

INTRODUCTION

We know more about Chaucer's life than Shakespeare's. Shadow and surmise, so often met by inquirers into the circumstances in which our first poet lived and worked, loom lightlier over the life of our earlier great poet. Chaucer, who was born in the early 1340s and died in 1400, spent his life in and around London and the Court, employed as esquire when young, and later as soldier, diplomat and civil servant, by such people as Prince Lionel, Edward III, Richard II and especially John of Gaunt – men whose first language was French, which was therefore the language of their courts, a circumstance which enhances Chaucer's achievement. In the last year of his life, Chaucer served Henry IV. He travelled in the royal service to France and Italy, and probably met most of the English, French and Italian poetic master spirits of the age. He knew Gower, Strode, Froissart and Deschamps, probably met De Granson and Machaut, and may well have met Boccaccio and Petrarch. In view of the evidence that he led a busy life in the precincts of power for thirty years or so, his poetic output is surprisingly large – the equivalent of about twelve Shakespeare plays.

The four long poems here presented in translation span nearly the whole of Chaucer's working life, 'The Book of the Duchess' dating from 1369–70, and the revised Prologue to 'The Legend of Good Women' from 1393–4. But the latter, since the Legends themselves are generally agreed to have been written earlier, is the only poem here to date from the time of, or later than, the bulk of *The Canterbury Tales*. The poems offered are the best of Chaucer outside *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales*, both of which are represented in the Penguin Classics, so that the present work is complementary to that already published. These four poems, because of the widely separated dates of composition, show the development of the poetic art which was fulfilled in the great work by which Chaucer is best known.

With regard to this development, there is some danger of considering Chaucer an isolated phenomenon just because he was the towering genius of his age and country, as Shakespeare was two hundred years later. But of the major poets of his time he was the successful innovator. The great alliterative poets, such as Langland, the poet of *Piers Plowman*, and the authors of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, crowned a dying tradition. But those who, like Chaucer, embraced the French tradition, such as Gower and Lydgate, cannot be compared with our poet. Chaucer was the fourteenth-century English poet who, basing his work on that of his French and Italian peers and also, like them, on the work of classical and late Latin poets, created highly original narrative poems with a skill in story-telling in which he equalled, if not surpassed, his masters. Ovid, whose outlook on women and sense of the great variety of life including the absurd, make him of the ancients most akin to Chaucer, may beat him for sensuousness and richness of detail, and Virgil and Dante for high seriousness and epic scope; but Chaucer offers a subtle humour which enhances the seriousness and complexity of what he has to say, as well as a kaleidoscopic range of tone and subject matter. In this volume, though the source poems which he translated in selection and which he transformed into new artefacts as he part-digested them, are referred to in the Notes, the use he made of them is not discussed in detail. The aim is to encourage enjoyment of the poetry, not study of its sources. Yet, to appreciate Chaucer's achievement, the reader should have some idea of the subject matter he selected for treatment, and some information about the poetic conventions he inherited and worked on. That will be done, as far as the scope of the present volume permits, in the separate introductory essays to the poems, and in the Notes, while a modest list of further reading is offered in the Bibliography.

Now to the main theme of this book, which the title almost fallaciously indicates: 'fallaciously' because on each occasion here (except the first) on which Chaucer ostensibly embarks on what was by convention a poetic ritual, he proceeds by wit and high invention

to frustrate ordinary expectation and develop new matters. 'Love vision' was the name given to one sort of poetic expression of the values of courtly love, that rigid system of lofty and mainly aristocratic frivolity into which western European poets were expected to cram both the rich diversity of classical stories and the early medieval inheritance of epic and folklore. The love vision is a dream dreamed by a poet who is in some way ready and yearning to make a discovery about love; either he suffers from love himself or, as in 'The Book of the Duchess' and 'The House of Fame', he falls asleep reading a book which leads him into his dream subject. When the dream begins the poet is often led on by a guide, perhaps into a paradisaal park or Garden of Love, where an action or debate about love, most often with allegorical characters and interpretation, takes place. The end comes with the poet-dreamer waking, and bringing from his dream a truth about love as about a sacred mystery. It is a truism that the vocabularies of religious poetry and the poetry of courtly love interpenetrate, and are in some respects, as in the expression of devotion and lofty morality, indistinguishable.

Only the first poem, 'The Book of the Duchess', conforms entirely to this prescription, and even then Chaucer applies to it a winning variation. The poem reaches through the love vision mechanism to an elegy which celebrates the wooing and virtues of a deceased lady and the grief of her lover. The next poem, 'The House of Fame', begins in an orthodox style, with the poet dreaming his way into the Temple of Venus in search of enlightenment about love, and seeing carved or painted illustrations of famous love stories. But from the end of Book I his concern with love is diversified, and the fascination successively of Fame and then Rumour takes over, guided as it is by the earliest of Chaucer's major comic creations, the Eagle. This character starts as a copy of a grand Dantean eagle, but then rapidly reveals himself as a self-satisfied pedant and, as A. W. Ward has it, a 'winged encyclopædia'. The operation of Fame and Rumour are allegorically examined with a humorous intelligence, and just when a conclusive judgement or summing-up of some kind is expected, at the approach of 'a man of great

authority' (whom some critics think may be Boethius, others, John of Gaunt, and yet others, some other poet), the poem breaks off, unfinished. We are left with rich ideas about vicissitude in the realms of Love and Fame, and a sense that such a serious matter requires, in the face of centuries-old poetical practice, light and even quizzical treatment. Satire is rarely far from the mind of Chaucer, who is at his best when he probes the complex ambiguities of emotional life.

For the ensuing short and pungent masterpiece, 'The Parliament of Birds' (to which I as translator refuse to give its old and now inaccurate title, 'The Parliament of Fowls'), a special convention of courtly love poetry provides the ostensible framework: the debate among birds, each species pleading a particular attitude to love.^{*} But before we find the birds, assembled at the feet of the goddess Nature, we are offered a lofty pagan sermon about our duty on earth, which is to 'sustain the common good' by our behaviour. Next we are taken on a trip into the paradisaal park where allegorical characters mark the way to Venus, lying half-naked; both are narrated in high style, but with enough glints of humour to make us ready for the big surprises which follow. Earthy, commonsensical and utilitarian approaches to love vie successfully with the loftiest – but here, intentionally, not most gracefully expressed – professions of courtly love, and we are left chortling over a humane and realistic synthesis of the subject.

The last poem, 'The Legend of Good Women', is the longest, and the most drastically unfinished, in this book. It starts with a superb Prologue containing some of the loveliest verse Chaucer ever wrote, which introduces his subject, the celebration of Cupid's saints: that is, good women of classical history and myth who were true to love until death. The Prologue is the only part of the work which is technically a love vision. There follow nine legends, containing altogether the stories of ten women. It appears from the Prologue (l.186) that Chaucer may have intended to versify the stories of nineteen, but his ninth story breaks off when apparently needing only a few lines of ending, and there is no conclusion at all to the

whole work which, it is thought, was simply abandoned, possibly in favour of the greater creative lure offered by the writing of *The Canterbury Tales*. All but one of the legends – two, if we exculpate Antony – emphasize male perfidy while extolling female virtue. That may sound monotonous, but the variety of tone, ranging from strained, tragic lyricism to almost knockabout satire, and the humorously changing identification of the poet with his subject matter, have not in my view been sufficiently analysed and praised.

The personality of the poet is designedly obtrusive in these poems. The particular persona Chaucer presents in each poem is structural in 'The Book of the Duchess', 'The House of Fame' 'The Parliament of Birds' and the Prologue to 'The Legend of Good Women' in that, without it, the poems could not exist without great impoverishment. In the separate legends, the poet's personality is not integral to the stories although it successfully obtrudes from time to time, especially at the opening or the close of a poem. In 'The Book of the Duchess' the poet is an earnest seeker of relief from love-suffering who, finding one whose pain is greater than his own, adopts a stance of sympathy and naive ignorance in order to draw from the other man some expression of his grief and love, with consolatory effect. In 'The House of Fame', which must count as one of Chaucer's most autobiographical poems, the quest on which he embarks, with its ambiguous non-ending, is a personal one, and the poet – who is almost comically obtuse at times – is accordingly the hero of his own story. This is also true of 'The Parliament of Birds', because we are always aware of the poet-dreamer's judging consciousness; but with less personal effect. In the climax of the poem, the birds' debate and its resolution make such an impact of their own that the return to the awaking poet and his books, in the last lines of the poem, is little more than formal. The Prologue to 'The Legend of Good Women', for all its beautifully fashioned 'vision' apparatus, its famous praise of the daisy and its lyrical intensity, is nevertheless something of an apology by the poet for himself and his work. So in these poems the reader will find, besides the particular delights of each, a poet's self-portrait, by turns

ruefully self-deprecatory, self-justifying, psychologically illuminating, often comically responsive to the world he presents and analyses, and always modest, witty and quietly humane.

One development which becomes apparent in presenting four poems in what is assumed to be their chronological order of composition concerns Chaucer's verse forms. He moves from the octosyllabic couplet of French romance, in which 'The Book of the Duchess' and 'The House of Fame' are composed, to rhyme royal in 'The Parliament of Birds'. This is a seven-lined stanza of iambic pentameter, rhyming *ababbcc*, which is so strongly associated with him that it is sometimes called the Chaucerian or Troilus stanza. From rhyme royal, Chaucer turns to the iambic pentameter rhymed couplet of 'The Legend of Good Women', which was to be the basic form of *The Canterbury Tales*. It is used flowingly, without general commitment either to the end-stopped line or the self-contained couplet. Owing to Chaucer, all these forms developed new traditions. The octosyllabic couplet gradually declined in status, and tended to be favoured more for satirical and comic verse, while the iambic pentameter line was to become the characteristic line of English poetry: as blank verse when unrhymed (in the Elizabethan and Stuart plays); as heroic verse when rhymed (in our neo-Classical age); and as the staple length for the line of the sonnet. Chaucer's practice in managing iambic verse is less strict than that of his French masters and English contemporaries. The fluent looseness he sometimes happily adopts, especially in the dropping of the first, unstressed, syllable of a line, was a narrative grace in keeping with an accented language such as English.

The movement in the four poems from allegorical narration to realistic story-telling, as Chaucer gains greater power and more independence from his French and Italian masters, is remarkable. Chaucer is at first rich in settings and descriptions; as P. M. Kean writes in *Love Vision and Debate* (Volume 1 of *Chaucer and the Making of English Poetry*, [p.192](#)): 'Since the core of the love vision in French is the didactic speeches, which give instruction concerning Love at length, the descriptions and settings are necessarily

subordinate, and there is nothing to compare with Chaucer's thematic use of these parts of his work.' And referring to 'The House of Fame' in particular, she continues: 'It might even be possible to see an element of literary satire in Chaucer's insistence on the elusive love-tidings which are never actually spoken.' The descriptions and settings become less and less set-pieces in Chaucer's later verse narratives, and more and more forcefully integral to the events and people of the tale.

Consequently, the stories become shorter and more realistic, especially after the completion of the great *Troilus and Criseyde*, which is, viewed from a modern standpoint, virtually a romantic novel in verse. Robert Worth Frank, Jr, in a revealing note (*Chaucer and 'The Legend of Good Women'*, pp.8–9), shows that after 'The Knight's Tale' (2,250 lines), which was probably written first of *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer 'abandoned the long narrative'. Three of the *Tales* just exceed a thousand lines, but all the rest approximate to the kind of length we find in 'The Legend of Good Women'. In these tales of women who died true to love, Chaucer is nicely selective as his theme requires. The full panoply of the classical story as in Ovid or Virgil is simply not there, and in understanding Chaucer's narrative art the reader cannot do better than compare his story of Dido and Aeneas, which concentrates on the perfidy of the man and the hapless faith of the woman, with Virgil's account in Book IV of the *Aeneid*.

Time and again in his short tales Chaucer leaves out matters which those who know the originals might think essential, until they ponder the reasons for Chaucer's selection. In the last fourteen years of his life he seems to have preferred composing short verse narratives, with highly pertinent description, to other forms of poetry. In *The Canterbury Tales* he was to develop the idea of linking his narratives by fully characterizing the tellers of the stories as members of a whole varied society, and so achieved his masterpiece. In this respect he went beyond other medieval writers who presented collections of tales, such as Boccaccio with his *Decameron* and the author(s) of the Arabian *Thousand and One Nights*. 'The

Legend of Good Women', the last poem in this book, thus represents the stage Chaucer reached just before starting *The Canterbury Tales*.

Perhaps we should be wary of using the term 'development' too freely. In the very first pages of poetry in this book there is a masterly short story of only 155 lines ('The Book of the Duchess', ll.62–216); the tale of Ceyx and Alcyone expresses irreparable loss of love, and contains descriptions of shipwreck and the Cave of Sleep, besides vivid dialogue of three kinds. Chaucer was always able.

GEOFFREY CHAUCER

Love Visions

THE BOOK OF THE DUCHESS

THE HOUSE OF FAME

THE PARLIAMENT OF BIRDS

THE LEGEND OF GOOD WOMEN

Translated with an Introduction and Notes by
BRIAN STONE

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20

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