

The Legend of Good Women: Cupid's Saints

It is reasonable to believe that Chaucer finished *Troilus and Criseyde* about 1385, himself aged about 45 and at the height of his powers, not tired but eager to proceed. There were so many possibilities open to the poet for whom every new poem was an experiment, and whose mind was full of stories, thoughts and questions. *Troilus and Criseyde* must have caused some little stir in court-circles because the next substantial poem, *The Legend of Good Women*, in its *Prologue* presents a vision of the mighty God of Love – the medieval Cupid, a bold, handsome young man – who reproaches the poet for bringing love into disrepute. (There are two *Prologues*, referred to as F and G, to be explained later. Here we refer to the earlier, F.) The poet, says the God of Love, has made wise folk withdraw from him because the poet has translated the *Romance of the Rose* ‘that is a heresy against my law’ (F 330) and has told the story of Criseyde which makes men distrust women who are ‘as true as steel’ (F 332–4). The likely date for *The Legend* is therefore about 1386. The god has with him a glorious Queen, incarnation of the daisy, or marguerite, who rallies to the poet’s defence, says he didn’t know what he was doing, etc. After some sharp words about the deceitfulness of courtiers she lists Chaucer’s own works which have made ignorant folk delight to serve love. She refers to the *Death of Blaunche the Duchess*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, ‘the love of Palamon and Arcite’ though the story is little known (F 415–21), many love-lyrics, Boethius, the *Life of Saint Cecilia*, and a great while ago, *Origen on the Magdalen*.

All this lodges the poet himself, not a stupid Narrator, but a self-mocking half-real half-fantatised *persona*, in a courtly environment, where ‘the woman question’ was a real issue, if also the subject of some teasing. The court was far from the powerful misogyny of some clerical writers, but probably all traditional societies, being male-dominated, have some ambivalence towards women.

The *Prologue* is delightfully relaxed and lighthearted, with the poet's references to spring and how he leaves his books to enjoy worshipping the daisy. It is highly personal in Chaucer's most mature vein of self-deprecatory humour. The god and his queen do not appear until a couple of hundred lines after the beginning, during which the poet has rather extravagantly proclaimed his love of the daisy in May and his allegiance to the Flower in the courtly game of Flower against Leaf – another social anchor for the lightly floating fantasy.

The god's accusation is not taken very seriously – witness the Queen's defence – and provokes no sign of anxiety. There is behind no hint of the savage political campaigns that would soon be fought around Richard II, to be noted later. There is no sense of urgency. The translation of the *Romaunt*, and *The Book of the Duchess*, had been written some 17 years before. We have a recapitulation of Chaucer's whole writing career, triggered by the reception of *Troilus and Criseyde* and presumably by the arguments it caused about women, their nature, their 'stability' – arguments that as we have seen continue, centred on *Criseyde*, to modern times, nowadays reinforced by the new feminism, which had its precedents in Chaucer's day. Throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries there were arguments especially in France about whether *Le Roman de la Rose* was or was not anti-feminist – la Querelle de la Rose. Similar arguments continue today about *The Legend of Good Women*, which is another of Chaucer's odd poems. The *Prologue* is superb, though some questions arise. The separate stories are rather different but also fascinating in their internal variations of tone, and the consequent uncertainty of how to take some parts of them.

The Legend of Good Women tells the stories of classical heroines deceived and ill-treated by men but showing constancy and goodness according to Chaucer's own version. The stories constitute a poem of profound repetition, recapitulation, of the experience of loss and betrayal. Indeed the repetition has been felt by many readers to be too great at the superficial level, since each of the nine stories extant repeats the same pattern. Commemoration is unlocked by 'the key of remembrance' (F 26) held by old books which we ought to believe, says the poet, 'there we han noon other preve' (F 28). That line is typical of the enigmatic qualifications inherent in the poem. How sceptical is it? Translation too in the deepest sense is involved. The poet translates and thus transforms. His versions are very different from some traditional accounts.

Several lines of thought and feeling come together. In earlier poems Chaucer has listed women betrayed, and there seems no

reason to doubt that their plight aroused his sympathy, and that the reiteration of the theme, and its gender-reversal in *Troilus and Criseyde* corresponded to some deeply felt pain in himself – a pain that few people will have completely missed in their lives, but noticeable in Chaucer. The main source of these narratives of pathos was Ovid's *Heroides*, letters supposed to have been written by the betrayed heroines and a source of literary interest and controversy in the medieval schools. Alongside these secular narratives ran the huge river of saints' lives, probably the most popular of all medieval literary genres, sacred or secular, of which many told of the heroic endurance and ultimate miracle-working power of holy women. Though these stories emphasised passive rather than physically active heroism for obvious reasons, their heroines often argued fiercely and effectively. They give a powerful image of a certain kind to women. Again we must recall how widely religious feeling percolates through a traditional culture, colouring so many acts and thoughts in as it were a casual taken-for-granted way. 'Normal' piety was not so intense, so highly strung, or intellectualised, as the serious devotion of the theologian, or of the female recluse, or mystic, which arose out of it, and which everyday religious practice accepted without necessarily closely following it. Saints' lives in particular may be regarded as religious folklore, not in any dismissive sense by those of us who are trying to understand this different culture, but in the sense of something appreciated, often fantastic, yet in some sense believed, and accepted, if not acted upon, in ordinary everyday life.

Chaucer responded to this popular veneration of saints quite wholeheartedly. He wrote, as he tells in the *Prologue* to the *Legend of Good Women* the *Life of Saint Cecilia* and later incorporated it into *The Canterbury Tales* as the *Second Nun's Tale*. It was not difficult therefore to blend sacred and secular elements of feeling, especially of pathos, in his rehearsal of the stories of betrayed classical heroines. At the same time, just as we have noticed the association of laughter with death (above, p. 101) so we may note Chaucer's irrepressible levity at times in the *Legend* like that found, for example, in *Palamon and Arcite* in the account of Arcite's death. Our post-Reformation, post-Counter Reformation, post-industrial, seriousness, fragmentation and almost complete loss of religious feeling finds it difficult to blend so many apparently incompatible attitudes together without one destroying the other. Traditional societies are less logical but can be more 'holistic'. Chaucer is also exceptional in the vividness, not to say the hyperbole, with which he represents his culture. The extreme pathos, the irreverent mockery, at times what seems the

satiric and ironic posturing of his style, are hard to keep in balance with his genuine enjoyment, delicacy of perception, true sympathy, and sombre reflections on the hardness of life.

To sum up, the *Prologue* is deservedly, at least in parts, among the most famous passages of Chaucer's poetry. In it he again displays and exploits his own enigmatic subjectivity, his courtly environment, and particularly his consciousness and pride of being a varied and important author, though without Humanistic didacticism and arrogance. Composition of the individual legends is the task which the God of Love imposes on Chaucer and they are intriguingly different.

THE PROLOGUE TO THE LEGEND OF GOOD WOMEN: ITS VERSIONS AND DATES

The Prologue is one of Chaucer's most delightful poems, with its own independence and a quite extraordinary mixture of old and new. In substance it is something of a throwback to the old-fashioned French love-vision, and several French poems about the marguerite are followed at times quite closely. But the metre is the new five-stress rhyming couplet and the manner is that of Chaucer's maturity, often apparently only half-serious. The jests go along with a real tenderness and beauty of description. The preciousness of daisy-worship is indulged without becoming mawkish, or being sneered at.

The poem was sufficiently interesting to Chaucer for him to have two goes at it, and *The Prologue* exists in two versions.

The first survives in 11 manuscripts or parts of manuscripts and in Thynne's edition. The best of these manuscripts is Bodley Fairfax 16, a notable anthology of Chaucer's minor poems. This version of *The Prologue* has therefore been labelled F. The second version appears in only one manuscript, University Library Cambridge Gg. 4.27, the biggest manuscript collection of Chaucer's poems in existence. Its spelling is odd but its texts are usually very good, and close to the originals. Hence this version has been labelled G. Each manuscript is of the early fifteenth century (and like many others, is now available in facsimile). The first version, F, must have been written, because of the content, sometime after *Troilus*. There is a kind of dedication to Queen Anne, for Queen Alcestis says,

And whan this book ys maad yive it the quene
On my byhalf, at Eltham or at Sheene

(*Pro LGW*, F 496-7)

(Eltham and Sheene were favourite royal palaces not too far from Westminster.) Since Anne died in 1394 *The Prologue* must have been written before then, and it seems reasonable to date it soon after the completion of *Troilus*, around 1386, before the beginning of *The Canterbury Tales*, which has been plausibly suggested as around 1387. The later, G-version of *The Prologue* omits the reference to the Queen and was probably produced some time after 1394. Not every scholar agrees that F is earlier but the cumulative literary evidence is overwhelming and has now been authoritatively reinforced on textual grounds by Kane and Cowen. Naturally, all manuscripts contain scribal errors and the solitary G-text of *The Prologue* is not free from them. Typical scribal errors have now been classified and identified by Kane and Cowen, and the remaining differences of G from the scribally edited versions of F can be confidently attributed to Chaucer himself.

THE FURTHER CREATION OF THE POETIC SELF

In *The Prologue to the Legend of Good Women* the poet tells us very clearly about his own personal tastes and habits. He makes explicit his love of books, in an extension of his earlier manner in *The Book of the Duchess*, *House of Fame* and *Parliament*, making deliberate play with his own personal character.

On bokes for to rede I me delyte.

(F 30)

Only in May, when the birds sing and flowers bloom, farewell his book and his devotion, and he walks the meadows at dawn to observe the daisy, the flower of all flowers. Granted that this derives from French poems devoted to the cult of the marguerite, it seems fairly specific to Chaucer's own situation. There is a reference to Saint Valentine (F 145) which may associate *The Prologue* with St Valentine's Day celebrations. A reference is made to the divisions of the Flower and the Leaf (F 72), which were court parties or associations, probably with some political overtones. In F, Chaucer seems to declare for the flower (F 82), but in the revision he adds a passage which denies adherence to either side (G 71–80). Whatever its significance, the brief reference stands the poet against a courtly social backdrop.

Chaucer tells us how he retreats to his house at dusk and sleeps in a little arbour he has had made in his garden. We are bound to feel

that all this refers to his new house at Greenwich, then so near the meadows. He has a couch made up for him on a bench of turves. This is a touch of personal domestic circumstance which gives a base for the dream-fantasy to come, just as it did in *The Book of the Duchess*. Servants are props to individualism, implying a person's authority and confidence. As so often, we do not know quite how seriously to take what he says. He fell asleep, he says, 'within an hour or two' (F 209) – surely a wry joke about an uncomfortable bed, a touch of irresistible comic realism? Then he dreams of the god of love coming to him over the meadows, hand in hand with a queen, both clad in green, she with a golden fret upon her hair, and a crown with white 'fleurons' – the small protrusions of medieval royal crowns – which were made of pearl, and resembled the petals of a daisy. The queen is the human transformation of a daisy, charmingly described in the height of courtly fashion. She is yet another of Chaucer's *grandes dames* who are also beautiful, young, authoritative, yet kindly, an important element in the complex image of women he creates throughout his work. Both the god of love and his queen speak with royal condescension to the poet. The god reproaches him. The queen defends him in a beautifully patronising way, and they eventually commission from him the stories of ladies loyal in love. The commissioning is unique in Chaucer and suggests an actual command or request from a patron and patroness of a kind completely lacking elsewhere in his poetry. One aspect of Chaucer's modernity is his normal freedom from patronage. Perhaps he was not free here. But the commissioning is not a reward: rather as it were a fine in kind, to make up for transgression.

WHO DOES ALCESTE REPRESENT?

But who was the queen? We later learn she was Queen Alceste, famous in Greek Antiquity for her loyalty to her husband, whose death she took on herself. Who does she represent in the *Prologue*? A natural guess is that the god of love is King Richard II and Alceste Queen Anne. It may be so, but it seems odd that she should suggest that the poems be presented to the Queen, that is Anne, at Eltham or Sheen. The God of Love was not married, and the Classical Alcestis famously had a husband. Possibly Chaucer intended a compliment to the Queen Mother, Joan, once the Fair Maid of Kent, now the widow of the Black Prince, with whom it is possible that Chaucer served in Aquitaine. Whether or not this very pretty scene represents an actual reproach and commissioning of compensatory

stories by some great lady, no outcome is suggested. Despite the courtly scene the result will be stories written to be read, not orally presented. They will be privately consumed, even if presented formally as a book. All is internalised. The scene is allusion rather than allegory, and teases us with its possible meanings. Whomever the god and the queen may allude to, the poet permits himself a fairly light-hearted dramatic portrayal of them, not disrespectful, but far from obsequious.

THE NAKED TEXT

The Prologue has many interesting literary points. Chaucer's listing of his works as a way of claiming and so to speak signing them has already been noted. The G version has the additional item of *The Wretched Engending of Mankynde*, a lost work, but witness to Chaucer's continuing pursuit of serious, not to say gloomy, devotional subjects, in his maturity, which accompanied his equally vigorous development of the far from moralistic bawdy comic stories in *The Canterbury Tales* at the same time.

Chaucer emphasises his interest in old stories, and his desire to revere and believe in them. But in the revised version, G, he is more clearly ironical about this – 'leveth hem if you leste' (believe them if it pleases you) G 88. It is here that he declares his intention for the narratives that will follow: to declare them in 'the naked text'. He aims at narrative literalism, without allegory. The plain or naked text, without the 'glose' – without, that is, the interpretation that came to signify falsification or flattery or deceit – appealed to Chaucer, and he always uses the word 'glosing' unfavourably. The point is important for the general understanding of Chaucer. Some critics have given extended allegorical readings of Chaucer's poems and in this they are surely mistaken. It goes against the grain of all his work. To admit as much is far from denying some conscious or unconscious symbolism and far-reaching implications which are by definition characteristic of great works of art, as they interact with those who hear, read or see them.

THE REVISION OF *THE PROLOGUE*

The revision itself gives us a unique opportunity to see Chaucer at work on the craftsmanship of writing, and at the same time gives us some insight into his changing attitudes. The structure of F is somewhat rambling, and there is an awkward confusion between Alceste

and 'my lady' (cf. 249ff., 432 and 540). G does a certain amount of tidying up and the confusion about Alceste is removed. In F the subject of the fashionable controversy between the Flower and the Leaf is approached in 72, but is not actually developed until 188–96. In G these two references are consolidated in 65–78. Chaucer now takes neither side. We may notice here as elsewhere that Chaucer, at least in his later years, somewhat distances himself from the court. In one short poem (to be mentioned later, *To Scogan*), he seems to regret his isolation, but elsewhere there is evidence of withdrawal and even condemnation. No doubt he was inconsistent in his attitudes, especially if he was, while writing the G revision, in what amounted to retirement in the mid-1390s in Greenwich. Chaucer is notable for divided or multiple attitudes. Many elderly people both hanker after and criticise the activities in which they can no longer take part.

In G the dream starts earlier. The effect of this alteration is to put the famous description of the beautiful morning and the charming anthropomorphic behaviour of the birds *inside* the dream. This is an improvement. The morning, for all its freshness, is nothing like the chilly hours just following dawn of an ordinary English May morning. It has the warmth and sweetness of a kinder clime, as in the French literary tradition, and is much easier to accept as part of the dream. The general effect of this and other structural changes is to consolidate, to make the development less wandering and casual.

G also develops certain matters more lightly touched on in F. In the earlier version Chaucer says that a king's subjects 'are his treasure and his gold in coffer' – a very appropriate sentiment for a customs officer. In the later version he substitutes six lines about the duty of a king to hear his subjects' complaints and petitions. This is an echo of increasing resentment about and criticism of Richard's irresponsible and autocratic behaviour. Nevertheless, in G the central occasion of *The Prologue* seems to be taken less seriously. As he grew older Chaucer was even less able to refrain from a little mocking with a solemn face. In the long and important insertion, G 258–312, he gives the God of Love a much livelier and fuller speech. The god accuses Chaucer of heresy against him, although he remarks that Chaucer owns a lot of books telling the lives of women, 'and ever a hundred good against one bad':

What seith Valerye, Titus, or Claudyan?
What seith Jerome agayns Jovynyan?

(G 280–1)

This is a joke at the expense of the God of Love. What Jerome said against Jovinian is touched on in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*. He and 'Valerian' (i.e. Walter Map), far from praising women, were perhaps the most satirical and effective of all the many libellers of women in the anti-feminist Middle Ages. Chaucer loved them as much as he loved the tales of noble women. Here he is deliberately making a fool of the God of Love. He makes other ironical additions. The queen defends him by suggesting that he translated poems, and 'knew not what he was saying'. On the other hand Chaucer cut out F 152, which is rather a feeble joke about sex.

Most of the alterations are obviously aimed to improve the sense and the poetry. Thus, he cut out the last 25 lines of F. They are somewhat verbose and are little loss. At the beginning he much modified the expression of his love for the daisy. It is difficult not to sense some personal feeling in the early, F, version of this – perhaps it was a genuinely felt courtier's address to the Queen or some great lady. Chaucer may have modified it later because the Queen's death made it inappropriate, or even simply because the daisy cult was no longer a courtly fashion in sentiment which was current or still appealed to him. Some of the alterations at the beginning forced him to abandon the charming four-line song which in F introduces Alceste's attendants. Chaucer's willingness to abandon these excellent few lines in the interests of the whole is a mark of his maturity and self-confidence as craftsman and artist.

Other changes are often minute, but hardly less interesting. Thus, he tones down the rather mechanical emphasis on the brightness of the God of Love. For 'holiness' (F 424) he substitutes 'busy-ness' (G 412). Where F 348–9 describes love as a god who knows all, G 323–7 substitutes the remark that all is not true which the God of Love hears; but the condemnation of court gossips and flatterers appears in both versions and is a traditional criticism of courtly life, of a kind going back for centuries, no doubt well justified but never destroying the glamorous appeal of the court. Occasionally the alteration enriches the density of the text, as, for example, instead of the repeated word 'serve', F 326–7, he substitutes 'trust', G 253. The later version also writes at somewhat greater length of Geoffrey Chaucer himself, in the familiar image of an amiable simpleton, but nevertheless extending the work of 'self-construction' and a kind of 'subjectivity' or self-awareness of himself as a person who is a subject for poetry. There seems little profit in referring to the poet as the Narrator, implying that the real poet is someone quite different. On

the contrary, we get a strong sense, in the revisions, of the actual poet at work.

In general, the revision gives a stronger sense of the poet's personality, a better construction, and a strengthened style. The G version is livelier in humour and also warmer in its praises of noble women. It varies much more in tone; some parts of G are more serious, other parts more flippant, than in the earlier version. Chaucer intensifies his source, even when it is his own earlier composition, as he intensified the style of *Il Filostrato*. Nevertheless, for all the tinkering, it is still the same poem. The wonderfully fresh sense of spring remains, with the poet's heart-warming confession of inability to read in that stirring time of the year. There is still the delight in books, together with a little more information on the books Chaucer has read or written.

Perhaps between the two versions of *The Prologue* Chaucer's interests turned away from the courtly subject of love and of the fundamental problems raised by love. He may have felt he had worked that vein. It is also a matter of common experience that as a man grows older he becomes less interested in fundamental questions, for willy-nilly he has made up his mind about them. Interest tends to turn from philosophy to ethics; from theories to facts. We may perceive this happening even in the difference between *The Parliament* and *Troilus*. We shall see it continue.

LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS PAGAN WOMEN

When we come to the stories themselves we find that there are only nine actual poems about these love's saints and martyrs, beginning, somewhat surprisingly, with Cleopatra, and continuing with Thisbe, Dido, Hypsipyle and Medea together, Lucrece, Ariadne, Philomela, Phyllis, Hypermnestra. In the *Introduction to the Man of Law's Tale* in *The Canterbury Tales*, undoubtedly written later, Chaucer gives another list of his works, along with a jest against himself, and lists 15 of these 'saints of Cupid', while in yet another list, his *Retractions*, written in a quite different spirit, he refers to his Book of the Twenty-five Ladies. He clearly wrote many if not all of the stories we now have after writing *The Prologue*. It may be that he intended to continue, but got diverted to *The Canterbury Tales*. It is also possible that some have been lost. It is clear from the state of the manuscripts that some of the stories (like some of those in *The Canterbury Tales*) circulated separately. Minnis¹ points out that the *Retractions* of *The*

Canterbury Tales show that some of Chaucer's other works have been lost. So may some of the individual poems of the *Legend*. But the last poem ends in mid-sentence, and that cannot be due to physical loss of a sheet or more. The fact that a further statement is promised but is non-existent is very like the abrupt stopping of *The House of Fame*. Chaucer was reluctant to give us his 'conclusioun'.

That most of the heroines may surprise the modern reader as illustrations of virtuous and loyal women has led some critics to assume, inevitably, that the poems are ironical, and the poet reluctant or bored, and even intent on introducing grotesquely obscene *double entendres*. Most of this is surely wrong, but as usual with Chaucer there is room for some critical disagreement. Readers may come to varied conclusions, though it must be possible to be proved wrong by recourse to vital evidence, even if we cannot be proved right.

A certain ambivalence, humour, and touches of irony in the *Prologue* have already been noted, and in the second version, G, some ten years later, the equivocal note is stronger. The poet is more detached from the court though still deeply interested in this particular poem, the *Prologue*, wishing to improve it. The poems themselves so vary in tone as they proceed as to encourage some critics to take them less seriously as a whole. But if there is one lesson to be learned in following the evolution of Chaucer's work it is that Chaucer constantly mixes elements, the serious with the comic, and that to do justice to all we must respond equally to all. The mixture will always be of different proportions and may give rise to different responses, but the reader's desire for unification, uniformity, consistency, will always over-simplify and impoverish. Chaucer is the supreme example of an internally self-contradictory – the modern North American word is 'conflicted' – culture, which nevertheless holds together and has certain attitudes in common more firmly than our own scientifically specialised age. Chaucer himself rejected fragmentation and chose consistency, uniformity and thus exclusiveness in his own *Retractions* at the end of his life, but luckily few have agreed with him, and the works he himself condemned escaped destruction. As already noted, what he calls 'the Book of the XXV Ladies' (or in some manuscripts 'XIX Ladies'), which must mean *The Legend of Good Women*, is included among those secular love-poems which are condemned in the *Retractions*. This must paradoxically encourage us to take them seriously, like *Troilus and Criseyde* and the others, as being poems about genuine love, however the tone may vary.

TROUTHE IS THE HYTESTE THYNG THAT MAN MAY KEPE

The subheading comes from *The Franklin's Tale* (CT, V, 1479) undoubtedly written later than *The Legend of Good Women*, thus illustrating the steadfastness of Chaucer's own moral vision, underlying so many variations of attitude. 'Trouthe' is a highly complex concept but among other things it illustrates the supremacy of faithful commitment and integrity in personal relationships in Chaucer's and his culture's moral universe. That being so, the breaking of personal bonds is necessarily the greatest harm.

True lovers deserted by their beloved either involuntarily through death or wilfully by breaking their word are a constant theme in Chaucer's poetry. It is the subject of *The Book of the Duchess*; it occurs in *The House of Fame* prominently in the case of Dido and those listed in *The House of Fame* 388–426; it is the story of Anelida, and of those listed in *The Parliament of Fowls* 284–94; and it is extensively treated in *Troilus and Criseyde*. The theme was fashionable in contemporary French poetry. Loss was a constant event in normal life. Life expectancy was low, disease endemic, war frequent: death was all around and people, especially courtiers, were as amorous, inconstant and unfaithful as ever. The insecurity of life and love bore heavily on those of any sensibility and with warm affections. Personal loyalty and stability were the virtues most highly praised, not only in love and friendship but socially in vows, promises and in the feudal obligations between lord and servant. Loyalty and stability were the essential bonds of social reciprocity that should promote community and override self-interest, selfishness, tyranny. Those bonds were broken continually then as now. Plenty of poets and moralists condemned the viciousness of the times then as in all periods. So did Chaucer in some of his lyrics, in *The Parson's Tale*, presumably in his lost translation, *The Wretched Engendryng of Mankind* and, in terms of troth-breaking, *The Legend of Good Women*. But as with *Troilus and Criseyde* he was more moved by virtue than by vice, 'virtue in all her works most lovely'. He commends *trouthe* and only incidentally condemns treachery and betrayal.

It is reasonable therefore to accept that the general purpose of the *Legend* is what it claims to be. It asserts that women are capable of steadfast loyalty of love, as supremely shown by the heroism of Alcestis. Though she was not one of those who had been betrayed, she is fitly regarded as a Queen. At the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* Chaucer had promised

And gladlier I wol write, yif yow leste
Penelopeës trouthe and good Alceste.

if it please you

(V, 1777-8)

Each of the tales has, in effect, the same theme as *Troilus* (for *Troilus* is a story of true love, though reversed in sex), and is essentially a counterpart to *Troilus*. The tales certainly are not a repudiation of the so-called repudiation of love at the end of *Troilus*. They are written to assert the steadfast loyalty of women against what is said to be Chaucer's imputation of their falseness in the character of Criseyde. *The Legends* is thin when compared with Chaucer's other treatments of closely similar themes. There seems little doubt that in writing *Troilus* Chaucer had excised that sense of loss and betrayal which had haunted his early work from *The Book of the Duchess* onwards. But he did not at first realise that. Another reason for their relative thinness may have been that there seemed so many stories to be told that each was rather cramped. Like the later project of 120 *Canterbury Tales*, it was too ambitious a scheme. Moreover, all Chaucer's work shows how ready he was to change subject-matter and treatment. By contrast, the *Legend* has for him and us the major disadvantage of a single theme and type of subject matter. Chaucer seems to have liked variety above all.

LOVE AND MARRIAGE

The recurrent theme makes clear the centrality of marriage to Chaucer's general conception of love. Every one of the betrayed heroines has been married or been promised marriage. Love is genuine, thought to be mutual, and free from concepts of service and humility. The plight of those who are betrayed is rendered with genuine pathos. Chaucer does his best to stick to the bare essentials of plot and character, and concentrates on the personal relationships which as always are at the centre of his interest. Nor are these as monotonous as sometimes claimed; if the theme is the same the circumstances are all different.

Gower told several of the same stories in his *Confessio Amantis* and Chaucer's principal aim seems to have been to achieve a rapid, plain, brief narration of the kind in which Gower excelled. Perhaps Chaucer set out to imitate Gower. Like him he always maintains the interest in the succession of events. Chaucer's difficulty was in restraining himself from adorning and enriching the narratives, and in preserving the benevolent even tone in which Gower is so tireless.

Praise of pagan women, though a lesser theme than misogynistic writing, had been known from antiquity even apart from Ovid, and had been repeated even in some of the most apparently anti-feminist Church Fathers, as Minnis shows. In the fourteenth century, besides Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claribus* (*Of Famous Women*), the classicising English friars of the earlier fourteenth century had written the lives of admirable pagan women. It was possible for them, as for Chaucer (as he had already shown in *Troilus and Criseyde*) to bring some historical understanding and sympathy to the different circumstances of those who had lived virtuous lives before Christianity. The problem of the saving of the virtuous heathen was widely discussed in the fourteenth century, as Dante and Langland witness in their references to the fate of the righteous heathen.²

Nevertheless, in such a 'dialogic' culture as Chaucer's, in which qualities are paired and opposed, it was inevitable that the virtue of 'trouthe' should be highlighted by emphasis on 'falsnes', as had happened in *Troilus and Criseyde*. The tales of good women emphasise 'trouthe' as the distinguishing virtue of women, and all the men are betrayers. Chaucer is quite prepared to adjust his 'sources' to make these points, and it is immaterial that the women whom he chooses to memorialise may be known in other accounts for different virtues and vices. In this respect his versions are indeed 'legend'. Saints' lives had a similar singleness of purpose, but Chaucer here is deliberately choosing pagan, pre-Christian and therefore secular examples. The morality is implicit in the narrative structure. As ever experimental Chaucer now tries out single-issue brief narratives. This is different from his more customary multifaceted and amplified style, and the strain shows. As an example we may consider the first poem, whose heroine is Cleopatra.

Boccaccio had presented her in his *De mulieribus claris* as completely evil but Chaucer's probable source is Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum Historiale*, one of the books that the God of Love says Chaucer owns (*Prologue* G 307). Even here she is not presented very favourably. Chaucer, as in other cases, both relies on a source and changes it radically. Cleopatra still seems a curious choice but it is significant that Chaucer had added her, together with Troilus, to the list of those who had suffered for love in the Temple of Venus in *The Parliament of Fowls* (291). In the *Legend* she is presented as the image of faithful 'wyfhod', and commits suicide for love of the not always faithful Anthony who has already committed suicide. The poet insists that all this is 'storiall soth, it is no fable' (702). This assertion by its very emphasis perhaps paradoxically suggests some unease.

There are also signs of unease about the strict discipline involved.

The weddyng and the feste to devyse	<i>describe</i>
To me, that have ytake swich emprise	<i>undertaking</i>
Of so many a story for to make	
It were to longe, lest that I shulde slake	<i>omit</i>
Of thyng that bereth more effect and charge:	<i>carries more power and</i>
	<i>significance</i>

For men may overlade a ship or barge.
And forthy to th'effect thanne wol I skyppe,
And al the remenaunt, I wol lete it slippe.

(616–23)

Chaucer makes similar remarks elsewhere in his verse, but never at such length, and never with such a sense of burden 'Of so many a story for to make.' Nevertheless he cannot resist amplification in the superb virtuoso passage on the naval battle where he imitates the movement of alliterative verse (635–53).

PATHOS, GOODNESS AND MOCKERY

Pathos has not much modern appeal: witness many modern readers' response, or rather lack of response, to the sorrow of Troilus. Compassion is frequently invoked in the late twentieth century, but its objects are rarely the sufferings of virtuous aristocratic lovers or similar victims. Yet Chaucer's feeling for the sufferings of women seems absolutely genuine as fully expounded in *The Man of Law's Tale of Constance* and *The Clerk's Tale of Griselda*, though modern responses even here may turn into impatience with the heroines for allowing themselves to suffer. Pathos is evoked by the spectacle of the innocent and vulnerable subjected to mental or physical pain and to read of it unrelieved can be a painful experience in itself. What paradoxically makes it tolerable is the strength revealed in the sufferers which evokes our admiration.

The account of Thisbe is longer than most and genuinely affecting. Like others it has some touches of striking if slightly grotesque realism, as when Thisbe finds her beloved in the throes of death

Betyng with his heles on the grounde,	
Al bloody, and therewithal a-bak she stert	<i>started</i>
And lik the waves quappe gan hire herte.	<i>waves heave</i>

(LGW, 863–5)

The story of Dido is also told with some fullness, and worth comparing with the account from the *Aeneid* in *The House of Fame*. As in all these poems there is a refreshing response to goodness. Thus, Dido is attracted by the noble Aeneas:

And saw the man, that he was lyk a knyght,	
And suffisaunt of persone and of myght,	
And lyk to been a verray gentil man;	<i>truly noble</i>
And wel his wordes he besette can,	<i>apply</i>
And had a noble visage for the nones	<i>at that time</i>
And formed wel of braunes and of bones.	<i>muscles</i>

(LGW, 1066–74)

This is an admirable summary of the good qualities of a knight. The cumulative descriptive style with frequent use of *and* is one of the characteristics of Chaucer's later manner. The apparently simple style has more subtlety than at first appears. The conjunction of qualities given here expresses Chaucer's genuine ideal of the knight and gentleman, sympathetic to Dido. Yet the doubled use of the word 'like', the empty and possibly mocking phrase 'for the nones', and the comment on Aeneas's handsome physical appearance, such as Chaucer does not make for his real heroes, like Troilus, signals a satirical or sarcastic implication about Aeneas, as do other stylistic touches. Compare, for its subtle differences, the description of Aeneas with that of Troilus (*TC*, II, 631–7). Aeneas promises, or seems, better than he really is, as the story shows. This little passage is a masterpiece of veiled criticism of Aeneas.

And thus we come to the other aspect of the poems, a vein of mockery. In these stories Chaucer cannot altogether refrain from his usual habit of taking the story so seriously as to address the characters, or make exclamations about them. Critics rarely if ever speak of the Narrator in these poems, and quite rightly, because the concept gives us no new insight, but the narrating poet or Expositor is evident enough. An example, together with Chaucer's irrepressible tendency to hyperbole, is found at the beginning of the Legend of Hypsipyle and Medea where the poet addresses Jason:

Thow rote of false lovers, Duc Jasoun	<i>root</i>
Thow sly devourere and confusioun	
Of gentil wemen, tendre creatures . . .	
O, often swore thow that thow woldest dye	
For love, whan thow ne feltest maladye	
Save foul delyt, which that thow callest love.	

Yif that I live, thy name shal be shove
In English that thy sekte shall be knowe,
Have at thee Jason! Now thyn horn is blowe.

kind
Now the game is
up for you
(LGW, 1368-83)

None of this is in Chaucer's sources. The concepts are serious and familiar enough, but the style, especially in the last three lines, is irrepressibly lively. The horn is presumably that which in hunting signifies the finding and death of the quarry.

LET US NOT PRAISE PAGAN GODS AND MEN TOO MUCH

The attitude expressed towards Jason appears elsewhere and may remind us of the 'rascaille' of heathen gods referred to at the end of *Troilus*. Although the stories are fascinating, Chaucer has a genuine medieval contempt for the vices of pagan heroes and disgust at the horrors which are the frequent subject matter of classical mythology. He expresses this most forcibly in the *Introduction to the Man of Law's Tale* when, after listing the stories in the *Legend* that he has written, or is going to write, he draws attention to his refusal to write about the incest of Canace and Antiochus. Although there again he diverges into humorous asides, there seems no reason to doubt, in a poet who so often expresses tenderness and pity, a real squeamishness on certain topics, a real moral conviction that some things are beyond the pale. Of course there are exceptions to the disapproval of pagan heroes and deities: Theseus, Palamon, Troilus, Hector among men, and among the deities Venus, perhaps, though she is 'really' a planet. And as he later shows in *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer has a robust enjoyment of the physical and sexual mishaps of the traditional comic tale. But in the strange poem that is the *Legend* Chaucer's idealism is in a sense the source both of his realism and of his mockery of some of his characters. Idealism, pathos and mockery come together.

RECULER POUR MIEUX SAUTER

Some critics have seen pervasive irony or even covert obscenities everywhere in *The Legend*. Such a view is yet another example of the attempt to foist a modernistic consistency or subversiveness or indecency on Chaucer's essentially variable work. But the uneasiness to which I have several times referred and many critics have perceived

does seem to be shown in the more than usually frequent interpolations, the relative thinness, and the strain of so many stories all on the same sad theme. Taking into account Chaucer's natural taste for variety, the absence of any post-seventeenth-century sense of decorum, and the proximity of death and laughter noted earlier on (pp. 101–3) it is not surprising that, in the stories in the *Legend*, as was the case of the failed philosopher Oliver Edwards, otherwise unknown to fame, 'cheerfulness was always breaking in'.³ The proximity of laughter to tears is a commonplace, but is notable in both Chaucer and Shakespeare.

The stories are very much a product of the Gothic sensibility in pathos and a certain risibility. They make an interesting contrast with Gower, who maintains a much more even tone, though he never put himself into such a ticklish straitjacket as Chaucer did in *The Legend*.

Chaucer in his stories was working the vein of love and desertion which he had so successfully mined in his previous poems. But he had both reverted to that theme and at the same time advanced beyond it, especially towards the notion, not original with him, of a collection of varied stories. The *Legend* is a sustained evocation of genuine pathos, drawing extensively on a great range of classical and other stories, with some corresponding variety, yet also with a new concision and drive. It is energetic, forward-looking, not tired. The style is often subtle. Were it not for Chaucer's other works we should admit without question that the *Legend* is a remarkably good, complex poem. The idea of a set of stories all on one theme was too constricting, but it led to the idea of a collection of highly variable stories. The metre, the so-called 'heroic couplet', was admirably set for broader narrative sweep. Narrow as it seems, and because it is so narrow, the *Legend* is a bridge to a much broader country of narrative.

NOTES

1. Alastair Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity* (Cambridge, 1982).
2. R. W. Chambers, 'Long Will, Dante and the Righteous Heathen', in *Essays and Studies* 9 (1924), 50–69.
3. James Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791), 17 April 1778.

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