigne son terme. Le radicalisme foncier de cette forme de poésie explique sans doute le phénomène: la tradition ne digère vraiment le "non-sens absolu", à l'époque des premiers rhétoriciens (Baudet Herenc a inauguré le *fatras* "possible" dans son *Doctrinal de la Seconde Rhétorique*; 1432) que parce qu'auparavant diverses "rectifications"⁴ avaient été opérées et que, du temps de Chaillou de Pestain et de Watriquet de Couvin, un genre nouveau, hybride de *fatrasie* et de *sotte chanson*: le "*fatras*", était né de l'héritage des poètes du XIII^e siècle.⁵

¹ Sur l'inscription parodique de l'énigme de Guillaume IX, *Farai un vers de dreit nien* (PC 183, 7), voir L. Lawner, *Notes Towards an Interpretation of the vers de dreit nien*, dans *Cultura Neolatina*, 28, 1968, pp. 147—164. D'après W. T. Pattison, *The Life and Works of the Troubadour Raimbaut d'Orange*, Minneapolis, 1952, p. 154, le *devinalh* de Raimbaut, *Escotatz, mas no say que s'es* (PC 389, 28), second dans la chronologie du genre, parodierait ouvertement le *vers* de Guillaume IX. La chaîne se prolongera.

² Cf. A. Langfors (avec le concours de A. Jeanroy et L. Brandin), *Recueil Général des Jeux-partis français*, 2 vol., Paris, Champion, (S. A. T. F.), 1926, II, pp. 275—280, pièces CLXXIV et CLXXV. Le sujet dilemmatique de ces pièces est emprunté à des *sottes chansons* du recueil Douce.

³ P. Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale*, Paris, Seuil, 1972, p. 104.

⁴ Cf. H.-R. Jauss, *Littérature médiévale et théorie des genres*, dans *Poétique*, 1, 1970, pp. 89—109; tout spécialement, pp. 86—87.

⁵ La "*sote chançon*" n° 1, insérée dans l'interpolation du *Roman de Fauvel* due à Chaillou de Pestain (incipit: *Au diex, ou pourrai ie trouver*; éd. E. Dahnk, *L'hérésie de Fauvel*, Leipzig, 1935, p. 184) est déjà un *fatras* du type: [A8B8] A8a8b8a8a8b8b8a8b8a8B8.