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Gender nominalized: Unmanning men, disgendering women in Chaucer’s “Legend of Good Women”

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Rice University, 1991

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GENDER NOMINALIZED:
UNMANNING MEN, DISGENDERING WOMEN
IN
CHAUCER'S LEGEND OF GOOD WOMEN

by

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ABSTRACT

Gender Nominalized:
Unmanning Men, Disgendering Women in
Chaucer's Legend of Good Women

Faye Walker-Pelkey

In the Legend, Chaucer manipulates the language of the narrator and the women, turning analytic attention toward the problem of gender categories, thereby undermining proscribed behavior and the language that represents that behavior. Nominalism, with its emphasis on singularity, is particularly suited to the problem of gender categories because it forces attention to the particulars of the man or woman, eventually draining the category of that which gives it substance.

Examining the legends closely with the nominalist principle of the particularity of language firmly in mind reveals women who are radically different from one another, who are not faceless victims. Cleopatra, Hypermnestra and Thisbe, for example, are imprisoned in a patriarchial system which rewards passivity and punishes independent thought and action. However, Chaucer allows these three characters to use their bodies and linguistic license to reach beyond the bars of the hierarchical prison, thereby disgendering the text in complex ways. Again, the legends of Lucrece and Dido are connected to Troilus and Criseyde through the exploration of the tension between public and private experiences and the imagery of seeing and invisibility.
Finally, Philomela's story is the most anomalous story in the poem, and thus it reveals Chaucer's attempt to reassert a particularized view of experience. These surprisingly clear-cut distinctions between characters, behavior, and reader expectations grow out of attention to the particulars of experience and language. The demand for universals made by Alcestes and the God of Love provides a contrast for the close attention to language and experience in the legends themselves.
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Introduction

Students of Chaucer have always found the Legend of Good Women difficult to explain. This is owing in part to its coming between Troilus and Criseyde and the Canterbury Tales on the one hand and returning to the dream vision of earlier works like House of Fame and Book of the Duchess on the other hand. The meaning of the poem itself is further clouded, moreover, by the God of Love's contradictory directions and the narrator's contradictory professions. Robert Worth Frank rightly notes that the "Legend is a mystery begging for some kind of explanation."¹ Current explanations of the poem suggest its multivalent objectives: it functions as a satire on the narrowness of literary conventions; as a treatise on the function of art; as an artistic movement into other subjects and treatments; and as a palinode to Troilus and Criseyde.²

In an effort to get at the meaning of the Legend, critics have subjected the poem to criticism of symbolism, patristic exegesis, psychology and, most recently, feminism.³ Many of these approaches have served to open the poem up to further consideration and have brought the poem onto the field of current critical discourse. Indeed, the variety of interpretations indicates that the Legend ranks with Chaucer's best work in multivalence, intrigue, and linguistic manipulation. Yet, although the poem is wonderfully pliable, the interpretations surrounding it,
each of which it seems to accommodate, tend to make it finally more mysterious. We are still asking how this poem "fits" into our understanding of Chaucer's works. Perhaps we are misled by the non-narrative structure of the poem, the choppy vignettes, the superficial characters, the narrator's supposed boredom, and not least of all, our supposed boredom with the poem. As Rowe notes in connection to the boredom argument: "[O]ur contemporary distastes is warranted by Chaucer's supposed dissatisfaction" (4) if we follow the circular argument which depends upon assuming Chaucer's boredom with the poem. The symbolical hierarchies which some current criticism creates out of the Prologue generally neglect the individual legends and ignore the potent simplicity of Alcestes's and the God of Love's directive: to write a poem, the interpretation of which will make up for the misinterpretation of the previous poem, Troilus and Criseyde.

In light of this seemingly straightforward directive, the earliest critics believed that Chaucer became bored with his assignment from Queen Anne and abandoned the work, after shoddily scraping together ten stories from various sources.

Early critics regarded it as little more than an ill-executed exercise in the kinds of portraits Chaucer "refined" for the Canterbury Tales. A later generation of critics recognized the phrases and devices Chaucer used--such as abbreviato and occupatio--which for earlier critics
had been signs of boredom, as common rhetorical devices. Chaucer’s use of these rhetorical devices persuaded the majority of critics to read the poem as ironic. Yet, although this criticism recognized the intricate poetics of the Prologue and gave it greater attention, there was still a sense that the Legend was a minor, slightly unsatisfying interlude in Chaucer’s career, and until Robert Worth Frank’s book appeared in 1972, the legends themselves had inspired no full-scale criticism.

When Frank wrote an entire book about the interpretation of the Legend, the poem’s slow emergence from obscurity began. He views the poem as an integral work, important to our understanding of Chaucer’s development; that is, the poem is a trial run for the Canterbury Tales. He is, for the most part, unhappy with the individual legends, indicating their imperfections in light of what Chaucer did in the Tales. Both Lisa Kiser’s and Donald Rowe’s books are among the most recent attempts to give the Legend a full-grown garden in which to prosper, following in Frank’s steps in order to encourage more fulfilling and sophisticated understandings of the poem. Kiser deals extensively with the poem’s Christian overlay and the utility of exempla, essentially reading the poem as a treatise on the function of art: "[the Legend] is, above all, about the survival of classical fiction in a Christian world" (25). She opposes, however, Frank’s sense of the
poem as forward-looking: "... the Legend is very much a backward looking poem, a work that seems to drag up the past rather than herald the future" (20). Rowe argues that the poem ultimately mirrors or recreates a Christian order of experience "inherent in all creation as a circular movement through contrary states" (80). Because of them, the poem—and especially the Prologue—has been given much more comprehensive attention, attention that reveals its various levels of sensibility. However, we continue to struggle to make sense of this oddly placed poem—its Prologue and especially the legends which constitute its main substance—settled between Chaucer's two greatest works.

Although these critical works suggest that the Legend is worth studying, they are often primarily about the Prologue and much less about the legends. And even the suggestions about the function of the Prologue leave me wondering about the context Chaucer sets up for the poem. Therefore, I would like to return to the initial directive given to the narrator in order to suggest that Chaucer is involved in a critical enterprise of the highest kind known to medieval writers and readers; that Chaucer is engaged in the most self-conscious act of literary criticism; that the Legend, with its focus on character, and specifically female character, functions as a commentary on Troilus and Criseyde; and that Chaucer uses medieval commentaries as both source and model to carry out this scheme.
There are three facets to Chaucer's commentary on *Troilus and Criseyde*. The first facet is the Prologue which he writes as a type of scholarly commentary, drawing from the commentary tradition, expanding it, using it as poetry and, most importantly, setting up the poem as a reflection of poetic and expressive assumptions. Alcestes's and the God of Love's requirements reflect not simply the need for an unquestioning categorization; those requirements also reflect a complaint which they do not articulate, one of which they may not be altogether aware: that Criseyde's behavior is complex and threatening. She is depicted as having loved Troilus, but she betrayed him in spite of that love. For the God of Love, this contradiction sets up situations over which love has no control. In an effort to gain back control, he demands rigid adherence to categorical behavior. Chaucer's *Legend*, I will argue, not only challenges the categorization, but, significantly, the underlying assumptions upon which Alcestes and the God of Love defend their categorization--their sense that behavior is a manifestation of being or essence. The Prologue, through its use of commentary rhetoric, positions the subsequent argument as a refutation to the assumptions Alcestes and the God of Love make as representatives of a philosophical and ideological stance.

In the first chapter, I explore aspects of the commentary tradition which influence the *Legend of Good*
Women by discussing the Legend in light of commentary practices, demonstrating rhetorical connections between medieval commentary and the Prologue. I show that Alceste and the God of Love, as a result of their stubbornness in reading Criseyde as a betrayal of love, actually present the narrator with a tool--commentary--to give readers the principles by which they might better read and interpret Troilus and Criseyde.

The second facet of Chaucer's examination of the characters and meaning of Troilus and Criseyde is the evaluation of Alceste in the light of commentary. He begins the break down of value-laden categories--gendered and politicized categories prized by commentators--by implicitly comparing Alceste and Criseyde within the Prologue. Alceste is the model of wifehood because she sacrificed her life so her husband might live, and Criseyde is the model of the betraying woman who sacrifices her love so she might live. The comparison of these two characters is a direct challenge to assumptions about female character and behavior, assumptions which are reflected in the God of Love's demands. When examined through the glass of mythography and considered in terms of her role in the Prologue, the character of Alceste emerges, to us if not to the God of Love, as an ambiguous role model for the women who follow. In thus realizing Alceste, Chaucer begins what I believe is a gradual submersion into analytical observation. His very
choice of a character like Alceste, whose background may not have been as readily available to his audience as the background of a character like Penelope, for instance, suggests his move from conventional use of myth to something less conventional, something indeed subversive of the conventions. This subversion becomes more important as he moves into the individual legends.

The third significant facet of Chaucer's commentary is his method of divesting the characters in the individual legends of mythographic significance and, by highlighting their particularities, enforcing the particularity of experience. In this way, Chaucer rewrites stories which serve to contradict and eventually undermine all categories.

Traditional criticism, as I noted, has focused on the Prologue to the Legend and neglected the individual legends—e ven when critics discuss the stories, they tend to flatten characters. John Fyler, for example, a usually perceptive critic, insists that the women of the Legends are formed by the employment of "hagiographical flattening" (108), thereby "los[ing] their diversity and individuality in order to suffer martyrdom passively" (107). Critics generally interpret the women of the legends as passive and uninteresting, as fitting into the mold of "good woman."

However, the women the narrator creates in his stories are as various as their backgrounds and are varied by the
poet from their backgrounds. I argue that Chaucer varies his sources in order to create new stories, new characters, in an effort to test the God of Love’s injunction: Chaucer uses those generalities, in other words, to question structures of gendered behavior. When the narrator suggests that we read a heroine’s letter in Ovid or compare the source to his version, he knows what we shall find—a different story, a different character. He does not try to repress those details, he refers us to them; but in all this, he emphasizes that his story is different from, not similar to, the other stories. He never says "our stories" are the same because he is not aiming for similarity. The poet both reminds us of the characters’ place in tradition and removes them from it. His portrayals are not as static as the "olde bookes" would advise. Close reading of the stories reveals that they are radically different from one another, that the characters, actions, and motives are significantly individualized, a move which tends to complicate gender categorization. I suggest that Chaucer, perhaps building on nominalist philosophy, subverts the traditional medieval tendency towards allegorization.

Allegorization is a problematic way to treat human experience because it easily blurs the edges of language and experience, thus imposing on groups of things or people categories which individual attention would render invalid. The kinds of categories the God of Love and Alceste
proscribe for the narrator are found to be inadequate once the narrator begins to actually describe the experiences of the individual women and men. That categorical decline appears to be indebted to the 14th-century nominalist philosophy of linguistic singularity, the particularity of abstract concepts that was in direct opposition to the Platonic notion of universals widely taught and believed in the 14th century. The nominalists' acknowledgement of the particularity of individual concepts, none of which can be truly categorized, leads eventually, it seems to me, to the empiricism of the 18th century. Chaucer's narrator, and Chaucer manipulating the language of the narrator and the women, turns nominalism towards the problem of gender categories, undermining proscribed behavior and the language that describes that behavior. Nominalist philosophy is particularly suited to the problem of gender categories because it forces attention to the particulars of the man or woman, eventually draining the category of that which gives it substance.

In the final three chapters, then, I examine the legends closely with the nominalist principle of the particularity of language and the God of Love's gender categories firmly in mind. The rationale behind my groupings of the individual legends--an order different from Chaucer's--will explain my approach to these anomalous stories. The legends of Cleopatra, Hypermnestra and Thisbe
are discussed as a group because of their imprisonment in a patriarchal system which rewards passivity and punishes independent thought and action. I demonstrate, however, that Chaucer allows these three characters to use their bodies and linguistic license to reach beyond the bars of the heirarchial prison, thereby disgendering the text in complex ways. The grouping of the legends of Hypsipyle, Medea, Phyllis and Ariadne results from the characters' insistence on similarity throughout their stories. Hypsipyle and Medea are conjoined by Jason in an attempt by the narrator to show the similarity of the women and the similarity of Jason's betrayal of them. Yet the text continually undermines similarity, demonstrating instead radical differences between characters. The legends of Phyllis and Ariadne, although separated in the manuscript, are discussed as companion pieces because Phyllis insists that Demophon is exactly like Theseus. Again, the text reveals vast difference where the characters assume similarity. These surprisingly clear-cut distinctions between characters, behavior, and reader expectations grow out of attention to the particulars of experience and language. The legends of Lucrece and Dido are discussed together because, I argue, they are connected to Troilus and Criseyde through the exploration of the tension between public and private experiences and the imagery of seeing and invisibility. Philomela's story is the final legend
discussed because her story is the most anomalous story in the poem, and thus it reveals Chaucer's attempt to reassert a particularized view of experience.

I am interested in the way in which socially-constructed gender roles are overturned in the poem, in the text's marginalization of men, in the power which the text allows the female characters through individual actions, all of which evolve from Chaucer's interest in analytical observation. It is not enough—it is not even true—to say that the men are the focus of the Legends; rather the focus of the Legends is various, on the constitution of love affairs and marriages, on relationships between men and women, and on the constitution of gender formulas and their effects on societal structures.
Notes


Steven F. Kruger, "Passion and Order in Chaucer's Legend of Good Women," Chaucer Review 23 (1989): 219-35, argues that Chaucer "never really intends to produce the series of repetitive stories that Alceste orders; he 'fails' on purpose" because he "explores how human passions distort social structures, how vital emotions and impulses escape the forms imposed on them" (220). Although Kruger's argument comes closest to my sense of the poem when he argues that the "passion" of the characters destroys both political and familial structures, he does not discuss other Chaucerian poems with respect to the Legend. And, although he attends to some of the details of the stories, his lack of definition for "passion" weakens the impact of his argument.

Pat Trefzger Overbeck, "Chaucer's Good Woman," Chaucer Review 2 (1967):75-94, argues that the poem is a preliminary exercise for the Canterbury Tales and asks: "Is it possible that this type character, this composite good woman . . .
represents a nexus not a lacuna between Criseyde and the women in The Canterbury Tales." (76). However, she does not discuss Criseyde in light of the Legend.

John Fyler, Chaucer and Ovid (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979) 96-123, suggests the palindonic function of the poem.


The Riverside Chaucer, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edition (NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1987) contains valuable introductions and Explanatory Notes to each poem as well as Textual Notes. All line numbers refer to this edition; page numbers refer to notes in the back of the edition.

4 The debate over whether Queen Anne or another historical figure is to be identified with Alceste ignores elements of Alceste which make her a questionable figure, such as her mythographic background and her role within the Prologue (see my Chapter 2). For a summary of these arguments, which are no longer central to criticism of the poem, see Rowe 3-4, 161-62; and Benson 1061.

5 See esp. Robert Burlin, Chaucerian Fiction (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977); Robertson; and Shannon. Frank, however, is the first to cite a close connection between the Legend and any other poem, see esp. 1-36. He believes the value of the Legend, for Chaucer and his readers, is the line of development of narrative style.

6 See Frank’s Excursus, 189-210, for a succinct history of the argument for "Chaucer’s Boredom" and Frank’s dismantling of that argument.
7 For example, there are many female characters the narrator could have chosen, or, if you will, that Chaucer could have chosen. Is it not peculiar that he does not use Penelope? She is mentioned five times in his works, besides in the ballad within the Prologue, as a "good woman" (Prologue to the Man of Law’s Tale, II.75; the Franklin’s Tale, V.1443; The Book of the Duchess, 1081; Anelida and Arcite, 82; and Troilus and Criseyde, V.1778). Hers is the first letter in Ovid’s Heroïdes, an acknowledged source of the Legend of Good Women, yet the legends do not include her. Why does he use the women he does: some have quite vivid literary backgrounds like Dido, Medea, and Philomela, and others are not nearly as dramatic or colorful, like Lucrece, Hypermnestra, Thisbe.

8 A word about my approach seems appropriate here. First, although I have read Alcestes as a mythographic character with all the implications and expectations of myth that brings with it, my inclination is to approach the stories, which are noticeably sparse in mythographic glosses, in a slightly different way. Where mythographic gloss can illuminate problematic relationships, I will use it although it is not the focus of my interest in the legends themselves.

9 In recent criticism, the exceptions involve not so much attention to the details of the stories, but recognition that the stories are somewhat particularized. For example, Dorothy Guerin, "Chaucer’s Pathos: Three Variations," Chaucer Review 20 (1985): 91-112, recognizes the unique nature of the individual stories by noting that "Chaucer varied the sound of the narrator’s voice, cast him in a variety of roles, in order to develop the point of each legend" (104).

10 For corroboration of this view, see Carolyn Dinshaw, Chaucer and the Text: Two Views of the Author (NY: Garland Publishing, 1988) passim.

11 William of Ockham’s nominalism and the rise of the "authority" of individual experience seems to be behind Chaucer’s study here. Etienne Gilson, in his quite accessible History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages (NY: Random House, 1955), summarizes Ockhamism in this way: "The proposition which dominates this metaphysics is that ‘every positive thing existing outside of the soul is by that very fact singular’" (490).

12 R. M. Lumiansky, "Chaucer and the Idea of Unfaithful Men," *Modern Language Notes* 62 (1947): 560-62, suggested that "Chaucer illogically uses unfaithful men as his guiding device for the Legend rather than faithful women . . . . Thus the Legend of Good Women . . . is a condemnation of bad men because of their infidelity" (561). Frank and Hansen concur with Lumiansky's general statement that men are the focus of the legends.
Chapter One

The 'Naked Text': Intention and Interpretation

When the God of Love speaks harshly to the narrator in the Prologue to the Legend, reprimanding the narrator for writing falsely of women (or writing of false women), we may be reminded of the schoolmaster correcting the pupil. Part of the humour of the situation is imagining the scene between the irate but somewhat foolish Master and the protesting yet weakly indignant pupil. That the scene recalls or is a parody of Chaucer's schooldays seems likely as Chaucer sets up other humorous master-pupil scenes: in The House of Fame, the pompous eagle lectures at length to his captive pupil; in the Book of the Duchess, the dreamer plays the bumbling Master leading the Black Knight to an understanding of his situation; even in the Parliament of Fowls, the dreamer is a "student of love" led by the mysterious Africanus. It would seem that Chaucer has a certain amount of fun parodying the manner and rhetoric of the teachers and masters of his schooldays since this kind of theme is not only the focus of some poems, but is strewn throughout his other works.

The commentary tradition, that concrete embodiment of the schoolmaster's activity, which was meant to solidify and moralize the privileged text, in fact serves to call that primary text into question. The necessity of a commentary suggests the insufficiency of the text--its difficulty or
obscurity or "nakedness" which allows for misinterpretation. The very act of determination of the text—discovering and revealing its "true" meaning—forces acknowledgement of its indeterminancy. With each added comment, with each gloss, the primary text is split more widely open. Chaucer’s use of the commentary tradition is apparent on the continuum of the Legend. Writ large is his use of the Legend to reappraise Troilus and Criseyde for his readers, and perhaps for himself. The style of the Prologue strongly suggests the commentary aspect: the "dream vision" is the moral, a Christianized manual on the use of classical stories, a poetics describing the intent and matter of literature. The narrative remaking of the stories themselves as well as the textual refashioning of the characters serve to foreground the commentary tradition.

Chaucer’s use of commentary may have been influenced not only by his education and the schoolmasters who taught him,¹ but by the example of other contemporary poets. A. J. Minnis has noted the similarities between commentary tradition and influences and poetry in John Gower, Thomas Usk, Giovanni Boccaccio, Francis Petrarch and Dante Alighieri as well as Chaucer.² More significant than the recognition of other poets’ use of commentary, however, is Chaucer’s use of commentary elsewhere in his own works.

Some of Chaucer’s other works fall into a broad commentary context, although none so completely as I believe
the Legend does. Most convincing, perhaps, is his contextualizing in the Canterbury Tales. In the broadest sense, several of the stories comment on one another. When the Miller, for example, speaks a tale to "quite the Knyghtes tale" (I.3127), he means not only to "repay" the Knight, but to comment on his story, to interpret it for the other travelers. That he does the interpretation in the form of his own version of the Knight's story is a way for him to comment in the vernacular, so to speak. In fact, he sets up his story for yet another repayment or comment from the Reeve. And this chain of commentary continues in one form or another throughout the Tales. Significantly, Chaucer's pilgrims often use words like "intent," "matere," and "manere" in ways that are decidedly commentatorial: describing, analysing, and evaluating others' stories and motives. Chaucer's language suggests a decided fondness for the rhetoric and function of the commentary tradition.

Given Chaucer's interest in analysing and evaluating stories, it is not surprising that commentary on pagan stories should become a component to be considered in his analysis of those stories. In this chapter, I shall describe ways in which the Prologue to the Legend models itself as a commentary. The influence of schooltexts which utilized commentary has been minimized in discussions of Chaucer's reading and source use, but it seems likely that the prologues, as Minnis points out, "provided both prologue-
models and sources of literary theory" ("Influence," 342) for creative writers like Gower and Chaucer. Minnis suggests that while Gower used the academic prologues as a "model for the composition of his own prolegomena" and that the "literary theory channelled by these same prologues provided him with principles for the description and justification of his own works," yet Chaucer did "not employ any of the traditional prologue-paradigms, although many of his literary attitudes seem to have been influenced by academic literary theory" ("Influence," 374). I will demonstrate, however, that Chaucer is rhetorically closer to the prologue tradition than Minnis suggests.

In order to suggest that the Legend is a commentary, I shall cite ways in which it is like the medieval commentaries which were so plentiful and popular. Inherent in this strategy are several problems: first, the medieval prologues and commentaries to which I would compare Chaucer's poem are prose works. Second, the prologues and commentaries are scholarly and moralistic with few claims to the kind of entertainment we associate with poetry. However, as Beryl Smalley and Minnis note, some commentaries were enormously popular, ("Influence" 379) and it is important to remember that poetry was supposed to instruct even as it delighted. The pagan myths were still attractive, if not more so, clothed in Christian garb. Third, the prologues are founded on and structured around a
solid set of standards designed to fulfill a certain rather solid set of reader expectations.

It would be foolhardy for me to suggest that the poetry of the Legend can be absolutely defined as commentary or that the poem is a scholarly commentary in the usual sense. It is my proposal that Chaucer used the idea and some of the rhetoric of these commentaries to design his own commentary --this one on his popular Troilus and Criseyde. There are, in the Legend, echoes and parallels to the rhetoric of the academic prologues that may lead us to a sense of its function as commentary. The stories themselves may provide a commentary, not only on Troilus and Criseyde, but on the Legend's Prologue.3

Why should we search in this direction? Although the poem seems amenable to the various interpretations of the recent criticism, the older criticism focused on its literal meaning, confining itself to the poem's integrity. (The one notable exception is Frank's book in which he suggests that the Legend is a trial run for the Tales.) Making an intertextual exploration, however, will lend greater understanding to the literal component of the poem, as well as the allegorical and psychological levels. The God of Love and Alcestes insist on the poem as a penance for both the translation of the Roman de la Rose and the depiction of Criseyde. As a penance for the wrongdoing, it necessarily functions as a "corrective." Penitential writings of any
kind are both a looking back and a looking forward, both a kind of mixed regret for the sin and a mixed hope for future action and grace. Furthermore, the penance does not simply erase the old and begin anew; it re-frames the former misdeed with present penance, and draws it into the future picture. While the penance is a corrective of the past action, it also becomes a marker for future action. The function of the penance as corrective is what brings it closest to the genre of commentary. Interestingly, an academic prologue works as a "pre-corrective": it gives the moral lesson, the interpretation, before the text. Its physical presence along with the textual commentary acts to keep the reader on track before he or she has the chance to sin, or in literary terms, "misread." Most simply the commentary tells the reader how to read the text, what to expect, what to understand. The penance of the narrator in the Legend becomes a way to re-read and re-assess Troilus and Criseyde, to reinterpret it in light of the criticism of his audience. The Prologue may also serve as an academic prologue in preparing its readers for the stories to come. It is, however, an ironic preparation because the stories are radically different from their prescription. By focusing on the narrator's understanding of his work and the God of Love's conception of what literature should do, tonal, verbal, and substantial connections between the prologues and commentaries and the Legend will become more
apparent.

The opening lines of the Prologue seem at first hardly connected to the following discussion of the daisy and the narrator's dream-experience:

A thousand times have I herd men telle
That ther ys joy in hevene and peye in helle,
And I acorde wel that it ys so:
But, natheles, yet wot I wel also
That ther nis noon dwelllyng in this contree
That eyther hath in hevene or helle ybe,
Ne may of hit noon other weyes witen
But as he hath herd seyd or founde it writen;
For by assay ther may no man it preve.
But God forbede but men shulde leve
Wel more thing then men han seen with ye!
Men shal not wenen every thing a lye
But yf himself yt seeth or elles dooth;
For, God wot, thing is never the lasse sooth,
Thogh every wight ne may it nat yees no
Bernard the monk ne saugh nat all, pardee!

(1-16)

On the most basic level, the narrator sets up the opposition between authority and experience, claiming that we do not have to experience every thing personally in order to believe the words and stories of others. This is a nice touch as an introduction to a dream sequence, a way for the dreamer to ask us to believe him in his dream experience without having ourselves dreamed it. But it is also a way for him to insist on the importance of an intermediary between experience and us, a directive to have faith in the person--not only the "authority," but also the writer--who must translate experience into words:

Than mote we to bokes that we fynde,
Thurgh whiche that olde thinges ben in mynde,
And to the doctrine of these olde wyse
Yeve credence, in every skylful wise,  
That tellen of these olde approved stories  
Of holynesse, of regnes, of victories,  
Of love, of hate, of other sondry thynges . . .  

(17-23).

Yet, this is tricky business because the narrator wants to claim both authority and the individual experience of his dream:

And as for me, though that I konne but lyte,  
On bokes for to rede I me deyle  
And to hem yive I feyth and ful credence  
And in myn herte have hem in reverence  
So hertely . . . (29-33).

Here again, Chaucer deals with a familiar concern, and one that is central to *Troilus and Criseyde*: experience as authority. Whether this is a philosophical struggle for Chaucer we cannot know--his education, career, and social life was so entwined with secular governmental, ecclesiastical, and heavenly authority that it is hard to imagine him escaping from it. However, it is also hard to imagine that the human spirit does not question the authority of authority. It is necessary for us to acknowledge that the paradox exists and is prevalent in Chaucer's works. 6

Although we might be tempted to question the propriety or necessity of positioning this dilemma within this poem--it stands somewhat awkwardly at the beginning and is then left behind rather hastily in order to describe the narrator's habits--this dilemma of experience as authority is, in some ways, the grounding of the poem. 7 First, the
narrator must determine how much authority to give his experience—his dream. The enormous appeal of the dream poem is obvious with just a cursory glance at a list of Middle English works and that popularity alone gives the dream genre a certain authority for this dreamer and his audience; however, the problem remains to determine how much authority the experience has. Then, he must decide how to handle the authority of the God of Love whom he, the dreamer, has conjured up. Implicit in the opposition of these two kinds of authority is the struggle for acknowledgement of the human particularities, for an awareness of the individual. There is a suggestion that these authorities need not be in opposition:

And that men mosten more thyng beleve
Then men may seen at eye, or elles preve—
(99-100).

Significantly, Ann McMillan translates these important lines about experience as:

... the belief that faith should supplement What senses and experience present . . .

The dreamer’s intention in *Troilus and Criseyde* and in the *Roman*, or at least so he says, is part of his experience: he has told stories about women as he has experienced them. Intention and experience seem to be bound together. The narrator has to modify his experience to accommodate the God of Love’s authoritative prescription. Although he has not seen/experienced a woman who is categorically like Cleopatra or Medea or Phyllis, he must go on authority that she
exists. Yet his own experience constantly works against the prescription that suggests that women can be pigeon-holed in this way.

Other Chaucerian characters speak their minds about this dilemma in various ways. The Wife of Bath pokes fun at the kind of biblical commentary (authority) that preaches against human needs and experiences:

But me was toold, certeyn, nat lange agoonis,
That sith that Crist ne wente nevere but oonis,
To weddyng, in the Cane of Galilee,
That by the same ensample taughte he me
That I ne sholde wedded be but ones (III.9-13).

She then goes on to give examples of men who had many wives, pointing the way to a misogynist commentary that has little basis in reality. Although her motivation may be self-justifying in her Prologue, her questioning of the dilemma is actually a way to suggest that individual experience and ecclesiastical authority do not have to be in opposition, that one's experience is itself a guide to life, even if there were no authoritative voice to legitimize it: "Experience, though noon auctoritee/ Were in this world, is right ynogh for me" (III.1-2).

In the House of Fame, the eagle dares to "preve . . . / Be experience" (787-8) how sound reaches the glass house, thereby mixing his authoritative teaching with the lesser element, experience. Significantly, he makes sure "Geffrey" pays attention to the method, as if it were unusual. When he says
Now hennesforth y wol the teche
How every speche, or noyse, or soun . . .
Mot nede come to Fame Hous,
I preve hyt thus—take hede now—
Be experience . . . (782-3, 786-8),

he stresses the empirical slant to this experiment.

Similarly, the narrator's opening lines to the Legend's Prologue reveal the framework by which we are to understand his subsequent legends: most women are human, not inexorably faithful; and most men are human, not inexplicably unfaithful.

Although the narrator attempts a narrative at line 40:

Now have I thanne eek this condicioun,
That, of all the floures in the mede,
Thanne love I most thise floures white and rede,
Swiche as men callen daysyes in our toun.
To hem have I so gret affeccioun,
As I sed erst, whanne comen is the May
That in my bed ther daweth me no day
That I nam up and walkynge in the mede . . .

(40-7, my emphasis),

the story-telling is repetitive and disjointed; he seems to have other things on his mind. In some ways, this short section fulfills the commentaries' category of *vita poetae* or *vita auctoris* (life of the poet/author) although I would not want to push the comparison too far. The "life of the poet" is one of the headings used in the *accessus* to give biographical information which, it was thought, would lend credibility and sense to the text, perhaps explain a motivation for the *intentio*. However, this abbreviated narrative, in which Chaucer has the chance to imitate the commentary model, is not satisfactory to the narrator. This
teasing draw into a particular form followed by an abrupt turnabout is one of Chaucer's favorite tactics. We need only look at the expectations he sets up in the Tales and his provocative frustration of those expectations.

Within a few lines, the narrator of the Prologue gets sidetracked into complaining of his inability to praise the flower:

Allas that I ne had Englyssh, ryme or prose,  
Suffisant this flour to preyse aryght! (66-7).

However, one wonders whether he ever meant to tell a story; rather the purpose of the Prologue is here revealed. His little love affair with the daisy is not nearly as important as figuring out how to write of her. In turn, description of her is not nearly as important as figuring out how she functions in his life. Before the daisy is Alceste, she is a means by which he can make readers believe what they cannot see:

But wherfore that I spak, to yive credence  
To olde stories and doon hem reverence,  
And that men mosten more thyng beleve  
Then men may seen at eye, or elles preve--  
(97-100).

Yet Chaucer does not allow his narrator the same kind of iconographic freedom that, for example, his narrator has in the House of Fame or at the beginning of the Parliament of Fowls, pictorial detail that draws the reader into the materere so that one may believe, for although the narrator describes Alceste's appearance, he does so in twelve compact
lines (F 214-25, G 146-57) and all for the purpose of showing her physical similarity to the daisy: "Made hire lyk a daysie for to sene" (F 224).

This lack of particularity results in yet another turn: her literalness quickly vanishes to make way for the narrator's involvement in writing. In a sense, he gives up writing of her in favor of explaining how one compiles, translates, and revises stories. It is not that she becomes the means by which he may write, but that she is replaced by his writing. The narrative quickly becomes a treatise and his modest complaint\(^{10}\) that he does not have the ability to praise the daisy actually conceals three important acknowledgements about writing:\(^{11}\) first, his complaint acknowledges that the vernacular ("Englyssh") is appropriate for writing poetry even if it is sometimes inadequate or not as completely formed as Latin;\(^{12}\) secondly, it acknowledges that a writer has a right, indeed, a responsibility to make others' writings clear and understandable; and a third, corollary, acknowledgement is that though others have written before, the narrator has the opportunity, indeed the obligation to "rehercen" (both revise and "re-use" [McMillan 67]) the "left-over" words: he must narrate the love sayings in the "service" of love/the flower. The narrator is following in a long tradition of belief in Romans 15:4: "Whatever is written is written for our doctrine." Minnis sums up this tradition in terms of using Ovid by noting that
"... Ovidian material [was] excitingly pagan and sometimes sexually risque (even anti-establishment, perhaps) but, in the final analysis, ethically edifying and conducive to virtue (the establishment had the last word)" ("Moral Gower," 57).

Of the many elements which constitute the academic prologue, perhaps most important is the intentio of the author. It is then significant that, throughout the Prologue, the narrator is nearly obsessive about explaining his intent. In lines 78-80 of the G Prologue (the F prologue expands and inserts it at lines 188-96), the narrator articulates his position among the love-sages who have written before him:

That nys nothyn the entent of my labour
For this werk is al of another tonne,
Of olde story, er swich strif was begonne.

His intention is to be not only of another "tone" than the flower and leaf debate ("swich strif"), but also of another kind than love poetry--his "werk is ... of olde story"; in other words, he plans his work as a compilation of others words on the daisy. But as the daisy ceases to be the focus of his work, it is replaced by his desire to explain not only his intent, but his modus agendi, that is, his "method of didactic procedure" (Authorship, 21) that points up the "pedagogic value of the literary medium" (Authorship, 20). And based on his explicit faith in books and his implicit faith in experience ("... whan that the month of May/ Is
comen . . . Farwel my bok . . ." [36-7, 39]), his work will be, like the commentaries, a discussion based on faith and perception, authority and experience.

Compulsively, the narrator makes clear his "intent" again; that is, his intent is to reveal or uncover the text by glossing or commenting in English:

For myn entent is . . .
The naked text in English to declare
Of many a story, or elles of many a geste,
As autours seyn . . . (G 85-8).

His stated reason is to make it easier for readers to believe the "autoritees" and give credence to the "bokes olde." Conversely, the narrator also seems to understand that even as the text of "many a story" will be revealed, understood, explained, it must also be embroidered with other words (the "gloss") to make it acceptable to the reader, just as the "naked earth" (F 125-6; G 113-14) is "with flours sote enbrouded" (G 108) in the glorious month of May. Here, perhaps, is a visual description of the glossed text in which the original words are surrounded by others' words, sometimes in different color inks.

This is, however, a difficult conjunction: because there is a danger that the naked text of a pagan writer could be mis-read and therefore could lead one to sin, the gloss was a Christian imperative. Yet it was also true that the gloss could be, and often was, excessively long and, at times, convoluted to the extent that it became nonsensical or deceptive. Moreover, the God of Love has accused the
narrator, using the literary language of the *accessus*, of betraying him:

". . . Thou maist yt nat denye,
For in pleyn text, *withouten nede of glose*,
Thou hast translated the
Romance of the Rose . . ."
(F 327-29, my emphasis)

". . . Thow mayst it nat denye,
For in pleyn text, *it nedeth nat to glose*,
Thow has translated the
Romauss of the Rose . . ."
(G 253-55, my emphasis).

This is an interesting accusation because the phrase "withouten nede to glose" (or its more ambiguous parallel in G) can go two ways: first, the God of Love makes his "naked" accusation that, he says, does not need to be interpreted to be understood. In other words, "You have betrayed me and you understand that you have." His words become a literal text which has no allegorical overtones. Secondly, the phrase may suggest that the narrator's translations do not need a gloss to be understood; but of course, if the God reads them without their "gloss," it is little wonder that he has been "misled" by their words, the naked text. Throughout Chaucer's work, his use of the word "gloss" ranges from the sense of "interpretation" to the sense of "deception," and although one meaning may be indicated, the other is always available. It is not simply that we may understand a deceptive practice when he uses "gloss," but that we must also recognize the human interpretation that clings to uses of the word "gloss." Human experience is always a part of
the word.

Just as the daisy cannot be compared to the "gome, or herbe, or tree" (F 121; G109), the naked text cannot be compared to its gloss—that is, one cannot substitute for the other—but one cannot be appreciated without the other. As Dante remarks in his Convivio:

"... since the literal meaning is always the substance and material of the others, especially of the allegorical, it is impossible to come to knowledge of the others without knowing the literal first" (Quoted in Minnis and Scott, 397).

The literal meaning of the text must be understood before one can provide the gloss. The problem Dante's statement forces is the dependence on the purpose of the letter of the text. The narrator's innocent credence of the glossed text may be an ironic gesture because at some point the gloss becomes cumbersome, hyper-imaginative, and too distant from the original. The poet again refers here to the tension that pervades Chaucer's work (indeed, medieval works in general): the divisive polarity between authority and experience and the hesitant recognition of the authority of individual experience. How his audience reacts to his work is outside his control, yet his experience of storytelling is as real as their experience in listening to it. How can his authority (as writer, compiler) be privileged over the audience's experience? Or how can his experience be considered authoritative? This is further complicated by the medievals' disdain for contemporary commentators and
commentaries on the vernacular texts. Commentary is, for the poet, problematic, not simply authoritative.

The narrator's insistence that he meant for Criseyde to teach "by ensample" is another echo of the intentio of the prologues:

Ne a tre lover oght me not to blame,
Thogh that I speke a fals love re some shame.
They oghte rather with me for to holde
For that I of Cresseyde wroot or toldre,
Or of the Rose; what so myn auctour mente,
Algate, God woot, yt was myn entente
To forthren trouthe in love and yt cheryce,
And to ben war fro falsnesse and fro vice
By swich ensample; this was my menynge (466-74).

Minnis focuses on these nine lines to suggest ways that Chaucer uses the rhetoric of commentaries:

"A particularly interesting example of entente being used in the sense of intentio is . . . in the prologue to the LGW, where Chaucer distinguishes between an intentio auctoris and his own professed intentio . . . . This idiom seems to be dependent on the way in which commentators described the utilitas of love-poetry" ("Influence," 375).

That is, the author's intent (his experience) and the original author's intent may be at odds; or it may be similar but be misinterpreted by yet another person--another writer or reader--like the God of Love who privileges his experience of the text. Even various intentions within a work are permissible, as Minnis notes:

"The general moral intentio of the [Heroides] is perfectly compatible with different intentiones, materiae and methods of instruction (modi) in different parts of the work; indeed, it is the very diversity [of the elements] which brings about the moral intentio" ("Influence," 348).
Minnis's sense that it is the "diversity" in a work's purposes which create a moral purpose suggests a way to read Chaucer's entire poem. Again and again, Chaucer poses the problem between personal experience and authority and between individuals' experiences by describing different acts of purpose and different acts of reception.

Another component of the academic prologue is on the God of Love's mind; his constant referral to the materere of the text is an echo of the accessus.\(^{15}\) The long passage in version G (268-312), a central passage in the debate over whether G is the revised version or the original, may be a listing of possible sources or fit a convention of naming one's predecessors and inspiration; some critics believe it is a digression while others argue for its integrity.\(^{16}\) More importantly, however, the critical debate highlights our inability to make the passage "fit" into the kind of poem we think the Legend is, and makes it clear that this passage is unique and noteworthy. It is here that the God of Love, while arguing for the propriety of finding other material with which to make a case for "good women," betrays his conception of the narrator's role.

In pertinent terms, the God of Love suggests that the narrator would be better off writing, not simply of "good women," but of other "good materere" (270); that the writer has other stories which he could write or translate. The god conceives of the writer's role as compiler or translator
and not as originator. He is angry because the writer chose the wrong stories to "rehercen," and reminds the narrator that "alle clerkes" (278) who have written of Roman and Greek stories have used "swich materere" (279) to reveal "an hundred goode [women] ageyn oon badde" (277). He even makes the point that "Ek al the world of autours maystow here,/ Cristene and hethene, trete of swich materere" (309-10); in other words, the narrator has no excuse for not writing of good women because every writer, whether Christian or pagan, has managed to say "goodnesse" (268) about women. Obviously, this statement ignores the enormous (and well-received) genre of anti-feminist literature, but the God of Love has, after all, a fairly narrow view of things. In addition, the repetition of "good" and "goodnesse" indicates the god's obsession with this category which he never defines. In writing the "draf of storyes and forgete[ing] the corn" (312), the narrator has betrayed his audience: he has given them a text with no comment, no guidelines for reading, a "naked text." An alternative suggestion concerning the God's question, " . . . what eyleth the to wryte/ The draf of storyes and forgete the corn?" (G 311-12), is that the God believes the narrator has written only a gloss without reference to the text, only of experience without reference to the authorities, only of what "men may seen at eye" (F 100) without reference to "olde stories." But a tenet of commentary is that authorial intention is primary.17 For the
God of Love, as for his prototype, the schoolmaster, presentation of the naked text is heresy: readers have to be shown how to read.

Alceste follows this lead, claiming, in her back-handed defense of the narrator, that the narrator may be "nyce," and that he translated from books without understanding the matter:

"But for he useth thynges for to make:
Hym rekketh noght of what matere he take"

(364-5);

"But for he useth bokes for to make
And taketh no hed of what matere he take"

(G 342-3).

Again, it is not as originator that he has got himself into trouble, but as inadequate translator or compiler:

"He hath not don so grevously amys
To translate that olde clerkes wryte
As thogh that he of maleys wolde endyte
Despit of love, and hadde hymself ywrought"

(369-72).

Perhaps the most explicit indication that the Legend is to be a commentary is the God of Love’s parting instructions:

"I wot wel that thou maist nat al yt ryme
That swiche loveres diden in hire tyme;
It were to long to reden and to here.
Suffiseth me thou make in this manere:
That thou reheerce of al hir lyf the grete,
After thise old auctours lysten for to trete"

(570-75).

Here, the God uses many of the touchstones of the commentary tradition to define the subsequent work: manner, matter, utility. He emphasizes that he wants to hear the
highpoints—"the grete"—because those moments will, supposedly, clarify the moral. This is more than mere penance; it is tradition. Whether the narrator fulfills those expectations is, of course, another topic; but it is clear how the god conceives of the writer's responsibility.

Even the terseness of the individual stories is a component of the academic prologues: the point in the accessus and in the narrator's stories—ostensibly—is to get to the moral point in as straight a line as possible. Indeed, the stories may be parodying the brevity of the academic prologues and their assumption that the facts will speak more clearly devoid of particularity. One of the most disturbing aspects of the individual legends for modern critics has been the dogged use of abbreviato, the condensation of facts and description. However, although the narrator is literally following the God of Love's orders, this style undermines that very imperative by drawing attention to the personal, experiential particularities while subordinating the moralistic issues. The result is humorous, but it is also indicative of the poet's/narrator's purpose: to write commentary. For example in Cleopatra's story, by changing the pagan senator into a chivalrous knight, the narrator forces the reader to recognize a Christian miles, thereby achieving a kind of moralization, perverse as it may be, of the story. When he notes that
The weddynge and the feste to devyse
To me, that have such empryse
Of so many a story for to make,
It were to longe, lest that I shulde slake
Of thyng that bereth more effect
and charge . . . (616-20),

he reminds his readers that those particularities do not matter, are not significant for the moral meaning which he must, perforce, tell and for which he knows we are waiting.

The subordinated text, however, as many readers have noted, will not be suppressed. And indeed, it is my feeling that Chaucer and the narrator do not want to repress it. Just as one senses the clerics could not bear to give up their pagan stories and so the "paganess" of them continues to seep through the moralizations, so too one senses that the narrator is not very interested in keeping the old stories subordinated. The narrator very clearly recognizes that his work must bear "effect and charge." Whether that effect will come from the particularities or the condensed generalities is not in doubt: he likes the individual effects, but the moralization demands the kind of broad generalizations discovered in commentary. This insistent tension underlies the whole of the Legend of Good Women.

I have tried to reveal a link between the writings of medieval "critics" and their influence on Chaucer's Legend, to demonstrate that the commentary tradition influenced poets in various ways, and thus that Chaucer's work, as usual, is both within a tradition and somewhat unique to it. Because I am interested in describing and assessing ways in
which the *Legend* comments on *Troilus and Criseyde*, I have demonstrated ways in which the *Legend* uses words and phrases from the commentary tradition, and also ways in which it echoes their tone.

Significantly, the commentary Chaucer begins in the Prologue is reinforced in the depiction of Alceste and in the stories that follow. His foray into commentary proves to him that commentary itself often delivers an element of human experience, even analysis, under cover of moralization. The individual legends push that human element into the forefront of our reading experience by altering the old stories to reflect human experience.

I initially thought of the *Legend* as a "gloss" on *Troilus and Criseyde* and Alceste as a formal model upon whom rests the responsibility of compensating for the narrator's depiction of Crisyege and for Crisyege's actions. In the next chapter, I will discuss Alceste as an *exemplum* and the literary and textual circumstances which keep her from being a "good" model.
Notes


2 I would like to place Chaucer in context with other contemporary poets, in order to suggest that he is not alone in working with commentary rhetoric, style and tradition. Even if his is an unusual assimilation, it is not far afield of the kind of thing others did. A. J. Minnis, "The Influence of Academic Prologues on the Prologues and Literary Attitudes of Late Medieval English Writers," Mediaeval Studies 43 (1981): 342-83, suggests that "[t]he prologues which Gower and Usk provided for their own works follow the traditional patterns of academic prologues; in academic prologues they had found [a critical] idiom sophisticated enough to provide the basis for their descriptions and justifications of their writings" (343).


The continual comparison of Gower's Confessio Amantis to Chaucer's Legend is noteworthy. Gower's work is most obviously drawn, at least in part, from the commentary tradition in its use of Latin prose glosses (what Minnis calls "sporadic commentary": "Moral Gower," 53) and verse summaries, and it seems no mere coincidence that Gower and Chaucer worked with some of the same stories. Concerning the Chaucer-Gower relationship, both literary and personal, see esp. John Fisher, John Gower (NY: New York UP, 1964). Also, the many fine articles in Gower's 'Confessio Amantis', ed. A. J. Minnis (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1983). Additionally, the exempla amantum (examples of lovers) which Gower uses are not only "patterned in a way which seems to owe something to medieval descriptions of the exemplifying method of Heroïdes" ("Moral Gower," 57), but also suggest an ordo tractandi (order of treatment) for Chaucer's work. The
"elaborate apparatus of glosses and summaries" (Authorship, 177) of Gower’s Confessio can hardly be compared to Chaucer’s more modest prologue and ten stories; however the Legend is remarkably like a skeleton commentary upon which the Confessio expands in more nearly traditional commentary form.

Dante himself may have begun a tradition within the larger tradition by commenting on his own works. Chaucer could not have had a greater example before him to lead him to exploit the commentary tradition for his own use. Chaucer does not use his poetry to describe a period of his life as Dante does in the Vita nuova, at least in so far as we know (Minnis and Scott 373-75). Certainly his narrators can rarely be as closely identified with the historical Chaucer as Dante’s narrators can be with the historical Dante. Dante’s efforts to make his vernacular works clearly understood and to resolve problems of literalness and allegory provide Chaucer with a valuable model.

3 For more on the connection between Prologue and stories, see esp. Donald W. Rowe, Through Nature to Eternity: Chaucer’s Legend of Good Women (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1988) chapters 3 and 4.

4 As a genre, the palinode works similarly; see my discussion of palinode in Chapt. 2.

5 References to line numbers of Chaucer’s works are from The Riverside Chaucer, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edition (NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). I have used the F Prologue except where noted. Page numbers citing Benson refer to notes in the back of the edition.

6 Although the Wife of Bath is the focus of much "experience vs. authority" criticism, many critics also recognize that the Tales in general are precariously balanced on this paradox. I would suggest that the underpinnings of both the Legend and Troilus and Criseyde are the problems of experience vs. authority. See Alfred David, The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer’s Poetry (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1976) 108-117, 135-58; and Robert Burlin, Chaucerian Fiction (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977) passim.

A discussion of the elements of dream poetry is not within the scope of this essay. For an excellent discussion of the genre, with some attention to the Prologue to the Legend, see A. C. Spearing, Medieval Dream Poetry (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976).


As noted in Benson 1061 and 832, this complaint may be categorized as the rhetorical "modesty topos" or it "may also reflect a concern about the state of literary English." Yet even that speculation seems not to go far enough.

Rowe suggests that the Prologue is about the process of writing, 47-79.

The editors of the Legend in Benson define "makyng" as writing poetry in the vernacular and "aimed at contemporary social interests and tastes, as opposed to poesye written in Latin on universal themes and classical subjects" (1061-62). Yet, the narrator is quite explicit about his non-involvement in current interests (the flower and leaf debate), clearly distancing himself from merely fashionable pursuits and yet maintaining his link with other poets and with "universal themes." Perhaps he is conscious of breaking down the barrier between "makyng" and "poesye."

The F Prologue does not contain a comparable passage.

From Benson 877, on the word 'glose': "The interpretation of the 'spirit' of a biblical text in contrast to its literal meaning (See Robertson Preface to Chaucer 331-32). For Chaucer, 'glose' is usually perjorative: "From the original sense of 'gloss,' 'interpret,' the word passes to the idea of irrelevant or misleading comment, and so to outright deception" (Robinson). See as examples, WBPro III.509, MancT IX.34 (to mislead verbally), MkT VII.2140, Pars Pro X.45 (to mislead, to deceive)."

Minnis: "Examples of Chaucer's use of materere in the sense of materia libri are legion. Maner is used in the
sense of *modus agendi* (to designate literary form or style) . . . " ("Influence," 374).


17 As Minnis points out when he paraphrases Dominicus Gundissalinus: "The reader of a work should regard authorial intention as the kernel . . . : whoever is ignorant of the *intentio*, as it were, leaves the kernel intact and eats the poor shell" (*Authorship*, 20).
Chapter Two

Alceste and Criseyde Within "Boundes they oghte keepe"

In this chapter, I would like to take up the God of Love's specific criticism of the narrator and the ostensible purpose for writing the Legend in order to suggest that Alceste functions as a commentary on Criseyde.¹ The God of Love confronts the narrator upon first seeing him:

'For thow,' quod he, 'art therto nothing able. Yt is my relyke, digne and deyltable, And thow my foo, and al my folk werreyest, And of myn olde servauntes thow mysseyest, And hynderest hem with thy translacioun, And lettest folk from hire devocioun To serve me. . . .
And of Creseyde thow hast seyd as the lyste, That maketh men to wommen lasse triste, That ben as trewe as ever was any steel' (320-26, 332-4).

In order to do penance for his depiction of an unfaithful woman, Criseyde, the narrator is commanded to write "a glorious legende/ Of good wymmen, maydenes and wyves;/ That weren trewe in lovying al hire lyves" (483-85) beginning and ending with Alceste.

Although the Legend starts out as a palinode with Alceste acting as a retraction for Criseyde, it quickly moves from palinode to commentary, from retraction to defense, from focusing on a new work to re-attention to an old work. The sense that the Legend is a palinode to Troilus and Criseyde is problematic. The figure of Alceste and the faithfulness she represents is supposed to function as a recantation of the figure of Criseyde and the infidelity she
represents; but the portrayal of Alceste both fulfills this requirement and undermines it. As a symbol of the sacrificial wife, she most explicitly contradicts the portrayal of Criseyde, a character who has been viewed as a symbol of the unfaithful woman. Alceste is to set right the image of woman. Yet the mythographic background surrounding Alceste undermines her pure, sacrificial status, forcing one to question the "intent" of the portrayal. If her portrayal is ironic—that is, strictly the flip side of what we see, or the implicit under the explicit—then the palinodic impulse has reversed itself, suggesting that Criseyde cannot be recanted by Alceste. But Alceste's portrayal cannot be so simply stated: she is much more ambiguous, a complex representation of men's desires and fears about women. It is not that the figure of Alceste is one thing and seems another: it is many things, the sum total of which cannot represent "true wifehood" or any other category. Irony simply asks us to see the opposite of the surface, but the portrayal's surface, as well as its background, is not smooth but textured. Chaucer's picture of Alceste reveals a figure who is both inadequate as a role model and resistant to categorization. This reversal of intention signals that the author chooses not to recant/retract his vision of Criseyde. By undermining his exemplary character, the author suggests Alceste's inadequacy as a palinodic figure.²

Moreover, in order to interpret Alceste positively (as
the "true wife"), one would have to agree that Criseyde is explicitly faithless. Yet most recent criticism suggests that her representation is a complex layering of personal qualities, social construction of gender, and fourteenth century mores among other things. The palinodic waters are further muddied then by the suggestion that one ambiguous character is meant to recant another equally ambiguous figure. Is it, in fact, the characters or representations of characters that are ambiguous, or is it Chaucer's assertion of the palinodic gesture which is complicated? The Legend as palinode is, thus, left behind in order to use the poem as commentary.

The God of Love and other critics see Alceste as the exemplary "Good Woman" who makes amends for Chaucer's former portrayals of women, and who gives specific penance that seems to encourage and demand regard for women. However, I believe that Chaucer's choice and use of the character of Alceste is yet another instance of an extreme portrayal in order to challenge the categorical analysis that the God of Love demands. Consequently, it is a way for the narrator to defend his depiction of Criseyde. In other words, I suggest that the initial purpose of the Legend is to look back to the narrative love poem rather than, as R. W. Frank suggests, to prepare for the writing of The Canterbury Tales. 3 Chaucer forms the Legend as a piece of literary criticism on his own work, Troilus and Criseyde.
Several critics read the Legend as a whole in an ironic light, exempting Alceste, yet the "serious praise" the narrator is supposed to write never materializes. Alceste's depiction is ambiguous; she becomes one more example within a misogynistic tradition of praising women who die for love, not survive for love. In place of the serious praise, the narrator does not substitute women who are unfaithful, but women who are imprudently and destructively faithful. His overstated portrayals eventually make the God of Love and conventional models look false, not the narrator himself nor the ladies he admires.

Ultimately, the text works to vindicate the depiction of Criseyde by showing how even a "good" woman like Alceste is doomed if the only praise she gets is for dying; Criseyde, after all, lives. The poet is not as interested in overturning conventions as in justifying his characterization of Criseyde. He does not possess a feminist bent which persuades him to create these seemingly ironic portrayals to poke fun at society, as much as he works to portray Criseyde as a more fully-developed human, an individual who cannot be neatly categorized, and uses the Legend, as a whole, to "prove" her so. Few critics fully employ the irony theory: they hold back when it comes to interpreting Alceste within the same theory as they interpret everything around her. Most Chaucerians promote the caveat that Chaucer is most serious when joking and most
unserious when he seems serious; perhaps Alceste is taken far too seriously by the narrator to be taken seriously by Chaucer or his audience.

It is not hard to see why a character like Alceste, or Alcestis as she is called in some stories, was created or how she has functioned throughout her long history in a male-dominated society. One might wish she had been created by someone like Christine de Pizan to countermand the authorities’ complaints against evil women by showing, through experience, a "good woman" who sacrificed for her husband out of goodness and unselfish love. ⁸ One suspects, however, that Alceste was created by men to appease male fears of women, thereby convincing themselves that one good woman proves the existence of nine bad.⁹ Alceste is a character to use against other female characters. If she is the exemplary wife, giving her life so her husband may live, all men can point to her for their own wives’ instruction and for their justification to treat the "other nine" not quite so well.¹⁰ Furthermore, Alceste is yet another character the interpretation of whose nature is dependent on how she performs in respect to a male—indeed, men, in general—rather than upon any individual qualities.

Euripides wrote an entire play about Alcestis (performed about 438 B.C.) of which we can probably assume Chaucer had no direct knowledge; Plato had Phaedrus speak of her in the Symposium, a source Chaucer acknowledges in the
Legend (526). Phaedrus states that "only lovers will sacrifice their lives for another" and uses the example of Alcestis, calling her "heroic" and noting that her "sacrifice appeared so noble in the eyes not only of men but of the gods, that . . . they released her soul from Hades."\textsuperscript{11} But Chaucer's use of classical sources is tempered by (or sometimes only through) the mythographers of the early Christian years.\textsuperscript{12} The mythographers, of course, have an agenda of their own. Not only are they intent on moralizing classical myths to accommodate Christian teachings, but those very teachings are male-dominated texts within which the female is to be suppressed or chastised. Hyginus, a Roman writing in the second century, tells Alcestis's story in an abbreviated and relatively neutral manner.\textsuperscript{13} Pelias rejects suits for his daughter's hand until someone can yoke wild beasts to a chariot to carry her off. Admetus completes the task assisted by Apollo. After Admetus wins Alcestis, he sues to Apollo for a postponement of his death if he can find someone to take his place voluntarily, which Alcestis agrees to do after Admetus's parents refuse. Hercules eventually brings her back from the underworld (58).

But Alcestis is mentioned in three other places in Hyginus's Fabulae in circumstances or with connections which necessarily color our interpretation of her character. First, Alcestis's father is Pelias, Jason's uncle who, being
warned by an oracle that Jason was the harbinger of his death (and being fearful of death, my emphasis), sent Jason on a journey to procure the Golden Fleece with the hope that Jason would be killed (33). Secondly, in retaliation for the trials he has endured, Jason convinces Medea to kill Pelias "without suspicion" (43), and Medea, in the guise of a priestess of Diana, approaches the daughters of Pelias. She promises to make Pelias youthful, "but this the eldest daughter Alcestis said could not be done." The translator of this edition of Hyginus notes in her introduction that Alcestis "insists with a certain dry rationalism" (10) that an old man cannot be rejuvenated. The editor attributes this rational quality to Alcestis, but Hyginus tells the story this way: "In order more easily to bend [Alcestis] to her will, Medea cast mist before [her], and by means of drugs formed many strange things which seemed to be like reality . . . ." In comments following the myth, the editor suggests that "the god [or sorceress] merely made spectators believe there was nothing there" (28). In other words, Hyginus suggests that Alcestis, though possessing some intelligence and healthy skepticism, is vulnerable to a psychological trance. She is also party to her father's death. Significantly, she functions as a pawn in the power struggle between Pelias and Jason. The third place Alcestis is named is in a list of "Women Who Committed Suicide" (163), as "Alcestis . . . [who] died a vicarious death."
The modern editors of Hyginus believe that the "lists" at the end of the Fabulae were added after Hyginus, but it is interesting to note that somewhere along the historical line Alcestis was considered a suicide, a damnable sin in Christian terms. Alcestis has already acquired an ambiguous background.

In the sixth century, Fulgentius told Alcestes's story in his Mythologies. Fulgentius quite consciously allegorizes the myth as his motivation in writing the Mythologies is to "expose alterations away from the truth." His telling of the story begins with the kind of back-handed compliment to Alcestes which I noted above:

As there is nothing nobler than a well-disposed wife, so there is nothing more savage than an aggressive one. For a prudent one offers her own soul as a pledge for the safety of her husband, to the same degree that a malevolent one counts her own life as nothing compared with his death . . . [she] is either a permanent solace or an endless torture (62-63).

Clearly, for Fulgentius, the reason to tell this particular story is to prove the bad nine by example of the good one, to make a point to (and about) other wives; to show that the good woman is one who thinks first of her husband and second, if at all, of herself. Alcestis is not an exemplar of pure love; she is an exemplar of wifely duty and sacrifice. Her actions are judged in respect to the man who owns her, not in respect to herself. Furthermore, Fulgentius changes the myth to accommodate his perception of what sacrifice involves by beginning his story with
reference to her suitor: "Admetus, king of Greece, sought Alcestis in marriage." Fulgentius gives Admetus a motivation for asking Alcestis to sacrifice her life: he is ill.

When Admetus fell ill and discovered he was dying, he sought to avert it by entreating Apollo, who said he could do nothing for him in his sickness unless he found one of his relatives who would voluntarily accept death in his place" (Mythologies 63).

Although this account gives Alceste a "reason" for the sacrifice beyond other accounts, Fulgentius trivializes Alcestis's acquiescence, commenting cursorily: "This his wife undertook." Fulgentius then moralizes the myth by explaining Admetus's name as "one whom fear could seize upon" (note the similarity to Hyginus's manner of explaining Pelias's fear of Jason) and Alcestis's as "succor," addressing the sacrifice from the male point of view: "Thus the mind hoping for succor . . . ." Even when he moralizes, Fulgentius sees Alcestis's actions only in reference to Admetus. Her action has no reality outside of the patriarchal context. Significantly, Hyginus and Fulgentius both begin a story of a woman by reference to a man who "owns" her. Hyginus relates the story with reference to her father:

Many suitors sought in marriage Alcestis, daughter of Pelias and Anaxibia . . . but Pelias, avoiding their proposals . . . set a contest promising that he would give her to the one who yoked wild beasts to a chariot and bore her off (Fabulae 58).

But Hyginus does not give an extensive justification for
Admetus's request. Hyginus states: "He obtained this, too, from Apollo, that another could voluntarily die in his place," which makes it sound as if Admetus asks the boon of Apollo merely to have it.

The manner in which I have presented the mythographers' myths might lead us to empathize with Alcestes, to acknowledge that her treatment at the hands of the mythographers has been one-sided at best. We might be pleased to see Chaucer, in response to the mythographers, treat her more sympathetically. And we might be pleased to see contemporary critics of the Legend praising Alcestes as the God of Love does, to redress the injustices that have been done to her simply because she is a female character. We might agree that the male mythographers have not recognized the magnitude of this woman's sacrifice, that they made it a test case for the good wife without recourse to her particular qualities. We would want to see Chaucer and contemporary critics right this wrong by addressing Alcestes as a woman beyond the status of exemplar of Good Women. However, Chaucer does not work to correct this injustice. Rather, he carries the characterization of Alcestes to its limits in order to discover other, more particular (and, ultimately, more interesting), qualities of character. Several critics do an injustice to the variousness of Chaucer's characterization by accepting the God of Love's categorization of Alcestes, by allowing her to
be used once again by men, by seeing her "in bono" even within the ironic context they themselves propose.

In order to discuss Alceste, we must examine the Prologue. Lisa Kiser sees the Prologue "as an explication through the person of Alceste of the proper melding of Christian thought and classical matter" (Benson, 1060). Kolve, identifying Alceste with the Hercules and Christ figures, states that "[T]he poem's larger quest [is] to realize the meaning of Alceste" (171, Kolve's emphasis). For these critics, Alceste is a symbol of the divine intercessor, the Virgin Mary; and she is a resurrected sacrificial lamb, a type of Christ. Those critics who do not read the poem as exclusively Christian identify Alceste with the daisy and a kind of spiritual and intellectual enlightenment. Criticism that represses "in malo" readings of Alceste assumes that because Alceste is praised in the poem, the poet must have admired her and wanted her to be seen as a paradigm of marriage and wifely devotion. This criticism has a twofold, somewhat paradoxical, effect: it denies Alceste's individuality by reducing her to a Christian image, thus divesting her of the particularity which makes her a convincing character. Secondly, it uses her, as a woman with particular qualities, against other "good" (read "bad") women, not only in the Legend, but in Chaucer's other works. This same body of criticism does not do justice to either the ironic rendering of the Prologue or
Alceste as a woman.

The reading of an "in malo" Alceste involves following three tracks: first, her connections outside the structured story; second, her function within a Prologue that is not strictly serious about its explicit goal; and third, her own actions and speeches in the Prologue. Chaucer encourages us to question the value-laden category of "good woman," to subject Criseyde as well as Alceste to this analysis, and to challenge the gender constructions which make this categorical analysis possible. Alceste is no better off because the mythographers put her on a pedestal than Medea is whom they damned. Taylor states that "Criseyde and Alceste become two standards against which the saints of the Legend must be measured" (259), but she equates Criseyde and Cleopatra and raises Alceste over them. Alceste is being used in the poem by men to repress other women. The implicit argument is pernicious: "Here is a good woman who gave her life to save her husband's. Why can't you be like that?" To complicate matters, Alceste's character itself is somewhat suspect—we have neglected to read Alceste within her contexts.

My skepticism of Alceste is grounded in the very classical accounts to which Chaucer turned in writing the *Legend of Good Women*. Her connections outside the Prologue are as important to understanding her as is her nature as portrayed within the Prologue. As Chaucer suppresses and
changes material for the individual stories, so he does with Alcestes's portrayal: one of the charges that can be brought against the women in the legends—that they died for name and a "fame" of sorts—can be leveled against Alcestes. Ann McMillan notes that "even the earliest accounts reflect conflicting beliefs about [Alcestes's] motives,"¹⁹ thus suggesting that Alcestes sacrificed her life not so much for her husband as for her reputation. Clearly, the God of Love's praise emphasizes Alcestes's sacrifice, not her love for her husband. Furthermore, her familial connection to Jason (first cousins), her father's fear of death which motivates him to send Jason on a journey which Pelias hopes is fatal, and her unwitting participation in her father's murder create an uncomfortable context in which to "judge" her. If we hesitate to fit her into a genealogical context, we need only remember the lessons of Ovid and the mythographers: characters are shaped by their lineage.

As if Alcestes's connections outside the Prologue were not enough to create questions, Alcestes's function within the Prologue also gives rise to skepticism. Kiser calls the Prologue "a chaotic dream world composed of fragments . . . " (18); the fact that the Prologue is a dream vision is an important element in seeing Alcestes as an ambiguous model of "wyfhood."²⁰ Dream vision complicates the tension between authority and experience, between vision and reality, between symbol and individual. Her function is one of
adornment; she arrives on the arm of the God of Love; she refers to herself as "your Alceste" when appeasing the God; her speech about the government of "nyce" ("foolish") writers and her surly admonishment of the narrator are met with the God of Love's paternal smile at the rote wisdom his protégé has spoken. It is difficult to hear genuine passion in Alceste's speech to the God of Love; she is only his mouthpiece. Clearly, her function is to look pretty and speak the words given her. If she is a model for the perfect wife, Fulgentius would be dissatisfied with her prominent and aggressive role in the Prologue. Is Chaucer being ironic? Yes and no: she is the model of wifehood that the patriarchal institution holds up for imitation because she put her husband's life before her own, and in undercutting her own speeches, she becomes somewhat ironical; but the narrator of the Legend perceives her as a great authority when in fact she is merely the voice for ageless misogynistic notions. One could argue that part of the undercutting of the conventions is the fact that Chaucer allows a woman to be the guide and the narrator to be led and taught, but this is a medieval convention, not a recognition of superior intellect or superior spirituality. Moreover, we have only the God of Love and the narrator to tell us what a perfect wife she is. Both views are suspect.

The most persuasive track to follow in determining Alceste's function is her speeches in the Prologue. Five
points are relevant here. First, her defense of the narrator is hardly a defense of art; rather she lectures the God of Love on the protocol of a deity. This rather wrong-headed, lengthy speech (342-441) serves to make Alcestes look foolish for not understanding the issues at hand. Second, Alcestes’s reply to the narrator when he tries to explain and defend his art and sources is surly and quite ungracious; the penance she serves, "while that thou lyvest, yer by yere, / The moste partye of thy tyme spende/ In makyng of a glorious legende" (481-83), surely does not fit the crime which she had previously declared "not . . . so grevously amys" (369). Third, the arrangement of the lines has her offering intercession and ordering justice before the narrator knows who she is;\(^{21}\) this organization makes Alcestes’s demands look rather presumptuous and silly. Fourth, Alcestes herself shows she is not prepared to carry out the very suggestions she gave the God of Love (342-441): she will not hear the narrator’s defense—his intention—concerning his portrayal of Criseyde. Alcestes also wants good women who fit into a preconceived (that is, male-determined) category—that the God of Love commands the narrator to end his Book with Alcestes’s story is what she herself expects. Finally, one begins to sense that Alcestes is working out a revenge of her own:

"And telle of false men that hem bytraien,
That al hir lyf ne don nat by assayen
How many women they may doon a shame" (486-88).
It is Alceste alone who commands the narrator to write of unfaithful men; the God of Love only asks for faithful women. Alceste’s request, combined with the total absence of Admetus in the Prologue, leads me to suspect that she is voicing her sense of betrayal by Admetus.

There is, however, yet another possibility to consider: that her request suggests the necessity of equal faithfulness in order for the marriage relationship to work, of women and men acting in concert to construct social relationships. Could she feel Admetus betrayed their marriage, betrayed her by asking for her sacrifice? If it seems that I am reading a scenario into the Prologue that is not explicit, we should recall that the Legend is built around reading scenarios into it that (purposely) are not "present." Moreover, there is a continuing tradition of making women complicit in their own fatal betrayal, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes:

There is an unspoken rule of propaganda . . . that goes like this: whenever an ideological judgement against a woman is so crushingly cruel that even the institutions of the society cannot bring themselves to pronounce it—for instance that a mother must give up her child, or that a wife must die to further her husband’s moral growth—in those cases it is the woman herself who is forced to pronounce and justify the sentence.22

Alceste, who is not really fit to be intercessor in this trial, is more than equipped to become a human model for a woman betrayed. Unfortunately, she will not get that chance.
If my comments about Alceste seem conflicting and not always strictly critical, it is a result of wanting simultaneously to expose her weaknesses as a model for women and rescue her character from the "boundes she oghte keepe" (F 546, G 526): the boundaries set by the mythographers, the God of Love and Chaucer himself. My initial suggestion was that Alceste can be read as a gloss on Crisseyde in order to see Crisseyde in a positive light. The next step, then, is to discover how critics have interpreted Crisseyde and secondly, how the God of Love interprets Crisseyde.

Why is Crisseyde condemned by critics, the Legend’s God of Love, and even Crisseyde’s narrator whose famous "slydyng of corage" she will perhaps never live down? I would suggest that their condemnation is grounded in fear. Crisseyde makes choices which make her life—her political and social situation—her priority. The assessments of her by a male-dominated critical field, including the God of Love, express fear of the power of will she has to choose to survive "at all costs." Perhaps it is not actually her inadequacies they denigrate, but her inherent power to maintain integrity, to remain alive. Would Crisseyde be treated more kindly by critics if she suffered more clearly or for a longer period of time? When they censure her, they are condemning her survival tactics, her understanding of the psyche, and her sense of what it takes to cope. C. S. Lewis’s argument that fear is Crisseyde’s motivation
throughout the poem seems to me an attempt to turn her trial-and-error thinking ("would I be better off this way or that?") into a feminine vice.

Furthermore, even some criticism that is sympathetic and feminist in approach eventually undermines her power as both individual decision-maker and "symbol" of independent woman. Although Criseyde, in some respects, is a symbol for the victimized woman, she is a very particularized character, a woman with whom one might empathize. Chaucer strives to undermine any indication that she can "represent" a category of woman. Obviously, the social/historical context which creates a character like Criseyde has bearing on her characterization, but the critical interest in her is often so minutely tuned to her particularities that the symbolism or status of "representation" is itself undermined. Maureen Fries argues that Criseyde cannot escape the inculturation of traditionally "feminine" qualities such as "tenderness, modesty, submissiveness, forgiveness" (57) and so cannot escape her situation at the Greek camp and, by extension, cannot escape the critics' censure of her actions. Fries's approach is compassionate, logical and attentive to conditions within which people are forced to cope. Yet among Criseyde's qualities, one might also include political and social savvy, the ability to order her widowed life, sexual assertiveness, and intelligence,
qualities which blur the category of "feminine"—in Chaucer’s day and in ours. Fries emphasizes the restraints on Criseyde: "Her proposals for escape, like her earlier liberation speech, are brave verbal shows, feminism of the word rather than feminism of the deed" (56, author’s emphasis). However, if we are to recover a more particularized Criseyde, we must recognize and emphasize her positive movements beyond the constraints, her "male" qualities.25

The God of Love, the representative of Chaucer’s convention-bound audience, charges the narrator with betraying all women through his portrayal of Criseyde:

"And of Criseyde thou hast syed as the lyste,
That maketh men to wommen lasse triste,
That ben as trewe as ever was any steel"

(332-34).

One has to wonder whether Love is disturbed by the subject matter—an "unfaithful" woman—or Criseyde’s non-conformity to the "olde approved stories" (21). The stories of authorities allow one to distance one’s self from one’s experience and from the experience of others. The God of Love is uncomfortably claustrophobic in the presence of a character as individuated as Criseyde—he cannot control this woman. He says he believes that there are a hundred good women to one bad (G 277), but in forcing the narrator to write of all women as good, he denies individuality and non-conformity. Even if there are more good women than bad
(and he seems unsure about this idea), he does not want them to be women but models of women. The whole point of the penance is to allay male fears of unfaithful women, not to praise faithful women; to allay fears of living women (like Criseyde) with examples of dead ones. The emphasis continues to be on comforting the male psyche. The God of Love's motivation is a timeless misogyny expertly covered with praise for the conforming woman and ridicule for the non-conforming woman. He enjoys reading about the "clene maydenes" and "trewe wyves" (G 282) for the vicarious suffering:

"Reading about them, one feels pain and woe
That for their faith they had to suffer so"
(McMillan 74).

These women are faithful "at any cost" (McMillan's translation of "For alle keped they here maydenhede," [G 294]) so that "men schulde sette on hem no lak" (G 298). In other words, Love gives the formula for a "successful" woman: the way for a woman to achieve merit is to forsake all feeling. Is it any wonder that the God of Love cannot abide a character or woman like Criseyde? And while we could fairly easily isolate the God of Love and claim that he cannot understand human needs or individual values, the problematic nature of contemporary criticism remains.

Although the Legend is, in some sense, a struggle between the God of Love and the narrator, perhaps the struggle also exists between the audience and poet. An
audience expects and desires categories by which it might understand characters, but the poet, believing that unyielding categories only restrict, works to undermine strict analysis.  

To interpret Alceste as a gloss on Criseyde involves seeing the Legend as undermining not only its purported goal, but undermining even an ironic rendering of that goal. Perhaps Chaucer sees himself as being betrayed by his audience (both in Troilus and Criseyde and in the Legend). That the narrator of Criseyde's story is forced to apologize over and over again, that he must assure his audience he would rather write about other, supposedly "faithful" women, is an indication that the narrator is aware of how an audience will perceive Criseyde. In the Prologue to the Legend, the narrator speaks of the small birds that will

... synge of hym and in hire song despise
The foule cherl that for his coveytsise
Had hem betrayed with his sophistrye (135-37).

[. . . sing against the fowler's treachery,
The churlish wretch that, with his sophistry
And selfishness, would gladly have them die.
(McMillan 68)].

There is a sense in which Chaucer sees himself as the bird betrayed by the treachery of the fowler, his audience. They wanted a faithful ("suffering" or dead) woman to close Troilus and Criseyde. When they do not get her, they feel betrayed and turn on the author.

Chaucer's "singing" of the Legend demonstrates to his courtly audience the problems of the categorization of
women. The "irony" Chaucer points out is one in which showing "bad" women as "good" is as misogynist—and false—as the other antifeminist tirades. The patriarchial tradition equates authority with "good women" and experience with "bad" women, a division the Wife of Bath, for example, exploits. Christine de Pizan refuses to gloss bad women as good. Through Criseyde, Chaucer demonstrates the possibility that women have a capacity for desires and faults similar to men's. The audience's and critics' preoccupation with suffering and death of a woman "at all costs" over her humanity, her individuality, her internal suffering, her integrity, is perverse. Alceste's preoccupation with her reputation and sacrifice (not her love for Admetus—he is not even mentioned by name in the Prologue) underscores the difference between these Chaucerian characterizations. Criseyde suffers because of her love for Troilus, and paradoxically, she must forsake Troilus for what she believes is Troilus's own good—at the cost of her reputation.

Perhaps the most convincing argument for the Legend as a gloss on Troilus and Criseyde—and by extension, Alceste as a gloss on Criseyde—is the narrator's own defense:

". . . it was myn entente
To forthern trouthe in love and yt cheryce
And to ben war fro falsnesse and fro vice
By swich ensample . . . " (471-74).

It is not necessary for us to believe the narrator's
statement to see the larger context. The poet-narrator undermines the model of "wyfhood" in order to make a broader statement about experience and authority than the narrator has previously been allowed. His statement or moral involves an attention to the threads of experience as the fabric of existence. One of the "ironies" in the Prologue is the narrator's professed philosophy of the value of learning from sources rather than experience over against his swift and unhampered abandon of those very books for the worship of the daisy. Throughout the Prologue, the narrator battles with the priority of authority and experience. Secondly, the dream world is evidently so real to the narrator that he is compelled to write the legends even after he awakes—that is, his experience of the dream vision modifies his former philosophy which he received from the "authorities." The narrator is aware of the ways in which he recreates experience by rewriting the legends. Furthermore, it is the "authorities" (his sources) that land him in trouble from the start: his "translaciouns" of the Roman de la Rose and Boccaccio's story, Il Filostrato. Significantly, even the God of Love points to experience over authority:

". . . A ful gret neglygence
Was it to the, to write unstedefastnesse
Of women, sith thou knowest here goodnesse
By pref . . . " (G 525-28).

The proof, for the God of Love, is the woman standing with him.
The request the God of Love and Alceste make of the narrator is a portrayal of women who do not hesitate to sacrifice themselves for love—who have accepted the patriarchal view that women must die for love and honor. Can we still see Alceste as an exemplar after she makes this kind of request? One of the strains of anti-feminism, as I noted above, employs women against women. If Alceste can only be raised by debasing other women, she serves as a poor model. Taylor states that "Criseyde and Alceste become two standards against which the saints of the Legend must be measured," and she goes on to equate Cleopatra and Criseyde as "spiritual sister[s]" on the basis of their "fickleness dictated by political straits" (259). This seems to me the wrong tack. Criseyde and Alceste are indeed standards, but where most critics follow a narrator they have labelled ironic and slow-witted in believing that Alceste is the female figure who will redress accounts, I suggest that Alceste is exposed to be an unacceptable model. Further, Criseyde's actions are vindicated in the name of a kind of completeness that Alceste is not allowed. Chaucer's "moral" is that human beings are clearly not acceptable as "models" or paradigms.

Finally, I suggest that Chaucer uses a "literary theory," in the form of the Legend of Good Women, which is based on mythographic characters—that is, Christianized mythical types—to gloss his work, Troilus and Criseyde.
But Chaucer simultaneously strips falsity away from the kernel of truth and recovers it, or adds a layer. The Legend becomes a gloss on the commentary Troilus and Criseyde itself creates. The "truth" or "reality," in whatever forms it takes, resides under these layers. Chaucer's poetry embraces issues of a pluralistic concern over against gender-divided issues. In the stories we begin to see that what resides under those layers is not Platonic, but Ockhamistic.

The following conclusions raise questions, and some answers, for further exploration. First, I think Chaucer sees "human" entanglements as opposed to "female" entanglements. He works within a Christian context which strongly influences his view of human relationships as male-leader and female-follower, but this does not mean that he believes women should die for men, nor does it mean that women should be textually submissive. Second, he sympathizes with the constrictions on human behavior without necessarily focusing on females to the exclusion of males. 29 He understands the difficulties of maintaining integrity within a system that demands adherence to a moral law which seems bent on repressing an individual's sense of self; at the same time, he recognizes the need for some kind of moral law. Third, Chaucer interprets Christian marriage as a way to alleviate the inequities of human life. We might not like the marriages he chooses to portray, but I am convinced
that his works focus, if not always directly, on marriage as a "cure" for inequity, although I would argue against a notion that Chaucer thinks marriage is for keeping women constrained.\footnote{30}

I have suggested that the Legend is a gloss, a commentary on Troilus and Criseyde and, specifically, that Alcest is a commentary on Criseyde. I have tried to make clear what Chaucer may not have wanted clearly acknowledged. There is a sense in which Chaucer uses the Legend to "re-cloak," re-cover (and recover, have access to again) his previous romance. Instead of using the Legend as a gloss to further unfold Troilus and Criseyde, to further open it up, Chaucer may use the Legend as a cloaking device. By demonstrating the insidiousness of narrow interpretations, he uncovers a "truth" while recovering Criseyde, the "shifting reality."\footnote{31}
Notes

A version of this chapter was read at the 1989 South Central Modern Language Association Convention in the International Courtly Literature Society session.

1 Ruth M. Ames, "The Feminist Connections of Chaucer's Legend of Good Women," Chaucer in the Eighties, eds. Julian N. Wasserman and Robert J. Blanch (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1986) 57-74, states, however that "It is most unlikely, of course, that the Prologue in which the God of Love accuses the poet of misogyny . . . was intended to be taken literally" (57). Eleanor Winsor, "A Study in the Sources and Rhetoric of Chaucer's Legend of Good Women and Ovid's Heroides," diss., Yale U, 1963, says emphatically, "Obviously, 'good women' are the occasion, and not the subject, of the poem" (35).

2 It may be that Chaucer is re-defining the palinodic form here in order to "reassert the validity" of the previous poem as has been suggested to me by a reviewer. The balance of the poem, however, is kept by looking back to Troilus and Criseyde while focusing on "new" and restructured stories in the individual legends, a process which suggests, at the very least, a melding of commentary and palinode. John Fyler, Chaucer and Ovid (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979), suggests that the palinode is itself an ambiguous form, that it "adds another voice to an unresolved dispute" (98) rather than acts as a strict retraction. Peter L. Allen, "Reading Chaucer's Good Women," Chaucer Review, 21 (1987): 419-34, suggests that "the poet did not sincerely desire to repent--that his 'sin' is a sin only in the eyes of the God of Love, and not in his own," and that, finally, the palinode is an ironic form (425).


4 The critics who do not interpret the Prologue and individual legends as ironic see Alceste nearly as the God of Love does. They include E. F. Shannon, Chaucer and the Roman Poets (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1929); F. N. Robinson, ed., 3rd ed., The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer (Boston:


6 The terms "human" and "individual" are not used in ignorance of the vast body of theoretical criticism which, challenging their meaning, suggests that these problematic words are terms with vastly various meanings contingent upon time and place. It suggests that "individual" as a value is a nineteenth century, bourgeois, capitalist notion. However, I would suggest that Chaucer has some notion of individuality as particularity: his poetry is filled with experiences and portraits which are so particular as to undo "symbolism," and which champion an interpretation of life's experiences that insists on engaging the particularities to find meaning. It would be impossible to identify how Chaucer might use these words. One can only construct a "meaning," or a range of meaning, from other documents (literature, sermons, legal papers, philosophical works) of the period. An approach which suggests reading "individuality" as late twentieth-century Americans might use the term could be labelled "anachronistic"; but a critic must admit her limitations when faced with them. My sense of individuality is obviously influenced by my time period, values, social class, political beliefs. I have tried, however, to temper my twentieth-century critical views with a medieval sensibility in as far as that is possible. I think other medieval works, as well as Chaucer's other works, are not definitively symbolistic or allegoristic. Every work need not be interpreted in this way only. For example, "Pearl" is available to allegorism and is often read under this category, yet by focusing on the dreamer's experience as an "individual," as a person having this "real" experience, rather than the dreamer as a symbol for an abstract quality, one finds other levels opening up; other interpretations become available. I wish to use the terms "human" and "individual" to represent what I believe to be qualities common to both men and women, to represent behavior and instincts that cannot be categorized in terms of male-female polarities.
7 Even the irony theory is undermined by the framing device used (or rather, half-of-a-frame) if we accept that the Legend is incomplete. For an insightful discussion of the "Legend of Alcestis" as the other side of the frame, see Kolve 153, 171-74.

8 The theoretical premise of Christine de Pizan’s Le Livre de la Cité des Dames is that woman is inherently good and can be proven so through experience of individual women despite what the "authorities" say. See The Book of the City of Ladies, trans. Earl J. Richards (NY: Persea Books, 1983) esp. 3-10.

9 As the Clown in All’s Well That Ends Well, William Shakespeare: The Complete Works, ed. Alfred Harbage (NY: Penguin Bks., 1977), so coyly remarks as he gets the song wrong, but the sentiment misogynistically "right":

Lavatch: "'... Among nine bad if one be good,
Among nine bad if one be good,
There's yet one good in ten.'"

Countess: "What, one good in ten? You corrupt the song, sirrah."

Lavatch: "One good woman in ten, madam, which is a purifying o' th' song. ... One in ten, quoth'a? An we might have a good woman born but or every blazing star, or at an earthquake, 'twould mend the lottery well; a man may draw his heart out ere 'a pluck one" (I.3.73-84).

10 Yet the situation is perhaps more complex than this. There is a sense in which the two views of Alcestis cannot be separated. She is a character to use against other women, but her characterization is a fact of her own oppression. She cannot escape the boundaries of "wyfhd" even at the moment she is made to act as a model.

See summary of sources in Benson 1059.

The Myths of Hyginus, trans. Mary Grant (Lawrence: U of Kansas Publications; Humanistic Studies #34, 1960). References are to page numbers in Grant’s book.

Ovid’s story in The Metamorphoses, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1964) 162-64, differs: Medea takes it upon herself to kill Pelias; her motivation is not explained; Alceste’s name is never mentioned; Pelias’s daughters do not flee, Medea does.

See Grant’s Preface.

Fulentius the Mythogapher, trans. Leslie George Whitbread (Columbus: Ohio State Univ., 1971). Quote is from Fulgentius’ Prologue 45.

Unlike Christine’s characters who, she says, have an inner worth.

Kolve disagrees with Whitbread’s translation of "sucor" (Kolve 215n55). Her listing of possible translations of "alce, glossed as praesumptio by [Fulentius]" include "opinion" or "thought," "preconception," "presumption," and "animositas" meaning "boldness, confidence, or fearlessness of spirit." All of these options cast a different light on Alceste than Whitbread’s translation does.


For discussions of the Prologue as dream vision, see A. C. Spearing, Medieval Dream Poetry (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976); and, more recently, Michael D. Cherniss, "Chaucer’s Last Dream Vision: The Prologue to the Legend of Good Women," Chaucer Review 20 (1986): 183-99. Winsor suggests that the "dream-experience" intensifies the narrator’s understanding of and reliance on "simple, conventional facts" (24). In other words, Winsor separates lived experience from the experience earned in dreams; the dream is but a way to "supply deficiencies of personal experience ... " (24).
21 In the G Prologue, the narrator recognizes her and names her when she enters his vision with the God of Love (173-79). Although she is not officially "introduced," we are led to believe that the narrator at least knows who she is.

22 As quoted in Hansen 19n22. See also Sedgwick’s Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire (NY: Columbia UP, 1985).


24 My answer to that question is an emphatic "yes." Consider Robert Henryson’s fifteenth century version of the Troilus and Criseyde story, in which Criseyde falls victim to leprosy. Henryson did for the audience the very thing it needed in order to feel sympathy for Criseyde: he killed her off. Henryson’s poem, which by mid-sixteenth century "came to be thought of as a sort of continuation of Chaucer’s story," is a perfect illustration of my point. See R. K. Gordon’s The Story of Troilus (London: J. M. Dent, 1934) for a collection of "Troilus stories" including Henryson’s poem. (The quote is from his Introduction xvii.) See also Marshall W. Stearns’s A Modernization of Robert Henryson’s Testament of Cresseid (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1945). Stearns’s introductory comments which praise Henryson for his "stern pity" (13) towards Criseyde, reflecting that "Henryson’s treatment is remarkably restrained, subtle and effective" (18) reinforce the sense that Criseyde’s death is necessary in order to satisfy the audience and critics.

25 I would like to call these "human" qualities, but postmodern critics maintain that there are no genderless roles in this world, that inculturation is so decidedly polarized that describing meaning in terms of "human" is, in
fact, accepting the patriarchal view of things so that "human" really means "male" or "male-determined." I find this attitude problematic, for while I am always interested in particularity and difference, I believe in and strive to discover similarities—common interests and abilities between people—that seem to me determined by our common, complex humanity, rather than polarized views of that humanity.

26 See Sheila Delany, "Rewriting Women Good: Gender and the Anxiety of Influence in Two Late-Medieval Texts," in Wasserman and Blanch. Her sense is that although the command Chaucer gives himself—"to rewrite woman good"—would subvert the anti-feminist tradition, Chaucer's "response is to subvert the directive in accordance with a world view and an aesthetic which see all created nature as inherently contradictory and the poet's task as fidelity to reality so perceived" (82). I suggest that although Chaucer may not be able to escape his own inculturation sufficiently to truly "rewrite woman," the very fact of his "fidelity to [a contradictory] reality" actually liberates him to undermine the neat gender categories with which he works.

27 If the only way to defend Troilus and Criseyde is to denigrate the Legend, then I would question the tone of Troilus and Criseyde in respect to women. I would not want to suggest that Criseyde be placed on Alceste's pedestal at Alceste's expense. This is a subject for another time, but it is significant that the Legend can raise these kinds of questions.

28 McMillan notes in her Introduction that "[t]hrough its assessment of the rules governing romantic relations between men and women and the rules governing poets who write about them, the Legend has important implications for many of Chaucer's other works" (8).

29 Diamond notes: "Unwilling to abandon the values and hierarchies he inherits, unable to reconcile them with what he has observed of human emotion and social realities, [Chaucer] accepts uneasily the medieval view of women as either better or worse than men, but never quite the same" (82). I do not think he accepts this unequal view, uneasily or not; the poetic manifestations of his observation constantly underscore human particularity while suggesting the potential for "equality" between people. Rather than simply having an awareness and sympathy for inequity, he undermines polarized distinctions. For a refinement of


31 Fyler's phrase 18.
Chapter Three

Disgendering the Text:
The God of Love's Contradictions
and
The Complexities of the
Legends of Cleopatra, Hypermnestra and Thisbe

As Chaucer moves into the writing of the individual legends, his interest in the particularity of experience is manifested in the undermining of categories. The stories dissolve gendered categories by presenting interesting, particularized characters whose experiences call into question the notion that women can be understood by describing "woman." Chaucer tried that method in the Prologue and he got an equivocal model in his depiction of Alcestes. In the legends, he stops describing or pretending to describe "woman" and describes characters. In doing so, he negates the power of gender and validates the anomalous tissue of experience that underlies poetry.

In this chapter, I will suggest that the engenderment—the polarization of actions and experiences into male and female categories—of the Legend of Good Women is undermined when one focuses on the individual legends. This disgenderment, motivated and supported by the God of Love's initial contradictions, turns passive, "feminine" women into subversively active women whose "male" qualities complicate socially-constructed gender roles. In each story, although the female character is hedged in by the actions of those
around her and her socially-constructed behavioral responses, the text allows her a certain freedom, a freedom, I suggest, that is not circumscribed by words like "female" or "male." Although not all the stories undermine gender imperatives, many challenge the notion that "human" automatically equals "male," and they champion a sense of female abilities and choices. Certainly female characters, as well as "real-life" women, are limited in activity historically and literally. However, potential for female activity can be, and is, highlighted in some texts in such a way as to challenge those categories which would allow critics to pigeonhole the characters. Although many Chaucerian critics suggest that the women of the legends are all alike through virtue of Chaucer's compression and repression of source material, that they all end up fitting the hagiographic model however oddly, in fact, the women are more various than similar. As critics, we are warned against seeing an unnatural connection between literary women and historical women, but I would argue that the more examples that we note in medieval texts of stereotypes and categories being challenged, the more evidence we have that all experience has not been completely subsumed under the historical patriarchal system.

Through close critical reading, I suggest ways in which the individual legends illuminate or undermine imperatives of gendered behavior: for example, many women of the
legends, often accused of passively accepting death at the
desertion of their "unfaithful" lovers, undermine that so-
called passivity by writing and staging the texts of their
endings. Furthermore, many men of the legends are divested
of much physical and verbal activity, and are further
marginalized by their inadequate or exaggerated
characterizations. The narrator's stories are broad-scale
commentary which is meant to challenge categorical analysis
of human behavior--perhaps to question and blur the
boundaries of gendered behavior.

The men in the legends are linked by grounding their
(presumed) collective infidelity in a "community" of men.
The image of Aeneas with Ascanius at his hand and Anchises
on his back foregrounds the most basic image of the men in
the legends by demonstrating the physical and psychological
continuity of the patriarchy at the expense of its "other"
gender. The loss of Creusa is not just a consequence of
this solidarity, but a goal of it. In all the legends,
except Lucrece's, the narrator confronts the father-bearing,
son-leading Aeneas directly, accusing each man of
participation in consumption and confusion of women. Some
critics have understood irony in the Legend by suggesting
that although the stories are presented as if love and
relationships were important, actually the male world is
treated as if it has a significantly higher morality and
thus a greater interest. The critics point to imagery and
line appropriation to support the idea that the narrator privileges the male point of view. Yet many times Chaucer undercuts these moral assertions by suggesting that the male world of sail and discover has its too-high price: the destruction of a unity available through male-female relationships. By assuming irony, critics manage to place themselves in the same league as Aeneas and Jason: they give a kind of moral priority to the community of men. Chaucer's handling of several of the stories suggests, however, that the institution which loses women and gains land, military honor, and male security presents nearly insurmountable difficulties for the society to which it belongs.⁴

However, even a theory such as this—"destruction by community of men"—is not sufficient to describe the intensity of a number of the legends. My use of the term "community" may, in fact, cloud the issue I wish to raise: that one of the ways Chaucer undermines the categories he is supposed to defend is by exploring the behavior of individuals within that community. As if to emphasize his analytical approach, Chaucer makes explicit links between characters, claiming their similarity only to undermine it. Ostensibly, the legends are held together by the categorical analysis based on the God of Love's and Alceste's commands. Yet the bundle of stories Chaucer chooses to tell seem to be unordered, haphazard. Is this simply a hapless indifference to categories or a measured resistance to categorization?
Can we discover a sequential organization to the stories in terms of sources or plot mechanisms, for example? Chaucer could have arranged the stories in clusters; can we discover a unifying thread or must the fabric of the Legend simply shred into remnants of fragmentary and episodic chance? I suggest that although there are few "unifying" threads, there are common ones.

Elaine Tuttle Hansen has suggested that men and men's actions are the narrator's focus in the Legend. She emphasizes that it is male-gendered activity which is highlighted throughout the individual legends: fighting, sea roaming, and so on, that is, actions normally associated with socially-constructed male behavior. She argues that this male point of view informs the narrator's antifeminism, turning his "good women" into ironic portrayals. Moreover, in her most recent essay, she extends this argument of focus by suggesting that the narrator explores and depletes the "feminization" of men in the stories. Their behavior, she says, is meant to warn men away from encounters of heterosexual love.

These two perceptive arguments form the basis of my suggestion that the goal of the stories is the undermining of categorical analysis, of categories strictly polarized into female behavior-male behavior. If feminized men nonetheless engage in socially-approved male activities, how do we describe "male behavior"; more importantly, how do we
describe and evaluate "female behavior"? Are the women then "masculinized"? Hansen does note that certain characters have power, but she says (somewhat disdainfully?) that they are "uninterested in using their power except to rescue men from life-threatening situations, usually in the hopes of marrying them afterwards" (60). Yet this is hardly a non-interest in, or non-use of, power, and their reasons for using this power are not as frivolous as Hansen makes marriage seem. In fact, their use of power is both subversive and legitimate within the very bounds they must perforce live. More important, however, is their power, through Chaucer's narrative, to re-write their deaths, re-construct their legacy in a way that challenges the God of Love's interpretation of women, and, in particular, his interpretation of Criseyde.

The God of Love's contradictory directives motivate the rewriting of women's lives in radical ways. His inability to decide what kind of stories he wants undermines the thrust of the injunction and allows the narrator to devalue the gender-constructed command from the God of Love. The narrator proceeds to "ungender" the gendered text based on the God of Love's ambiguous purpose. The God of Love's complaint about the narrator is two-fold: that the translation of the Roman de la Rose makes "wise folk fro me withdrawe" (F 331; G 257); that is, the translation uncovers the romance of love, revealing something which makes prudent
people think twice. His second accusation is that the narrator has misrepresented Criseyde so that she who was faithful is seen as not faithful, and therefore men lose trust in women.¹⁰

The God of Love’s contradictory purpose is most apparent when he suggests a balance of good and evil representations: "Why noldest thou as wel han seyd goodnesse/ Of wemen, as thou hast seyd wikenedesse?" (G 268-69, my emphasis). He does not want, here, a wholesale commendation of women such as he will insist upon later in the Prologue, a commendation which is easy to parody. His specific advice to the narrator is to read Valerius, Titus Livius, Claudyan, and Jerome (G 280-81, Benson 1064) for stories of great women; these are ambivalent authors who sometimes praise women, but whose works contain some of the most well-known antifeminist rhetoric.

The God of Love’s contradictions extend to Alceste, creating some very awkward moments of understanding and undermining his initial directive. First, he accuses the narrator of forgetting to include Alceste in his "balade":

Thanne seyde Love, "A ful gret negligence
Was yt to the, that ylke tyme thou made
‘Hyd Absolon, thy tresses,’ in balade,
That thou forgate hire in thi song to sette,
Syn that thou art so gretly in hir dette . . . "
(537-41).

Yet the narrator makes clear that the ballad is in her honor: "And therfore may I seyn, as thynketh me, / This song
in preysyng of this lady fre . . ." (F 247-48), a fact the God of Love "forgets." Secondly, he claims Alceste as the exemplum for both lover and wife—a difficult conjunction even for courtly love conventions. He contradicts his belief that her power as example lies in her status as sacrificial wife, not courtly lover. Yet his speech indicates both at once with little distinction:

" . . . [a] kalender ys shee
To any woman that wol lover bee.
For she taught al the craft of fyn lovyng
And namely of wyfhod the lyvyng . . ."

(542-45, my emphasis).

I cannot escape the sense that the God of Love is aware of this contradiction and that his own antifeminist beliefs are revealed in his attempt to make the wife into lover, to divest the wife of that which gives her a certain amount of respectability and status. Of course, the result of being either wife of lover is the same—she knows "al the boundes that she oghte kepe" (F 546, G 536). Finally, the God of Love says that "no trewe lover [shall] come in helle" (F 553), but of course Alceste did enter hell and for love—a contradiction even the God of Love cannot evidently fathom.

The God of Love's parting instructions follow this pattern of contradiction which makes it hard to pin down what the "rules" are, what the purpose is to this project. First, he instructs the narrator to write of:

"This other ladies sittyngge here arowe
Ben in thy balade, yf thou kanst hem knowe,
And in thy bookes all thou shalt hem fynde.
Have hem now in thy legende al in mynde;
I mene of hem that ben in thy knowynge" (554-58). This last line John Fisher suggests "leaves the door open to alter the original list"; however, it suggests more ambiguously that the narrator might draw on his experience to supplement whatever he finds in his books: "in thy knowynge" is a slippery phrase which allows the narrator to use any material he can. Significantly, "thise other ladies" are referred to as "hem," the third person plural, in every line of this speech as if to underscore their remarkable likeness (and facelessness) to the neglect of their differences: "For here ben twenty thousand moo sittyng / Than thou knowest, good wommen alle, / And trewe of love for oght that may byfalle" (559-61). The suggestion that the narrator is to draw on his own experience to detail the women in the stories is supported by the God of Love's exit lines:

"Suffiseth me thou make in this manere: That thou reherce of al hir lyf the grete, After this olde auctours lysten for to trete" (573-75).

Literally, that is, the narrator is to write about the important points in each woman's life as ("after") the former authors were "pleased" to do. The command is to compile and translate, not make anew. Yet the advice is contradictory, or at the very least, ambiguous, since the narrator may choose to interpret the directive--"reherce of al hir lyf the grete"--as the explicit advice and to
disregard the injunction to follow the old writers.

All of this leads to the conclusion that the God of Love's injunction is contradictory at best. His continuous act of contradiction allows for two results: the narrator can easily take the suggestions or parts of advice and discard the remainder; more importantly, the narrator can follow the God of Love's example by "contradicting" himself. These mixed signals allow the narrator in the succeeding stories to attend to the details of difference under cover of those of likeness. And so it is that the stories of Cleopatra, Hypermnestra, and Thisbe are radically different from one another: different focuses, different tenors, different styles. The Legend of Cleopatra seems determined to demonstrate Cleopatra's equality with Antony and, ultimately, her disruption of categories designed to bind her. The Legend of Hypermnestra fulfills this disruption in a different way, subverting the male order of things by turning the very loyalty expected of her against her father in favor of her husband. The overriding concern in The Legend of Thisbe in the link between language and burgeoning sexual appetite.

**Queen Cleopatra**

The God of Love directs the narrator to tell about faithful women and Alceste orders "goode wommen" and "false men"; that the God of Love then directs him to start with Cleopatra's story, in which Antony can hardly be considered
a "false" man, reveals the contradictory nature of the project. The narrator, beginning his story with no invocation, suggests the equality of the rule between Ptolemy and Cleopatra:

After the deth of Tholome the kyng,
That al Egipt hadde in his governyng,
Regned his queene Cleopataras (580-82).

The syntax of these first lines suggests, in fact, that whereas Ptolemy was ruled by Egypt, Cleopatra decidedly "regned": the syntactical emphasis on "Egipt hadde" detracts from the logic of the sentence in which we understand "hadde Egipt." Moreover, the placement of the strong verb "regned" as opposed to the more diffuse and syntactically inferior "hadde in his governyng" underscores Cleopatra's importance in their co-rule and in her survival after his death.₁³

Others have pointed out that more lines are devoted to Antony than to Cleopatra, but if we look at the content of those lines, we can see that the narrator's excessive description is a way to undermine Antony's importance. When we compare the effects of love on the two lovers, it is easier to see the contrast which privileges a cool head and brevity. Antony loses control:

But love hadde brought this man in swich a rage
And hym so narwe bounden in his las,
Al for the love of Cleopataras,
That al the world he sette at no value.
Hym thoughte there nas nothyng to hym so due
As Cleopatras for to love and serve;
Hym roughte nat in armes for to sterve
In the defence of hyre and of hire ryght

(599-606).
Cleopatra takes the emotions in stride:

This noble queene ek lovede so this knyght,
Though his desert, and for his chyvalrye
(607-08).

The abbreviated lines of Cleopatra are in fact a way to point up the exaggeration of Antony’s portrayal and to make her the focus of attention. "Though his desert" is a nice touch as it proclaims Cleopatra’s love to be adequate to Antony’s worthiness, to what he deserves—no more and no less. There is a humorous conciseness as well as a contradiction of the sources concerning Antony and Cleopatra when the narrator contrasts Antony’s excess with Cleopatra’s exactness. 14

Similarly, the narrator chooses to use four qualified lines to describe Antony’s worthiness:

As certeynly, but if that bokes lye,
He was, of persone and of gentillesse,
And of discretion and hardynesse,
Worthi to any wyght that liven may (609-12).

The syntax of these lines reveals an effort to distance the narrator from the claim of Antony’s worthiness and an equal effort to distance Antony himself from the report: two prepositional phrases separate "He" from "worthi" and the entire clause is preceded by a negative subjunctive. The explicit meaning of "But if that bokes lye" is "if they do not lie, and of course they do not"; yet the syntax of the words suggests that they do lie occasionally and this may be one of those times. Additionally, the comparison of
Antony's worthiness—"to any wyght that liven may"—is a generalized formula that cannot address this particular person; it is used to describe the Knight in the Tales with much the same equivocation. This formula is interchangeable with any other, as Antony is interchangeable with any other "knyght." Perhaps Antony is worthy and perhaps he is not.

The narrator contrasts this complex moral statement by asserting simply that Cleopatra is "as fayr as is the rose in May" (613). Obviously this description is a misrepresentation in two ways: first, this statement of physical comeliness has nothing to do with worthiness, with the abstract qualities of a person as the preceding lines do concerning Antony. Secondly, Cleopatra is not "fair as a rose" by any stretch of the imagination; the courtly conventional phrase cannot embrace the physical description (or the experience) of this mature Egyptian woman. There is a sense in which this conventional phrase, its rhetorical blandness, signals that the terms mean, essentially, nothing. Yet the phrase signifies something by its inadequacy. Throughout the legends, the narrator discovers that conventional phrases and easy formulas do not hold the necessary power to distinguish people, to separate out the units composing a category. These categories of worthiness and beauty cannot hold up to the most casual scrutiny, let alone add up to a representation of human being.

The narrator's simple assertion that "This noble queene
"ek lovede so this knyght" is an intriguing assertion of Antony's and Cleopatra's equality, of their power in loving: the extensive description of Antony's love is matched by "ek lovede so" which suggests Cleopatra's similar love for Antony. At the same time, the brevity of the phrase distinguishes her love from his, her style of love from his, perhaps her strength from his. After all, love does not bring her "in swich a rage," forcing her to lose control.15 Additionally, the phrase "She wax his wif, and hadde hym at hire leste" (615) suggests Cleopatra's dominance in the relationship. Literally, she "became" his wife, but "wax" is from the Old English wexen, to grow, which, when conjoined with "hadde hym as hire leste" suggests her domination of the relationship, her energetic and erotic volatility.

The narrator's excuse for skipping the wedding feast is that he has more important "effects" to describe, that those details would not "add up" to any new understanding of this story or his purpose. The details of the battle unlike those of the feast, allow the narrator to point up the circumstances which allow Cleopatra to "act as a man" might and Antony to become "feminized"--thus, to break down and rebuild the categories of male and female behavior.16 Why then does he "digress" into the sea battle? Octavius is intent on Antony's "destruccioun" (626) and yet the moment of their battle is conveyed as chance: "And in the se it
happede hem to mete" (634). Although the battle itself is filled with the particulars of warfare, the result is a generality, "at the laste, as every thyng hath ende . . . ." (651), that works as well with the kind of impassioned love which makes Antony "so narwe bounden" (600). This is not to appropriate the sea battle as an "allegory" for the complexity of love, but to suggest that the narrator reveals the intimate connection of all human experience—love and war. Anyone can win or lose at either "game," and the narrator stresses the randomness of life's experiences. The juxtaposition of love and war is further underscored by Antony's action. When he is "schent" (ruined) and the queen flees (although the narrator excuses her by stressing: "For strokes, which that wente as thikke as hayl, / No wonder was she myghte it nat endure"), Antony mourns, "My worshipe in this day thus have I lorn" (659) in which "worshipe" means either his honor or the woman he loves/worships or both. Antony's paradox is evident, for his personal honor is weakened by his suicide and his worship of the woman he loves is the reason his personal honor is at stake.

Although Antony is initially sent "To conqueren regnes and honour . . . / To han the world at [Rome's] obesaunce" (585, 587), it is Cleopatra who conquers "the world" by creating Antony's burial place, ensconcing him safely where she wants him, and staging her own suicide with powerful elaborateness and artfulness. She uses her naked body to
write the text of her death and its interpretation: 18 

And there she ches to have hire buryinge . . .
And she hire deeth receveth with good cheere . . .
For love of Antony that was hire so dere
(698, 700-701, my emphasis).

Although critics have maligned the Cleopatra character, Chaucer rewrites her story from a perspective of non-gendered power. 19 Through the randomness of life's experiences she sails triumphantly to an end she desires and designs, disrupting the categories within which the narrator ostensibly places her. The disruption, then, is in part due to the narrator's manipulation, but it is primarily due to the unboundedness of Cleopatra herself.

Like the Legend of Cleopatra, the first and perhaps oddest candidate for a story of a "good woman," The Legend of Hypermnestra, the last in the series Chaucer presents, breaks through the boundaries of good and bad also, in ways which serve to show how those categories cannot contain life's experiences. Hypermnestra, despite the implicit injunction to "be good" and uphold the values of the patriarchal society in which she lives, steels her resolve and subverts the male order of things.

**Steely Hypermnestra**

The Legend of Hypermnestra begins with the image of a community of men which harkens back to the Aeneas icon, a community of men who will direct the lives of its wives and daughters:
In Greece whilom were brethren two,
Of whiche that oon was called Danao,
That many a sone hath of his body wonne,
As swiche false lovers ofte conne.
Among his sones alle there was oon
That aldermost he lovede of everychoon.
And whan this child was born, this Danao
Shop hym a name and callede hym Lyno.
That other brother called was Egiste,
That was of love as fals as evere hym list, and
And many a daughter gat he in his lyf;
Of whiche he gat upon his ryghte wyf
A daughter dere, and dide hire for to calle
Ypermystra, yongeste of hem alle (2562-75).

Yet the narrator immediately challenges that community with
the self-willed, moral Hypermnestra. The emphasis from the
beginning is on Hypermnestra’s personal attributes, those
qualities which particularize her:

To all thewes goode yborn was she,
As likede to the goddes er she was born,
That of the shef she sholde be the corn
(2576-78). 20

The nonsensical astrology (2584-2599), meant to describe
Hypermnestra’s absence of control over her life, can hardly
undo the emphasis on "thewes." 21 This is the only story in
which the woman’s "destiny" is supposedly responsible for
the resulting actions. Yet one suspects that Chaucer
expects his readers not to have too much faith in this
particular conjunction of planets, demanding that we
question the validity of the categorical response to
Hypermnestra’s situation. Her situation is unique not
because of the conjunction of the planets and stars at her
birth, but because of the human demands and challenges she
faces.
This is not the story of a betrayed and passive woman whose life is only a reflection of traditional standards, or whose destiny is created solely by her heritage. Chaucer redirects the focus in Hypermnestra's story to her subversion of male order. The scene between Hypermnestra and her father (Aegyptus's speech was added to the source material by Chaucer) is fraught with the consequences—to both subject and object—of trafficking in women. After her marriage, Hypermnestra owes allegiance to both males and it is obvious that her father recognizes that his authority must be reinforced. His constant referral to the hierarchy of their relationship serves not only to remind Hypermnestra, but to assure himself that she will obey. The status of his authority here is in question if the structure of his speech, filled as it is with "assurances," is any indication:

'My ryghte doghter, tresor of myn herte ...
So nygh my herte nevere thynge ne com
As thow, myn Ypermystre, doghter dere.
Take hed what I, thy fader, seye the here,
And werke after thy wiser evere mo'

(2628, 2631-34, my emphasis).

Even when the possessive adjectives refer to Aegyptus' person, they serve to strengthen his tie to Hypermnestra—that she is merely an extension of his body—and the endearments ("tresor," "dere") work like honey to stick her to him. After reminding Hypermnestra of the hierarchy, Aegyptus flatters her. But flattery is insubstantial within a system
of patriarchial power; it serves to repress her by making her acquiescence a condition of being the loved daughter:

'For alderfirst, doghter, I love the so
That al the world to me nis half so lef;
Ne I nolde rede the to thy myschef
For all the good under the colde moone'

(2635-38).

In order to assure that the flattery has not undermined his authority, he ends by threatening her life and womanhood:

'And what I mene, it shal be seyd right sone,
With protestacioun, as in this wyse,
That, but thow do as I shal the devyse,
Thow shalt be ded, by hym that al hath wrought!
At shorte wordes, thow ne scapest nought
Out of my paleys or that thow be ded,
But thow consente and werke after my red;
Tak this to thee for ful conclusioun'

(2639-46).

The irony—in its own way, a kind of subversion—in this speech derives from his inability actually to articulate the fearsome end that must come to his daughter if she disobeys him: six parenthetical phrases precede his death threat.

Hypermnestra answers that she is bound to do his will "so it to me be no confusioun" (2652), an answer which, in its duplicity, seems to befuddle her father. Does Hypermnestra mean "as long as it is not morally repulsive or offensive" (with the emphasis on her moral qualities, her "thewes")? Or does she mean "as long as your request does not "confuse"/invert the hierarchical order"? Her father’s cryptic "I nele . . . have non exceptioun" confirms his fear of losing authority and his sense that her answer can have two meanings, and that both meanings assert her ability to
take control of the situation if it is not acceptable to her.

The peculiar thing about this story is the almost total lack of romance, love interest, sexual interest: unlike the other legends, in which sexual and romantic passion are the ostensible "reasons" for the women's devastation, those matters hardly play here. Consequently, there can be no "betrayal" in the sense that the God of Love and Alcestis mean it where there is no compelling interest. The marriage is arranged between the men and this has its implications which I would not want to dismiss, but Hypermnestra is no more coerced than Lynceus:

\[
\text{It lyked the fathers to make a manage} \\
\text{Bytwixen Ypermstre and hym Lyno,} \\
\text{And casten swich a day it shal be so,} \\
\text{And ful accorded was it utterly;} \\
\text{The aray is wrought, the tyme is fast by (2603-07, my emphasis).}
\]

The syntax of the next two lines underscores the distanced arrangement, the emotionless, but dangerous, triangle of fathers, son and daughter: "And thus Lyno hath of his faders brother/ The doghter wedded, and ech of hem hath other" (2608-09).

If we were to extend Hansen's argument, we would probably suggest that Lynceus is "feminized" by his sexual encounter with Hypermnestra, and is therefore so weakened that he must run away; but I suggest that through the intimacy, Lynceus learns what he needs in order to live, and Hypermnestra is strengthened by the marriage consummation.
She is able to resist the patriarchal system which orders her to kill her husband. It is her role as wife and its demands, and her willingness to fill that role, which empowers her and overpowers the other forces. Although, as I mentioned, there seems little romance in this legend, Hypermnestra has obviously decided Lynceus will benefit from whatever strength she has and that she will maintain her "wifly honeste" by protecting him. Since, in this system, her reputation is all she has, she must use her strength to hold onto it. She "tenderly" weeps and holds him in her arms before waking him (2705-06). Her reasoning takes in her new role as wife and the narrator never suggests that she regrets having helped him. In fact, her words indicate that she did not expect to go with him: "He shal awake, and ryse, and gon his way . . . " (2704). The astrological conjunction which foresaw her destiny--"That Ypermystra dar nat handle a knyf/ In malyce, though she shulde lese hire lyf" (2595)--is somewhat altered by her self-will: she does not cut Lynceus' throat, but neither must she in order to defend herself, nor does her neglect lead to her death. Chaucer's story does not end with her death, but her imprisonment.

Her private speech about why she cannot kill Lynceus is a mixture of practicality ("And shal I have my throte korve a-two" [2695]), belief in the signs at her birth, her inversion of the hierarchical order, and, most importantly,
her belief in her womanhood:

'Allas! and shal myne hondes blody be?
I am a mayde, and, as by my nature,
And bi my semblaunt and by my vesture,
Myne handes ben nat shapen for a knyf,
As for to reve no man fro his lyf.
What devel have I with the knyf to do? . . .'
(2689-94).

Hypermnestra's imprisonment is troublesome for feminist readers of this text, but I suggest that we also keep in mind her attempts to subvert the male order of things by assertion of her womanhood and her, at least partial, achievement in this attempt.

Hypermnestra's physical imprisonment reflects her inevitable imprisonment in a system which praises passive women and seeks to keep them passive through suppression of physical and sexual desires. The Legend of Thisbe describes an imprisonment composed of not merely the consequences of sexual emergence, but also the language of love which is used in place of the acts of love and sex.

**Thisbe Grown Up**

The Legend of Thisbe is one more anomalous story in a poem structured around anomaly because it belies every principle one expects of it given the God of Love's directive and Alceste's amendment. Thisbe is neither "good" nor "bad"--she is an adolescent with emerging sexual drives, as my analysis of the text will suggest. Yet this quality cannot be categorized in handy ways. Similarly,
Pyramus is not glaringly "unfaithful" to Thisbe. He is a confused adolescent uncertain of his sexual drives and, as I shall further suggest, more interested in (or--more accurately--comfortable with) the languages of love and sex than their acts. My sense is that conceptions about intimacy and sexuality are closely tied to the lovers' use of language. I do not mean here something even as complex or intricate as syntactical manipulations or rhetorical flourishes. Simply, it seems that speech often replaces activity in this story.

The first speech which replaces activity is the gossip of the neighbors, the report of Pyramus's and Thisbe's love which seems, throughout the story, to represent their love without being their love.

The name of everych gan to other sprynge
By women that were neighebores aboute ....
And thus by report was hire name yshove
That, as they wex in age, wex here love
(719-20, 726-27).

The syntax here suggests that the talk of their love came before the act of it--that Pyramus and Thisbe grow in love because they grow up. The speech about their actions always comes before their actions. Additionally, the denial of assent--that is, speech of approval--supposedly increases their love, but what we hear is that it increases their speech of their desire: "But pryvyly som tyme yet they mette/ By sleyghte, and spoken some of here desyr" (733-34, emphasis mine).
The words they speak to and through the wall are a substitute for activity: it becomes clear that they can meet outside their enclosed yards if they so desire. Besides acting as a conduit for their words, the wall is the dominant representation of the safety of their enclosure. When they leave its presence, its absence signals both the opportunities of space and the dangers of isolation. And although the wall represents societal restraint between sexually emerging adolescents, that restraint is more a linguistic and moral one than a physical one. The paradox of the wall is that its physical presence is both comforting and threatening in ways which are non-physical. The love words are spoken as confessional words:

And with a soun as softe as any shryfte,  
They lethe here wordes though the clifte pace,  
And tolden, whil that they stode in the place,  
Al here compleynt of love and al here wo,  
At every tyme whan they durste so (745-49).

In some sense this suggestion of confessional style is typical of romance narrative in which the lover "confesses" as a sinner to his priest(ess), the female lover. What strikes me as unusual in Pyramus's and Thisbe's confession is their belief in its sufficiency. The spacing out of words, the "swote soun" of one another's voice, is both a release of sexual energy and its containment. The soft confessional words deceive their guardians and simultaneously keep their fiery love stoked. In all of this, the wall is the transmitter of their words, the text
itself.

Pyramus's precipitate arrival at the wall on the fateful day suggests his eagerness for engagement with this particular text, the wall. Does it also suggest that he is more eager when no physical contact is possible? He seems an ardent lover within this enclosed (but also separate) space, wishing (with Thisbe) that the wall would fall or allow them to kiss, or at least allow their meeting (758-61). They unreservedly kiss the wall in place of kissing one another (768).28 Yet Pyramus is late to what would be their first physical meeting--perhaps a sign he fears the connection between language and its physical consequences. For Pyramus, text and physicality are two distinct realms.

Their agreement to meet at a particular place is a result of their knowledge that "the feldes ben so brode and wide" (782). Their reluctance to be in wide-open spaces, their propensity for enclosed or close spaces (their meeting place is a tomb, after all), reflects not only a fear of the big broad grown-up world where sexual adventure has physical consequences, but a desire/need for places in which physical action can be circumscribed by the past (Ninus's tomb recalls Babylon's walls, Troy's walls) and by language. Once beyond the wall's physical restraint and the conventional community restraint/repression it represents, there is a potential for sexual union which seems to empower Thisbe and frighten Pyramus.
Thisbe appears ready for the move from the innocence allowed by language to sexual intimacy and awareness. Her early arrival at the well by Ninus's tomb has signified to some her premature sexuality; but her innocent eagerness and timely arrival---"That whan she say hire tyme myghte be" (795)---seems to me a healthy sign of movement away from the static world of linguistic maneuvers into feminine assertion. Not surprisingly, Thisbe is eager to see Pyramus because they have never seen one another.

Thisbe's wordless encounter with the lioness is a test of her new feminine maturity. It demands action of an elemental/fundamental order and Thisbe reacts with sensible and life-serving measures by hiding in the cave. Moreover, the conjunction of the wild lioness, the bloodied veil, and the bright, unashamed moon (mentioned twice: 812, 825) reflects Thisbe's new sexuality. When she ventures out of the dark cave, not knowing whether the lioness has gone, she combines her new-found sense of action with her former propensity for linguistic analysis:

And out she cometh and after hym gan espien,
Bothe with hire herte and with hire yen,
And thoughte, "I wol hym tellen of my drede,
Both of the lyonesse and al my deede" (858-61).

When she finds him, she weeps and holds him, kisses and talks to him, urging him to talk to her---"O spek, my Piramus!" (880)---recognizing both his inability to act and her right to possess him (her second use of "my"). The narrator at this point gives with one hand and takes away
with the other by declaring that "Tysbe ryst up withouten noyse or bost . . ." (887) which seems to indicate her resolve to act without use of language; yet the narrator then gives her long speech which weakens her new-found abilities. Still, her announcement that she can reveal a woman’s ability to be "trew in lovynge" by taking her own life is far different than Pyramus’s self-indulgent rhetoric.

Pyramus’s late arrival on the scene is a revealing contrast to Thisbe’s arrival: his discovery of the wimple brings forth a torrent of words and no sensible action. He believes that his "bidding" (used twice: 837, 838), his words, are responsible for Thisbe’s death: he believes that he has slain her. This sense, combined with his apprehension that the beast is the male of the species (842-44), suggests that Pyramus is reacting primarily to a singularly male threat to his ego and his possession, not to his love for Thisbe. He speaks too as if a male has despoiled Thisbe before he himself had the chance (or the nerve?). His nearly masturbatory reaction to the wimple (on which is what he imagines to be Thisbe’s virgin blood) demonstrates his preference to interact with an inanimate object over interaction with a woman. Why does he not look for her body? Why does he not speak to her rather than to the wimple? Although Pyramus kills himself more in disgust at his inability to protect Thisbe (who ironically does not
need his protection), I suggest his suicide is also a 
dramatic reaction to his sexual misgivings. Thisbe’s 
subsequent action is self-confident and sure-handed:

Thanne spak she thus: "My woful hand," quod she, 
"Is strong ynoch in swich a werk to me . . ."
(890-91).

However "feminized" Pyramus is, though, he is not unfaithful 
to Thisbe and this legend as well as Cleopatra’s and 
Hypermnestra’s simply does not fit the God of Love’s 
directive. It is not simply that Pyramus is, paradoxically, 
unfaithful (by his inclusion in stories which are supposed 
to depict unfaithful men) and faithful (according to the 
narrator and certainly to a reader who follows the events of 
the tale); he lives and dies in the happenstance world of 
experience. Thisbe’s actions can be interpreted either in a 
favorable light (or an ironic/unfavorable one), but the 
prevailing sense is her place in a world in which all is 
random and categories are destroyed by the experiences one 
lives.

There may be some question about the efficacy of 
placing these three legends in a single chapter. My primary 
defense of this grouping lies in my thesis that the stories 
are radically different from one another in order to 
undermine categories of gendered behavior. Whatever else we 
can say about these three tales, they resist any critical 
attempt to make them similar or to find common "themes" or
structures; their very anomaly is a manifestation of the vast tissue of experience which undermines categories, which attempts to disgender texts that seem outwardly to fulfill traditional gender structures.
Notes

1 My thesis is enhanced, perhaps, by Claire Nouvet’s suggestion at a recent symposium that the woman or the body of the woman disrupts polarity—even the polarity of male-female (closing remarks, "Writing Women, Women Writing: Gender and Text in the Middle Ages." Symposium sponsored by The Medieval Studies Seminar and the Faculty Feminist Reading Group of the Center for Cultural Studies at Rice University, Jan. 26, 1991).

2 For example, see Introduction, Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writings: Essays in Feminist Contextual Criticism, ed. Sheila Fisher and Janet Halley (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1989) 1-17.

3 In The Legend of Lucrece, Chaucer goes farther afield to suggest the destruction of women through the images of war; yet this military situation directly recalls Aeneas’ flight from the Trojan War and the situation in Troilus and Crisyde.

4 For a cogent, articulate, and, ultimately, sobering, argument of this destructive phenomenon in "modern" terms, see Dorothy Dinnerstein, The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise (NY: Harper & Row, 1977).

5 Donald Rowe, Through Nature to Eternity (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1988), suggests that the Legends are a "dramatization of the order of justice" (87).


says, "Chaucer's powerful women--although they passionately surrender their positions of political influence--move to validate their passions within the structure of marriage . . ." (229) I suggest that the marriages the characters make are both psychologically and politically expedient.

9 Sheila Delany, "'The Naked Text': Chaucer's 'Thisbe,' the Ovide Moralisé, and the Problem of Translatio Studii in the Legend of Good Women," Mediaevalia 13 (1987): 275-94, gives the God of Love more credit than I am able to: "In the Legend of Good Women, the God of Love, like any bureaucrat, is concerned to discipline subversives so that his own influence may survive" (289).

10 The God of Love's criticism of the poet's translation of the Roman de la Rose is complicated for modern readers by the inchoate nature of the translation. The problem of the authorship of the Romaunt of the Rose is compounded by its absence in the list of works in the Retraction. We simply do not know what or how much Chaucer actually translated of the 22,000 line French poem. It is generally agreed that he translated what is called Fragment A, a section consisting of, for the most part, praise for love. To take "seriously" the God of Love's condemnation of the translation is to recognize that the God of Love has not read the work itself. F. N. M. Diekstra, "Chaucer and the Romance of the Rose," English Studies 69 (1988): 12-describes similarities between the Roman's God of Love and Chaucer's character, similarities which would suggest that Chaucer is turning the tables on his God of Love in the Legend. See Benson 685-86, 1103-04. An early comparison of Chaucer's work and the French poem is by Dean S. Fansler, Chaucer and the Roman de La Rose (NY: Columbia UP, 1914). Significantly, very little recent criticism is directed at the Romaunt or at its similarities and differences to the Roman. Caroline Eckhardt, "The Art of Translation in the Romaunt of the Rose," Studies in the Age of Chaucer 6 (1984): 41-63, attempts to assess the "quality of the A Fragment as a literary translation" (44). She suggests that "the Romaunt in many ways remains essentially the same old (new) song as the Roman . . . because . . . Chaucer as translator wanted to achieve exactly that effect . . ." (61). This final suggestion is intriguing because my exploration of the individual legends suggests something of the same idea--that Chaucer seeks a melding of both old and new without giving up either.

11 The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer,
12 Perhaps Chaucer starts with Cleopatra as a kind of parody of Ovid's *Heroides*. Ovid says that he has been ordered to write of Augustus Caesar's war with Cleopatra and Antony, but Cupid draws him away to write of the forlorn ladies.

There is no single, verifiable source of Chaucer's story; Robert Worth Frank, *Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1972), says that Chaucer "launch[ed] her on her English career" (39). He suggests Plutarch, Florus's *Epitome Rerum Romanorum*, Orosius, Boccaccio's *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium* and *De Claris Mulieribus*, and Vincent Beauvais's *Speculum Historiale* (38). He notes further that Chaucer "had the sketchiest of narratives to work with . . ." (39).

Beverly Taylor, "The Medieval Cleopatra: The Classical and Medieval Tradition of Chaucer's Legend of Good Women," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 7 (1977): 249-69, provides a thorough background of the tradition of Cleopatra. She argues that "Chaucer has not written a serious praise of Cupid's saints in accordance with the terms of his imposed penance, but has instead delineated women--and men--whose lives testify to the destructive results of excessive passion. His choice of Cleopatra as the first figure considered establishes his ironic principle, and her story provides a context for evaluating each of the tales to follow" (250).

V. A. Kolve's important study, "From Cleopatra to Alcestes: An Iconographic Study of the Legend of Good Women," *Signs and Symbols in Chaucer's Poetry*, ed. John P. Hermann and John J. Burke, Jr. (University, AL: U of Alabama P, 1977) 130-78, argues that Chaucer got his vision of Cleopatra from paintings and manuscript illuminations of her.

See also Frank 37-46 and Benson 1065-66.

13 Taylor notes that Cleopatra was depicted as "a woman who seduced and dominated Antony, who opposed the Roman Empire and especially Octavian Caesar" (251). She documents the depiction of Cleopatra through the Augustan Age to the 14th century as excessively lustful, greedy, cruel, traitorous and unscrupulous. Yet Chaucer ignores much of this background, choosing instead to focus on the equal rule of Antony and Cleopatra.

14 The sources are intent on keeping Cleopatra truly "other"--female, Eastern, pagan--but Chaucer stresses her abilities as ruler and lover. Cf. Carolyn Dinshaw,

15 A point Hansen uses to suggest Antony's feminization, "Feminization" 57-59.

16 John Fyler, Chaucer and Ovid (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979), takes a quite opposite view: "Yet this diversion of our attention is . . . opportune in another respect. Chaucer's haste in moving beyond Cleopatra's wedding is understandable, given the sinister undertones of 'hadde hym as hire leste' . . ." (101, my emphasis). Fyler's comment signals the discomfort critics have with powerful women who show up in places they are not expected.

17 There is a disturbing aspect to the making of Antony's shrine. After Cleopatra makes this beautiful shrine, she embalms "the cors" and puts it in the tomb. Antony's body is totally divested of soul: it is referred to as "cors" or "it" three times. Moreover, Cleopatra must stop three lines into her final speech to Antony's dead body to recall that "love" refers to Antony: "I mene yow, Antonius, my knyght" (684) in a gesture that appears more calculated to remind her not to forget than actually to remember.

18 Critics are often puzzled by the meaning of Cleopatra's nakedness as she prepares to die. Kolwe's explanation is Chaucer's familiarity with iconographic images of Cleopatra (see above, n9). Since it is such a startling, and for this text, unusual description, I suggest that it links her act with the literary "naked text" which underlies the Prologue's discussion. Without allegorizing Cleopatra out of existence, we might see her act of naked death as the text with no gloss, as something which cannot be glossed or explained--raw experience.

19 The women who give of themselves, either in sexual intercourse or in death, are figures of mastery and control whose actions and sacrifices result in victory for the hero but whose power is also threatening; that is, she is both life-giver and a potential death-giver. See, for example, Francesca Sautman, "Woman and Birth-and-Death-Giver in Folk Tradition: A Cross-Cultural Perspective," Women's Studies 12 (1986): 213-39.
20 This last line, although it literally means that of the lot of daughters, she would be most valuable, recalls the moment in the Prologue to the Legend when the narrator remarks on his responsibilities as a compiler:

For wel I wot that ye han her-biforn
Of makyng ropen, and lad awye the corn,
And I come after, glenyng here and there,
And am ful glad yf I may fynde an ere
Of any godly word that ye han left (73-77).

It also recalls the God of Love’s complaint that the narrator has written "the drayf of storyes, and forg[oten] the corn" (G 312), so that Hypermnestra’s qualities, her "thowes," are somehow tied in with the "naked text," the essence of authoritative stories.

The primary source for Hypermnestra’s story is Ovid’s Heroides 14, although Sanford B. Meech, "Chaucer and an Italian Translation of the Heroides," PMLA 45 (1930): 110-28, suggested that Chaucer worked not from the Latin, but from a translation. Frank notes that Skeat and Shannon thought Chaucer may have used Boccaccio’s De Genealogia Deorum 2.22 (Frank 157). See also Frank 156-68 and Benson 1074-75.

21 About the lines "That Ypermestra dar nat handle a knyf/ In malyce, though . . .," Fyler says that "astrology brings into sharp focus what the narrator imposes in a more subtle fashion on all his heroines: it takes away Hypermnestra’s noble exercise of will when she decides that the duties of a wife outweigh those of a daughter" (107). Fyler suggests that Hypermnestra’s decision is simply made for her. But as I will suggest, she runs and survives the complex hierarchial obstacle course which patriarchy sets for her.


23 The similarities to Criseyde’s situation are significant: Pandarus uses his familial relationship, and his power within the patriarchal system, to "convince" her to accept Troilus (II.228-259). Pandarus uses possessive adjectives to describe her attachment to him and endearments to both flatter and bind her. Most persuasively, and insidiously, he uses the formula in which the male family member expresses the "protection paradox": Pandarus claims
Criseyde is the one "That I best love, and lothest am to greve" (II.237). Pandarus' speech is no more than Aegyptus's kind of persuasion. Additionally, the narrator's assignment of the epithet "trewe as stel" (2582) may well be "proverbial," as the editors of the Benson edition label it, but it does not describe any other woman in the legends, and I believe it is used to call up Criseyde since it is most prominently used to describe her in the Prologue (F 334).

Dorothy Guerin, "Chaucer's Pathos: Three Variations," Chaucer Review 20 (1985): 91-112, makes a significant connection between the fathers' uses of first-person pronouns in the Physician's Tale and in Hypermnestra's story, noting that there is "[t]he same over-use of endearments, and a juxtaposition of loving words and brute force that borders on caricature" (106-107).

24 There is no legitimate sexual interest. There is, as both Carolyn Dinshaw, Chaucer's Sexual Poetics (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1989) and Hansen, "Feminization . . ." 62, point out, the threat of father-daughter rape/incest. Guerin merely acknowledges that the "focal point . . . is the confrontation between father and daughter" (105). If any man betrays Hypermnestra, it is her father.

25 The source for the bulk of Thisbe's story is Ovid's Metamorphoses 5.55-166, although both Meech, "Chaucer and the Ovide Moralisé," PMLA 46 (1931): 182-204, and Delany, "'The Naked Text' . . .," suggest the French translation of Ovid as direct sources. Delany, "Geoffrey of Monmouth and Chaucer's Legend of Good Women," Chaucer Review 22 (1988): 170-74, also suggests that Chaucer may have got the detail of Pyramus's "beating heels" from Monmouth. Frank suggests Chaucer may have noted Boccaccio's De Claris Mulieribus (49). See also Frank 47-56 and Benson 1067. For an example of the comparison of Thisbe's story to the sources, see James W. Spisak, "Chaucer's Pyramus and Thisbe," Chaucer Review 18 (1984): 204-10.

26 Kruger acknowledges the wall's role in this way: "But the wall of course serves not only to separate the lovers; it also provides them with an avenue of communication" (230).

27 Frank has a different interpretation—that the addition of this line to Ovid by Chaucer signals "The sacredness of the love and the innocence" (56).
28 For the sexual overtones of the lovers’ engagement with the wall, see Delany, "The Naked Text." and Delany, "The Logic of Obscenity in Chaucer’s Legend of Good Women," Florilegium 7 (1985): 189-205.

29 See Frank 54-56.

30 As Hansen notes, "Feminization." 58.
Chapter Four
What Difference Does Difference Make?:
The Particularities of the
Legends of Hypsipyle-Medea, Phyllis and Ariadne

In a quartet of stories, Chaucer approaches the
gendered text from yet another perspective by exploring the
ramifications of particular experience. In doing so, he
details the implications of gendering behavior from strict
categorical analyses. In the Legend of Hypsipyle and Medea,
the Legend of Ariadne, and the Legend of Phyllis, Chaucer
explores first how one man can behave differently (actually
be a different person) at different times and then how
people who may be predisposed to act alike, do not, in fact,
act alike. The stories of Hypsipyle-Jason and Medea-Jason
work out the particularities of individual experience by
juxtaposing Jason's behavior under different conditions.
The Ariadne-Theseus and Phyllis-Demophon pair of stories
work out the particularities of individual experience by
insisting on the similarity of two radically different
situations. This insistence and subsequent undermining
reveal women who are often assertive and interesting because
they are not faceless victims. In turn, their choices and
actions divest the male characters of any remarkable or
demonstrable action, thereby marginalizing the male
community.

The categories of faithless man and faithful women are
supposed to be illustrated by the close-knit stories of
Hypsipyle and Medea, but the categories are, in fact, subverted. The Legend of Hypsipyle and Medea is, on the face of it, a description of the way in which one man betrays two women. The narrator presents Jason as betraying similar women, as acting consistently as a betrayer, as operating under similar motivations and in similar ways, as gaining similar results by his actions. Jason is presented as a man whose character we can understand by examining the singular way in which he treats these two women. It would seem that the narrator links these stories in order to show how similar betrayal is—-for both the man and the women involved. Yet Chaucer’s purposeful juxtaposition of these stories undermines the very precept it is meant to exemplify.

Because the text demonstrates that one man can act very differently at various times in his life, that we cannot categorize even the "same" man if we have two experiences of him, our most basic belief that we can "know" an individual by examining his or her behavior is undermined. As Chaucer presses this sense of knowing, as he juxtaposes two moments of Jason’s behavior, we are forced to see that those moments are radically different from one another. Jason’s behavior on two separate occasions, and our experience of his behavior, will not hold up under the category "Jason."

Additionally, the category of "faithful woman" is fragmented by positioning the stories of these two women
together. Explicitly, the text suggests that the stories can be placed together because the women are merely faceless examples, identical victims. Implicitly, though, the juxtaposition belies their similarity. Just as Phyllis's attempt to identify herself with Ariadne fragments itself, the poet's sly comparison of Medea and Hypsipyle undoes his stated precept.

The structure of the Hypsipyle-Medea legend is misleading in modern editions because Robinson placed the currently used headings, Legend of Hypsipyle (between lines 1395-96) and Legend of Medea (between lines 1579-80), creating a division that the manuscripts do not support.¹ In Robinson's division, there is a twenty-seven line introductory section concerning Jason, 183 lines of Hypsipyle's story, followed by 99 lines of Medea's story. This division suggests unequal attention to each member of the triangle; however, the actual line numbers concerning each character are much more equal: Jason, 101 (1368-1461, 1580-88); Hypsipyle, 117 (1462-1579); Medea 99 (1589-1679). This line count is not merely an exercise; rather it demonstrates that the three characters are treated structurally similarly, and that their roles may have equal (if dissimilar) value.² This suggestion, in turn, forces us to consider each character individually.

The paradigm suggested in this introductory section is filled with various figures all of whom are reduced to
interchangeable game pieces. Jason is immediately located in the community of men as "Thow rote of false lovers . . . / Thow sly devourere and confusioun/ Of gentil wemen . . . " (1368-70). The narrator describes the false fox eating the capon as if it were a paradigm in which we could substitute Jason and his two wives. The paradigm can be filled with animals or with humans to the same result. As we shall see, however, a paradigm simply will not work for this duet of stories.³

Perhaps most interesting in this story is the eventual but decisive marginalization of Jason in a story ostensibly about him. The emphasis on the relationship between Jason and Hercules quickly overshadows Jason's role in the promised betrayal. The bonds between Jason and Hercules are sanctified by the patriarchal culture from which they arise. Even Pelleus's betrayal of Jason becomes a way to solidify the relationship of Jason and Hercules. Pelleus tells Jason to "chees what folk that thow wilt with the take" (1449) and, in the same breath, dares him to accept the challenge. It is understood that the challenge cannot be taken up without the help of (male) friends. The bonds, then, exist for at least two purposes: to hold men together, to strengthen sense of duty and honor, and, secondly, to hold a community (of men) together by expelling the troublesome male. In other words, Pelleus can challenge Jason to search for the Golden Fleece because of an
established system of proving one's honor that ultimately strengthens the male community. Jason's only named choice for male companionship (in Chaucer) is Hercules. The bond severed by Pelleus, kin and male, is re-knotted with the repetition of Jason's and Hercule's names in the following 100 lines.

They are placed together, joined with a preposition or the coordinating conjunction, "and," in four places from the time they board ship until after several days with Hypsipyle (1454, 1480, 1501, 1513-14). It is, therefore, surprising and significant when the narrator notes "And namely, most she spak with Ercules" (1519). Hercules has separated himself from the male community, or Hypsipyle has somehow forcefully separated him from that community, to talk with her. Has Hypsipyle disrupted the community of men or has Hercules acted in concert with the aims and goals of that community? There is a sense in which Hercules's and Jason's bond is strengthened by the act of deceiving a woman. The narrator's description of Hercules's and Hypsipyle's tête-à-tête ambiguously suggests both ideas:

To hym hire herte bar, he shulde be
Sad, wys, and trewe, of wordes avyse,
Withouten any other affeciuon
Of love, or evyl ymagynacioun (1520-23).

Hypsipyle "bares" her heart to this stranger, but we are not told what motivates her or what intention she has. It is as if the opportunity to speak with him automatically allows
her this revelation of soul, yet we do not know what she says. It is not that the content of her speech is unimportant, but that her heart's revelations make it possible for Jason and Hercules to act. As Hercules speaks about Jason, one tries to gauge Hypsipyle's reaction even though she is textually "absent." Moreover, the next phrases are meant to indicate Hercules's nature or what the narrator believes of Hercules's nature or what Hypsipyle believes. What do these lines mean? That he should have these qualities but does not, that she thought he had these qualities, that he seemed to have them, that he did, in fact, have them? Is the burden laid on Hypsipyle for being gullible or on Hercules for being deceptive? Why is this the only moment in which the narrator places Hercules alone? As soon as he has established an exchange between Hercules and Hypsipyle, the narrator notes that all Hercules did was talk about Jason: "This Ercules hath so this Jason preyed . . ." (1524). So that once again Jason and Hercules are joined, indeed, are incorporated into one another. It is not just that Hercules praises Jason, but that Jason is manifested by Hercules: the words Hercules speaks compose the character of "Jason." It is only after twenty lines of making Jason real that the narrator admits that Hercules and Jason cooked up a scheme to fool Hypsipyle.

Hansen suggests that Jason's "coyness" (1548), his
"feminization" (her word), is a result of heterosexual contact, that he is unmanned by the pursuit of a woman, that in order to "secure a more powerful woman's assistance . . . [Jason] is . . . forced, like any victim, to play up his weakness . . ." (60). I disagree, however, because he does not need, on any level, Hypsipyle's assistance: when the messenger meets him at the water's edge and offers his lady's "sucour," Jason replies ("mekely and stylle" [1491]) that

\[. . . us nedeth, trewely, 
Nothyng as now, but that we wery be,
And come for to pleye out of the se
Tyl that the wind be better in our weye'\]

(1493-96).

Do they need her solely to reaffirm their male bond? Unless Hypsipyle controls the sea and wind, she cannot be of much assistance. According to Chaucer's story, the Argonauts have not had an especially hard journey for which she can compensate. She cannot even further his quest for the Golden Fleece as Medea can. On the other hand, it seems fairly clear that Jason and Hercules are looking for a good time: note the use of "pleye" and the insistence on the plural pronouns "us" and "we." Indeed, the word "pleye" is twice used to describe Hypsipyle's actions; it seems she, too, is looking for fun.

Yet the narrator attributes more real action to Jason than can be substantiated, accusing Jason of perfidy at the beginning of the story:
Thow madest thy recleymyng and thy lures . . .
And thy wordes farced with pleasance
And of thy feyned trouthe and thy manere
With thyn obesaunce and humble cheere,
And with thy contrefeted peyne and wo.
There other false oon, thow failest two!
O, often swore thow that thow woldest dye
For love . . . (1371, 1373-79).

Allegedly, Jason devises lures for getting women: he stuffs his words with amusement, pretends faithfulness, falsifies his behavior, fakes his pain, swears oaths. Then he betrays them. Yet he is never this active or verbal in the stories that follow. The exceptions are few and have nothing or little to do with the women he betrays: he "undertok" the journey (1452); he "gan devyse" his ship (1453); he "seyled" (1462) and "aryvede" (1463); he "answerde mekely and stille" (1491) and so on. Even before contact with Hypsipyle, he is strangely divorced from active verbs. The subject and verb are sometimes separated by articles and prepositions; sometimes the subject (Jason) is implied, but absent; sometimes the action refers to both Jason and Hercules. After meeting Hypsipyle, both Jason and Hercules become objects of verbs and prepositions. She gets to know who they are not by speaking with them, but "by folk that in his shipes be" (1512). Jason is divested of most physical action.

Because of Jason's passivity, the attribution of motivation is somewhat pointless and weak.

And al this was compassed on the nyght
Bytwise hym Jason and this Hercules.
Of these two here was a shrewed lees,
To come to hous upon an innocent!
For to bedote this queen was here assent
(1543-47).

It may remind one of the attribution in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight when the Green Knight finally reveals himself as Bertilak and Morgan la Faye as the deus ex machina of the plot. Sheila Fisher argues that Morgan la Faye is marginalized by and subsumed under the patriarchy by the Gawain-poet’s tactic of announcing her complicity at the end and that complicity being summarily dismissed by Gawain.6 I sense the same maneuver in the narrator’s delayed and perfunctory discussion of the plot initiation, which seems to marginalize Jason and center Hercules and Hypsipyle. This is a destabilizing move in a story which is supposedly about Jason and his powerful falseness: "Thow rote of false lovers, Duc Jasoun" (1368).

The narrator’s claim that Jason and Hercules planned the deception of Hypsipyle is further thrown into question by Jason’s stated inaction:

    And Jason is as coy as is a mayde,
    He loketh pitously, but nought he sayde
(1548-49).

Indeed, Jason has not "sayde" a single word throughout the story. Even his marriage and procreative activities are circumscribed by prepositions: "Jason wedded was/ Unto this queen" (1559-60) and "Upon hire begat he children two" (1562). The few actions he takes at this point seem most direct and cruel:
. . . Jason wedded was
Unto this queen and tok of hir substaunce
What so hym leste unto his purveyaunce;
And upon hire begat he children two,
And drogh his sayl and saw hir nevere mo
(1559-63).

His "taking" of her "substance" for his own "provision" is an obvious double entendre for the sexual consummation of the marriage, but it suggests also the violent nature of the project. Jason physically takes her possessions for his future provisions, yet his use (or abuse) of her "substaunce," her essential being, for his own providence is little more than his reliance on her (female) qualities to keep him going. It may be that he took what he desired, but he took also what he needed. By acknowledging this need, we recognize that his actions are further marginalized.

The couplet ending this description collapses time, presumably to emphasize Jason’s betrayal: that immediately after the consummation, he took off. But of course, he did not. We can assume that he stayed with Hypsipyle long enough for her to become pregnant and bear two children. Though this narrator does not say so, Ovid has Hypsipyle claim twins and a two-year marriage (VI.121). We must assume in Chaucer’s version that Jason stays with her for a period of time, that they continue to have some semblance of marriage. Recognition of these possibilities undermines the narrator’s earlier efforts to paint Jason as a "love ‘em and leave ‘em kind of guy."

In her letter, Hypsipyle states that her children,
Jason's children, are identical to Jason except in one respect: they cannot deceive. Here Hypsipyle creates another link in the male community by invoking the collective infidelity that binds men together. She also prefigures Phyllis's observation that Demophon is exactly like Theseus, an observation that proves to be totally false. Even as Hypsipyle denies the betrayal connection between her children and Jason, she marks it out, she highlights it. In doing so, she locates Jason squarely within the broader community of men which the text has revealed. Out of Hypsipyle's letter, the narrator chooses to tell what Hypsipyle says about her children and Medea's children, choices that emphasize that betrayal is somehow "handed down." Yet the inherited ability to betray is undermined by the act of articulating likeness where there is vast difference.

Not only are Jason's actions in Medea's story unlike his actions in Hypsipyle's story, but he is not the same character. The juxtaposition of the two stories forces a distinction between the characters of Jason and Jason even as it insists on their equivalency. This distinction, however, is only the prelude to the divesture of his manhood as his actions and abilities are subsumed under Medea's direction so that he is once again marginalized, and her character is made anew.
The narrator signals that this story of Medea and Jason will be different from the other stories of the couple by stating his "theory of versions," or "how to tell a story":

As mater apetiteth forme alwey
And from forme into forme it passen may,
Or as a welle that were botomles,
Ryght so can false Jason have no pes (1582-85).

That is, a subject cannot be relayed without words; substance must have a form. The important thing about form, however, is that it can change. The substance of one form, one genre or type, can be appropriated and placed into another form. As I have suggested, though, the individual legends are not merely repetitive saints' lives into which the narrator simply places new names. As the text works itself out, it becomes clear that one paradigm cannot hold the various matter. Matter is not the words but the meaning, the sentence. The narrator is not lying about Medea or "white-washing" Medea in any sneaky way, but telling a version of Medea's story, a different point of view.

This is perhaps the only point in the Legend in which the narrator makes explicit his approach to the stories, his sense that they are not required to be the same old stories but can be acknowledged as versions of the same old stories. This definition comes in an analogy referring to Jason: that just as matter must find a form, so must Jason find another woman to betray. The definition of version then is also applicable to the Jason story/character. Indeed, it is this reference to Jason that intensifies the subtle and the not
so subtle shift in characterization of Jason from the *Legend of Hypsipyle* to the *Legend of Medea*. The narrator indiscriminately presents the Medea story as yet another example of Jason's pernicious nature, but the Jason presented here is not the Jason of Hypsipyle's story. Nor is Medea a characterless victim.

The seduction of Medea is actually initiated by her father who himself is enamored of Jason. The king forces Medea to entertain Jason:

> He made hire don to Jason companye  
> At mete, and sitte by hym in the halle (1601-02).

Her father here acts as procurer, setting himself in line with Pandarus and the Hercules of Hypsipyle's story. Incredibly, the handsome lurer of women—"that is of love devourer and dragoun" (1581)—must be brought to women by other men.10 His good looks take over, however, once he is seated by Medea and, in combination with Fortune, seem to overwhelm Medea: "She wax enamoured upon this man" (1610).

Yet her direct, no-nonsense speech belies the passivity implied by "wax enamoured." She sums up his situation, interpreting its peril as his need for her:

> 'Jason,' quod she, 'for ought I see or can,  
> As of this thyng the whiche ye ben aboute  
> Ye han youreself yput in moche doute.  
> For whoso wol this aventure acheve,  
> He may nat wel asterten, as I leve,  
> Withouten deth, but I his helpe be' (1611-16).

She goes on to declare her use to him:

> 'But natheles, it is my wylle,' quod she,
'To fortheren you so that ye shal nat die,  
   But turnen sound hom to youre Tessalye' (1617-19).

The prevalence of the first person pronoun and the emphasis on "my wylle" suggests a confident and assertive woman: no coy wallflower, she. Her ability to arrange and direct the near-military strategies of overcoming Jason's trials demonstrates sagacity. Medea is an acute engineer of the situation, reminding Jason that his life depends not on her whim but on her abilities. Moreover, they come to an agreement that his surety for her abilities will be marriage. That is, he agrees as much as she does; there is an equality to the arrangement which suggests that gender has little to do with the situation and power has everything to do with it. The "terme[s]" are set and Jason must take an oath to be true even as Medea must take an oath to keep him alive. When they "mette in-fere" (1643), the pact is sealed. Medea has successfully negotiated her own marriage--and with no mention of magic whatsoever. In fact, the narrator divests the story of all but one reference to Medea's famous magic (1650), making the success of her enterprise depend almost entirely on her ingenuity.

Significantly, the lovemaking in which they participate the night before Jason's trials both seals their covenant and imparts the knowledge of survival Jason requires. The scene has implications of quick sexual satisfaction and abandonment: "... and goth with hire to bedde;/ And on the
morwe upward he hym spedde" (1644-45) with the "bedde/spedde" rhyme as a kind of man-to-man joke. Yet the next few lines specify that the sexual intimacy has been beneficial to Jason because Medea orchestrated it so:

For she hath taught hym how he shal nat fayle
The fles to wynne and stynten his batayle;
And saved hym his lyf and his honour (1646-48).

There can be little doubt that Medea has charge of this situation and that Jason is, in some sense, only an instrument by which Medea claims power and recognition for her talents.

Medea’s control of her life extends to her willing departure from Colchos, and, in Chaucer’s version, "unwist of hire fader" (1653).

This is the mede of lovynge and guerdoun
That Medea receyved of Jasoun
Rght for hire trouthe and for hire kyndenesse,
That lovede hym beter than hireself, I gesse,
And lafte hire fader and hire herytage

(1662-66).

The narrator’s tone strikes me as disapproving of Medea’s actions at this point: that she leaves "hire fader and hire herytage" (1666) disturbs him, especially, it would seem, in conjunction with Medea’s "lov[yng] hym [Jason] beter than hireself" (1665). The narrator’s struggle with this situation is evident in his timid "I gesse" after his assurance that Medea acted out of an unselfish love. Yet what the narrator may be struggling with is the fact that Medea took on the traditionally male role of arranging and finalizing/approving the marriage. If her father had
arranged the marriage, she may still have left both father and country. It is not her desertion which is problematic, but her mastery of events. The narrator seems somewhat scandalized by her behavior even as he must praise "hire trouthe and . . . hire kyndenesse" (1664). What may be more troublesome for feminist readers of Medea's story, however, is recognizing Medea's complicity in her own trafficking.

Medea's story is one of the few that end with a portion of a letter. In this version, the letter is a painful denunciation of her own desires that, in some sense, is not supported by the story which came before. We never see Medea out of control, swept away by Jason's looks or behavior, so the letter is something of an anomaly. However, I do not believe that we should think of the letter as having been pasted on to Chaucer's version, but as the narrator's compensation to the men in his audience. By means of the letter, he can give his audience the weak and faithful woman who simply would not appear in his story proper.

There are two main points to be made, then, about the legends of Hypsipyle and Medea. First, the marginalization of Jason in these stories undermines any implicit intent to focus on the male and his power. Despite Hansen's eloquent argument for the focus on a feminized Jason (among other male characters), and Frank's well-structured insistence on
the narrator's focus on Jason, I suggest that Jason is, finally, not the center of attention, perhaps not even enough to be unmanned. The text undermines the narrator's proclamations of Jason's power and charisma by separating Jason from any decisive action or verbal activity. Ultimately, this separation even calls into question the structure and efficacy of a male community. Further, the focus on Hypsipyle's and Medea's actions is so much more vivid and aggressive than the focus on Jason that we are forced to "ungender" their actions and interpret them more fully.

Second, the depiction of Jason in two different places, at different times, in different situations points up the particularity of experience. The only similarity between these two Jasons is his departures, and even those acts of departure are different from one another. By juxtaposing two experiences of Jason, the narrator forces us to distinguish between the characters, to particularize them, which ultimately undermines the project of categorization. Moreover, the contiguity of Hypsipyle and Medea calls into question the very precept it was meant to prove. They are no more alike than Criseyde and Alceste or May and Griselda; the juxtaposition fragments the category of "faithful women" by particularizing their characters.

As if to drive home this nominalist vision, Chaucer
tries again with the physically separated stories of Ariadne-Theseus and Phyllis-Demophon in which he insists on
the likeness (the exact likeness) of Theseus and Demophon only to demonstrate, at each point of similarity, how
different the two characters are. He has Phyllis insist on
the similarity of her situation to Ariadne’s only to
underscore their obvious differences. Chaucer displays an
obsession with analytical observation that is the
underpinning of his entire project.

The narrator’s explicit intention in the Legend of
Phyllis is, "By preve as wel as by autorite," to prove that
wicked men have wickedness in their genes and cannot be
anything but wicked; that is, that they are part of the same
community of men. He will do this, ultimately, by
comparing Demophon to Theseus from the Legend of Ariadne.

The authority of the stories maintains this fact of
wickedness, and the narrator will prove it by telling yet
another story or yet another version of a story. Although
his project sounds two-fold—to prove by experience and by
authority—in this case, the argument is circular. The
"proof" is authoritative and is, by its very nature, a
generalized notion of experience rather than attendance to
the particulars. The narrator’s intention is undermined by
the very "ensaumple" he chooses. His insistence on the
similarity between Demophon and Theseus, and between Phyllis
and Ariadne, underscores the difficulties inherent in
generalizing behavior, in categorizing events. At each point that the narrator claims Demophon is like Theseus, the text undermines the similarity. The situation with Phyllis is as different from Ariadne’s as it could be; the illusion of similarity and the claim of similarity seem to make it so. The ten-line introduction sets up the "rule" of similarity which the text then dismantles.

The beginning of the Legend of Phyllis makes explicit the narrator’s interest in similarity and the text’s undermining of that attempt to assimilate all particularity into one generalization. The narrator wishes

To tellen yow of false Demophon
In love a falser herde I non (2398-99)

which appears to be a description of a particular person and experience. And, although the narrator quickly absorbs Demophon into the experience we have already had of Theseus:

In love a falser herde I non,
But if it were his fader Theseus (2399-2400),
the text continually undermines this project. Even in these first lines, as the narrator joins Demophon and Theseus by virtue of their familial connection and modes of false loving, the conjunction is sundered by the prayer he proposes for women:

‘God, for his grace, fro swich oon kepe us!’
Thus may these women preyen that it here (2401-02),

for the prayer itself particularizes the two different men into "oon" man. The vacillation between the general and the
particular seems to be a result of the effort to meld two candidates for "most treacherous man" into one and the consequent breakdown of that effort. The simple exercise of comparing Theseus's and Demophon's activity (and inactivity), of reading Phyllis's legend and Ariadne's legend closely, will reveal the continual undermining of the narrator's attempts to generalize about behavior and relationships.

The structure of the story itself, beginning with Demophon's unplanned sea wandering and spontaneous landing on Thrace's shores, belies any similarity to the events in Theseus's life. Like Demophon's ill fortune of getting caught in a storm and his directionless "seylynge in the se" (2405-30), Theseus's bad luck in being chosen to be devoured by the Minotaur underscores the randomness of events, the inability to order life as we might like. At the same time, however, the particularities of the situations undermine the generalizations of likeness. The narrator's despair over Demophon's situation--"So derk it was, he coude nowher go"--emphasizes the sharp reversal of events that dominates human experience, juxtaposed as it is with "And [the sea] maden hym upon a lond to falle,/ Wherof that Phillis lady was and queene" (2423-24). The particularity of this digression, of human experience, in fact, is a tie to other stories and other events. For example, Troilus undergoes this directionless wandering only to wind up beached on the
shores of Crisyde's image: "This Troilus, as he was wont to
gide/ His yonge knyghtes, lad hem up and down/ In thilke
large temple on every side . . . / Now here, now there . . .
. . " (I.183-85, 187). Yet it is unlike Theseus's experience
which is, in a sense, "planned for" by the tradition of
casting lots. In addition, the phrase describing Demophon's
situation--"so derk it was, he coude nowher go"--is in
direct opposition to Theseus's eventual location as
described by Phaedra: "a place/ That nys nat derk, and hath
roum eek and space . . . ." (1999). Demophon's experience
reminds us that Theseus not only did not endure this
wandering, but was led to his situation: "And forth is lad
this woful yonge knyght/ Unto the court of king Mynos ful
ryght,/ And into a prysoun, fetered, cast is he . . . ." (1948-50). The narrator has undermined the similarity from
the beginning by narrating a lengthy introduction which
contextualizes Theseus's experience in a way that he does
not for Demophon's experience.

Once Demophon is in Thrace, his actions never suggest
that his conduct is traitorous even though the narrator
continues to compare him to Theseus. Demophon's physical
likeness to Theseus is noticed by the inhabitants of the
town and is not, initially, a reason to mistrust him:

Whan he may walke, hym thought it was the beste
Unto the court to seken for socour.
Men knewen hym wel and diden hym honour;
For of Athenes duk and lord was he,
As Theseus his fader hadde be,
That in his tyme was of gret renoun,
No man so gret in al the regyoun . . .
(2439-45, my emphasis)
The inhabitants of Thrace honor him because he is Theseus's son. It is only after this inherited honor is noted, an honor which has to do with regal lineage, that the narrator points out Demophon's "falseness in loving." This acknowledgement occurs before Demophon has met Phyllis, and the narrator has pointed out all along that Demophon has been shipwrecked on the shore; that is, he has not chosen to come to Thrace to betray Phyllis. Moreover, the personal similarity between Theseus and Demophon is made to seem ludicrous:

And lyk his fader of face and of stature,
And fals of love; it com hym of nature (2446-47).

The brevity of the statement weakens the connection between looking like someone and acting like him. Furthermore, the suggestion that betrayal is an inherited trait is undermined by the animal analogy which is a cliché, old and worn-out even in Chaucer's time:

As doth the fox Renard, the foxes sone,
Of kynde he coude his olde faders won
Withoute lore, as can a drake swimme
When it is caught and caryed to the brymme
(2448-51).

The narrator's insistence on the similarity between Demophon and Theseus is undercut at every early stage of the narrative by the particularities of the situations and the use of terms or expressions that cannot explain the details of experience.
In his haste to get on with the story, the narrator makes his blunder of generalism. 15

But, for I agroted herebyforn
To wryte of hem that ben in love forsworn,
And ek to haste me in my legende... .
Therefore I passe shortly in this wyse.
Ye han wel herd of Theseus devyse
In the betraysynge of fayre Adryane
That of hire pite kepte him from his bane.
At shorte wordes, ryght so Demophon
The same wey, the same path hath gon,
That dide his false fader Theseus

(2454-56, 2458-64).

The understanding is that Theseus and Demophon were cut from the same cloth, that they are duplicate models from the same prototype. The repetition of the word "same," the "shorte wordes" (17 monosyllabic words out of 20 in three lines), and the short lines all highlight the narrator's decision to make "short" work of this tale by stressing the similarity. Yet the following passage dramatically undercuts the similarity by the simple narrative process of describing Demophon's "doynge to and fro."

As soon as the narrator leaves his generalities, the similarity is lost, disappearing into the details of his narration. He says that Demophon promises Phyllis that after he makes proper wedding arrangements, he shall return for her. We could question the assertion of Demophon's sincerity, but there is nothing substantial on which to base a challenge. The narrator's description of Demophon's leave-taking (2472-81) does not suggest intent to betray; indeed he says that Demophon, unlike any other man in the
Legends, "openly . . . tok his leve" (2475), the adverb calling up Brutus' manner of honoring Lucrece (1865-66). Only occasionally does Chaucer use this adverb to describe a character’s actions and I would suggest that its use is not ironic, but straightforward. I am immediately reminded of Crisseyde’s "open" departure and, I believe, sincere assertions of imminent return. Indeed, Demophon’s departure is in direct opposition to Theseus’s abandonment of Ariadne:

He made his ship a-londe for to sette . . .
And seyde that on the lond he moste hym reste. . . .
Whan Adrayne his wif aslepe was,
For that hire syster fayrer was than she,
He taketh hire in his hond and forth goth he
To shipe . . .

(2166, 2168, 2171-74, my emphasis).

Theseus’s betrayal is purposeful and deceitful; Demophon’s is not. The comparison does not hold.

It may be significant that a kind of untamed sexual relationship is admitted between Phyllis and Demophon that colors subsequent events:

And [he] piked of hire al the good he myghte,
Whan he was whol and sound, and hadde his reste;
And doth with Phillis what so that hym leste . . .

(2467-69, my emphasis).

The narrator’s language is intensely sexual, suggesting, perhaps, that the violation of Phyllis makes her a candidate for betrayal victim. Indeed, Phyllis signals her complicity (or her recognition that her announcement of complicity is "required" by society) when she complains that she knows why Demophon has not returned: "For I was of my love to yow to
... (2521). Yet her statement contradicts the narrator's reason and her own reasoning in other places—that is, that Demophon betrayed Phyllis because he is like Theseus and so had betrayal in his genes. It is the only place in the legends where a woman reasons that she has been too sexually available to the detriment of the affair. The other women, Ariadne included, believe that they deserve the men's devotion (and sexual attention) because they have helped the men in some way.

The juxtaposition of Demophon's departure and Phyllis' suicide points up yet another difference between Theseus and Ariadne. Demophon's departure is, on the face of it, intentional betrayal and so similar to Theseus's departure:

But in a month he wolde ageyn retorne; . . .
And hom he goth the nexte weye he myghte.
For unto Phillis yet ne com he nought . . .
She was hire owene deth ryght with a corde,
Whan that she saw that Demophon hire trayed
(2477, 2481-82, 2485-86).

Yet, the conjunction "for" works oddly here, turning the reader backwards to Demophon's actions and, only later, forward to Phyllis's action. In other words, without punctuation, the "for" can be read as the coordinating conjunction between "And hom he goth the nexte weye he myghte" and "Unto Phillis yet ne com he nought" so that one reads his intention as betrayal: that is, he goes home because he will not come back. Using the punctuation as in the quotation above, we understand that the "for" anticipates her action: she kills herself because Demophon
does not return. However, there is no indication even in this latter reading, the most probable one, that Demophon intends to betray her.

Once again the action which is said to be similar is not. Moreover, the representations of the women themselves are radically different. Ariadne's discovery of the betrayal is instantaneous and brutal:

Ryght in the dawenyng awaketh she,
And gropeth in the bed, and fond ryght nought.
'Allas,' quod she, 'that ever I was wrought!
I am betrayed!' and hire her torente . . .
(2185-88, my emphasis).

The description of her mental sorrow made physical anguish is amazingly vivid and present as opposed to the static statment about Phyllis's death: "She was hire owne deth ryght with a corde,/[Whan that she saw that Demophon hire trayed" (2485-86). Furthermore, Chaucer's use of Ovid's letter in Ariadne's story is much different from his use of Ovid's letter in Phyllis's story. He changes the words Ariadne speaks in the Heroides into actions, a change that may make her more vulnerable, but which has the advantage of creating a physical, assertive woman instead of the relatively passive, if eloquent, woman from Ovid's letter.

In fact, it is only after Phyllis has killed herself that the narrator backs up and fills in with her letter to Demophon, essentially picked from the Heroides, thereby giving us the information that Demophon has been absent for
four months instead of the promised one. Why, though, does
the narrator choose to place her letter at the end of her
story after he has already narrated her death? He uses this
tactic of quoting from the letter (in direct quotes, as
opposed to indirect quotations) after the woman’s death in
two other stories: Dido’s and Medea’s. The placement of
the letter seems to allow the heroine her own voice: it
allows a woman to speculate about men’s behavior from a
female view-point, to redirect attention to human
relationships, to suggest that those human relationships are
part of the same experience as discovering new lands and
returning to old ones. The letters are the only indication
we have that the constitution of love affairs and marriages
have the same dignity in the human experience as do men’s
exploits.17

Phyllis’s letter is important, not only to the reader,
but to the narrator. Before the letter comes up in the
story, the narrator describes Demophon’s relationship to
Phyllis in ways that I suggested were sexual (2467-69).
However, there is also a strong suggestion that the
narrator’s relationship to Phyllis is a sexual one in the
only way it can be: textually. The lines in toto read:

For unto Phillis hath he sworn thus,
To wedden hire, and hire his trouthe plyghte,
And piked of hire al the good he myghte,
Whan he was hol and sound, and hadde his reste;
And doth with Phillis what so that hym leste,
As wel coude I, if that me leste so,
Tellen al his doynge to and fro

(2465-71, my emphasis).
The syntax in this problematic section suggests a couple of different interpretations which in fact may seem closed down due to modern punctuation. First, and most obviously, the narrator could "tellen al [Demophon’s] doynte to and fro," which could mean anything from Demophon’s social engagements to his private activities/intercourse with Phyllis. It also suggests a voyeur-like interest in the love affair that should not go unnoticed: the narrator has seen it all and will replay it for anyone who will listen.\textsuperscript{18} The second interpretation is that the narrator could do with Phyllis what Demophon had done--"pike of hire al the good he myghte"--that is, assaulted her or robbed her with the sexual overtones to "pike" that I have noted. The narrator could, additionally, do with Phyllis "what so that hym leste." Although those actions are contingent upon his own sexual/textual desire--"if that me leste so"--he acts upon that desire when he uses her letter. For he does not simply quote it; he introduces it, he interrupts it, he plays with it.

Despite Carolyn Dinshaw’s suggestion that the narrator makes short work of Phyllis’s letter, altering it to suit his fancy, there is a sense in which he cannot tear himself away from it.\textsuperscript{19} He says he will "reherce . . . a word of tweyne" (2484), "a word of two, althogh it be but lyte" (2495), but he actually recites sixteen lines before quitting with the complaint that the letter is too long to
translate all of it. Yet he seems unable to let it go, noting somewhat slyly:

   But here and ther in rym I have it layd,
   There as me thoughte she wel hath sayd (2516-17).

Dinshaw argues that the narrator appropriates her writing and "fixes" it, thus controlling it; but clearly he thinks she has spoken well and of importance: he devotes a third of the story to the letter. His quip about placing it in rhyme is surely a double entendre intended to suggest sexual engagement with the woman and the text.

Significantly, Chaucer has expanded the two references to similarities between Demophon and Theseus in the Heroides to become the focal point of Phyllis's story. In Phyllis's letter via Ovid, she accuses Demophon of admiring his father too much, saying that Theseus's abandonment of Ariadne "has made [an] impress upon [Demophon's] nature" and that Demophon "act[s] the heir to [his] father's guile." Chaucer, interested in pointing up the community of men from which, he says, treachery arises, expands these references, complicating Phyllis's reaction to Demophon and complicating her insistence on similarities.

The two places in which Phyllis compares her situation to Ariadne's only serve to highlight differences between them. It is after her particularly vehement complaint of being "to fre" with her sexuality that Phyllis mentions Demophon's "lynage" (2526) and the similarity of her
situation to Ariadne's (2544-59); yet, in both these assertions, it is obvious that she has misinterpreted the situation.

It is of course bitterly comical that she can state: "To moche trusted I . . . / Upon your lynage" (2525-26), for her most obvious complaint is that Demophon is too much like the traitor Theseus. Why she should trust in a lineage that is so obviously unsavory and unreliable is not, however, the real point, since she goes on to note that she also trusted "to moche" on "youre fayr tonge, / And on youre teres falsly out yronge" (2526-27). She fell in love with him, by her own admittance, due to his manner, his behavior, his looks. There is a kind of desperation in shifting the blame to his lineage, although this is also an effort to exonerate Demophon, to blame his compulsive behavior on "bad genes," locating him in that same community of men to which Jason belongs.

Her second assertion of Demophon's likeness to Theseus is also sadly comical in its inappropriateness. In her insistence on similarity, she says:

' . . . ye ben lyk your fader as in this,
For he begyled Adriane, ywis,
With swich an art and with swich subtilte
As thow thyselfen has begyled me' (2544-47).

Yet the betrayal of Ariadne is so radically different from Phyllis's situation as to make the comparison meaningless. In this maneuver Phyllis is like Dorigen in the Franklin's Tale, who compares her problematic, but not life-
threatening, situation to situations in which women kill themselves because they have been dishonored or rather than be dishonored (V.1355-1456). Dorigen's comparisons, for me, serve to highlight the difference of her situation rather than its similarity to those of her exempla. Phyllis's analogous comparison challenges the "fact" of similarity which she claims and calls attention to the difference in situations, in experiences.

Like Cleopatra and Lucrece, Phyllis uses her physical body as a supplement to the text of her letter when she promises that "My body mote ye se withinne a while,/ Ryght in the haven of Athenes fletynge,/ Withoute sepulture and buryinge" (2552-54). Her belief that a "dede" is necessary to illuminate the written words of her letter is not unlike Lucrece's appropriation of the "myght" that will both limit and define the female experience. Yet her insistence on a physical statement is unlike Ariadne's experience, for it is the metaphysical manifestation of Ariadne's body which serves to rebuke Theseus.

The Legend of Phyllis both asserts and undermines the "fact" of similarity between Demophon and Theseus and in so doing, also asserts and undermines the similarity between Phyllis and Ariadne in significant ways. From the beginning, there is no indication that Demophon is an actively false lover except the narrator's insistence that he is so because he is the son of Theseus. In calling up the Theseus-Ariadne
story over and over again, the narrator undoes his stated objective—to prove "By preve as wel as by autorite"—and forces us to rely on the particular experience at hand, an experience which, except for the narrator's role, never suggests betrayal. As the male characters are divested of similarities, their strength, drawn from the community of men and fortified by women's "similarities," is eventually weakened.
Notes

1 See Benson 1182.

2 My line division is in contrast to Robert Worth Frank's, Chaucer and The Legend of Good Women (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1972), 82.

3 The sources for Hypsipyle's story are Heroides 6 and possibly Ovid's Metamorphoses 7. For other possible, but—according to Frank--unlikely sources, see Frank 81-82n2 and Benson 1069.

4 Elaine Tuttle Hansen, "The Feminization of Men in Chaucer's Legend of Good Women," Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writings: Essays in Feminist Contextual Criticism, ed. Sheila Fisher and Janet E. Halley (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1989) 51-70, notes that Jason is one of the heroes who is "caught up... in the plots of other men, constrained by forces beyond [his] control and unable to rule [his] own destin[y].... Jason...[is] conspired against (like Theseus) in the dynastic struggle[s] of [an] elder male relative[s]" (59). Yet it is the solidarity of the community of men which makes the betrayal even possible.

5 Hercules is a curious choice for a traitorous go-between. Cf. his role in the Prologue in respect to Alceste and his traditional mythographic role as a type of Christ.


8 The sources for Medea's story are Heroides 12, Guido delle Colonne's Historia Destructionis Troiae, and possibly Metamorphoses 7. S. B. Meech suggests Chaucer's use of an
intermediary translation of the Heroides, "Chaucer and the Italian Translation of the Heroides, PMLA 45 (1930): 110-28. See also Frank 81-82n2 and Benson 1069-70.


10 Perhaps this fact is not so incredible considering Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's interesting argument that heterosexual relationships are, in many literary cases, acts of homosocial attachment between men. Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire (New York: Columbia UP, 1985). See esp. her discussion of Hornor's role in Wycherly's The Country Wife, Chapter 2.

11 Frank notes the rhyme in order to demonstrate Jason's "unscrupulous" nature: "Certainly no man is dispatched more rapidly in and out of bed than Jason" (89).

11 The source for Phyllis's story is primarily Heroides 2, but also perhaps Jean de Meun's Roman de la Rose and Ovid's Remedia Amoris contributed details. Meach suggests the Italian translation as source for some details (see above n8). Also see Frank 146-48 and Benson 1073.

12 The sources for Ariadne's story are Ovid's Metamorphoses 7 & 8, Heroides 10, the Ovide Moralisé and perhaps an Italian translation (see above n8). Frank suggests other authors as influences: Boccaccio, Plutarch, Virgil, Hyginus, and Machaut (Frank 111-112n1-7).

13 The narrator says Demophon is like Theseus in the following lines: 2398-2400; 2441-43; 2446-47; 2462-64; and 2492. Phyllis says he is like Theseus in the following lines: 2526; and 2544-49.

14 Frank points out details in the Dido story that seem to have influenced Chaucer's Phyllis story, 147-48.
15 Lines 2454–56 are often used to support the argument that Chaucer was bored with the poem. See esp. Frank 205–208.

16 Benson's glossary, after the MED, defines "piked" as "robbed" for this instance only. Yet the verbal form of the noun "pike" or "staff" carries greater weight than a mere assault. In the 18th century, the verb came to mean "killed by thrusting (with a pike)" (OED). Chaucer can hardly have been unaware of the phallic and violently destructive connotations of the word. J. M. Cowen, "Chaucer's Legend of Good Women, Lines 2501–03," Notes and Queries 31 (1984): 298–99, suggests the sexual double entendre of these lines.

17 This suggestion has two problems: first, that the narrator translates these letters and so can skew what is said and that he gets the final word anyway; and second, that the appearance of the letter, in which the woman berates her lover and asks him to return, after her death only underscores the ineffectiveness of her words. Yet the letters are manifestations of a world-view which sees the details as having importance.

18 The narrator's voyuerism is not patently obvious in many of the Legends, but it is nearly always within the text in various forms. Dinshaw's suggestion of control and manipulation of the female voice and body implies a kind of voyuerism. See her Chaucer's Sexual Poetics (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1989) passim.

19 Chaucer's Sexual Poetics, 84–86.

20 "de tanta rerum turba factisque parentis/ sedit in ingenio Cressa relict a tuo" (II.75–76); "heredem patriae, perfide, fraudis agis" (II.78); Heroïdes and Amores, trans. Grant Showerman (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1947).
Chapter Five

The Polarization of Public and Private: Reading the Commentary of Troilus and Criseyde Through the Legends of Lucrece and Dido

My interest throughout this essay has been the rhetorical connection between the two poems: the Prologue as a commentary on the poetics/politics of reading (Chapt. 1), the Legend as a kind of palinode (Chapt. 2), and the stories as re-visions of gendered texts (Chapt. 3). Chapter 4 suggested that this wide literary and historical landscape is grounded in empirical reasoning and attention to particularities of experience as they are textualized. Because I am interested in ways in which the stories of the Legend of Good Women respond to Troilus and Criseyde, I want to explore literary and syntactical connections which bind the two poems together. In this way, we may discover ways of re-reading Troilus and Criseyde as well as gaining valuable insights into the chronologically subsequent Canterbury Tales. In this chapter, I shall discuss the Legend of Lucrece and the Legend of Dido as rhetorical sisters of the implied "Legend of Criseyde."

In order to read the Legend as a response to Troilus and Criseyde, we must study the God of Love's accusation concerning Criseyde, an accusation which is problematic because he has misunderstood--however ironically Chaucer means this--the complex individuality of the character. This attempt to create a category out of Criseyde's behavior
sets the stage for continuous contradictory advice. The narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde* desperately tries (however successfully) to excuse Criseyde's actions. Even if we decide that his defense is ironic, we must concur that it is Criseyde herself who records her "unfaithfulness" for posterity. Criseyde is a unique creation formed, in part, from the dust of the "appreved storyes"; yet there is no one character on which Criseyde is modelled. The compelling power of the character Chaucer created is evident in the wealth of criticism which has grown up around Criseyde. Indeed, she predicts her own notoriety which suggests her hand in her own literary creation. The God of Love's misunderstanding extends to the very events of the Troy story. Criseyde was not "faithful" to Troilus--within the limits she was placed--so the God of Love's assurance that she was "trewe as ever was any steel" (F 334) is itself a misrepresentation of Criseyde's actions. Furthermore, the God of Love's categorization of Criseyde in this ambiguous way elides the painful paradox of Criseyde's actions, thereby reducing her to yet another story, controlled and controllable by his words.

In the G Prologue, the God of Love does not claim that Criseyde is "trewe as . . . steel," instead he charges the narrator with disloyalty, assumes Criseyde's guilt and generalizes it to all women:

"Hast thou nat mad in Englysh ek the bok
How that Crisseyde Troylus forsok,
In shewynge how that wemen han don mis?"
(G 264-66).

Yet many readers have difficulty taking the directive to the narrator "seriously," that is, that the textual Crisseyde motivates the Legend. Although Chaucer creates Crisseyde and so she is under his control, she is an autonomous, essentially "new" character in a poem peopled with gods and goddesses who have long and well-known careers. The mythography of the poem is staggering, yet the composition of Crisseyde has little of that background. A poem in which the female characters are so obviously not Crisseyde--characters with literary, Christianized backgrounds and preconceived notions attached to their names--is more complex than simply the desire to treat "good women" or ironic portrayals of good women. And although the Prologue is very likely "about" how a Christian poet ought to use classical sources, as suggested by Kiser, the stories do not ever become the kind of exempla that would prove that point. The stories are also "about" gender as it is experienced through empirical observation. Although Chaucer uses contemporary notions about these textual women to create a contrast between the artistic sensibility which created the textual Crisseyde and that which "translated" the stories of well-known women--and so the poem is about poetics--he uses female characters again and again, indicating his interest in gender issues.
In the following discussion of the legends of Lucrece and Dido, I suggest that the text polarizes and genders public and private experiences through images of seeing and invisibility, a polarization which recalls the public-private tension underlying Troilus and Criseyde. The problem with this gendered dichotomy is that the experience of the characters complicates and blurs those categories.

**Lucrece Seeing Lucrece**

Reading this legend with Troilus and Criseyde in mind reveals striking similarities between the two stories: the situation in Ardea is remarkably like the situation in Troy, a besieged city that engenders idleness and forces the plot action; Tarquinius' character and actions are remarkably like Troilus' and Pandarus' movements; and Lucrece's situation parallels Criseyde's in ways that suggest we should be thinking of Criseyde as we read Lucrece's story.¹

The complexity of the levels of interpretation becomes obvious in the introduction to the *Legend of Lucrece*. The narrator seems quite aware that he can be accused of writing more about men than about women in the previous stories, and so he prefaces his account of Lucrece by proclaiming, "Now mot I seyn the exilynge of kynges/ Of Rome ..." (1680) where the emphasis of the sentence is ambiguous. Is it on the moment, "now"? On the possibility, "mot"? On the subject matter, "the exilynge of kynges" (my emphasis)? The
narrator plays with our perceptions of the stories, of the God of Love's directive, and of the narrator's progress so far. In a duplicitious move, he says he could talk about the end of an institution and the men (both the actor and the writers) who brought it about; instead, his response to the generalities of "kynges" and "doinges" is to focus on the actions of one woman. The obviousness of "preyse," however, is only a cover for the story of a private woman forced to go public.

The idleness of the siege brings about Tarquinius' "jape" (1699), his sarcastic call to verbal arms: "Preyse every man his owene as hym lest" (1703) which will be undone by the sight of Lucrece. This scene sharply recalls the scene in which Troilus strolls through the Palladium with his friends poking fun at the lovers: "Withinne the temple he wente hym forth pleyinge . . ." (I. 267), his disregard for love reversed by the sight of Criseyde. After he sees Criseyde, "Out of the temple al esilich he wente,/ Repentynge hym that he hadde evere ijaped,/ Of Loves folk . . ." (I.317-19). Both men, overcome with lust (1750-52; I.295-96, I.325-26), find their "japing" attitudes changed by the woman's image. Like Troilus, Tarquinius finds the image of woman, imagined in the privacy of one's thoughts, more "present" than her person. When Troilus returns home after seeing Criseyde, he withdraws to his chamber alone, sighing and groaning until he sets upon the idea of bringing
her image before him:

[He] thought ay on hire so, withouten lette,
That, as he sat and wook, his spirit mette
That he hire saugh a-temple, al the wise
Right of hire look, and gan it newe avise.
Thus gan he make a mirour of his mynde
In which he saugh all holy hire figure . . .
(I.361-66).

Tarquinius is even more explicit about his desire.

For, although he is obsessed with Lucrece’s image:

Th’ymage of hire recordynge alwey newe:
"Thus lay hire her, and thus fresh was hyre hewe;
Thus sat, thus spak, thus span;
this was hire chere;
Thus fayr she was, and this was hire manere."
Al this conseit hys herte hath newe ytake. . . .
(1760-64),

he is as equally pleased by her image as he would be by her presence:

Right so, thogh that hire forme were absent,
The pleasaunce of hire forme was present
(1768-69).

These thoughts he has as he "cometh ful privily" towards Lucrece’s house. It is at this point that he most reminds me too of Pandarus, an identification that it would seem Chaucer wants us to make as he plays on parallel images. At the beginning of Book II of Troilus and Criseyde, Pandarus is awakened by the swallow on the morning of his visit to Criseyde to tell her of Troilus’ passion:

The swalowe Proigne, with a sorrowful lay,
Whan morwen com, gan make hire waymentynge . . .
That with the noyse of hire he gan awake . . .
Remembryng hym his erand was to doone
From Troilus, and ek his grete emprise
(II.64-65, 70, 72-73).
His "grete emprise" being, as the critics so coyly call it, the "seduction" of Criseyde; that is, this is the first step toward Criseyde's "rape." The first step in the rape of Lucrece is begun when Tarquinius, "A-morwe, whan the brid began to synge" (1757), journeys toward Lucrece's house.

Lucrece's attempts to keep busy while the war is on--spinning wool and asking the servants for news--are similar to attempts made by Criseyde who reads and persistently asks questions of Pandarus about the status of the war. The similarities, while not as superficially striking as the similarities between Tarquinius and Troilus, place these women in equally vulnerable situations. Indeed, their vulnerability is intensified by parallel scenes. For example, in Book III, after sequestering Troilus in the closet, Pandarus approaches the sleeping Criseyde:

And as he com ayeynward pryvely,  
His nece awook, and axed, "Who goth there?"  
"My dere nece," quod he, "it am I.  
Ne wondreth nought, ne have of it no fere."  
And ner he com and seyde hire in hire ere,  
"No word, for love of God, I yow biseche!  
Lat no wight risen and heren of oure spech"  
(III.750-56).

As we know, Pandarus means her no physical harm, but his sneaking entrance, the warning to remain quiet at the expense of her reputation, the subsequent accusation that she has betrayed Troilus for "Horaste" (III.792-812), and the later "substitution" of Troilus (like Tarquinius, a "kinges sone"), are situations which occur in Lucrece's room to more horrible ends. Tarquinius enters Lucrece's house in
much the same way as Pandarus enters Criseyde's room:

> With swerd ydrawe shortly he com in  
> There as she lay, this noble wif Lucrese.  
> And as she wok, hire bed she felte presse.  
> "What beste is that," quod she,  
> "that weyeth thus?"  
> "I am the kynges sone, Tarquinius,"  
> Quod he, "but, and thow crye or noyse make,  
> Or if there any creature awake,  
> By thilke God that formed man alyve,  
> This swerd thourghout thyne herte shal I ryve"  

(1785-93).²

He also offers to make a substitution should she "refuse" him: "As I shal in the stable slen thy knave,/ And ley hym in thy bed, and loude crye/ That I the fynde in swich avouterye" (1807-09). Both women, in one way or another, are undone by the similar "dedes" which occur.

The most striking polarization in this legend is the public-private, one that is in the story from the very beginning and which is essential to understanding Lucrece's actions.³ In calling for a game to break the "idel lyfe," Tarquinius proclaims that words will "ese oure herte," a statement that seems to contradict his previous mysterious assertion that "No man dide there no more than his wif" (1701, my emphasis). Upon Collatinus' taking up of the challenge, the public arena stages a private exhibition. For Collatinus, the word is not as good as the deed: "Nay, sire, it is no nede/ To trowen on the word, but on the dede" (1706-07), yet "it is no nede" is ambiguous: does he mean simply that "seeing is believing"? Or does he mean that words are not equal to the praise his wife deserves? Why
does he take the challenge seriously enough to drag Tarquinius into the city, and why do not other men go, too? Even between men, the public desire challenges the private experience.

The emphasis on "dede," ringing ominously throughout the legend, manifests this public desire's attempt to subordinate the private experience. The narrator makes a point of equating Lucrece's beauty with her worthiness (not an unusual medieval, or modern, assumption), remarking that "they acorde both in dede and sygne" (1739), making her beauty the "dede" itself. The rape is also called the "dede": the narrator speaks directly to Tarquinius saying, "Allas, of the this was a vileyns dede!" (1824) in effect saying that the combatants should have stuck to words. Brutus, through the narrator, calls the rape a "horryble dede of hir oppressyoun" (1868). In the most obvious sense, we are to understand a connection between Lucrece's beauty and the rape—and here we are at the still prevalent modern notion that a woman brings about her own violation. However, the link is complicated by Collatinus' suggestion that words are not to be trusted, only deeds. This supposition in effect forces Lucrece's eventual death, as she must enact her own deed when words are not to be "trowen." Moreover, the word "dede" is really the focal point for the interaction of public and private. Tarquinius's challenge is a public one, but Collatinus's
acceptance of the challenge requires private proof. He brings the public, as represented by Tarquinius, into the private "estris" which Collatinus knows "wel and fyn," a knowledge which Tarquinius will exploit when he "cometh into a prive halke/ And in the nyght ful thefly gan he stalke" (1780-81). Collatinus allows the private affection "as of wives is the won" (1744) to become a public trial of faithfulness: "I have a wif . . . that, I trowe/ Is holden good of alle that evere hire knowe" (1708-09).

Yet Lucrece challenges the boundaries of public-private by taking control of her own reputation. She creates the stage upon which the remaining action takes place: she calls her friends and family together, tells them of "this rewful cas and al thys thyng horryble" (1838). She rejects all offers of forgiveness, preferring her interpretation—both the story she tells her companions and the sentence she gives herself. When they tell her that the rape "lay not in hir myght" (1849), Lucrece appropriates the "might" to write her own text. She brings the news to public light, but pulls the knife "pryvely" to kill herself. The full contradictoriness of this action is only apparent when we try to determine if she is in public or private when she kills herself. There is the painfully ironic description of her moment of death:

. . . she kaste hir lok,
And of hir clothes yet hede she tok.
For in hir fallynge yet she had a care,
Lest that hir fet or such thyng lay bare
(1856-59)
which suggests her physical and emotional presence within a
public sphere, yet the emphasis on the action as private
blurs those lines. Immediately after her private death,
she is made a public relic:

And *openly* the tale [Brutus] told hem alle,
And *openly* let cary her on a bere
Thurgh al the toun, that men may see and here
The horruble dede of hir oppressyoun. . . .
. . . and she was holden there
A seynt . . .
(1865-68, 1870-71, my emphasis).

The private is turned into a public generality, a way to
warn others, a reason to rid the town of Tarquinius. Yet
the public can only make a saint of her--there is no other
public "place" for a woman like Lucrece. Crisseyde, who
acquiesces to the public, knows what it will get her: she
predicts her public (literary) reputation which is,
essentially, the flip side of sainthood.

When Lucrece casts a look at her garments as she falls
to the floor, the act of suicide transcends the private and
opens onto the public, the realm of "seeing." The *Legend of
Lucrece* begins by polarizing public and private realms and
actions only to obscure that polarization by complicating
its applicability to particular experience. Additionally,
although the public-private tension is very clearly a male-
female tension at the beginning of the legend, by the end of
it, those categories have broken down. In the *Legend of
Dido*, the public-private tension is manifested through the
characters' ability to see and be seen. There are moments when Criseyde and Dido are more similar than different and when Aeneas and Troilus are similarly blind to the women in front of them. And yet this gender dichotomy will not hold completely as Aeneas and Criseyde are, for very different reasons, similar in their blindness to private moments, in their over-attention, perhaps, to the public; conversely, Dido and Troilus are similarly weakened by the very privacy of their emotions.

**Dido Seeing Aeneas**

The characters in the *Legend of Dido* "see" differently and for different reasons. Aeneas's sight is, in general, characterized by a public, military focus to the exclusion of more private experiences so the loss of Creusa along the way is not surprising.\(^5\) The narrator's sight is also unusually restricted: he "loses" aspects of the narrative, "loses" track of his characters, is even complicit in Creusa's loss. In contrast, the very public ruler, Dido, evokes intensely private moments of sight.\(^6\)

Aeneas's focus is clearly on the public and, as I shall argue, male community from the moment he is "charged by Venus" (940) to leave the fallen Troy:

```
And Enyas was charged by Venus
To flee away, he tok Ascanius,
That was his sone, in his ryght hand and fledde;
And on his bak he bar and with hym ledde
His olde fader cleped Anchises,
And by the weye his wif Creusa he les (940-45).
```
Aeneas actively "takes" Ascanius and "bears" Anchises; the language is specific about the actions: "in his ryght hand," "on his bak," and "with hym ledde." And yet Creusa is merely lost "by the weye," as if she was forgotten, a stray article of clothing which it was not possible to save in the turmoil of leaving a burning city. The narrator, perhaps uneasy with the brevity of his statement, immediately notes that Aeneas

... moche sorwe hadde he in his mynde,
Or that he coude his felaweship fynde (946-47).

The text suggests that the sorrow Aeneas feels follows Creusa's disappearance, but the line is linked syntactically more closely with the fellowship that he cannot find. Benson's glossary defines "felaweship" as "company" and specifically as "household" in line 965; yet surely the community of men is called up here just as it must be in line 965 when Aeneas chooses a "knyght" from his "felaweship" to accompany him into Carthage. The couplet which pairs "Anchises" with "Creusa he les" (944-45) privileges the "fellow"-ship inherent in the son-man-father triad over the husband-wife pair which he summarily "les."

The narrator himself loses sight of Creusa when he reports

And to the se ful faste he gan him hye,
And sayleth forth with al his company
(950-51, my emphasis).

Aeneas has "all his company" without Creusa. Creusa has completely disappeared.

Aeneas's choice of Achates to the exclusion of all
"He tok with hym no more companye" (967) -- renders impregnable the community of men and the bond of man-to-man which is so necessary for Aeneas. The companionship between Aeneas and Achates -- "forth they gon . . . / His dere and he" (968-69) -- is reinforced by their solitude and by Aeneas's not admitting a woman into that community. His inability to "see" a woman, or at least a human woman, is indicative of the blind nature of his experience. When Venus approaches them dressed as a "hunteresse," she asks "'Saw ye . . . ./ any of my sustren. . .'" (978-79, my emphasis) and Aeneas answers that he has not. As if to emphasize that he has not seen any other woman, Aeneas declares that the hunter in front of him cannot possibly be a woman:

"But by thy Beaute, as it thynketh me,  
Thow myghtest nevere erthly woman be,  
But Phebus systers art thow, as I gesse" (983-85).

Venus's strange denial that she is both goddess and mother and her assertion that "maydens walken in this contre here/ . . . in this manere"(990-91) suggest an emphasis on the human woman especially since she goes on to tell Aeneas about Dido and her accomplishments. In a parallel scene, Troilus in the Palladium looks at women, but does not see them:

This Troilus, as he was wont to gide  
His yonge knyghtes, lad hem up and down  
In thilke large temple on every side,  
Byholding ay the ladies of the town,  
Now here, now there; for no devocioun  
Hadde he to non . . . (I.183-88)
Troilus leads his friends through the crowded temple, not to get to a place, but to survey the field. Restlessly casting glances at the women, he indicates not only his disinterest in them, but his blindness to them. The women hardly exist for Troilus. The repetition of verbs of motion suggest a man on the move whose interest is really himself:

> Withinne the temple he wente hym forth pleyinge,
> This Troilus, of every wight aboute,
> On this lady, and now on that, lokynge,
> Wher so she were of town or of withoute

(I.267-70).

Troilus is "pleyinge" and "lokynge," his eyes roving over ("byholding") the women without seeing the individuals, categorizing them as he moves through the temple. They are truly only objects to him. His interest is not in them as women, but in their effect on his "yonge knyghtes." Troilus does look at the men with him as they parade through the festivities--

> And in his walk ful faste he gan to wayten
> If knyght or squyer of his compaignie
> Gan for to syke, or letes his eighen baten
> On any womman that he koude espye.
> He wolde smyle and holden it folye . . .

(I.190-94)---noting pointedly their responses to women. Significantly, this is the moment when the God of Love "gan loken Rowe" (206) and shoots Troilus with his arrow. Troilus's subsequent experiences signal the inadequacy of his restricted view of humanity—the community of men with which he has surrounded himself.

The narrator of Dido's story demonstrates his blindness
by eliding the information that makes Dido so interesting and powerful (994-1003). He says he could tell more about Dido and Carthage, but it would be "but los of tyme" (997). (Besides, Chaucer has told this story before--his *House of Fame* narrator has literally "seen" the adventures of Dido and Aeneas.) As if to point up Aeneas's blindness, Venus "vanyshed anon out of his syghte" (1001).

Aeneas's selective sight affects his relationship to Dido in two ways: he cannot see her or the "things" she gives him. The gifts Dido gives to Aeneas are carefully and objectively described—they are wondrous gifts and yet Aeneas does not "see" them. In fact, one wonders if the narrator actually "sees" them. Although the objective description of the gifts fills up ten lines (1114-23) in a story which is to be noted for its brevity, each gift is preceded by a negative, a construction which equivocates both the giving and receipt of the presents. Indeed, Aeneas is not much interested in them. "Withouten les" (1128), he sends his fellow Achates to the ship for Ascanius, Aeneas's son. This sending for the son so close upon the receipt of Dido's gifts suggests that Aeneas is eager to present his son as a reciprocal "gift," included as Ascanius is with "riche thynges,/ Both sceptre, clothes, broches, and er ynges" (1130-31). And although Aeneas cannot *see* Dido's gifts to himself, he "ful blysful is and fayn/ To sen his yonge sone Ascanys" (1137-38, my emphasis). The child is
not Ascanius but Cupid, the blind god sent by Venus, the formerly "invisible" mother goddess. The aspects of seeing and unseeing—whether blindness (subjective) or invisibility (objective)—dominate this story, structuring the public-private iconography.

The narrator's sight is simultaneously insensitive and keen. Although he loses Creusa and elides Dido's military background, he is acutely aware of Dido's powerful femininity. He points out that Dido is considered so beautiful and noble "That wel was hym that myghte hire ones se" (1011, my emphasis), suggesting that a focus on her would be worthwhile. Indeed, his sight is squarely on her once he decides to pay attention to her. His descriptions of her are intensely iconographic: the image of her standing in the temple fulfilling her political function is so perfect that the narrator says that God himself would be in love with her (1035-43). Similarly, on the morning of the hunt, the narrator presents the image of Dido as a portrait, imbuing her image with the medicine of lovers:

On a thikke palfrey, paper-whit,
With sadel red, enbrouded with delyt,
Of gold the barres up enbosede hye,
Sit Dido, al in gold and perre wrye;
And she as fair as is the bryghte morwe,
That heleth syke folk of nyghtes sorwe

(1198-1203).

Significantly, her own image is the cure for her lovesickness of the night before.

In contrast to Aeneas's focus on the public community
of men (Anchises, Achates, Ascanius) and his very public military exploits, Dido’s sight is intensely private. Like Troilus who, after seeing Crisseyde at the Palladium, hurries back to his room in order to subject her image to his internal scrutiny, Dido quietly takes in the sight of Aeneas and works it over in her mind. One can envision the moment when Aeneas startlingly appears in front of Dido and his men. They crowd around him, happy and relieved to see him, and Dido, standing now off to the side, the request for her succor forgotten, privately watches the fair Aeneas: "The queen saugh that they dide hym swych honour . . . / And saw the man, that he was lyk a knyght" (1061, 1066, my emphasis). Her pleasure in the Trojans’ company and in Aeneas’s in particular is screened behind the public mask, even if that mask is sometimes transparent. "Sely" Dido becomes so enamoured "[t]hat she hath lost hire hewe and ek hire hele" (1159). But as Frank notes, Dido’s falling in love is emphatically visual and objective (67-68), and the narrator further suggests that Dido’s subjective desire fulfills its public obligations in this mediated, objective manner.

Moreover, Dido is conscious of the limits and boundaries of private sight and she supplements it with a kind of public approval. It is after her restless night—her private lamenting and her more public complaint to her sister Anne—that she pursues Aeneas. There is a sense in
which Dido must hold up to her sister’s eye the vision she herself has of Aeneas. She must test that private image against the public mirror to see what and how it reflects:

"Now, dere sisyster myn, what may it be
That me agasteth in my drem?" quod she.
"This newe Troyan is so in my thought,
For that me thynketh he is so wel ywrought,
And ek so likly for to ben a man,
And therwithal so moche good he can
That al my love and lyf lyth in his cure"

(1170-76);

that is, she must determine the social and political value that Aeneas might have for the community. She suggests that he can be "effective" ("wel ywrought") and do "moche good"--whether she means politically or sexually is not certain. Anne functions for Dido as both the public mirror and Dido’s personal mirror. Dido needs to re-view her own image of Aeneas, and to place it against her community’s values. In using Anne, she gets both without making her private desire truly "public."

However, the hunt (1188-1217) that Dido arranges for the following day is yet another public manifestation of her private feelings--as were the gifts. And so the private is never completely private; it quickly becomes public. The iconographic detail of the hunt preparation not only shows the public nature of the activity, but its pictorial nature, the scene’s ability to stop the action and reveal the moment, solidifies its place in a public domain--the scene is a picture to hang on the wall and be viewed. In a more
literary fashion, the action itself suggests the public nature of experiences. When Dido and Aeneas flee the rainstorm and end up in a cave, the narrator, diverting from his source, says:

I not, with hem if there wente any mo;
The autour maketh of it no mencioun (1227-28).

Chaucer adds the following scene in which Aeneas kneels to Dido and "swore so depe" (1234) indicating, I think, that the narrator's intimation of public-ness is a hazy cover for the intimacy of the situation. And yet the suggestion remains that there were interlopers as indeed there were in Virgil's work: Juno and Venus. This scene and the narrator's careful profession of ignorance recall the famous bedroom scene in Book III of Troilus and Criseyde in which the lovers meet in a small, enclosed room during a rainstorm and Criseyde must be the one to swear love to the swooning Troilus. Moreover, Pandarus's presence in the lovers' room is stated in such a way as to deny it:

Quod Pandarus, "For aught I kan aspien,
This light, nor I, ne serven here of nought. . . ."
And bar the candel to the chymeneye
(III.1135-36, 1141).

The moment which is supposedly private is ambiguously a public moment in which vows are made. Although it is Pandarus who "aspies" that he does not serve a purpose, in fact there is a sense in which the vows are made valid through their publicity, that is, Pandarus does serve a purpose. Unfortunately for Dido, the quite proper public
manifestation of her desire—the hunt—\(^8\) is transformed into a rather improper public showing:

\[
\text{The wikké fame upros, and that anon,}
\text{How Eneas hath with the queen ygon}
\text{Into the cave; and demede as hem liste (1242-44).}
\]

In Troilus’s and Criseyde’s case, the vows are not public enough to save their relationship; in Aeneas’s and Dido’s case, the public nature of the vows only serves to oppress Dido.

Dido’s death exemplifies the tension between public and private by balancing her private sight with the public seeing. When she awakes to find Aeneas gone, her eyes fall on a piece of clothing he has left behind. Like Pyramus with Thisbe’s wimple, Dido makes love to it, swooning several times; nevertheless, she makes a decision. Like Lucrece, Dido calls together the public—in this case, her sister and nurse—as if to make a final statement. Yet Dido lies to them about what she is planning, sending them for sacrificial materials. Whereas Lucrece tells her friends and family that she will kill herself to save herself, thereby appropriating the public might for her private cause, Chaucer suggests that Dido is not as confident of either her private sight or her public abilities, for she must sneak her death out from under the public eye:

\[
\text{And seyde that she wolde sacryfye—}
\text{And whan she myghte hire tyme wel espie,}
\text{Upon the fir of sacryfice she sterete,}
\text{And with his swerd she rof hyre to the herte (1348-51, my emphasis).}
\]
As sympathetic as Chaucer is to the story of Dido and to Dido's fate in particular, the legend explicitly blinds the private sight of Dido, locating her, along with Lucrece and Criseyde (to name only two), squarely in the unkind public eye.

In his gentle rebuke to "sely wemen," the narrator focuses on the public results of a trusting sight as he points up the feigning (that is, mis-appearance) of the lovers. Repeating forms of the verb "to see," he asks rhetorically how his characters can be so taken in by traitorous men:

O sely wemen, ful of innocence,  
Ful of pite, of trouthe and conscience,  
What maketh yow to men to truste so?  
Have ye swych routhe upon hyre feyned wo,  
And han swich olde ensamples yow beford?  
Se ye nat alle how they be forsworn?  
Where sen ye oon that he ne hath laft his leef,  
Or ben unkynde, or don hire som myscheef,  
Or piled hire, or bosted of his ded?  
Ye may as wel it sen as ye may rede

(1254-63, my emphasis).

And yet, despite the narrator's somewhat simple-minded sense that a woman's sight is always blinded by a flashy man, the structure of the text itself pivots on the tightwire of public-private as it highlights the public nature of private experience. Like Troilus and Criseyde, Dido discovers that private experience is always vulnerable to abuse or exploitation by the public sight.

In the conclusion, I discuss the Legend of Philomela as the most anomalous story in a series of varied stories,
demonstrating that the categories we are asked to use in order to define the human condition cannot contain human experience.
Notes

1 The source of Lucrece's story is primarily Ovid's Fasti II, although Chaucer's mention of Livy has caused scholars to suggest Augustine's De civitate Dei or the Gesta Romanorum. See Frank 97-98n7-9 and Benson 1070.

2 It is not a mistake, it seems to me, that this passage is violently sexual as if to anticipate the actual rape. Tarquin's drawn sword, his pressing weight, and his promise to pierce her "heart" appear to be puns on the sexual act, horrible as they may seem. Pandarus's entrance is no less sinister, perhaps, but under cover of "oure spech" (III.756), appears innocuous.


4 "Estris" (the "interior arrangement of the apartments," Benson 618) is surely connected to the "krynked hous" of Araidne's legend, suggesting again the sexual entrance and violation. See esp. Carolyn Dinshaw, Chaucer's Sexual Poetics (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1989) 78-80.

5 The betrayal and loss of Creusa is analogous to Kruger's suggestion concerning Cleopatra and Antony—that Chaucer has Antony betray his first wife early in the legend so the story can go on. The category of "unfaithful man" as demanded by Alcestes is taken care of right away and Antony is shown to be a "faithful" man to Cleopatra (221).

6 The source for Dido's story is primarily Virgil's Aeneid, although Chaucer also uses Heroides 7. For other possibilities, see esp. Frank 58n4.

7 Virgil, of course, has Juno and Venus connive at a meeting between Dido and Aeneas (Bk. 4). Juno lays out the plan to Venus:
Dido et Trojanus dux devenient eandem speluncam; aderet si tua voluntas certa mihi, jungam stabili connubio, quae dicabo propriam.
(Dido and the Trojan leader shall come to the same cavern; I will be present and if your consent be sure to me, I will unite them in firm wedlock, and I will consecrate her as his own.)

8 Frank disagrees, noting that "Chaucer treads on dangerous ground, making his 'amorous queene' initiate the hunt.... Thereby suggesting she is the pursuer. In fact she becomes almost immediately the quarry" (69). But Frank's interpretation is wholly dependent on interpreting the Legend of Dido as a courtly poem, a category with which I cannot agree. Even so, if the legend is a manifestation of courtly love, it is a "logical" paradox that the lady is both pursuer and quarry.

9 The medieval tradition of Dido was much more sympathetic in general than classical renditions. See Frank 57-78.
Conclusion
The Paradigmatic Paradox:
Philomela’s Anomalous Legend

The Legend of Philomela is perhaps the most anomalous of the stories Chaucer chooses for his collection of good women and bad men. It simply defies categories of all kinds: Alcestes’s, the God of Love’s, and the kinds of categories I have discussed in other stories. It is hard to imagine what Chaucer’s motivation is for including it in the poem. From beginning to end, the story does not "fit" with any other story. Paradoxically, the anomaly of the story seems, finally, a paradigm of a kind, an occasion to reinforce the anomalies of all the legends.

Although Chaucer begins with invocations in three other legends (Dido, Ariadne, Hypsipyle & Medea), the invocation to "Thow yevere of the formes . . ." is quite different from the other invocations in four significant ways. First, it is not specific to a person (Virgil, Mynos, Jason); indeed, the cleverness of the invocation is its ability to refer to the Christian God, Ovid from whom the story is taken, and/or the writer himself (that is, Chaucer). Moreover, the "giver of forms" oddly foreshadows Philomela’s tapestry in which she will tell the story yet another time, in yet another version. Secondly, the invocation is a question. The narrator not only questions God about the purpose of creating a man like Tereus, but questions the
appropriateness of retelling the story of a man like this. Amazingly, the narrator suggests that the making of Tereus was not God's doing. Yet how can this be? God, for the Christian narrator has control of everything, even evil elements. The narrator suggests a total loosening of control in this story, a loss of form for this substance. Thirdly, this invocation is the only time the narrator expresses a heart-felt revulsion for a character. He carefully warns women against bad men in the conclusion of each tale (except Hypermnestra's); however, in this legend, the narrator begins his "warning" before the story. This is a decidedly commentatorial move of the kind I noted at work in the Prologue, suggesting that the utility of this tale is its ability to speak about other stories. In no other legend does he express such disgust and fear of infection in retelling the story. Tereus's "dede" is "so grisely" that reading it infects the narrator, telling it infects him and our reception of it infects us. Why is this story, in the narrator's opinion, so much worse than all the other tales of betrayal, suicide, abandonment and even rape?

Finally, the invocation reflects a concern for a larger issue outside the story but still bound up with it. The surface question--"God, how could you allow such evil to exist?"--is intertwined with questioning the role of writers and the usefulness of pagan stories. The narrator's initial expression of disgust and fear of "infection" challenge the
utility of moral by example. To read, to tell, to name, to hear the story are all possible venues of infection, not only by the action Tereus performs but by the attitude which informs that action. This legend alone foregrounds the medieval preoccupation with the utility of pagan exempla. Kiser suggests that the Prologue is wholly consumed with this question of suitability, of melding classical and Christian. Yet--though Kiser does not point this out--the legends themselves rarely approach the issue directly. On a certain level, the legends are, I believe, Chaucer's restructuring of pagan stories for a Christian audience, yet not one of them ends with a clear moral about specifically Christian values.

The choice of the Philomela story is itself an example of the anomalies of the legends. Hers is an unusual story to tell within the context of a legendary of "good women": she is the only mythological character included in a group of stories practically devoid of gods, goddesses, magic, and transformations. Critics have pointed out that Chaucer ends his story before the women become metamorphosed. While that is true, it is more significant that they are the only characters in the entire poem (aside from Alcestes's reverse transformation) who have that potential in the sources. The narrator, unconcerned with or unconvinced about the potential for metamorphosis, both suggests it and denies it by stopping the story at the point of metamorphosis. His
attention is on the individual characters and he highlights that particularity by expressing astonishment and grief at Tereus's behavior.

And well he might be astounded and grieved. Tereus's "badness" is unlike any other male character's behavior in the legends. His "dede" is similar, of course, to Tarquinius's action in the Legend of Lucrece. In fact, there is a striking disturbing image repeated in the two stories. Tereus's lust for Philomela begins when she embraces her father:

For Philomene with salte teres eke  
Gan of hire fader grace to beseke  
To sen hire syster that she loveth so,  
And hym embraseth with hire armes two.  
And therewithal so yong and fayr was she  
That, whan that Tereus saw hire beauté . . .  
He caste his fyry herte upon hyre so  
That he wol have hir, how so that it go  
(2284-89, 2292-93),

just as Tarquinius's lust for Lucrece begins when she kisses her husband:

And with that word hire husbonde Colatyn,  
Or she of him was war, com stertynge in . . .  
And she anon up ros with blysful chere  
And kiste hym, as of wifes is the won.  
Tarquinius . . .  
Conceyved hath hire beaute and hyre cheere . . .  
And caughte to this lady swich desyr  
That in his herte brende as any fyr,  
So wodly that his wit was al forgotten  
(1740-41, 1743-46, 1750-52).

But Tereus's "dede" encompasses so much more than rape. He not only tricks and rapes Philomela, he cuts out her tongue, and keeps her "to his usage and his store" (2337). So, unlike half the men in the stories, he also does not abandon
the woman he has abused. Then he has the nerve to go to his wife Procne and "in his armes hath his wife ynome" (2343) and lie to her about Philomela's welfare. He does not abandon his wife or Philomela as Jason, Aeneas, Lyno, Theseus and Demophon abandon their women, and he does not betray Procne through suicide like Antony and Pyramus. He simply keeps both women.

It is not only Tereus, though, who is unlike any other character in the legends. None of the characters in this legend--Pandion, Procne, Philomela--is similar to a character in any other story. For example, Pandion's affection for his daughters differs vastly from the behavior of the only other fathers in all ten stories. Hypermnestra's father, Aegyptus, is downright threatening; Medea's father is unconcerned with his daughter except as a showpiece; and Ariadne's father, Mynos, is nearly absent. Pandion and Aegyptus are clearly drawn characters even though they are supposedly "incidental" to the narrative, but they are presented very differently, with widely diverse methods of speaking to their daughters and diverse attitudes toward their children.

Moreover, the female characters cannot be categorized with any other woman in the legends. Procne is not powerful and assertive as I believe the text suggests Lucrece or Dido or Medea is. On the other hand, she does not bend to patriarchial will, but that may be because she is not
subjected to it. The text does not allow Procne the opportunity to use her body as a sign of power or her own oppression like Phyllis or Dido. She does not speak her inner feelings as Hypermnestra does. Similarly, the characterization of Philomela is unique within the legends. Although she is a sister like Phaedra, she does not plan a seduction, she is the victim. The narrator ends her story before she has the chance—if the text would even allow it—to avenge her rape or appropriate it for her own use as Lucrece does. Seen in these terms, these female characters may be the most passive in the legends, but their passivity is, I believe, subordinate to their unique natures within the poem.

The abrupt ending of the Legend of Philomela is not, perhaps, unique, but its substance surely is, for although it begins as a warning like the other legends' endings, it takes a strange turn:

Ye be war of men, if that yow liste.
For al be it that he wol nat, for shame,
Don as Tereus, to lese his name,
Ne serve yow as a morderour or a knave,
Ful lytel while shal ye trewe hym have--
That wol I seyn, al were he now my brother--
But it so be that he may have non other

(2387-93).

The narrator warns his female readers that they must be on guard against men (in general) because although he (a particular man) probably will not do as Tereus has done or treat a woman as a murderer or a "knave" would (but none of
the other men in the legends have been murderers either), he will only be "trewe" for a little while--unless he cannot find someone else (in which case he will be true for a longer time?). This very complicated and disjointed admonition serves to highlight its own anomalies and its difference from any other legend's ending. By bracketing the Philomela story with two odd moralizations, the narrator insists on similarity where none exists and finds himself in trouble. Although Tereus is supposed to serve as an illustration of the category of "bad man," he cannot, the narrator realizes, serve as an example. At the moment when he should be referring to Tereus, the narrator turns to another type of man. The effort to return to the generality, to efface the specific crime and dangerous example of Tereus, fragments the warning and intensifies the anomaly of the story. Additionally, the narrator's inclusion of himself as a kind of "other"/objective voice--"that wol I seyn, al were he now my brother" (2392)--is similar to his presentation of himself as a protector of weak-willed women at the end of Phyllis's story when he says smugly, "trusteth . . . no man but me" (2561). Yet the narrator actually plays two different roles in what appear to be similar circumstances: in Phyllis's story he suggests that he is outside the story but the text ties him in by showing him to be yet another "subtyl fo" (2559). In Philomela's story, the narrator binds himself to Tereus and
other "knaves" by making himself, if only for a moment, a brother. As the narrator struggles to cancel the effect of Tereus's actions, the effort to return to a general moral statement cancels itself.

The Legend of Philomela differs so greatly from any other legend that I suggest it is used to reinforce the anomalous nature of the empirical stories which Chaucer tells. Ockham's principle that "only the singular exists" is hard at play in Chaucer's work. At any point of similarity, closer examination of the detail or experience reveals wide diversity, so that finally, we are forced to admit the empirical quality of the Legend of Good Women.

The Legend is a rhetorical and textual commentary on Troilus and Criseyde, a study of common ideas and prejudices and illusions about poetry and the constitution of character. The Legend is not a retraction of Troilus and Criseyde as we might have expected; it is a "corrective-reading" for an audience which seems to have misread the moralization. The task appointed the narrator is a critical one which requires an analysis not only of the story he told in Troilus and Criseyde, but the stories he will tell in the future. Just as a modern literary critic discusses the aesthetic value of a work (and what constitutes value), so Chaucer's narrator must explore and comment on the value of his work. The God of Love is a discontented reader misled by the "moral" of Troilus and Criseyde and wanting a
clarification of values, so the narrator reviews his own "litel bok" and writes a review as yet another poem. The narrator of the Legend forces us to question the categories, interpretations, and values to which we commonly subject people and poetry.

By way of summary, we might look ahead to the Canterbury Tales. I see this revisioning of the Legend as a way to tread between the older tradition of interpreting the Tales as "realistic" representations of characters and the somewhat newer critical theories which suggest that the characters of the Tales are only texts to be deconstructed. Attention to the value of empirical analysis in Chaucer's works--both our own analysis and Chaucer's--enlivens the text and its many meanings. As John Locke was to phrase it three centuries later, everything that exists exists in particular. Whatever answers Chaucer discovered by writing the Legend of Good Women, they allowed him to begin the tremendous work of the Canterbury Tales with an elevated sense of particularity and, one senses, sheer pleasure. The Legend contains elements which not only stirred him to discover his Canterbury pilgrims, but to suggest ways of reading and interpreting his past work to his audience.
Notes

1 The source of Philomela's story is primarily Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 6; there is evidence to suggest use of the *Ovide Moralisé* for details. See esp. Frank 137n10 and Benson 1072-73.

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