

"NO MAN BUT ME"

Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* and the ironic subversion of masculine representation

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Abstract

In Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, irony comes from both the narrator's perspective on the women he aims to represent in the legends, and from the author's and reader's perspectives on the narrator as a constructed persona. In this thesis, I trace the ironic development of the narrator's relationship with written authority in the G Prologue, without completely disregarding the F Prologue.

I examine the narrator's anxiety, caused by his desire to believe in the presence of God to provide meaning for his text. This desire derives from his belief that for texts to be authoritative, their writers must be present in them. To construct an identity for himself in writing as a masculine subject, the narrator controls the representation of women in his text, partly through his continuing interest in and identification with the members of his own sex.

Other strategies used by the narrator to control the representation of women, who come to symbolise the cultural qualities of femininity, are his interpolations, asserting that their stories are boring and must be hurried through, his use of sexual imagery to reinforce the phallic domination of women and his juxtaposition of courtly, Christian and classical imagery in his heroines.

The conflict between these frames of reference, particularly the simultaneous presence of the Christian God and the classical gods and goddesses in the text, leads to the breakdown of the narrator's attempts at signification. Despite his efforts to extinguish the values culturally associated with femininity, the irony which works against him as the narrator paradoxically reveals a potential space for the representation of the feminine.

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For trusteth wel, it is an impossible
That any clerk wol speke good of wyves,
But if it be of hooly seintes lyves,
Ne of noon oother womman never the mo.
Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?

- The Wife of Bath's Prologue

...In the very real continuity of concern throughout Chaucerian fiction with the representation of women, I hear not a swelling chorus of female voices entering the text and speaking for and about themselves, but something of a monotone making known both feminine absence and masculine anxiety.

- Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*

Introduction

Summing up the narrator's view of his relationship with the female members of his audience, the quotation in the title of my thesis¹ is a touchstone for the narrator's involvement in gender issues in the *Legend of Good Women*. Making a personal demand for the female audience's trust in his powers of representation, the narrator demonstrates his desire as a masculine author to have a mandate from women for his actions.

As a writer, the narrator dominates his material, just as his male characters dominate female characters. His request for the trust of his female audience is ironic, as he demonstrates his complicity with the male characters throughout the legends, despite his claims to support women against the faithlessness of men. My argument is based on the premise that there are two levels of irony in the poem; authorial irony around the construction of the narrative persona and irony used by the narrator in his representation of the heroines as good women who are faithful in love.

In Chapter One, using Jacques Lacan's development of Ferdinand de Saussure's sign theory, I draw parallels between the disjunctions inherent in the narrator's implication of the presence of God through the debate about the existence of heaven and hell and the presence of writers to give their texts authority, and the disjunctive symbolic relationship between the daisy

¹ The full line, from the *Legend of Phyllis*, reads: "And trusteth, as in love, no man but me." (2561).

image and Alceste. Such parallels show that our expectations as readers that this text will offer smooth connections between signifiers and signifieds are bound to be frustrated. The narrator's attempt to establish such connections is the first sign of his discomfort with his writing identity, just as his combination of courtly, Christian and classical imagery for the symbolism of Alceste and the daisy aims to unify disparate elements in a similar way to the later representation of the heroines of the legends.

The separation of the author-function from the narrative persona, essential for understanding the double ironic perspective of the poem, is outlined in Chapter Two, using the theories of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault on writing and subjectivity. Intertextual references to the *Legend of Good Women* in the Introduction to the *Man of Law's Tale* and the *Retraction* to the *Canterbury Tales* intersect with the presentation of the narrator as the author of the Chaucerian canon. Through an analysis of the construction of the narrative persona in the G Prologue, I explore the narrator's anxiety in relation to the authority of his textual sources, and his response, which is to try to establish a gendered identity for himself in writing. This necessitates his desire for control of the representation of women, in order to reinforce his masculine identity.

In Chapter Three, the gendered implications of the narrator's anxiety about written authority become clearer. In his manipulation of the sources, close translation is subordinated to proving the premise of Alceste and the God of Love, that all women are good because they are faithful in love. In this chapter I explain also the influence of hagiographic narrative and classical

sources upon the *Legend of Good Women*, especially Ovid's *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses*.

The female characters, representative of the cultural qualities of femininity such as volatility and unpredictability, pose a threat to the narrator's project. In response, the narrator develops strategies to increase his control over their representation. I examine three of these strategies in Chapter Four; the narrator's "boredom" and expressed desire to move quickly through the legends, his use of sexual imagery to reinforce phallic domination of women and his identification with the members of his own sex, despite his protestations to the contrary.

In addition to strategies of direct narratorial intervention, the imagery chosen by the narrator to represent the heroines and heroes in the legends juxtaposes courtly, Christian and classical elements: this proves ineffective, however. Conflicting expectations of the behaviour and sexuality of a good woman are generated, and resolved by the narrator through the reduction of the stories and personalities of both male and female characters to the repetitive theme of faithful women and faithless men. Male characters have their reputations blackened, but are redeemed through the narrator's interest in their actions. Female characters are lauded, but their portrayal as good women is undermined by the narrator's ironic strategies.

I examine the use of courtly imagery in Chapter Five for the appearance of the heroines and the behaviour of the heroes, as well as in phrases placed in ambiguous contexts within the text. In Chapter Six, we see how religious imagery crosses the boundary between the Prologues and the legends with

the heaven and hell motif. The juxtaposition of different religious codes highlights the uneasy coexistence of classical gods and goddesses with the Christian God as literary motifs in the text. This conflation of systems of religious meaning works against the imposition of female hagiographic narrative patterns on the heroines, as saints cannot inhabit the same text as classical deities.

Concluding that the narrator has done his best to kill off symbols of femininity, through his imagery, narrative strategies and manipulation of genres, assisted by plots which contain two rapes and five female suicides, I explore the paradoxical possibility of feminine survival through the paradigm represented by the final heroine, Hypermnestra.

* * *

A brief overview of scholarship on the *Legend of Good Women*, will be necessary, to explain the background to the controversy over the dates of the F and G Prologues, and to situate my discussion within the field of Chaucerian criticism, particularly from a feminist perspective. At the beginning of this century, the issue which dominated critical study of the poem was the existence of two versions of the Prologue to the poem, labelled A and B by Skeat (Skeat, III, p.65) but known to modern critics as F and G since F.N. Robinson's first edition in 1933 (Rowe, p.2). The F Prologue, originally known as B, is extant in seven manuscripts, whereas the G Prologue, formerly A, is found in only one. Critics were keen to establish their dates of composition, believing that one could occupy the position of a revision or expansion of the other, the original text.

With the entry of Harold C. Goddard into the arena, the question of irony and the *Legend of Good Women* was raised for the first time in the modern period, in conjunction with the dates of the Prologues. Goddard believed in the prior composition of the G Prologue. Finding more wit and ironic humour in the F Prologue, he concluded that Chaucer must have written it as an expansion of the G Prologue to make it more outrageous and amusing (Goddard, "Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*" I, p.97).

In his response, John Livingstone Lowes justifiably pointed out that Goddard had unnecessarily intertwined his argument that the poem was intended to be read ironically with his contention that the F Prologue was a revised version of the G Prologue (Lowes, "Is the *Legend of Good Women* a Travesty?" p.513). Lowes refuted Goddard's ironic reading of "a most unmerciful satire upon women" (Goddard, "Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*" I, p.101) with the suggestion that the women cited in the *Legend of Good Women* were all well-known in the medieval period as stock moral exemplars (Lowes, "Is the *Legend of Good Women* a Travesty?" p.546). His preference for the F Prologue as the original version had already been made clear in an earlier article (Lowes, "The Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* Considered in its Chronological Relations", pp.750-751).

No critical consensus has been reached on either issue. Despite wide-spread support for an ironic reading, particularly since Elaine Tuttle Hansen's identification of irony in the construction of the narrator as well as in the narrator's portrayal of the heroines (Hansen, "Irony and the Antifeminist Narrator," p.12), critics continue to publish in support of the opposite

position (Ames, p.69). Similarly, although many critics support Lowes' position in favour of the prior composition of the F Prologue, often adducing that the probability of irony is increased if they were composed in this order (Frank, p.25), Donald W. Rowe has recently pointed out that Lowes' article "demonstrates the impossibility of determining which is the revision without recourse to subjective judgements" (Rowe, pp.2-3).

Critical study of the poem, therefore, relies on assumptions, as proof has not yet emerged on either issue. In the absence of proven chronology or authorial intentionality, I will argue that the F Prologue was written first. Examining the internal logic of the two Prologues, I find a development of the ironic perspective in the G Prologue, particularly around the issue of written authority and the expansion of the God of Love's charges against the narrator.

One interesting feature of this debate, however, has been the tendency to select one version over another, as if only one can have had the approval of the author as the 'right' Prologue. For a text which sets out to question the basis of written authority, the final irony would be if one of the manuscript versions were privileged over the other to the point of exclusion. Both Prologues should be read and their differentiation understood. This is facilitated by the recent editorial practice of printing them side by side².

² The editions of F.N. Robinson follow this practice, and this has been maintained in Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), which is based on F.N. Robinson, ed., *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* 2nd. edn. (London: Oxford University Press, 1957, rpt.1968).

When quoting from the F and G Prologues, if a passage is identical in both Prologues, I will identify this by placing both references in brackets after the quotation. If, however, the passage is very similar but contains variant spellings or phrases, I will indicate the passage equivalent to the version quoted in a footnote.

In developing the analysis which I have outlined, I have been greatly indebted to recent feminist critical work on the *Legend of Good Women*, a poem which is making a spectacular come-back into critical favour after a long period of neglect. Feminist Chaucer criticism has moved past the a-historical question "Was Chaucer a feminist?" and is using a variety of strategies to interrogate gender construction, both masculine and feminine, in Chaucerian texts.

Philosophically, my work is closely aligned to the work of Elaine Tuttle Hansen on the fear shared by the narrator and the male heroes of being "feminized" (Hansen, "Feminization of Men", p.52) and that of Carolyn Dinshaw on the medieval association of the text with the female body, both "read" by men (Dinshaw, p.86). I investigate the gender issues at stake somewhat differently, examining more fully in response to Hansen's work the narrator's complicity with the behaviour of his masculine heroes, and the associations of his anxiety to produce a gendered identity in writing with his belief in the authority of texts.

Dinshaw's discussion centres on the metaphor that the narrative persona is "reading like a man," which eventually closes off the text. I have

emphasized the narrator's involvement with his own writing project, as well as his interpretation of sources, and have developed a relatively new analysis of the disjunctive use of courtly, Christian and classical elements in the representation of Alceste and the daisy, and the heroines of the legends. The most appropriate metaphor for my study, in contrast to Dinshaw, is that the narrator is "writing like a man". In addition, I feel that the closure of the text is not as totalizing as Dinshaw claims. I am deeply grateful to these critics and others who are breaking new ground. It is an exciting period in which to be engaged with Chaucer studies.

Chapter One

“The Fresshe Dayesye”: The Challenge to Signification

Applying sign theory to the structures of the Prologues, made possible by the work of Lacan, helps us to see the similarities between the suggestion in the text of the Christian framework, through the motif of belief in heaven and hell, the presence of writers to give authority to their texts, and the representation of the daisy and Alceste. The narrator anxiously tries to stabilize all these things by affirming his belief in heaven and hell and written authority, and establishing a firm symbolic relationship between Alceste and the daisy. Lacan's model of the relationship between signifier and signified, as two sets of sliding chains of meaning, provides us with a better model for understanding the textual relations of the Prologue than de Saussure's original proposition, which shows a fixed relationship between two elements.

Ferdinand de Saussure's model of the linguistic sign is composed of a signifier, phonetically or visually embodied, and a signified, the conceptual component (de Saussure, pp.10-14). Linguistic signs are only intelligible within a signifying system. Their meaning is reliant on their perceived difference from other signs within that system.

Following Lacan, we can apply this model to the literary text as well (Lacan, pp.80-106). The surface content is analogous to the signifier, and the meaning to be extrapolated by the reader takes up the position of the

signified. Lacan, however, resists the neat formula of de Saussure's sign, preferring to talk of a sliding chain of signifieds beneath a chain of signifiers, to emphasize the fluid rather than the fixed nature of signification (Grosz, p.95). That this is an appropriate metaphor for the textual relationships within the G Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* will become clear.

The F and the G Prologues share a similar opening. Until line fifty, where they diverge, there are only minor differences in expression. An impression of restlessness builds up in this opening section, as the narrator rattles through two themes very quickly. Both of these themes can be considered as signifiers on the surface of the text, and the presence of a signified for each is implied by the narrator's evident desire to establish an authoritative standpoint.

The narrator initially affirms his belief in an article of faith: "A thousand sythes have I herd men telle/That there is joye in hevene and peyne in helle,/And I acorde wel that it be so;" (G 1-3)³. Not only does he accept this proposition, but we are specifically told that he accepts it on the authority of other men. This invokes clerical discourse, which is predicated on the presence of God and the existence of the spiritual world. The narrator takes a supremely textual view of religion. If the debate about the existence of heaven and hell is the signifier, then the implied signified is the presence of God, which we assume is invoked in order to stabilize the meaning of the text.

³ See also F 1-3. All quotations from the works of Chaucer are from Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer* 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

If this early reference to religious matters were the only one, it would be slender evidence that God is invoked as an implied signified. But as we shall see, religious imagery constantly recurs on the surface of the text. In his discussion of the nature of authoritative writing, the narrator uses the name of God to give emphasis to what he is saying: "Goddess forbode" (G 10)⁴ and "God wot" (F 14, G 14). The narrator's casual use of the name of God is part of his evasive strategy to simultaneously affirm and deny the implication that God is a signified for the text.

"Bernard the monk" (F 16, G 16), St. Bernard, one of the great religious thinkers, is referred to as a purely epistemological example, after the shift of the discourse into the philosophical mode at line 10. Religious imagery surfaces when we are asked to believe "the doctryne of these olde wyse" (G 19)⁵, and "holynesse" (F 22, G 22) is one of the subjects of the writing of these old wise men. The narrator claims to have "reverence" for books in both Prologues (F 32, G 31) and for the daisy in the F Prologue only (F 52). Further on we have a creation reference in both Prologues (F 286, G 189) and the ironic allusion in the G Prologue to the misogynistic St Jerome, in the God of Love's list of authorities (G 281).

Religious imagery is mixed with the discourse of courtly love in the presentation of the daisy. In addition, religious imagery features in the legends, in conjunction with the hagiographic narrative model, and the

⁴ See also F 10.

⁵ See also F 19. "Wyse" refers to wise men.

Christian God and the religious framework of which God is the symbol are juxtaposed with the classical deities and the religious world-view of antiquity.

It is clear, however, by the very obliqueness of the narrator's reference to God, that if the narrator intends to use God as a signified to stabilize the text and provide it with a field of meaning within which it can be interpreted, he will need to be less elusive. By raising the issue and then moving on immediately to a related one, he seems to be going off at a tangent. There is no smooth logic to follow in the first forty lines, merely a jerky introduction to matters which seem to have little to do with the later content of the dream vision.

At line four, the narrator raises the question of the epistemological sources of the information given about heaven and hell. He soon drops his original subject to focus on the methodology of knowledge instead, concluding that we should rely on books where no other proof is possible. Although the initial emphasis is on books, at line 83 in the G Prologue the focus changes to belief in "authorities." In the God of Love's accusation of the narrator in the G Prologue, he focuses very much on the names of individual authors, appealing to their wisdom. Written texts are the signifier for the issue of authoritative writing, and the posited presence of their authors is the implied signified.

The narrator's model for authoritative texts considers that a text is validated because of the presence of its writer. Exclusive pronouns in the first few

lines emphasize that knowledge and epistemological debate are the preserve of men:

But Goddes forbode but men shulde leve
Wel more thyng than men han seyn with ye!
Men shal nat wenen every thyng a lye
For that he say it nat of yore ago. (G 10-13)⁶

It is no surprise that the issue to be treated in the greatest depth by the masculine authorities in this text is the representation of women. In a paradigm of knowledge and the production of texts such as the narrator's, those who are excluded from the signifying process must be portrayed by someone else who has access to it.

The theme of written authority is accorded more attention by the narrator than the issue of the existence of heaven and hell and by implication the Christian spiritual framework of meaning. However, it too is apparently dismissed from the surface of the text in favour of the narrator's spring-time occupation of worshipping the daisy. Written authority, however, is revived from time to time as a conscious concern, for example in the narrator's relationship with the courtly poets from whom he quotes in the Prologues, the writers mentioned by the God of Love, and the authors of the sources used by the narrator in writing the legends. It adds to the narrator's anxiety as a producer of a text, as he tries to establish his own authority for his writing in the light of the respect he grants to other texts and their producers.

⁶ See also F 10-13.

The G Prologue deals with the theme of written authority more deeply than the F Prologue, which is dominated in the first half by the narrator's affection for the daisy. Both the themes introduced initially in the Prologues are worked out in the narrator's altercation with the God of Love, particularly in the G Prologue, and the legends, as the narrator searches for the implied signifieds they seem to offer. As part of the narrator's project, he aims to express his version of reality in writing. Unable to do this smoothly, his reliance on literary convention and fictions of presence is exposed within his own text.

To understand the way in which the implied signifieds of the presence of God and the presence of the authors function in the text, it is helpful to compare them with the search for the signified of the most spectacular signifier in the text; the daisy. Intertextually, the daisy is modelled on the French courtly *marguerite* poetry. In that genre, the daisy was a substitute for a particular courtly lady, so the signified for it in the poem was the presence of a real or imagined courtly beloved.

The signified of the narrator's daisy cannot be reduced to such a simple formula. Lowes, in tracing the sources of the Prologues to the *Legend of Good Women*, finds quotations from Guillaume de Machaut's *Dit de la marguerite*, Froissart's *Dittié de la flour et de la Margherite*, *Paradys d'Amours* and *Le joli mois de mai* and Eustache Deschampes' *Lay de Franchise* (Lowes, "The Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* as related to the French *Marguerite* Poems and the *Filostrato*," p.616), revealing the importance of the theme of the substitution of the daisy for a courtly lady. This is apparently borne out when Alceste comes into the poem and is

associated with the daisy: "For al the world, ryght as the dayesye/Ycoroured is with white leves lite,/Swiche were the floures of hire coroune white." (G 150-153). However, the imagery surrounding the daisy is more complicated than a substitution for one courtly woman. The imagery in the F Prologue is even more diffuse than in the G Prologue, but there are still sufficient contradictions within the G Prologue to call the simple equivalence of the daisy with Alceste into question.

Religious imagery, particularly that normally reserved for the Virgin Mary, is used to describe the daisy. This occurs in both Prologues, but is strengthened in the G Prologue, as the simile in the F Prologue becomes a metaphor:

As she that is of alle floures flour,
 Fulfilled of al vertu and honour, (F 53-54)
 This dayesye, of alle floures flour,
 Fulfyld of vertu and of alle honour, (G 55-56)

This imagery is reminiscent of the *Invocacio ad Mariam* of the *Second Nun's Prologue*, which describes Mary as "flour of virgines" (CT VIII 29). At line 416 in the G Prologue, Alceste mentions "the lyf also of Seynt Cecile" as one of the works which the narrator has composed, so we can assume that it had been written at this point, although not yet subsumed into the wider project of the *Canterbury Tales*. By placing this image here, the narrator conjures up the connotations of the elaborate imagery used to represent Mary in religious discourse. As we can see in the comparison with the *Second Nun's Prologue*, this imagery often focused on virginity.

This disjunction in the representation of the daisy symbol, part of the courtly code of love, which saw women as the object of chivalric and erotic devotion, and the religious discourse around Mary, stressing her purity and virginity, is the first of many such discontinuities of imagery and form in the poem. In the legends, such ruptures in the textual systems of signification, and the narrator's participation in them, are focused around the representation of women in female saints' legends. The imagery of virgins devoted to God conflicts with both the courtly imagery used to represent the heroines, and the classical stories in which the women are endlessly faithful in love.

A religious image in the F Prologue seems to provide encouragement for the synthesis of the codes of courtly love and religion:

With dredful hert and glad devocioun
For to ben at the resureccioun
Of this flour, whan that yt shulde uncloze
Agayn the sonne... (F 109-112)

Because of Alceste's symbolism as a type of Christ, which we shall examine in this chapter, at least one critic has been tempted to combine the daisy and Alceste as the Christ symbol for the religion of love (Martin, p.199). This approach neglects the lack of continuity between the daisy and Alceste, and therefore falsifies the relationship between them, as well as distorting the contrast between courtly and Christian images.

Two incidents which occur as part of the appearance of the God of Love, hand-in-hand with Alceste, strengthen the connection of the daisy with Alceste in the G Prologue. However, in the F Prologue, the associations of

the daisy are much looser, and link the daisy to the God of Love as well. By limiting the implications of the daisy as a symbol in the G Prologue, the problem of locating its signified is not solved, but the issues are focused more clearly.

In the F Prologue, the narrator sings the *Balade*, with the refrain "My lady cometh" (F 249-269). Then the nineteen ladies who accompany the God of Love and Alceste kneel in front of the daisy and sing:

"Heel and honour
To trouthe of womanhede, and to this flour
That bereth our alder pris in figurynge!
Hire white corowne bereth the witnessynge." (F 296-299)

This proclamation of the daisy as the symbol of the truth and honour of womanhood is linked only indirectly with Alceste, through the white crown. These lines are cut in the G Prologue, where the ladies dance around the flower, singing the narrator's *Balade* and substituting "Alceste is here" (G 203-223) for the narrator's earlier refrain. Alceste is therefore more clearly associated with the daisy in this version.

An attempt to use the daisy as the God of Love's flower in the F Prologue is cut in the G Prologue. The narrator is noticed by the God of Love when he is kneeling by the daisy:

..."What dostow her
So nygh myn ounne floure, so boldely?
Yt were better worthy, trewely,
A worm to neghen ner my flour than thow...
Yt is my relyke, digne and delytable,

And thow my foo, and al my folk werreyest..." (F 315-318, 321-322)

"Relyke" is a word normally used for the treasured body parts of saints, preserved in elaborate containers. This provides a link with the forthcoming saints' legends. The God of Love casts the narrator in the role of a sinner, unworthy to approach the quasi-religious trappings of courtly love. Alceste continues this imagery when she says that he has been given "grace" (F 478, G 468) and must do "penaunce" (G 469)⁷ for his actions.

At this point in the G Prologue, however, the daisy is cut altogether. The God of Love asks how the narrator dares to come into his presence, and says that it would be better for a worm to come into his sight than the narrator (G 241-244). By not associating the daisy with the God of Love in the G Prologue, the signified of the daisy remains elusive, but the issues raised are around the representation of women through different codes, rather than the wider field of associations raised in the F Prologue.

We have seen the signifier of the daisy operating within the signifying systems of courtly love and religious imagery, particularly in connection with the representation of women. A classical dimension is provided by the association of the daisy with Alceste, strengthened in the G Prologue as we have seen. But this relationship is not straightforward. The narrator misses Alceste's self-identification (F 432, G 422) and has to be told by the God of Love who she is. His response is:

Now knowe I hire. And is this good Alceste,
The dayesye, and myn owene hertes reste?

⁷ See also F 479.

... Wel hath she quit me myn affecioun

That I have to hire flour, the dayesye. (G 506-507, 511-512)⁸

In the search for the signified of the daisy, Alceste seems to fit the bill perfectly.

Immediately before this, however, the God of Love returns us to the issue which opened the Prologue, about the existence of heaven and hell, and by implication the Christian spiritual framework. He narrates briefly the story of Alceste, derived through Latin versions from Euripides' play *Alcestis*. Alceste is the epitome of a faithful wife. Her husband, Admetus, is offered a reprieve from death if he can find someone to die in his place. Alceste is the only one who is prepared to do so. Heracles (Hercules) goes to the Underworld and rescues her.

The problem with the God of Love's retelling of the story is that he himself is a classical construction, and he narrates a classical story, but from a Christian perspective. The debate about heaven and hell in the opening passage is closely linked to Christian doctrinal authorities and the clerical tradition. In the God of Love's version, Hercules, another classical figure, rescues Alceste "out of helle ageyn to blys" (G 504). This implies a Christian dichotomy, in which hell is a place of punishment, instead the conception of the Underworld as a place of shadows. Both Hercules and Alceste can be seen as types of Christ, who was believed in the medieval period to have undertaken the Harrowing of Hell between his death and resurrection.

⁸ See also F 518-519, 523-524.

The unsettling juxtapositions of these codes makes it difficult to assign any one signified to the signifier of the daisy. Associated in the G Prologue with the representation of women, the daisy is used in too many different contexts, and becomes overdetermined. Likewise Alceste is at once courtly queen and faithful wife, in league with the God of Love and a sacrificial image of Christ. Here Lacan's model of the signifieds, which slide in a chain beneath the chain of signifiers, becomes useful, to show the relationship between signifiers and signifieds as fluid rather than fixed.

When we look back at the signifiers and signifieds of the themes introduced in the opening lines, we see that there is no fixed signified for the daisy, because it symbolises too many things at once. Likewise, the implied signifieds of the presence of God and the authoritative writers are suggested by the way the issues are raised in the text, but textual strategies then work against their establishment as signifieds. In particular, the multiplicity of religious imagery, and the way in which Christian religious imagery is challenged by the existence of the classical religious alternative, works against enlisting God as a stabilizing principle for the text.

Correspondingly, the presence of authors to give meaning and validity to their texts is implicitly questioned by the substitution of books for authors, the varying uses to which textual authority can be put, and last but not least by the inability of the narrator to establish his own presence for his text. The construction of the narrator's persona in the Prologues and the legends can be seen as the history of his attempt to represent himself and his presence for the text. Through his anxiety, the narrator demonstrates his insecurity about his identity and his textual authority.

Part of the narrator's anxiety is that he is a gendered subject. A masculine narrator, he needs to represent women for the sake of his own masculine identity and his position as a speaking subject within the masculine order of discourse. These women become symbols for the narrator's treatment of the cultural qualities of femininity, just as his attempt to establish his masculine identity has wider resonances for the cultural implications of masculinity than mere biological determinism. Eventually we will see him representing women in the way that Alceste and the daisy are represented, according to the conflicting codes of courtly, religious and classical imagery.

The themes which are introduced in the Prologues soon give way to the more usual conventions of the dream-vision. However, they set the tone for the juxtaposition of codes, which reveals the instability of the implied signifieds for the signifiers in the text. The resultant search for stability and an accepted framework of meaning fuels the narrator's drive to find a system of representation for women and a way to create his own identity within the text.

Chapter Two

"These Olde Wyse": The Narrator and Written Authority.

The nature of written authority, raised at the start of both Prologues to the *Legend of Good Women*, is particularly important for the construction of the narrative persona in the G Prologue, as it stimulates the narrator in the production of his own text, yet causes him anxiety when he attempts to rely on the presence of authors to give credibility to their texts. From Donald E. Pearse we see that the author was a cultural authority figure in medieval times, and we can interpret Alceste and the God of Love as ambiguous authority figures on whom the narrator attempts to rely. The separation of the narrative persona from the author-function is crucial for the understanding of the double ironic perspective of the poem. The multiplicity of texts which are named by the God of Love, and taken out of context by him, and also of texts which form the Chaucerian canon and are intertextually related to the *Legend of Good Women*, undermine the narrator's attempts to stabilize the nature of written authority for himself. Firstly, however, we will examine the nature of the double ironic perspective, and how it relies on the separation of the narrative persona from the author-function.

Although it is now a commonplace of modern critical practice to separate the narrative persona from the author-function, the *Legend of Good Women* is a poem peculiarly susceptible to critical confusion of the two, as the narrator presents himself as the author not only of this text but also of others in the Chaucerian canon. This fiction has become part of Chaucerian

mythology. Some older critics such as Coghill even assert as fact that Chaucer wrote the poem for Queen Anne in response to court criticism of the misogyny of *Troilus and Criseyde* (Coghill, pp.12-13).

To understand the irony and the complexity of both the narrator's and the author's relationship with written authority, it is necessary to distinguish between author and narrator, recognizing that the narrator uses irony against the heroines as part of his characterisation, while the author uses irony around the figure of the narrator. In making this distinction, I am indebted to Roland Barthes, who asserted the anonymity of written language and its dispersal of identity:

...Writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing. (Barthes, p.168).

Michel Foucault's response to Barthes was that the subject is created in and through language rather than being the locus of its meaning:

In short, it is a matter of depriving the subject (or its substitute) of its role as originator, and of analyzing the subject as a variable and complex function of discourse. (Foucault p.209).

In distinguishing between author and narrator, Barthes' comment negates any attempt to produce hypotheses about the "real-life" author Chaucer from the evidence of the poem. Foucault's point shows us that the persona of the narrator is a fiction created for us by the text, and that this is part of the source of the narrator's anxiety. He wants to believe that he is creating an authoritative text, like those he cites at the beginning of the Prologues,

yet he is reduced to being a function of the text, controlled by it rather than being in control.

The separation of author-function from narrator-function relates to the double ironic perspective of the poem. The first level of irony is constructed by the persona of the narrator through his textual strategies. He refers to sources which undermine his assertions of the goodness of the heroines and reduces the potential narrative impact of the stories to control both the text and its representations of femininity. In his desperate effort to construct definitively good women, he mixes up the usual codes for portraying women, so that he represents them simultaneously as courtly ladies, classical heroines and female saints. This subverts the whole attempt to define the good woman by example, as the boundaries of the different categories by which women can be judged shift constantly.

Elaine Tuttle Hansen believes the irony to be intentional on the part of the author, describing the author-function as a "gendered agency" which is "dispersed and fragmentary" (Hansen, *Fictions of Gender*, p. 25). The narrator does not suspect the second level of irony around his own figure. His portrayal as a comically anxious and covertly misogynistic writer, whose insecurities are fuelled by the tension between his reliance on old books and his desire to create a persona for himself through writing, provides the reader with a wider perspective on the first person voice than is possible for that voice to experience or represent.

This raises the question of how we account for the author-function of Chaucer in terms of the rest of the Chaucerian canon. In other works, such

as *Troilus and Criseyde*, both intentional irony and the distancing of the author-function from the narrative persona can be clearly seen. These issues become even more important for this poem, however, when the "Seintes Legende of Cupide" is used by other Chaucerian narrators in different contexts.

In the reference to the "Seintes Legende of Cupide" (CT II 61) in the Introduction to the *Man of Law's Tale*, the Man of Law asserts how difficult it will be for him to tell a tale that has not already been told by "Chaucer." The *Legend of Good Women* is part of the description of the vast number of tales which "Chaucer" has "seyd hem in swich Englissh as he kan" (CT II 49). This joke clearly separates the author-function from the narrator-function.

Unfortunately, the Man of Law does not seem to know the "large volume" (CT II 60) well at all, as he includes several characters who are mentioned in the *Balade* but do not have individual legends written about them, Erro (Hero) and her male counterpart Leandre, Eleyne (Helen), Ladomya, Penelopee and Alceste, who is in a special category, and three who do not appear in the *Balade* or the legends, Dianire, Hermyon and Brixseyde, forerunner of Criseyde. In addition, Cleopatra and Philomela are left out of the Introduction. The Man of Law gives false information about Medea, implying that "Chaucer" had written of: "The crueltee of the, queene Medea,/Thy litel children hangyng by the hals," (CT II 72-73), which the narrator of the legends only mentions as part of Hypsipyle's curse. In addition, the Man of Law falsely claims that "Chaucer" did not include Canacee, who does appear in the *Balade*, although he correctly says that the

daughter of Antiochus whose father committed incest with her was not mentioned by "Chaucer."

This confusion is further compounded by the reference in the *Retraction* at the end of the *Canterbury Tales*, as part of his "translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees", to "the book of the XXV. Ladies" (CT X 1084,1085). The status and interpretation of the *Retraction* is a contentious issue. If it does attempt to represent the unmediated intentions of the author it is perhaps the only passage in the entire canon to do so. A more fruitful line of inquiry for our present purposes is the fact that if the number of the heroines of the legends (ten) is added to the number of women mentioned in the *Balade*, including Alceste in the G Prologue, who do not also have legends written for them (eleven) and the number of women mentioned in the Introduction to the *Man of Law's Tale* who have not already been named, including Antiochus' daughter who we are specifically told is not included (four), then we have reached the magic number of twenty five ladies.

This posits a fictional text, constructed intertextually within the canon, about which we are told conflicting things, but of which we are given only tantalizing fragments or descriptions. As a game, this seems to me to be similar to the playful way in which the narrators of the *Legend of Good Women* and *Troilus and Criseyde* tell us to go and read the original source for more information, when that original does not always exist. In other words, a complex point about the nature of written authority is made. Its semblance can be assumed for the benefit of the author engaged in constructing a new text. The Man of Law is showing off his learning, both of Chaucerian texts and of the sources used in their construction. But we

cannot rely on what he says without checking the different texts to which he refers.

Similarly, merely by talking about the "book of the XXV. Ladies," the narrator of the *Retraction* somehow makes us feel that he has actually written one, when in fact he has dispersed the ladies over two different texts instead of gathering them up into a conceptual unity. The narrator of the *Retraction* also works on the assumption that it is possible to retract literary works like sins if necessary. This comes close to the accusations made against the narrator of the *Legend of Good Women*. It indicates that, like so many other Chaucerian passages, the *Retraction* is not the straightforward piece of intentional narrative it purports to be.

Even the intertextual references to the *Legend of Good Women* in other canonical works do not help us to construct an authorial persona, beyond strengthening the belief that the irony in the poem is intentional. However, the narrative persona manages to give a convincing portrayal of authorship. The Prologue in both versions can be seen as an elaborately overdetermined myth of origins, an attempt to provide the text with both an author's presence and an occasion when it was constructed. This can be seen in the different endings to the F and G Prologues, which stress both the textual orientation of the legends and the apparent circumstances of their composition.

The major difference between the endings is that in the F Prologue, the legends are begun within the frame of the dream-vision, but in the G Prologue, there is a clear distinction between the ending of the dream-vision

and the beginning of the process of writing the legends. However, both endings share an inbuilt inconsistency. The Prologue is unlikely to have been written down before the legends, given the immediacy of both statements. However, as the *Legend of Hypermnestra* is supposedly unfinished, it seems not to be credible that the Prologue be written by the narrator after the legends. This imparts an atmosphere of the narrator's anxiety of paternity towards the text. By his very insistence on his status as a constructor of the text, and by specifying the conditions under which it was written, we are inadvertently reminded of the fact that he is a character in the text rather than its controlling author.

The impression that the Prologue conveys the narrator's experiences, without his having to write them down, means that in the G Prologue, where the narrator awakes before writing the legends, our different expectations of the legends as constructed literary artefacts are manipulated, while somehow we take the dream-vision Prologue on trust. However, the dispersal of the illusory subject which we have seen as a function of writing ensures that ultimately, neither Prologue nor legends are privileged with authorial presence.

As well as understanding the postmodern tendency of Barthes and Foucault to dissolve the authorial subject into a textual construction, to comprehend the dynamics of the narrator's reliance on textual authority we need to understand the medieval conception of the author as far as we can. Donald E. Pearse traces the development of the term (Pearse, p.105), which was used interchangeably as "auctour" or "autour," both to be found in the *Legend of Good Women*. The auctour or autour was part of the tradition of cultural

authority. Protectors of knowledge, their works were consulted to allegorize natural phenomena and everyday experiences within a religious and philosophical framework.

This cultural background helps us to understand the narrator's supposed self-portrayal of his complex relationship to the authority of auctours and their texts. He affirms this model with his passion for old books, but undermines the possibility of its smooth operation by exposing the absence of the auctours from their texts, with the denial of the possibility that the textual signifier can accurately represent the signified.

This tension between his desire to discover textual fathers and his wish to establish his own gendered identity by representing his own experience in writing, without reference to cultural authority, structures his anxiety in dealing with the text, particularly in terms of the representation of women. I have already described this in part as the anxiety of paternity. This metaphor can now be extended to include performance anxiety as well. The ambiguity of the narrator in relation to his own writing manifests itself as a desire to dominate the text and the images of women which it presents, and as a fear of his inability to do so.

It is no accident that it is the representation of women which is the narrator's greatest challenge. To establish firmly his own identity, he needs an opposite with which to contrast himself. Elaine Tuttle Hansen identifies this as the fear of the masculine subject being undifferentiated from the feminine and therefore at risk as a stable category (Hansen, "Feminization of Men," p.66). This plausibly explains part of the narrator's anxiety, and why

the representation of women is crucial to him. His anxiety, however, is also strongly linked to his own textual reproduction in the light of authoritative texts. Thus when he tries to establish a stable feminine gender identity in written representation, he is reduced to calling on all the literary conventions for representing women; conventions which conflict in their expectations of the feminine subject.

In the Prologues the ambiguity around the representation of women is focused on Alceste and the daisy, as we saw in the first chapter of this thesis. The narrator's personal implication in it, is even clearer when we see his involvement with the stories and heroines of the legends. The other root cause of the narrator's anxiety is also evident in the Prologues, where we find a cyclical pattern of the narrator's assertion of reliance on books and then doubting his ability to represent his own reality in writing.

In the epistemological debate of the opening lines, it is significant that the narrator appears to affirm books: "Wel oughte us thanne on olde bokes leve,/There as there is non other assay by preve." (G 27-28). After this pronouncement, however, he denigrates his own abilities, utilising the rhetorical modesty topos for psychological purposes as well: "And as for me, though that my wit be lite,/ On bokes for to rede I me delyte," (G 29-30). This stresses his personal reliance on cultural authority. However, he immediately cites spring as something which has the ability to take him away from his books: "Farwel my stodye, as lastynge that sesoun!" (G 39).⁹ This attitude conflicts with the one just cited. He has now presented his

⁹ See also F 27-30, 39.

respect for books but also his ambivalence about his own abilities as well as his occasional reluctance to read books.

With the employment of courtly literature motifs such as May, the birds and the flowers, the focus, as we have seen, is on the narrator's writing, and here again his discomfort surfaces: "Fayn wolde I preysen, if I coude aryght;/But wo is me, it lyth nat in my myght." (G 59-60). This portrayal of his own narrative inadequacy contrasts with his attempts to do the thing he says he cannot, using the mixture of codes outlined in the previous chapter.

The claim made by the narrator, that he is unable to praise the daisy sufficiently due to his own lack of skill, is followed by a passage which acknowledges the abilities of courtly love poets. The emphasis on their literary skill is different in focus to that contained in the F Prologue, which addresses "Ye lovers that kan make of sentement;" (F 69). A shift in pronouns to the third person qualifies this statement to:

For wel I wot that folk han here-beforn
 Of makyng ropen, and lad away the corn;
 [And] I come after, glenyng here and there,
 And am ful glad if I may fynde an ere
 Of any goodly word that they han left.
 And if it happe me rehersen eft
 That they han in here freshe songes said,
 I hope that they wole nat ben evele apayd,
 Sith it is seyde in fortheryng and honour
 Of hem that eyther serven lef or flour. (G61-70)

The narrator erects an elaborate defence of what he claims is his own tendency to follow in the footsteps of other writers. The ironic subtext to this is the presence of many phrases borrowed from French courtly sources for the Prologue (Lowes, "The Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* as Related to the French *Marguerite* Poems and the *Filostrato*, pp.593-658). By claiming that his "glenynge" is for the benefit of lovers, the narrator attempts to justify his actions. His need to come up with a justification at all indicates his awareness of and ambivalence about his reliance on courtly models for his writing.

The crux of the G Prologue in terms of written authority comes shortly after this section:

But wherfore that I spak, to yeve credence
 To bokes olde and don hem reverence,
 Is for men shulde autoritees beleve,
 There as there lyth non other assay by preve.
 For myn entent is, or I fro yow fare,
 The naked text in English to declare
 Of many a story, or elles of many a geste,
 As autours seyn; leveth hem if yow leste. (G 81-88)

This is the most explicit attempt to make clear the connection between the substitution of old books for their culturally privileged authors, and the narrator's own writing project. However it also contains a crucial inconsistency. The first four lines assert the primacy of authority, without evidential proof, but the last line enables the reader to choose whether or not he or she believes the narrator's version of what autours say. This radically contradicts the narrator's attempt to set up texts as reliable

distributors of knowledge, on behalf of their producers. It also calls into question the status of his own text, as he seems not to claim for it the cultural authority which he grants to the texts of other people.

By claiming his ability to produce "the naked text in English," the narrator invokes the assumption that such a thing is possible. Sheila Delany has remarked on the ambiguity of the phrase, which could refer to a literal translation, a rhetorically unadorned text or a text without glosses, to mention only some of the possibilities (Delany, "Naked Text," p.290). In emphasising the vernacular language, when most of the sources are in Latin, the narrator posits his ability to produce a text which conveys the words of the "autours." This makes it all the more puzzling that he cannot guarantee its authenticity for the reader.

There is another fallacy in this statement, however, and that is the narrator's assumption that by declaring his intentions, he can somehow influence the reader's interpretation of the text. This is the first of many attempts to control the production of meaning in a way that is ultimately futile, as the narrator seems almost to concede by not claiming the full privilege for his intentions that he willingly grants other texts. This uncertainty about imposing his own project on the reader reveals the ambiguity of his convictions.

The narrator's anxiety about his writing performance and the difficulty of his attempts to establish his own identity through narrative are both highlighted in his contacts with the God of Love and Alceste. They become contradictory authority figures who try to impose on the narrator their own

interpretation of his texts, which is that they are misogynistic. A cross-current is established, as the narrator's representation of them as figures in his text becomes confused with their response to his writing. His controlling position as the first-person "I" of the narrative is challenged.

Pearse considers the feudal monarch to be the consummate medieval auctour, able by his claim of divine authority to interpret his own actions and desires in the allegorical framework espoused by the auctours of theological learning, sanctioning in turn their cultural authority (Pearse, pp.106-107). The God of Love can be seen in this context as a tyrannical figure who claims the right to interpret the narrator's work and pin down its meaning. In this way he attempts to make himself into a cultural auctour. The narrator's attitude to the God of Love demonstrates the narrator's subservience to authority in the hope of himself becoming authoritative, yet suffering from tyranny in the meantime.

Arbitrary judgements are made by the God of Love, and we mistrust the charges made against the narrator because they demonstrate simplistic readings applied in an authoritarian way. The narrator's literary "heresy" (F 330, G 256) is closely related to the matter of translation. Echoing the narrator's promise of a "naked text" in the vernacular, the God of Love says: "For in pleyn text, it nedeth nat to glose,/Thow hast translated the Romauns of the Rose," (G 254-255)¹⁰ and "Hast thow nat mad in Englysh ek the bok/How that Crisseyde Troylus forsok,/In shewynge how that wemen han don mis?" (G 264-266). The limitation of the God of Love's interpretation of

¹⁰ See also F 328-329.

the "pleyn text" is that he only pays attention to substance, not style, which falsifies the interpretation of the text as it does not take irony, tone or point of view into account.

The God of Love also has no hesitation in invoking St. Jerome, who was part of the misogynistic tradition, as the only women he praised were virgins. This raises a tension between martyrdom and virginity with regard to the definition of female saints. In the early stages of the development of the Christian faith, martyrdom was seen as the best way for the faithful to imitate as closely as possible the suffering of Christ. This was reflected in the production of hagiographic narrative. However, once Christianity was adopted as the religion of the Roman Empire, persecution was much less common, and virginity in imitation of Christ and Mary became the most acceptable way for followers to show their true dedication (Heffernan, pp.252-253).

The combination of virginity and martyrdom was not only possible but frequently cited, as we see in the examples from St Jerome at lines 286-304 in the G Prologue, and in Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale* on the life of St. Cecilia. But the God of Love remains inconsistent, quoting sources which only praise women who remain celibate, and then citing Ovid's *Heroides*, where the heroines die from an excess of love rather than an excess of chastity. Next he mentions Vincent de Beauvais' *Speculum Historiale*, which recounts the stories of women whom Vincent considered to be historical, including Cleopatra as well as various female saints (W.K. Wimsatt jr., pp. 376-377). This fatally flawed combination set up by the God

of Love prepares us for the representation of women through conflicting codes in the legends.

Alceste, an ambiguous authority figure whose role is even less clear than that of the God of Love, suggests several reasons why the narrator may be innocent. She links this defence of him with her lecture to the God of Love on the duties of a good ruler. Although this has been seen as an attempt to mediate between the other two figures (Peck, p.46) it is a peculiarly ineffective one. In her own way she is as emphatic and unwilling to listen, as is the God of Love.

Her defence of the narrator is also problematic. Firstly, she thinks up contradictory reasons as to why he may not be guilty, then she settles on the unflattering, and unlikely, assumption that he translated without knowing what he was doing. This would make the narrator not only naive, but a bad translator. She cuts across the narrator's defence, yet he is forced to be grateful to her, and it is she who gives him his restricting and difficult task, to write the legends, focusing on the representation of good women who are faithful in love.

The narrator himself comes up with a defence of intentionality:

For that I of Criseyde wrot or tolde,
Or of the Rose; what so myn auctour mente,
Algate, God wot, it was myn entente
To forthere trouthe in love and it cheryce,
And to be war fro falsnesse and fro vice

By swich ensaumples; this was my menyng. (G 459-464)¹¹

By claiming his ability to define both his intention and the meaning of the work, the narrator tries to control his text. He is anxious when confronted by authority figures who challenge his right to determine this meaning, in favour of their own right to do so.

He implies that either he or his authoritative source is able to provide through their intentions a stable location from which the meaning of the text can be produced. But this claim is undermined by the use of the phrase "myn auctour" in connection with the two works in question. The *Romance of the Rose* has two authors, Guillaume de Lorris, a courtly writer, and Jean de Meun, who was at the centre of a controversy during the period in which the *Legend of Good Women* was written about whether or not his work was misogynistic (Ames, p.59). This obviously makes it difficult to claim that the Rose had one author with a clearly decipherable intention.

The narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde* invents an author: "As writ myn auctour called Lollius," (TC I 394). There are several sources which Chaucer uses for the poem, such as Boccaccio's *Filostrato*, Benoit de Saint-Maure's *Roman de Troie*, Guido delle Colonne's *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, Ovid and Virgil (Benson, *History of Troy*, pp.134-135), but the claim made for Lollius is that exact translation is possible:

But plainly, save oure tonges difference,
I dar wel seyn, in al, that Troilus

¹¹ See also F 469-474.

Seyde in his song, loo, every word right thus

As I shal seyn; (TC I 395-398)

This intertextual reference contrasts with the narrator of the *Legend's* claim to have a different intention from his auctour. However, because it is ironically designed to alert the reader to the impossibility of the *Troilus* narrator's assertion, it also challenges the very existence of the narrator of the *Legend's* auctour. If there is no one reliable auctour for *Troilus* and *Criseyde*, then the narrator of the *Legend* cannot appeal to such an auctour's intentions as a defence.

The narrator's anxious defence of authorial intention, when challenged by authoritative figures, indicates his desire to establish the meaning of his work, instead of allowing it to be established again and again by the interpretation of individual readers. His defence is an attempt to give his own work the prior authoritative status which he began by attributing to others. But it is only his presence which enables him to do this. Once his text is distributed, the narrator will have no chance to defend his work or his intentions, and must rely instead on the unpredictable dissemination of the meaning of the text.

For both the narrator and the God of Love, the issues of written authority and the narrator's right and ability, or lack thereof, to construct his own text, are focused most clearly when it comes to representing women. As a male critic, the God of Love relies on the constructions and codes of other auctours to represent women, and challenges the narrator because his representations are not perceived to be the same. His argument focuses on literary representations, implicit in his instructions to the narrator to

portray women according to a selective understanding of the sources he mentions.

Even as he pleads his good intentions for his portrayal of women in other works, the narrator is faced with the complicated challenge of trying to define good women in this one. This project is intimately bound up with his anxiety about his ability to engage in textual production, because of his conception of texts which stand in for their authoritative writers. We have seen his problems in representing the daisy symbol and Alceste, and his inability to decide on any one interpretative framework to define their meaning, unsettling the reader's expectation of his right and ability to do so. I will go on to examine in further chapters the narrator's actions when faced with the problem of representing women in the legends, according to both authoritative sources and the authoritarian project laid out for him by Alceste and the God of Love in both versions of the Prologue.

Chapter Three

"Olde Stories": The narrator's use of sources

Nowhere is the narrator's complex relationship to written authority more clearly revealed than in his use of sources for the legends. Naturally, the persona of the narrator is a substitute for the author who has chosen what to retain and what to leave out, but this narrative persona sustains the fiction that he is writing the legends. The project originally suggested to him was to select and reproduce stories of good women. We have seen that the narrator's reliance on written authority is one of the causes of his anxiety as he tries to produce his own text. He dominates this text with his own struggle for a stable and gendered identity. This desire, closely associated with his writing project, is defined in opposition to his textual representations of femininity. Because of this, the narrator needs to retain control of his representations of femininity.

The narrator's selective manipulation of the sources ensures that only a censored version of the story is reproduced. He insists on authoritative sources for his texts, yet frequently departs from them, and combines stories from different genres into the same all-encompassing model, without regard for the forms of their sources. Just as the daisy and Alceste were represented according to different and conflicting codes, the women of the legends have their classical origins juxtaposed with courtly and religious imagery, as part of the narrator's urgent quest to find a definitive image of a good woman. However, the attempt to represent women under these

conditions ultimately breaks down through this very multiplicity of images, calling the attempt to establish a stable framework of meaning into question.

One of the formal influences on the author of the *Legend of Good Women* was the folk tradition of hagiographic narrative. The legends or lives of saints developed their own characteristics. As part of an oral folk tradition, the genre had certain unique features, which are significant for the *Legend of Good Women*, such as the singular use of "Legend" for a collection of stories. Thomas J. Heffernan quotes Gregory of Tours on this point, as he prefers the singular *vita* to the plural *vitae*, even when discussing more than one life:

Unde manifestum est, melius dici vitam patrum quam vitas, quia, cum sit diversitas meritorum virtutumque, una tamen omnes vita corporis alit in mundo.

Whence it is clear that it is preferable to speak of the life of the fathers than lives, because, although there is a diversity of merit and virtue, in the world one life nourishes all bodies. (Heffernan, p.7)

This principle is applicable to female saints as well, who were considered to share in the one life of Christ. Doctrinally, this justified substantial borrowings from other saints' lives, as spiritual truth was believed to reside not in the individual particulars of each life but in the universal truth in which all could participate.¹² This feature of the saints' lives was the greatest

¹² This will be reflected in my thesis. When I refer to the "Legend", I refer to the whole work. Individual legends, however, are named, for example the *Legend of Dido*. But if I mention an

influence of hagiographic narrative on the form of the *Legend of Good Women*.

Two classical works which influence several of the legends are Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides*. As well as their contribution to the subject matter of the legends, both have an impact on the form of the collection. The *Metamorphoses*, Ovid's attempt to construct a definitive version of Greek and Roman mythology, has the metamorphosis, or change of state, as a single unifying theme. In the *Legend of Good Women*, the narrator strains his material to make it fit with the supposedly unifying principle of the unfailing faithfulness of women and falsity of men in love.

From the *Heroides*, a series of letters written by Ovid, purportedly from classical heroines to their faithless lovers, the legends derive part of their content, and their episodic, thematically organised structure, which brings disparate elements together. Elizabeth Harvey has commented perceptively on the way in which the Chaucerian narrator subverts Ovid's usurpation of feminine voice, by telling the legends in the masculine third person (Harvey, p.54). The women's first person voices are used only in brief conversational snatches or direct translations from the *Heroides*. This, along with constant references to Ovid himself, emphasises the fact that they were originally constructed by a masculine poet.

individual legend without its proper name attached it will not have a capital letter, appearing as a "legend."

The *Legend of Thisbe* is a close translation from Book IV of the *Metamorphoses*, but has also been influenced by the *Ovide Moralisé*, a twelfth century French lai with a fourteenth century moralization added (Delany, "Naked Text," p.276). One line has also been traced to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (Delany, Geoffrey of Monmouth, p.170). The most significant change from the *Metamorphoses* is the narrator's characteristic excision of the metamorphosis of the mulberry tree, which in the original version implies the pity of the gods, a stable mythical framework for the interpretation of the story and offers some kind of ongoing redemption for the hopelessness of the ending.

Another woman, who does not fit the paradigm outlined by Alceste, is named in the *Legend of Thisbe*. Semiramis, who built the town of Babylon, unsettles the prescriptive definition of the good woman who is faithful in love by any standards. She reputedly seized the throne from her husband King Ninus after cajoling him to let her rule for five days only, and had him imprisoned and killed. Johnstone Parr speculates from the mention of Semiramis in the *Man of Law's Tale* that Chaucer knew from Orosius' *Historia libri septum adversos paganos* of her unnatural sexual proclivities, such as her rumoured incest with her son. She appropriated his throne as well, on the grounds that he was too young to rule (Parr, p.59), subverting the masculine line of succession.

Semiramis is everything that Thisbe is not, and her name functions here as a subliminal textual reminder that for every example of a 'good' woman there is a counter-example of a 'bad' one. Similarly, the *Legend of Ariadne* uses the story of Scylla from *Metamorphoses VII*. Much of the action in this

legend is derived from the *Ovide Moralisé* as well (Meech, p.201) and its ending is from the *Heroides*, with Ariadne's complaint.

Scylla, who unlike Semiramis is never named in the legend, is the daughter of Nysus. The city of Alcathe, ruled by Nysus, is besieged by Ariadne's father Mynos to avenge the death of his son Androgeus, murdered in Athens as a student. Scylla betrays her father by cutting off the lock of hair which contains his life-force. In the *Metamorphoses*, she gives it to Mynos, expecting that in his gratitude he will marry her and take her with him. Mynos, approved by the narrator, is horrified at her act of betrayal and leaves without her. She swims after his ship, clinging to the boat, but is pursued by her father Nysus, who has been changed into an osprey. Letting go of the boat, she is about to drown, when the gods change her into a bird called a ciris.

This story is briefly retold in the *Legend of Ariadne*, with the crime condensed into the line: "She made Mynos wynnyn thilke place" (1915). Without the crime as a reason for spurning her, this becomes another example of an ungrateful and false man:

But wikkedly he quitte hire kyndenesse,
And let hire drenche in sorwe and distresse,
Nere that the goddes hadde of hire pite;
But that tale were to long as now for me. (1918-1921)

The narrator's unease about the reported metamorphosis in the source, again with the theme of the pity of the gods implying a stable interpretative framework, is revealed in his claim that the story is too long to go into. His frequent references to haste often cover up something which he is trying to

avoid. With painstaking care he makes Scylla's story conform to those of the other women (Meech, p.186), but her divergence from the pattern remains in the subtext, and works by association to destabilize Ariadne's position as a good woman. Scylla "stod upon the wal" (1908) to see Ariadne's father Mynos just as Ariadne and Phedra "stode on the wal" (1971) to listen to Theseus. Both women betray their fathers for the men they love and are rejected for their pains.

The *Legend of Philomela* comes from *Metamorphoses VI*, and is also thought to have been influenced indirectly by the *Ovide Moralisé* through Chrétien de Troyes' *Philomela*. The omission of the metamorphoses of Procne, Philomela and Tereus has a more serious effect on the legend than any of the other legends which have their metamorphoses cut. Both women are silenced by Tereus' behaviour in the legend, Philomela literally, as Tereus cuts out her tongue, and Procne figuratively, from grief.

By leaving out the grisly banquet of Procne and Tereus' son Itys, and the metamorphoses of Philomela into a nightingale, Procne into a swallow and Tereus into a hoopoe, the narrator protects the reputations of Procne and Philomela as good women, but also silences them as effectively as Tereus does. Elizabeth Harvey sees this as textual violence analogous to the violation of Philomela (Harvey, p.56), and this metaphor can be extended to include his betrayal of Procne as well. Despite the narrator's attempt to portray them as passively enduring good women who are faithful in love, it is Tereus' faithless behaviour that qualifies them for inclusion, rather than their reaction to it. More than any other legend, this highlights the impossible conflict of principle imposed on women by the totalizing

standard of Alceste and the God of Love, which demands that they remain faithful no matter what their lovers do to them. Of course, this only applies to Procne, not to Philomela.

For the *Legend of Hypsipyle and Medea*, *Metamorphoses* VII is but one source among many. The narrator refers in the legend to the *Heroides*, from which he uses VI and XII, the *Argonauticon* of Valerius Flaccus and Guido delle Colonne's *Historia Destructionis Troiae*. Statius' *Thebiad* and Hyginus' *Fabulae* are also possible sources. Tantalizingly, the narrator tries to promise the reader an original work as a reliable source, after describing Jason's prowess as a false lover: "Ye gete namore of me, but ye wole rede/Th'orygynal, that telleth al the cas." (1557-1558). By positing such a hypothetical original, and drawing the reader's attention to it, the narrator, while apparently relying on textual authority to back up his own account, draws attention to the multiplicity of sources, which denies absolute truth for the story.

The narrator's association of the two women in one legend, when the only thing connecting them is that both are betrayed by Jason, emphasizes the way in which his general principle has started to take over from the individual stories of the women. This reduces the threat which the variations in the individual women's stories pose to the narrator's gendered identity. The personal histories of the heroines are not as important as the fact that they have both been duped by the same man. In the case of Hypsipyle, the narrator leaves out the crime of the other Lemnian women, who killed their husbands for sleeping with other women, as if to protect the good name of women, but this overlooks both

the fact that Hypsipyle did not commit the crime, and that the other women were motivated by their husbands' betrayal. Medea's infamy as a child-killer to avenge herself on Jason is left out of her section of the legend, mentioned only in Hypsipyle's curse on her as a rival.

The *Legend of Dido* relies on the tension between two classical sources, Ovid's *Heroides VII* and Virgil's *Aeneid I-IV*. Because of their different form and tone, each produces a very different Dido. The narrator tries to combine these versions without processing their differences. This results in a legend with a hybrid structure.

Dido in the *Aeneid* is not merely marginalised as a woman in epic, a genre that relies largely on the activity of men in voyages and battle, but she represents a distraction for Aeneas from his quest to reach Italy so that his descendants can found Rome.¹³ For the narrator of the *Aeneid*, Dido is also marginalised by her nationality. She is not Roman or Trojan, but a Tyrian queen of Carthage.

Paradoxically, of course, the very tragedy of her expendability to the plot, which leads to her despairing suicide, is taken over by the narrator of the *Aeneid* and made into part of the epic. Her passionate self-destruction becomes domesticated as part of the inevitability of narrative. The Virgilian

¹³ Characters such as Aeneas/Eneas, whose names are different in the *Legend of Good Women* to the sources, will be referred to by the most common form of their name in the work under discussion. For example, Aeneas is the form used when the work in question is Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Eneas is used for discussion of the character in the *Legend of Dido*.

narrator refers to Aeneas as "The True" until he reaches Carthage, but withdraws this approving epithet while he is involved with Dido, bestowing it again once Aeneas leaves without her. This is in contrast to the narrator of the legend, who describes Eneas' "false teres" (1301) when he is on the verge of leaving Dido.

In the *Heroides* however, with Ovid's appropriation of the feminine voice, Dido is placed centrally in the text. Her first person narrative moves from reported speech in the *Aeneid* to an epistolary monologue, addressed to Aeneas, with no other narrative voice-over in the *Heroides*. Naturally, this is considerably more sympathetic to Dido than the *Aeneid*. But this generates the illusion that Dido herself is speaking, through the potential for authorial impersonation offered by the anonymity of written discourse.

By drawing attention to the fact that Dido's letter is to be found in Ovid, the narrator of the *Legend of Dido* exposes Ovid's fictionalised appropriation of her voice, as Elizabeth Harvey explains (Harvey, p.54). The narrator appropriates her story in an analogous way, but does not pretend to be doing anything else. Both his attempt to construct his own presence and his reference to his sources are contained within the text. This reveals the power position of the masculine author over the feminine subject, but although this power imbalance is ironically exposed, the stories of the heroines are still affected by it.

The Ovidian text is contrasted with the Virgilian material, as the narrator acknowledges at the beginning of the *Legend of Dido*. The narrator does not mention the fact that the accounts may conflict, but the presence of both

sources works against the notion of a single reliable original for the story. The resulting synthesis of material is marked by reduced narrative interest in Dido, and distrust of any reference to the influence of classical deities on events, guiding the reader back to the book if there is any doubt as to how things really happened.

Calling on another Ovidian source, *Fasti II*, a poetic treatise on the Roman calendar, the *Legend of Lucrece* presents another story of a woman confronting the patriarchal Roman empire. Lucrece is not a foreign queen but a faithful Roman wife. Her husband Colatyn is related to Tarquin, a prince of royal blood, who rapes Lucrece. Her story, like many popular versions of the persecutions of female virgin saints of a later period, records the struggle of a virtuous woman against a representative of the corrupt state. The horror of the people at Tarquin's deed makes them reject the institution of monarchy in favour of a republic. So Lucrece's courage in making the deed known, which costs her her own life, has far-reaching effects.

The narrator names Ovid as one of the sources, and also "Titus Lyvius" (1683) although it is unclear whether Livy was used as a source. The fall of the Roman kings becomes a topic of patriarchal history, validated by the references to classical authors. Lucrece herself, whose death is announced before the story begins, is appreciated by the "payens" (1688) and "The grete Austyn" (1690).

The reference to Augustine, however, is not straightforward. As a cultural authority, Augustine interprets Lucrece's classical story in the light of

narrator's confused attitudes to classical stories of women, which he tries to use as quasi-religious exemplars. The whole debate about *translatio studii* ¹⁵ is deeply embedded in the poem (Delany, "Naked Text," pp.289-290). It is revealed at the points where the Christian and classical values systems come into irreconcilable conflict.

The form of the *Fasti* is significant for this adaptation, as Lucrece's resemblance to a saint is increased by the fact that the people keep her day sacred:

...and she was holden there
A seynt, and ever hir day yhalwed dere
As in hir lawe; (1870-1872)

Traditional female hagiographic narrative stressed conversion, celibacy as a rejection of the world and the temptations of the flesh, subsequent conflict with the celibate's family, suitors and state authority, and finally trials which imitate the suffering of Christ as closely as possible. Such trials were often eroticized around the breasts, as symbols both of women's renounced sexuality and their connection with the Virgin Mary as spiritual mothers (Heffernan, pp.231-299).

Obviously, as a pre-Christian woman, Lucrece has not been converted to Christianity, and therefore her story differs from these characteristics in some important respects. She is not celibate, but is sexually involved with her husband. By struggling against Tarquin she does resist a representative of the state, but her motive is to keep her honour and that of her husband,

¹⁵ The transmission of classical learning to the Christian context.

rather than to dedicate her virginity to God. Fundamentally she is a secular woman, and literary convention cannot claim her as an example of Christian sanctity.

The many medieval sources of the *Legend of Cleopatra* demonstrate different types of historical writing. Vincent de Beauvais' *Speculum Historiale*, Florus' *Epitome Rerum Romanorum* (Frank, p.38n.), Orosius' *Historiarum libri septem adversus paganos* (Skeat, III, p.310) and Alfred's Anglo-Saxon version of Orosius, if the latter was known by Chaucer (Ghosh, p.336), all belong to the chronicle type of history. Their main aim was to present facts authoritatively and chronologically.

Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum et feminam illustrium* and *De claris mulieribus*, identified as sources by Edgar F. Shannon (Shannon, p.182), were part of a different historical tradition which aimed to interpret historical stories as moral exempla, for the instruction and edification of readers. Despite his more ambitious rhetoric and willingness to embroider stories for artistic purposes, Boccaccio claimed a truth value for poetry that was of a different order to fact. Godman reads the narrator of the legend's line: "And this is storyal soth, it is no fable." (702), as an ironic indication that Chaucer has borrowed and satirized not just the accounts of Cleopatra, but also the philosophical foundation on which Boccaccio rests his tales (Godman, p.291).

The division between chronicle and moral histories was not absolute, and the narrators of the chronicle histories did convey moral judgements. Most of them were negative about Cleopatra. Like Dido, Cleopatra was a foreign

queen who represented the sensuality of femininity and the Orient, but unlike Dido she was portrayed as cruel and corrupt, swaying Antony more drastically from his duty than Dido was able to sway Aeneas. On the other hand, Augustus, her dramatic opponent, was often portrayed as a good ruler. The narrator of the legend simultaneously attempts to portray her as a good woman, and reveals his knowledge of her infamous reputation in the sources.

As Demophoon is Theseus' son, the *Legend of Phyllis* is a continuation of the betrayal of Ariadne. Its main source is *Heroides II*, which Chaucer may have read from Filippo's Italian translation. This version may also have influenced the *Legend of Ariadne*. Phyllis' death is announced to us before we hear the rest of the story. The narrator describes this as a real event recorded in narrative, without considering that it is something that narrative has created: "Allas! - that, as the storyes us recorde,/She was hire owene deth ryght with a corde," (2484-2485). This refusal to distinguish between artifice and event is a disavowal of the narrator's own power as a constructor of fictions. By attributing the event to other stories, he avoids taking responsibility for his selection and presentation of material.

The *Legend of Hypermnestra* has as its sources *Heroides XIV* and possibly Hyginus' *Fabulae 168*. The facts of the story are changed, as Danaos becomes the father of the fifty sons and Egiste the father of the fifty daughters. In the original story the daughters marry their cousins, and all Hypermnestra's sisters carry out the grisly work of their father by murdering their new husbands, to avert the prophecy that his downfall will be through his nephew. By recording only the story of the one woman who does not

commit the crime, and omitting the stories of all the women who do, the narrator is ostensibly trying to control the damage to the image of women as inherently good. This ignores the fact that the evil in the story is motivated by the father's victimization of the daughters, and the omission implies that the women who do commit the crimes are guilty for bowing to pressure.

To demonstrate the consistency of the narrator's use of the Heroides material, with the twin recurring themes of the narrator's boredom with what are supposedly the words of the women, and his citation of Ovid as the authoritative source, a set of combined quotations may be helpful:

But who wol al this letter have in mynde,
 Rede Ovyde, and in hym he shal it fynde. (*Dido*, 1366-1367)
 A letter sente she to hym, certeyn,
 Which were to longe to wryten and to sen, (*Hypsipyle*, 1564-1565)
 Wel can Ovyde hire letter in vers endyte,
 Which were as now to long for me to wryte. (*Medea*, 1678-1679)
 What shulde I more telle hire compleynyng?
 It is so long, it were an hevy thyng.
 In hire Epistel Naso telleth al; (*Ariadne*, 2218-2220)
 But al hire letter wryten I ne may...
 But here and ther in rym I have it layd,
 There as me thoughte that she wel hath sayd.
 (*Phyllis*, 2513, 2516-2517)

The assurances we are given here conflict, as the fiction that the heroines themselves wrote the letters is embedded in the text, yet the impersonation of the heroines' voices by Ovid as a masculine writer is reinforced. This

paradox is crucial to the relationship between the *Heroides* and the *Legend of Good Women*.

In his manipulation of the sources the narrator tries to fit all the stories he retells into the pattern laid down by Alceste and approved by the God of Love. This means reconciling the "reverence" for old books which he claimed to feel in the Prologue with the vicissitudes of his own textual production. But the narrator does not manage to solve this problem. He repeatedly refers to other sources to cover up information which seems to threaten the symmetry of the proposed equation. As a researcher, he selects only data which will support his theory. His insecurity about simultaneously using the work of others and producing his own text ensures that the subtext of the narrator's misogynistic conviction remains. His representation of women and their stories becomes duplicitous.

We have seen that the original implied signified for the signifier of old books was the presence of the authorities who produced them. The books are used as a substitute for these authors, but owing to the isolation of a written text from its creator, they are an unsatisfactory one. They cannot provide the cultural authority which would secure the narrator's identity, but which would also probably stop him from writing. He is only able to write because of the gap between the power of the authorities and his own desire to create an identity for himself. However, as a narrator he remains privileged within the system of signification, reserving the right to define the other, in this case the feminine subject.

Just as he desires and fears the presence of the authorities through the mediation of their texts, the narrator desires to be present for his own text, which is why his voice is heard with increasing frequency. Yet he cannot establish his own presence in the text. Unable to find a stable literary framework for the representation of women, the narrator tries to reduce the threat which female characters pose to his project, through various strategies which we shall examine, as well as in his selective use of sources. While he is generally successful in doing so, the ambiguous ending to the *Legend of Hypermnestra* destabilizes his project just when it has apparently been most successful.

Chapter Four

“The Grete Effectes Make”: Narrative Strategies

Having overcome to some degree the tendency to rely completely on the authority of old writers, at least enough to create his own text, the narrator is still affected by performance anxiety. Throughout the legends, he develops strategies to cope with the project he has been given and with his own need to define women. Insecure and searching for stable meaning and gendered identity, he uses his power position as a masculine author to construct a conceptual framework to represent women. The oppressive effects of his strategy can be seen in his attempts to control the representation of the heroines, and to construct and verbalise the responses of the women in the audience to his legends.

Two of the narrative strategies which I will examine in this chapter are the impression of boredom and haste the narrator gives, often clumsily concealing a piece of damaging information about a heroine, and the use of sexual imagery which validates phallic domination. The third strategy is evident on the level of authorial, rather than narrative irony. The narrator's concern for women masks his desire to control their representation, and his outspoken anger at false men is merely a device to dissociate himself from their behaviour, in which he is patently more interested than in the exploits of the heroines.

Asserting that women's stories are boring, and stating his intention to get through them as quickly as possible, the narrator reveals his attachment to the principle of good women. The good women are defined as passive objects of masculine falsity, and he seems to have little interest in the individual women whose stories he tells. On a deeper level, his use of this device of boredom and the necessity of haste shows his discomfort with some of the implications of his material.

The brevity topos begins even in the F Prologue, when the God of Love advises him: "For whoso shal so many a storye telle,/Sey shortly, or he shal to longe dwelle." (F 576-577). Here the use of the masculine pronoun connects this narrative behaviour with the sexuality expressed by most of the men in the legends, who move from woman to woman as fast as they can. Dinshaw's discussion of the links between the masculine exchange of women and the masculine exchange of texts in patriarchal society (Dinshaw, p.82), provides a theoretical framework within which this movement can be understood. She elaborates the nature of homosocial bonding in patriarchal social organisation, which causes men to form relationships with other men through the exchange of women. While this is applicable to the attitude of the narrator and the male characters, I find that the situation is more complex than Dinshaw allows, as the narrator addresses female members of the audience, and historically women would have formed part of the courtly audience for poetry, even if literacy was not widespread. The narrator engages with the tension between his desire to write for men and the necessity of writing for women in the text.

After a lengthy description of Antony, and an extremely short one of Cleopatra, which will be considered in the chapter on courtly imagery, the narrator assures us: "And, for to make shortly is the beste,/She wax his wif and hadde hym as hire leste." (614-615). This skirts around the narration of the nuptial celebrations, which in Boccaccio's account were particularly debauched (Godman, p.288). However, doubt about Cleopatra's moral well-being is retained by the narrator, despite his obvious avoidance of dangerous source material. Feminine sexual dominance is suggested by the final phrase.

Frequently, the narrator claims to be pressed for time and space when he is about to detail something relevant to one of his heroines. Often it is an indication that the missing material may cause him unease, as it conflicts with his representation of her as a good woman. In the *Legend of Dido*, after extensively describing the story of Aeneas, he omits Virgil's section where Venus tells Aeneas the history of Dido with the words: "I coude folwe, word for word, Virgile,/But it wolde lasten al to longe while." (1002-1003). Likewise, when Dido's sister Anne is about to advise her on whether or not to entertain the stranger more intimately, the narrator breaks in: "But herof was so long a sermounynge/It were to long to make rehersynge." (1184-1185). Not only is a woman's speech to another woman cut off, but the narrator goes on to alter the nature of Anne's advice in his paraphrase. In the *Aeneid*, Dido's sister is in favour of her having a liaison with Aeneas, but in the legend, Anne is more hesitant.

In their next conversation, the narrator neglects to tell us what is said between them, supposedly because of his own emotional involvement with

what Dido says: "And whanne that she unto hire syster Anne/Compleyned hadde - of which I may nat wryte,/So gret a routhe I have it for t'endite - " (1343-1345). The narrator's intrusion, which obscures the feminine character he is supposed to be describing, is a typical example of his concern with constructing an image of himself as sympathetic to the concerns of women betrayed by men, when his behaviour in constructing his text is analogous to the betrayal by men of women in love.

In the *Legend of Lucrece*, the narrator adds to the promise that he will be brief the assurance that he will deal only with the most important things: "And in what wise, I wol but shortly trete,/And of this thyng I touche but the grete." (1692). We have had similar assurances in the *Legend of Cleopatra* (622-623) and the *Legend of Dido* (929), but the narrator's choice of what is important reveals his inherently masculinist bias. He tends to focus on sexual relationships and the manly accomplishments of the hero. Details of the women's stories are often relegated to the background or left out completely.

By the time we reach the *Legend of Philomela*, the narrator claims that Tereus' iniquities are making him sick of writing the legend: "But shortly of this story for to passe,/For I am wery of hym for to telle" (2257-2258). However, in overlooking the fact that Procne and Philomela's stories are tied to Tereus' story, the narrator reveals a fascination with Tereus' mental processes which he does not extend to the women involved. Again trying, and failing, to present himself as a man sympathetic to women's problems, the narrator cuts off his declaration of solidarity with Philomela abruptly: "O sely Philomene, wo is thyn herte!/God wreke thee, and sende the thy

bone!/Now is it tyme I make an ende sone." (2339-2341). This is a humorous contrast but indicates that the narrator does not take the story or the heroine seriously.

As we read the last two legends, which are shorter than the others, the pace begins to quicken. The narrator uses these boredom statements to cover his growing unease at his failure to coherently represent the feminine subject:

But, for I am agroted herebyforn
 To wryte of hem that ben in love forsworn,
 And ek to haste me in my legende,
 (Which to performe God me grace sende)
 Therefore I passe shortly in this wyse. (2454-2458)

His excuse is that the principle of faithful women and faithless men is becoming monotonous. If the narrator could have established that principle more clearly, he would have been much happier with the result, as it would have confirmed him as a powerful masculine subject. At the same time, he would have been disassociated from the other faithless men through his privileged writing position. As it is, the ambiguities he has encountered have almost upset his unstable sense of gender identity. In the *Legend of Hypermnestra*, the narrator's anxiety continues: "And shortly, lest this tale be to long," (2675). The tale remains apparently unfinished, symbolising the narrator's inability to continue with his project of signification.

The high incidence of sexual imagery which tends to establish masculine phallic dominance over the feminine subject provides further evidence of the narrator's misogynistic treatment of the feminine characters in the poem, despite his protestations in support of women. Often the narrator's

deep interest in the sexual relationships of his characters masks his erotic complicity in the phallic domination which his masculine characters reveal.

In the *Legend of Dido*, he promises that he will: "the grete effectes make." (929), without specifying what these will be. Before detailing Dido's passion for Eneas, leading up to their night of love, he says: "Now to th'effect, now to the fruyt of al,/Whi I have told this story, and telle shal." (1160-1161). This seems to refer to their love, rather than Eneas' betrayal of Dido, which should be the thing uppermost in his mind. The betrayal is not even hinted at until after their night together, when the narrator suddenly begins to blacken Eneas' character. This is analogous to the narration of *Troilus and Criseyde*, where the narrator becomes intensely involved in the love story, and is reluctant to narrate the betrayal which he knows must come. Dido and Eneas spend the night together in a cave, which itself takes on an erotic dimension: "How Eneas hath with the queen ygon/Into the cave;" (1243-1244).

But his obsession with sexual imagery is not confined to love scenes. In the *Legend of Cleopatra*, Sheila Delany describes the naval Battle of Actium as a metaphor for copulation (Delany, "Logic of Obscenity," p.192):

Up goth the trompe, and for to shoute and shete...

With grysely soun out goth the grete gonne...

And from the top doun come the grete stones.

In goth the grapenel, so ful of crokes...

In with the polax preseth he and he... (635,637,639-640,642)

The narrator comically stresses phallic penetration, an allusion all the more threatening because of the battle setting.

The association of the phallus with weaponry is seen again in the *Legend of Ariadne*. Theseus lays aside "His wepne, his clewe, his thyng" (2140) to enter the labyrinth, which Dinshaw persuasively links with both the text and the feminine body (Dinshaw, p.78). This analogy with the feminine body is strengthened for the misogynistic context by the presence of the Minotaur, which could be seen to represent the animalistic destructiveness of women's sexuality, in the misogynistic view. The Minotaur came into being through the sexual relation of Pasiphae, Ariadne's mother, with a bull. This connects women with bestial lust, but the narrator does not even mention Pasiphae's name.

Phedra's description of what will happen when Theseus enters the labyrinth is even more suggestive:

Ye wote wel that the beste is in a place
 That nys nat derk, and hath roum eek and space
 To welde an ax, or swerd, or staf, or knyf;
 So that, me thynketh, he shulde save his lyf.
 If that he be a man, he shal do so. (1998-2002).

The repetitive association of the phallus as a weapon emphasizes the narrator's valorization of phallic dominance as the heterosexual norm. Social beliefs can be effectively reinforced through jokes, and in this phallic imagery women are reduced to sexual objects, passive and ripe for domination. The imagery shows clearly that women are represented in the poem through the double lenses of masculine fantasy and anxiety.

An atmosphere of sexual suggestiveness forms around Thisbe in the *Legend of Thisbe*: "For in that contre yit, withouten doute,/Maydenes been ykept, for jelosye,/Ful streyte, lest they diden som folye." (721-723). This, along with Thisbe's repentance at the time of her death for leaving her father's house, implies that her motives for meeting Piramus in the fields were sexual. The narrator manages, in spite of Piramus' obvious loyalty, to strain the material enough to find his moral in it: "allas, and that is routhe/That evere woman wolde ben so trewe/To truste man, but she the bet hym knewe." (799-801). Ironically, Piramus does not betray Thisbe as the other men betray the heroines.

The narrator's language in the legend is loaded with sexual imagery, for which Sheila Delany has traced the influence of the *Ovide Moralisé* (Delany, "Naked Text", p.281). The crack in the wall can be read as a reference to buttocks (clove a-two, clifte)¹⁶ and the anus (fundacioun)¹⁷ initially, and then the parts of the wall as the male and female genitals. However, it is Thisbe's vagina which is associated with the crack (from the *Ovide Moralisé*, possibly suggested by the *Metamorphoses*), and therefore associated with the earthier possibilities for the crack as well. On the other hand, it is the 'lym' and the 'stone' (765) of the wall which represents the penis (limb) and testicles, and these parts of the wall are erotically charged, albeit comically, by being kissed by the lovers.

¹⁶ "Clove a-two" is at line 738. "Clifte" occurs three times, at lines 740,744 and 746. This repetition is a form of foregrounding.

¹⁷ "Fundacioun" is at line 739.

Delany reads Thisbe's death speech as an allusion to feminine masturbation (Delany, "Logic of Obscenity," p.194):

Thanne spak she thus: "My woful hand," quod she,
 "Is strong ynogh in swich a werk to me;
 For love shal yeve me strengthe and hardynesse
 To make my wounde large ynogh, I gesse." (890-893).

For the misogynist, feminine masturbation can be seen as a disturbing sign of independence from the masculine phallic order. But the pun from which this reference may have been suggested, that of "vulva" and the "vulnera" (wound) of Ovid's version,¹⁸ defines feminine sexuality as essentially mutilated and deformed. This definition is a result of phallic domination and continues to legitimize it.

The sword with which Thisbe stabs herself can be equated with the phallus, just as Piramus' readiness to kill himself with it can be interpreted as his desire for the phallus of adult masculine heterosexual identity. The implication that Thisbe may be the more masculine and sexually confident of the two casts doubt on Piramus as an agent of phallic domination. Elaine Tuttle Hansen comments on the similarity between Piramus and Thisbe, and interprets Piramus as an adolescent, feminized through his domination by his father (Hansen, "Feminization of Men", pp.58-59). This is borne out by the description of Piramus which is similar to the description of

¹⁸ Frank Justus Miller (trs.), *Ovid Metamorphoses I*. (Loeb Classical Library, London: Heinemann, 1916, rpt.1946), pp. 188-189.

Criseyde's feminine strategies:¹⁹ "His eyen to the ground adoun he caste," (827).

In the *Legend of Philomela*, Philomela is raped inside a "derke cave" (2312), rather than the hut of the *Metamorphoses*. The extent of the narrator's complicity with the masculine phallic order at its most oppressive, despite his professed sympathy for Philomela, is demonstrated by this inappropriately eroticized image, used once before in the *Legend of Dido*.

Phyllis addresses Demophoon with a suggestive image in the *Legend of Phyllis*: "Youre anker, which ye in oure haven leyde" (2501). This has been altered from the original. Even more interesting is the narrator's willingness to employ phallic imagery about his own representation of Demophoon, which, while it ostensibly disapproves of him as a false man, aligns the narrator with him and the others: "My lyste nat vouche-sauf on hym to swynke,/Ne spende on hym a penne ful of ynke," (2490-2491). This refusal to waste precious ink is not only sexualized with the word "spende," but also with the mention of the narrator's pleasure.

Hypermnestra is described as a woman who "dar nat handle a knyf" (2594). This is the kind of woman the narrator can cope with, one who makes no independent challenge to the masculine order. But Hypermnestra's situation outlines the difficulty for women of remaining true and faithful, as Procne's position does. Hypermnestra must choose between her loyalties, to her husband or to her father. She is able to choose, but the effort destroys

¹⁹ See *Troilus and Criseyde*, II 142, II 253.

her personality and her oppressive father condemns her to prison as a result. Although there is almost no other sexualized imagery in the legend than the example noted, the suggestion of incest is conveyed with the brooding atmosphere and Freudian request of her father, that she kill her husband.

As well as his apparent boredom with the project, his desire to be done with it quickly and his interest in the sexual relationships of the characters, revealed through sexual imagery which generally denigrates women, the narrator is deeply attracted to his villainous cast of male characters. Because of his concern with the charges of misogyny, however, he must cover this with protestations of sympathy for the abandoned women and virulent accusations of the men. Although he desires to be seen as favourable to women in his text, his masculinist bias is evident.

Despite the fact that the women are supposed to be central to the stories, the narrator introduces almost every legend with the masculine figure, family line or historical setting; anything, in fact, except the heroine. This is the case for the introductions to the legends of Hypsipyle and Medea, Ariadne, Philomela and Phyllis, which focus exclusively on the hero. Although Piramus and Thisbe are mentioned almost simultaneously, their fathers are placed even more prominently towards the start of the text. Lucrece is mentioned after Tarquin, reasonably early on in the text, but when the action begins it shows the soldiers at the siege discussing the faithfulness of their wives. The *Legend of Cleopatra* and the *Legend of Thisbe* are ambiguous, in that Cleopatra and Semiramis have prominent roles in the patriarchal order, and are named in that context.

The narrator's problem with his masculine characters is that he has to prove that all men are faithless, as the corollary to the proposition that all women are faithful in love. Leaving aside the illogicality of this causal nexus, it would always be difficult to prove this by examples. The narrator has, however, an even bigger problem. Alceste implies that previously he was biased against women, therefore as his reparation he will disapprove of men. His project increases his gender insecurity even more by forcing him to take sides against his own sex.

It is almost impossible for him to control the representation of women from his power position within discourse, shown by his fruitless attempts to reconcile conflicting values systems. It is also hard for him to choose how to represent men. If he portrays them favourably, he will not prove his point, yet if he criticises them too much, he risks being implicated in their behaviour as a masculine subject. So the narrator becomes an apparent turn-coat; yet his real interest in his masculine subjects is shown by his vicarious participation in their behaviour.

Two of the men commit suicide, a typically feminine behaviour in the legends and valorized as such, parodying the valorization of the martyrdom of the saints. The narrator deals with this unforeseen turn of events by ignoring one male suicide and making the other into an exception. At the end of the *Legend of Cleopatra*, in which Antony kills himself before Cleopatra, the narrator blandly remarks in relation to her suicide:

Now, or I fynde a man thus trewe and stable,
And wol for love his deth so frely take,

I preye God let oure hedes nevere ake!

Amen. (703-705)

This reveals the disjunction between what the narrator says and what he demonstrates in the text.

Like Antony, Piramus commits suicide before his lover does, thus demonstrating whatever faithfulness the women prepared to commit suicide have also shown. But the narrator is unable to make his praise unqualified:

Of trewe men I fynde but fewe mo

In alle my bokes, save this Piramus,

And therefore have I spoken of hym thus.

For it is deynte to us men to fynde

A man that can in love been trewe and kynde.

Here may ye se, what lovere so he be,

A woman dar and can as wel as he. (917-923).

The reason for this grudging praise can be sought in the phrase "us men," which makes the narrator's gender identification very clear. Yet he goes on to denigrate implicitly the achievements of men by asserting that a woman can be just as good. This suggestive duplicity reveals that he has a stake in portraying men - other men - to be essentially faithless.

Other men are to be found in books, at a safe distance from the narrator. As a masculine author, he summons them at will. By decrying the deeds of masculine characters, he can present himself as sensitive to the feelings of women. We need the corrective of Chaucer's ironic portrayal of the narrator in the text to counter the narrator's self-delusion. We must

examine the ironic construction of his persona as a man who pays lip-service to ideals of women, yet in his textual practice omits and denies their representative powers, and uses their betrayal by other men to protect his own position.

In the *Legend of Dido*, the narrator begins to blacken Eneas' character without warning by means of a stereotypical address to women. He tells them to beware of men because of literary examples:

Se ye nat alle how they ben forsworn?
Where sen ye oon that he ne hath laft his leef,
Or ben unkynde, or don hire som myscheef...
Ye may as wel it sen as ye may rede. (1259-1261, 1263)

This reveals the narrator's false equation between literature and life. Furthermore, by being so overtly misanthropic, he conceals his misogynistic bias. His excessive sympathy for women implies that because he is on their side he is eligible to represent them in discourse, but the many parallels between his behaviour and that of the false men undermine this assumption. Despite his protestations, the narrator is no real friend to women. In addition, his attempt to influence his female audience is oppressive as he constructs their responses. With male readers, he tends to address them directly without representing their responses.

When the narrator reviles Jason at the start of the *Legend of Hypsipyle and Medea*, he takes a metaphor from Guido delle Colonne's *Historia*

destructionis Troiae, Book II,²⁰ and reverses it from its misogynistic application to a version unflattering to men:

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. (1582-1585)

In the original source, the matter endlessly seeking form is a metaphor for the lust of women. By simply changing the gender of the accused, the narrator has not removed the slur against women. Like the excisions from the text, it remains part of the subtext, as the narrator reveals his knowledge and manipulation of misogynistic sources.

At the end of the *Legend of Lucrece*, the narrator is not above changing the evidence to suit his argument. As Goddard has pointed out, following Bech, the Scriptural example cited by the narrator, that Christ found the greatest faith in Israel in a woman, is incorrect (Goddard, II, p.79). The person who actually received that accolade in the parable was a Roman centurion. Again a metaphor is reversed, ironically as Tarquin is the antithesis of the faithful Roman who is not mentioned. In trying to praise women and denigrate other men, the narrator goes too far. He finishes his assertion with the phrase: "and this is no lye." (1882) By now, such comments arouse our suspicions rather than lulling them.

The narrator uses the fictional woman he incorrectly claims to be mentioned by Christ, and the good qualities of Lucrece, as a contrast to prove

²⁰ *Riverside Chaucer*, p.1070.

that all men are untrustworthy, using the key word "tirannye" (1883). This connects the behaviour of the masculine characters with the comments by Alceste in both Prologues about the proper role of a feudal ruler. To accuse men of tyranny enables men who are not tyrannical in their abuse of power to remain in a powerful position. The narrator, in speaking against the falsity of these particular men, defends the right of men who are not as extreme in their abuse to remain in control of women, just as in the Prologues Alceste legitimates feudal rule, as long as it is not excessive. This legitimates the narrator's own textual behaviour, in which he justifies his control of the representation of the feminine subject, as long as he is not overtly misogynistic.

In the *Legend of Ariadne*, the language of love becomes the language of obligation. Ariadne helps Theseus, following Phedra's advice, so the narrator expects him to love her. This is extensively parodied in their conversation, where between them they strike a deal. Theseus promises her his devotion in return for her help, and eventually confesses a spurious attachment to her of long-standing date. Ariadne extracts a promise of marriage from him for herself, and on behalf of his son for her sister Phedra. That Phedra was not going to benefit from this arrangement is clear from the fact that Theseus himself is only twenty-three. Despite the characterisation of Ariadne as self-interested and of Phedra as the one who actually comes up with the plan to rescue Theseus, by the end of the legend the narrator describes Theseus as "false" (2226) and Ariadne as "true" (2227). This dichotomy between men and women is increasingly stressed, despite textual evidence which complicates the narrator's deliberately simplistic interpretations.

The most effective legend in terms of the representation of masculine violence against the feminine subject is the *Legend of Philomela*, but like the other legends it does not reveal the effects of violence on feminine subjectivity. The narrator has his own reasons for reviling Tereus' violation of Philomela and betrayal of Procne, but his concern is to disassociate himself from Tereus' actions rather than to examine the effects of masculine violence on the disempowered feminine subject.

We see the narrator implicate himself in the story he tells, while trying to dissociate himself from it:

And, as to me, so grisely was his dede
 That, whan that I his foule storye rede,
 Myne eyen wexe foule and sore also.
 Yit last the venym of so longe ago,
 That it enfecteth hym that wol beholde
 The storye of Tereus, of which I tolde. (2238-2243)

An indication of the narrator's interest in the story is his choice of pronouns for his audience. We have heard him before warn women to beware of false men. But this warning is specifically to men, and the disease metaphor implies that Tereus' masculine violence against women is catching.

The narrator tries to disassociate himself from the story, by describing his reading experience of it. However, his admission that he was affected by the disease-like corruption places him under suspicion. This is later borne out by his excision of the metamorphoses of Procne and Philomela after their revenge against Tereus. This reduction not only reassures masculine

subjects that women will not react violently to oppression, but re-enacts the repression endured by the women within the text itself. Thus, it can be seen not only to fulfil the narrator's needs as a masculine subject who requires a domesticated feminine other, but also his need to dominate the narrative process, while taking up the position of an advocate for women.

At the scene of the rape, the narrator's comment is: "Lo! here a dede of men, and that a ryght!" (2327). Not only does this elide Tereus into a masculine principle, implicating all men except, presumably, the narrator, exempt through his status as a speaking voice, but the word "ryght" has uncomfortable resonances in this context. It approximates to the sense of "a right one," but it also imparts the sense of rights, in connection with men who commit rape. The narrator's control of the characters is emphasized in his descriptions of Procne and Philomela: "And thus in terys lete I Progne dwelle,/And of hire sister forth I wol yow telle." (2348-2349). This shows the narrator's self-image as a writer to be that of a manipulative, powerful, god-like figure.

At the end of the *Legend of Philomela*, the narrator addresses women in the audience, claiming that even if their lovers are not as violent as Tereus, they will still prove faithless: "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." (2391-2393). The ambiguity of this statement centres on the narrator's relationship to other men, who are potentially false lovers. Initially, the narrator uses the brother image to testify to the honesty of his intentions and the reliability of his assurances, to show that he is not biased. Then, once the idea of the relationship has occurred to him, he

implies that no one else will wish to be connected to false lovers. Again this raises questions about how deeply he is involved with the faithless masculine characters.

The narrator implicates himself in the predatory sexual behaviour of his masculine characters in the *Legend of Phyllis* by means of an ambiguously structured sentence: "And doth with Phillis what so that hym leste,/As wel coude I, if that me leste so," (2469-2470). This erotic bragging on the part of the narrator is quickly qualified, so that the sentence actually reads: "As wel coude I, if that me leste so,/Tellen al his doynge to and fro." (2470-2471). This is a good example of the narrator's ambiguous involvement in the story, from which he swiftly extracts himself. The emphasis is thrown back onto the character's behaviour rather than his own. Instead of being a participant, the narrator is once more a voyeur.

The narrator's clearest statement of his dissociation from the false lovers he describes comes at the end of the *Legend of Phyllis*: "Be war, ye wemen, of youre subtyl fo,/Syn yit this day men may ensaumple se;/And trusteth, as in love, no man but me." (2559-2561). Even when addressing women, the narrator uses the masculine noun for those who will actually interpret the examples, such as himself. His statement that he alone is trustworthy summarizes the tenor of the poem towards his exposure as a writer who, as a gendered subject, is implicated in what he writes. This is a defamiliarization from the position of misogynistic literature, when masculine authors had full power to represent the other without being challenged in their own power position. Through authorial irony, the

narrator is exposed to us as a persona whose writing creates his own identity.

The strategies used by the narrator in the legends so far have centred on his interpolation of his own voice into the text, and on his allusive sexual imagery. They reveal the anxiety generated by his search for a masculine identity, which leads him to control the representation of the feminine in the text. His interest in his male characters is a complication which needs to be decoded; his insistence on the falsity of all men must be interpreted in the light of his own position as a narrator who wishes to retain his power to represent women.

Apart from his use of sexual imagery, his strategies so far have focused on the interpolation of the narrative voice. In the next chapter, I will examine the ways in which his juxtaposition of conflicting models for the portrayal of femininity within the text, similar to the representation of Alceste and the daisy, eventually destabilizes his whole project. He uses a multiplicity of courtly and religious images, in conjunction with the classical basis of the stories.

Chapter Five

“And Thoughte Hire Fayr”: Courtly imagery

The dream-vision form of the Prologue, and the association of the daisy with Alceste, are both derived from courtly models. Chaucer had already worked extensively with dream-visions in the *Book of the Duchess*, the *Parliament of Fowls* and the *House of Fame*, but the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* has some unique features in comparison to these. In the other three works, the narrator reads a book and narrates its contents before falling asleep and dreaming. Here, instead of using one story, the narrator raises the whole issue of written authority and its relationship to the production of texts. In addition, the narrator of the Prologue draws attention to the construction of courtly conventions in a way that other Chaucerian narrators do not, through the disjunction in the symbolic relationship between Alceste and the daisy.

We find that this proven indebtedness to other courtly literature in the Prologue has a curious effect on the narration of the legends, because of the narrator's anxiety when it comes to representing women. His tendency to use sexual imagery and to refer to incidents in the sources which implicate women in unfaithful behaviour, defined by the masculine system of signification, has been noted in the last two chapters. His professed abhorrence of faithless men and his sympathy for women are undermined by his evident textual interest in men who betray women and his dismissal

of feminine concerns. The narrator privileges the patriarchal use of feminine suicide as closure over the ambivalence of metamorphosis.

The narrator needs to find a reliable system of meaning which will stabilize the representation of women. In his efforts, he overreacts by simultaneously utilising more than one such system, which leads to conflicting expectations and definitions of the good woman. This, in turn, plunges into chaos the narrator's attempt to find such a system, and as the anxious masculine subject trying to exercise his representative power over the dispossessed, voiceless, feminine subject, he is confronted with his failure to produce an adequate representation on behalf of the feminine. The indeterminacy of gender categories threatens his own scriptive manhood.

The juxtaposition of courtly, Christian and classical models for representing women is the result of the operation of the second level of irony around the persona of the narrator within the text. Confusing the codes is a narrative strategy, not an accident. An examination of these codes reveals that they have been structured carefully to contrast both with their normal usage and with one another in the text. Courtly motifs in the legends are used differently in terms of men and women. For female characters, recognisably courtly idioms focus almost exclusively on their appearance. Male characters, however, are judged by whether their behaviour measures up to courtly norms, in their devotion and fidelity to the women with whom they are in love.

In each Prologue, Alceste's appearance is described in a courtly blazon, a top to toe description (F 213-225, G 145-157). As we saw in the first chapter, her

physical characteristics emphasize her similarity in appearance to a daisy. This reverses the more usual symbolic relationship of the French courtly *marguerite* poetry, in which the daisy is a symbol of the woman. Here the woman becomes the symbol of the daisy. Instead of the poet's beloved providing the text with its stable meaning, as a panegyric on her charms, the representation of the daisy as ambiguous textual signifier supposedly supplies the text with meaning. However its indeterminacy makes it difficult to interpret.

Courtly literature bases its imagery on the premise that the narrator is representing a lived experience in writing; in this case of the beauty of the feminine beloved. This sets up a power relation between the narrator, usually in the masculine position of subjectivity, who constructs the gaze, and the passive feminine object, who is under observation by textual description. The narrator, by representing Alceste in these artificial and stylised terms, disrupts our directed reading expectation, that it is possible to reproduce lived experience in the text. We are left with no distinct mental picture of Alceste. This forces us to examine our belief that the character is somehow present for us in the text, exposing the illusory nature of representation.

None of the women in the legends is represented according to the daisy conventions of *marguerite* poetry. Descriptions of their appearance are both brief and heavily derived from traditional courtly imagery. The word "fayr" is conspicuously overused, occurring in eight of the ten heroines' descriptions (Hypermnestra and Ariadne are the two who do not have the adjective applied to them). The patriarchal gaze assesses women in relation

to one another. These repetitive descriptions suggest that their individual physical appearances are inaccessible to the narrator, forcing him to describe them in the same way. As with the portrayal of Alceste, our expectations that these women are real, and that their presence is somehow created for us in the text, are raised only to be thwarted. This is, however, a different kind of expectation of presence than the possibility of the presence of an author who can stabilize the meaning of a text for us.

Cleopatra's legendary exotic, sensual beauty, aligned in the sources with the perceived sensuality of the Orient, is trivialised in the *Legend of Cleopatra* by the courtly tag: "And she was fayr as is the rose in May." (613). Naturally this removes the negative implications in the sources about the moral consequences of such beauty, as part of the narrator's concern to portray her as a good woman. It also excises all individuality and all our sense that this representation portrays a real woman.

Antony, according to the narrator, is an impeccable courtly lover to Cleopatra:

This noble queene ek lovede so this knyght,
 Thourgh his desert, and for his chyvalrye;
 As certeynly, but if that bokes lye,
 He was, of persone and of gentillesse,
 And of discrecioun and hardynesse,
 Worthi to any wyght that liven may (607-612)

This description attributes to Antony all the courtly qualities, which are specifically linked to his literary reputation. In the sources, however, Antony is often criticised for being under the sway of Cleopatra and

neglecting his duty as a Roman soldier to further his passion and her interests. In the narrative, we are told that he does fit into the same category as the other false men in respect of his relationship to Octavia: "And over al this, the suster of Cesar,/He lafte hire falsly, or that she was war," (592-593). This is one of the very early indications that there is something drastically wrong with Alceste's scheme, where a man can be classified as both faithful and unfaithful, to different women.

Antony's suicide can also be seen as a drastic parody of courtly behaviour:

"Allas," quod he, "the day that I was born!
My worshiþe in this day thus have I lorn."
And for dispeyr out of his wit he sterte
And rof hymself anon thourghout the herte (658-661)

By referring to "worshiþe," Antony invokes two separate contexts, his loss of honour in battle, and his courtly love for Cleopatra. This incident occurs just after Cleopatra's departure from the scene of battle. The narrator carefully protects her reputation from the charges in the sources that she abandons Antony in her precipitate flight: "No wonder was she myghte it nat endure." (656). The ambiguity of "worshiþe" marks it out as a crucial word in the text, which obscures Antony's motivations. When he goes out of his mind through "dispeyr," a word often used for the feelings of the courtly lover when his lady is unresponsive, the context is rendered even more ambiguous.

We are told in the *Legend of Thisbe* that Thisbe was: "the fayreste/That estward in the world was tho dwellynge." (717-718), a close translation of the phrase used in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Like Cleopatra, this associates

her as a woman with the idea of Oriental sensuality. Fairness is a quality freely, almost automatically bestowed upon the heroines, but it is often used as a relative term. In the case of Thisbe, it is used to judge her in relation to other women, according to the values system of patriarchal literature.

Piramus is presented to us as a courtly hero, who makes long, flowery speeches. We have already noted Elaine Tuttle Hansen's interpretation of him as an adolescent hero with regard to the sexual imagery of the legend (Hansen, "Feminization of Men," p.58). In the courtly context, it is worth observing his rhetorical question: "How shulde I axe mercy of Tisbe,/Whan I am he that have yow slayn, alas!" (835-836). A courtly lover usually asks his lady for mercy when he wants to be accepted as her adoring knight. Piramus' self-torturing remorse implies sexual guilt for Thisbe's symbolically bloody "death," which says more about his own conflicting sexual desires than her position as his courtly ideal. This is supported by his almost comic willingness to believe in her death before it is satisfactorily proven.

Courtly motifs are highly significant in the *Legend of Dido*. This legend is structured around the initial assumption that Eneas is a suitably courtly lover until the consummation of his relationship with Dido, when he is suddenly revealed as the first in a long line of false and feigning men. Dido herself "fayrer was than is the bryghte sonne" (1006) and is also described as "fair as is the bryghte morwe" (1202). These images connect her with the sun, continuing the chain of fair heroines. Fire imagery runs through the legend, from the flames which destroy Troy to the sacrificial funeral pyre on which Dido immolates herself. Eneas is described in the hunting scene as

"lik Phebus to devyse,/So was he fressh arayed in his wyse." (1206-1207). As Phebus is the god of the sun, the couple are split into the hierarchy of Dido as the natural phenomenon and Eneas as its divine manifestation.

The hunting scene in the *Legend of Dido* contains courtly erotic imagery, which normally implies that the masculine figure is the hunter and the feminine figure the object of pursuit. In a reversal of this stereotype, Dido is portrayed by the narrator as the more sexually aggressive of the two: "That sely Dido hath now swich desyr/With Eneas, hire newe gest, to dele."²¹ (1157-1158). She lavishes gifts on Eneas and lies awake at night, tossing and turning, like the conventional masculine courtly lover.

Little is revealed about Eneas until the end of the narrative. Our perspective on him as a character is very carefully controlled. In Dido's eyes he appears to be a courtly lover:

And saw the man, that he was lyk a knyght,
And suffisaunt of persone and of myght,
And lyk to been a verray gentil man;
And wel his wordes he besette can,
And had a noble visage for the nones,
And formed wel of braunes and of bones. (1066-1071)

However, we have no assurance that he really possesses these qualities. With the consecutive "Ands" the passage is apparently loosely structured by

²¹ "Dele" is glossed in the Riverside edition as "to have sexual intercourse" (*Riverside Chaucer*, p.611).

a naive narrator, but the syntax has been carefully arranged to achieve this effect, to convey the impression that the narrator is naive and artless.

Eneas is revealingly "feminized," to use Elaine Tuttle Hansen's terminology (Hansen, "Feminization of Men," p.51), by the ascription of fairness to him because of his mother: "For after Venus hadde he swich fayrnesse/That no man myghte be half so fayr, I gesse" (1072-1073). His attractive appearance is directly linked to his ability to feign and deceive, a charge often brought against women by misogynists. Eneas is not given the credit he receives in the *Aeneid*, for having good intentions and for knowing where his duty lies. But the effect of the ironic courtly imagery on the representation of Dido is even more interesting. As she is taken in by Eneas, the narrator implies that she is no judge of character, allowing appearances to sway her more than substance.

In the *Legend of Hypsipyle and Medea*, the rival heroines both receive brief, formulaic descriptions, which help to link them together, just as the structure of their legend does. Hypsipyle is: "The fayre yonge Ysiphelle, the shene" (1467) and Medea, her rival for Jason's affections, is: "Medea, which that was so wis and fayr/That fayrer say there nevere man with ye," (1599-1600). The similarities between the two women do not stop with their representation here. Both have two children by Jason, both are abandoned by him and both write him a letter, based on the *Heroides*.

Like Eneas, Jason is charged with feigning courtly behaviour, as well as abandoning two women. The narrative emphasis is on the first charge

rather than the second, as if it is the more serious. Repeatedly he is accused of manipulating women through his appearance and attractive qualities:

Now was Jason a semely man withalle,
 And lyk a lord, and hadde a gret renoun,
 And of his lok as real as a leoun,
 And goodly of his speche, and familer,
 And coude of love al craft and art pleyner
 Withoute bok, with everych observaunce. (1603-1608)

From the beginning of the legend, Jason's appearance is set up in contrast to his deeds. Syntactically, this string of phrases enumerating the courtly qualities of the masculine hero, linked by the starting "And," is remarkably similar to the structure of the previously cited passage about Eneas. It has a similar effect, making the narrator seem naive and credulous.

The narrator's reference to the fact that Jason is able to do all this without looking it up in a book emphasizes the literary conventions on which these descriptions of his behaviour are based. This device, and the more general use of courtly motifs in the legends, has a curious effect on the reader, as these literary conventions are simultaneously ironically exposed within the text by the narrator's supposedly naive usage of them, and accepted as Jason's well-known model for his feigning behaviour.

The fact that the *Legend of Lucrece* is the next variation in this theme of fair ladies and false courtly lovers strikes an ominous note for the use to which these conventions can be put. As in the *Legend of Philomela*, the narrator uses the legend to try to show his sympathy for women. But the courtly imagery, distorted and misplaced, links the legends in which the women are

raped with the legends in which they are deserted, demonstrating the dangers of conventions of representation which are based on inequalities of power.

Lucrece is not described initially as fair. Instead, her good qualities are enumerated. The familiar adjective arises in the mind of Tarquin when he is contemplating her beauty and his own lust, prior to raping her: "And ay the more that he was in dispayr,/The more he coveyteth and thoughte hire fayr." (1754-1755). As we have seen, the word "dispayr" is usually applied specifically to a courtly lover who feels that he is unlikely to be accepted by his chosen lady.

Intense respect and devotion to the chosen lady formed the basis of the ideals of courtly love. Sexual contact was not out of the question, but once in love, a knight was supposed to be faithfully devoted to his lady, no matter what the circumstances. Tarquin, despite borrowing the language of courtly love, rides roughshod over these ideals, with the rapist's eroticization of power: "For, maugre hyre, she shal my leman be!" (1772). The word "leman" is not a courtly term, but has sexual connotations. It is used by lower-class lovers such as Nicholas and Alisoun in the *Miller's Tale* (CT I 3278, 3280).

The narrator is fully conscious of Tarquin's shortcomings as a courtly lover, and focuses on his crime from this angle:

Tarquinius, that art a kynges eyr,
And sholdest, as by lynage and by ryght,
Don as a lord and as a verray knyght,

Whi hastow don dispit to chivalrye?

Whi hastow don this lady vilanye?

Allas, of the this was a vileyns dede! (1819-1824)

Although there is no particular reason to apply courtly rhetoric to Tarquin's behaviour, the narrator's insistence on applying the standards of courtly idealism to his masculine characters dooms him to disappointment.

In the *Legend of Ariadne*, although Ariadne is not described directly as fair, the reason given for Theseus' preference of her sister Phedra is: "For that hire syster fayrer was than she" (2172). This comparative usage is particularly cruel, as it privileges the masculine subject, both character and narrator, enabling them to decide to whom the adjective "fair" is applied, and act accordingly.

In the same legend, Scylla falls in love with Mynos "For his beaute and for his chyvalrye" (1912), once more combining the themes of appearance and courtly prowess. But the pseudo-courtly lover par excellence is Theseus. This time the narrator implies criticism of Theseus before we have even reached the point in the story when he abandons Ariadne: "And if now any woman helpe the,/Wel oughtestow hire servaunt for to be,/And ben hire trewe love yere be yere!" (1956-1958). Again this is a direct narrative imposition of courtly ideals on characters for whom they are not necessarily relevant.

Theseus' speeches to Ariadne read like a parody of courtly love conventions, as he struggles to assert that his love for her is not merely expediency to get him out of his predicament. He makes many offers of

lowly and humble service, which Ariadne skilfully turns into an offer of marriage. His speech is adorned with many courtly turns of phrase: "And mercy, lady! I can nat elles seye." (2073). His own abilities with language, a crucial distinguishing characteristic of other seemingly courtly masculine characters such as Jason as well, change him from an imprisoned man pleading for help to save his life, to a courtly lover kneeling in front of his lady, imploring her for her favour.

Like most of the other male characters, Theseus adopts this pose because it suits him, even to the point of asserting that he has been in love with Ariadne for seven years, sight unseen. The unlikeliness of this scenario, given that he is only twenty three and has a son who is supposed to be betrothed to Phedra, leads us to doubt the authenticity of his other statements as well. The narrator insists on his disapproval of Theseus: "Me lest no more to speke of hym, parde./These false lovers, poysoun be here banel" (2179-2180), and he asserts his solidarity with Ariadne: "Allas, for thee myn herte hath now pite!" (2184).

In conjunction with the *Legend of Lucrece*, the word "fair" in the *Legend of Philomela* is associated with the oppressive mind of the rapist. One chilling difference is the implicit comparison between the attractiveness of Procne and that of Philomela, as assessed by Tereus and the narrator. Procne is "Kyng Pandiones fayre doughter dere," (2247) and the flour of hire cuntre" (2248). Philomela's fairness is described through the mind of Tereus:

And therwithal so yong and fayr was she
That, whan that Tereus saw hire beaute,
And of aray that there was non hire lyche,

And yit of beaute was she two so ryche,

He caste his fyry herte upon hyre so

That he wol have hir, how so that it go; (2288-2293)

There are several images here which connect with those from other legends. The naively simple syntax is by now very familiar, and in this case is important to link the narrator's description of Philomela as fair with Tereus' lustful thoughts.

In other legends rivals for the favour of the male characters are paired together, such as Hypsipyle and Medea, Ariadne and Phedra. In this context, the statement that no one else was dressed like Philomela and that she was twice as beautiful as she was well-dressed, reflects badly on Procne. It is as if she is less fair and therefore has lost Tereus' interest. The sisters are set up as if they are competitive rivals for Tereus' preference. However, the implicit contrast in their appearances is far more ominous and foreboding in the light of the rape of Philomela and the cutting out of her tongue. In the *Metamorphoses*, the revenge and change of state brings the women together and gives them some release from their intolerable situation, particularly as their metamorphoses successfully resist the closure of the story. While the women are brought together in the legend, it is only to weep, and they are isolated from one another because of Tereus' behaviour.

An image in the *Legend of Phyllis*, which combines the daisy of the F and G Prologues turning towards the sun, and the appearances of Procne and Dido, is used to describe Phyllis: "Ligurges doughter, fayrer on to sene/Than is the flour ageyn the bryghte sonne." (2425-2426). This evocation of earlier

elements is in keeping with the legend which is so like the legends of Hypsipyle and Medea, Dido and Ariadne.

Demophoon is closely connected with his father Theseus, so they are portrayed together in the *Legend of Phyllis* as false lovers: "And lyk his fader of face and of stature,/And fals of love; it com hym of nature." (2446-2447). There is no need for a lengthy description of Demophoon's behaviour, as this is one of the shorter legends, which indicates that the ending is approaching. Demophoon's behaviour is implied by the narrator to be the same as the other men, including his father. For once, the indictment of Demophoon as a false and feigning lover comes from the words of Phyllis rather than those of the narrator: "To moche trusted I, wel may I pleyne,/Upon youre lynage and youre fayre tonge,/And on youre teres falsly out yronge." (2525-2527). Phyllis' disappointment, like the narrator's, comes from the gap between her expectations and Demophoon's actual behaviour.

On the other hand, in the *Legend of Hypermnestra*, the heroine is not associated with fairness at all, although we are told that: "Venus yaf hire gret beaute" (2584). Like Lucrece, her good qualities are expounded upon, and she is the only heroine to receive a classical horoscope. Both Hypermnestra's and Lyno's fathers are described as false lovers, which is associated with their fertility. Danao has had many sons: "As swiche false lovers ofte conne." (2565), and "That other brother called was Egiste,/That was of love as fals as evere hym liste" (2570-2571). Clearly Egiste, Hypermnestra's father, is the villain of the piece, but when the narrator asks his rhetorical questions of the villainous masculine character, as he has done in so many other legends, he asks Lyno why he ran away: "Allas, Lyno, whi art thou so

unkynde?/Why ne haddest thow remembred in thy mynde/To taken hire, and lad hire forth with the?" (2716-2718). The initial introductions of both fathers notwithstanding, it seems as though the narrator needs to maintain Lyno as the false lover who betrays Hypermnestra, rather than Egiste, the far more likely culprit.

It is time to examine the narrator's position. His willingness to pretend to side with women, in order to protect his own reputation as a man sympathetic to women, was examined in Chapter Four. He is also keen to dissociate himself from false men. One of the main strategies he employs is to set them up as men who pretend to be courtly lovers but then betray the courtly ideology of service to womanhood, as we have seen with Eneas, Jason, Theseus and Demophoon. However, this supposed usurpation of courtly ideals originates with the narrator. The sources for the stories and the masculine characters were all pre-courtly as well as pre-Christian. We must ask why the narrator applies the theories of courtly behaviour to sources which originally had no connection with them, to form this hybrid.

Naturally the *Legend of Good Women* is by no means the first attempt to incorporate classical material into texts that were primarily courtly or Christian. For example, Measure, an allegorical figure in Guillaume de Machaut's *Jugement dou Roy de Navarre*, cites classical examples, such as Dido, Hero and Thisbe, as part of a debate about whether men or women are more faithful in courtly love (Calin, p.114). What is unusual about the *Legend of Good Women* is the ironic portrayal of the narrator as naive in his mixture of material from different periods or genres. The

inconsistencies in the text problematize the easy transmission of material from one form to another.

In order to fulfil his project, the narrator needs to portray almost all other men as false. By using the impossible ideals of chivalry as the standard by which he judges men, so that only men such as Píramus who are prepared to commit suicide for their loves are approved of, the narrator virtually guarantees that he will be able to disapprove of most men. This ensures that as the writing subject, he is immune from the charge of misogyny, because of his apparently straightforward identification with beleaguered women.

However, we have also seen the narrator's counter-strategies. His selective use of sources reveals his misogyny, through the limited representation he is prepared to concede to women. His descriptions of the heroines are courtly and repetitive, depriving their representations of narrative interest. Finally, his interest in the masculine characters rather than the feminine ones is obsessive. The narrator uses courtly imagery to blacken the reputations of the masculine characters in relation to himself, and as a system which provides a representative role for women. When he attempts to juxtapose courtly imagery with other systems of representation, eventually his narrative project to control the representation of women breaks down.

Chapter Six

“The Goddesses of the Heaven Above” Religious Imagery

In addition to the other strategies and codes used by the narrator, religious imagery forms an important part of the narrator's project to represent good women. Introduced by the recurring motif of heaven and hell, which forms as a link between the Prologues and the legends, religious imagery is used to suggest the sanctity of the heroines. However, because the female characters come from pre-Christian times, the only way that this can be done by the narrator is through a false application of the literary hagiographic legend to the women's stories. Having raised our expectations that the women will be represented as saints, the narrator then destabilizes this possibility through the disjunction in the text between the Christian God and the classical gods and goddesses.

The motif of belief in heaven and hell was used at the start of the Prologues, to introduce the question of epistemology and to suggest the presence of God as a provider of meaning for the text. With the disruption of symbolic relationships examined in Chapter One, however, this was an ambiguous representation of God's presence. In the God of Love's retelling of the story of Alceste, the heaven and hell motif is Christianized from its classical origins, in which Hercules rescues Alceste from the Underworld rather than hell.

Continuing this theme in the legends, Eneas in the *Legend of Dido* experiences the Christian dichotomy between heaven and hell in the narrator's description: "This Eneas is come to paradys/Out of the swolow of helle" (1103-1104), further evidence for the narrator's partial Christianization of characters from the classical past. In another instance from the *Legend of Ariadne*, however, the narrator refers categorically to the classical Underworld: "Juge infernal, Mynos, of Crete kyng" (1886). While this reference to Mynos as judge of the Underworld is actually mistaken, as Mynos the judge was the grandfather of Minos the king, classical terminology is used with no Christian overlay.

Religious imagery which suggests that the heroines are pious women, similar to their counterparts in saints' legends, is usually ambiguous in its context, as is much of the courtly imagery. In the *Legend of Cleopatra*, we find the first of many instances of the word "grace," which meant "sexual favours" as well as "God's mercy" (Taylor, p.264). The narrator says of Cleopatra: "His wif, that coude of Cesar have no grace,/To Egipt is fled for drede and for destresse." (663-664). This can be read as a subtle allusion to the sources which claimed that Cleopatra tried to seduce the young Augustus after the defeat of the Battle of Actium. A word such as "grace" with a double meaning simultaneously affirms Cleopatra's propriety and suggests her unfaithfulness.

Cleopatra also uses the word "covenant" for her vow of fidelity to Antony in her death speech (693). This word, used in the Bible to describe the relationship between God and the chosen people, conjures up powerful

Hebraic religious imagery, which sits oddly with Cleopatra's infamous reputation in the sources as an adulteress (Taylor, p.250).

The language of confession is juxtaposed with the bawdy connotations of the crack in the wall in the *Legend of Thisbe*, when the lovers whisper through it, making a sound "as softe as any shryfte" (745). This combines an erotic image with the conventions of Christian religious observance.

Ritual is very significant for the heroine of the *Legend of Dido*: "She seketh halwes and doth sacryfise" (1310). Dido has her own funeral pyre constructed on the pretext of religious sacrifices: "Upon the fir of sacryfice she sterte,/And with his sword she rof hyre to the herte." (1350-1351). Clearly these are classical rites which cannot be transferred easily to the Christian context.

Although Lucrece has been acknowledged already as the most likely woman in the legends to be sanctified, religious imagery in the *Legend of Lucrece* has some disturbing implications. The word "grace" recurs, once in a religious context in a prayer for her husband's life (1731), and once in a far more unsettling way, during her appeal to her rapist Tarquin: "She axeth grace, and seyth al that she can." (1804). Again the double meaning is exploited by the narrator, as what seems like her innocent request for mercy, similar to the mercy of God, also has sexual connotations. Through her prayer for the grace of God on her husband's behalf, her marital relations are juxtaposed with Tarquin's rape. This is more serious if we remember Augustine's assertion that Lucrece may have enjoyed the rape, and killed herself as punishment.

At the end of the legend is the misquotation from the Bible (noted in relation to the narrator's manipulation of sources in Chapter Four). By reporting the passage incorrectly, the narrator further undermines the possibility of any system of meaning providing a single framework of understanding. Because of the anonymous circulation on which the transmission of written texts is based, textual authorities can be cited or misquoted for any purpose, and no intentionality from their authors can save them. The narrator denies privileged status to the Bible, including it as a text which can be misused and taken out of context like any other.

Religious imagery in the *Legend of Ariadne* uses similar words to the other legends. Theseus prays to Mars for "grace" (2063), a curious request to make to a classical god, and he asks for a shameful death if he does not serve Ariadne as her lowly page. The erotic meaning of "grace" is less evident in this context, but classical worship, Christian terminology and the courtly context are all mixed. Another example of religious imagery, similar to that in the *Legend of Cleopatra*, is that the courtly vows sworn by Theseus to Ariadne, which he is all too soon to break, are described as a "covenant" (2139).

"Grace" is used in the *Legend of Philomela*, when Philomela asks her father if she may visit her sister: "For Philomene, with salte teres eke,/Gan of hire fader grace to beseke" (2284-2285). She is a genuine suppliant and her request is fulfilled. The eroticized element in this case derives from the source. In the *Metamorphoses*, Tereus observes Philomela embracing her

father and lustfully imagines himself in the father's place.²² In addition to this example of religious imagery in the legend, Procne's excuse to visit Philomela is a religious observance: "But feynede hire to gon on pilgrymage/To Bacus temple;" (2375-2376). Pilgrimages were often undertaken to the shrines of saints, and the narrator has transposed this concept onto classical pagan ritual.

Prayer is used by the narrator to construct the response of his feminine audience to yet another story of a false lover in the *Legend of Phyllis*: "God, for his grace, fro swich oon kepe us!" (2401). Although this appears to be an orthodox usage of the word "grace," the narrator pictures the female members of the audience renouncing sexual involvement with men. Celibacy was the theme of many saints' legends, often directly expounded upon to the feminine audience by the writer. However, this application of the beneficent effects of virginity, based on the claim that all men are false, is far removed from the religious idealism which saw celibacy as a means to avoid carnal sin and become closer to God.

In the same legend, Demophoon's advisers suggest that he apply to Phyllis for aid after the shipwreck: "And loke what his grace myghte been" (2433). The ambiguity of the word "grace" fails to distinguish between Phyllis' mercy and Demophoon's sexual charms, given the relationship which develops between them afterwards. As reported speech from Demophoon's

²² *Metamorphoses* VI, 475-482, in Frank Justus Miller (trs.), *Ovid, Metamorphoses I* (Loeb Classical Library, London: Heinemann, 1916, rpt.1946, pp.320-321.

advisers, rather than a comment from the narrator, it is even more ambiguous.

However, the narrator uses the word "grace" himself in the same legend, as part of his strategy, outlined in Chapter Four, to move quickly through the legends: "And ek to haste me in my legende,/(Which to performe God me grace sende)" (2456-2457). While this could be seen as the narrator praying for inspiration, the ambiguity around the word "grace" also implies that the process of writing has become eroticized for the narrator as a sexual act which he hopes to complete. In the context of the prayer, this is a blasphemous possibility.

At Hypermnestra's wedding we find sacrificial fires burning once more, and the flower and the leaf, symbols of the Prologues, are being pulled up by the roots to make garlands. Zepherus, the classical representation of the West wind, last seen with Flora in the May meadow of the F Prologue (F 171), is now ominously shaking branches in a winter image linked to Hypermnestra's tendency to shiver (2681), and she is described as cold as frost (2683). We have come full circle from the narrator's springtime worship of the daisy.

The juxtaposition of ambiguous religious and courtly imagery with classical stories means that no one code is sufficient to account for the representation of the heroines. It is not possible to conclude from the religious imagery alone that the narrator is attempting to represent women as if they are saints, but when the use of the legend form is taken into account as well,

there is plenty of evidence that the implications of hagiographic narrative for women influence the text.

Similarities between the narrator's legends and real saints' lives show up most clearly in their endings. The pattern of female saints' lives concluded with persecution, death and redemption by God for their suffering. The narrator's selected classical heroines are often persecuted and five of them commit suicide. The motivations for their deaths, however, are different. The female saints die for the sake of their devotion to God, because male aggressors try to make them worship something else or force them out of celibacy. In contrast, the *Legend of Good Women* heroines die for their fidelity to the principle of faithfulness in love, owing to the faithlessness of men. This pattern is not adhered to in all the stories cited, however; Lucrece and Philomela do not suffer from the faithlessness of their own lovers, but are attacked by men who do not know them well. Thus, there is no reason for them to display their faithfulness to these men.

The narrator attempts to martyr his heroines, and for the most part he succeeds. However, it is only the semblance of Christian martyrdom, as their resemblance to female saints remains superficial. The narrator seems to be incapable of realising the difference between devotion to God and devotion to men. In addition, he apparently cannot distinguish between worship of the Christian God and the classical gods and goddesses, juxtaposing them in the same legends.

Metamorphosis, already described in Chapter Three as a textual strategy for eluding the closure of a text, is the classical version of redemption.

Transformation into another shape by the classical gods takes the place of Christian redemption. Yet in the cases of Scylla, Thisbe, Philomela and Procne, the metamorphoses of their stories are left out by the narrator. Ariadne is the only one whose transformation is narrated in the text. In the uneasy hybrid structure composed of classical and Christian frameworks, most of the heroines suffer and die without the redemption offered by either system of meaning.

The narrator takes care to achieve this, as for the construction of his own gendered identity, it is important that the values culturally associated with femininity be defined. The death of his female characters is an essential part of this process, as any suggestion of resistance to the closure organised by the masculine author implies that there is more to be said by and about the feminine, challenging the construction of his own stable gendered identity.

Looking more closely at the narrator's juxtaposition of different religious frameworks, we find that they cannot logically coexist. This destabilizes both the meaning of the text, and the representation of the heroines. Characters and narrator alike seem to be unsure what beliefs they espouse, and what culture they come from. Through the repetitive endings which the narrator emphasizes, I conclude that along with the destabilization of the text, the point is made that under masculine representation, it does not matter which framework of meaning is currently used; the narrator is still determined to control the representation of women, to the point of violence.

Although the God referred to in the Prologues and the legends is never identified, we can assume that he is the Christian God of the narrator. Often this God takes up a position once occupied by a classical deity in the sources, usually a reference to Jupiter which does not specify his name. Because the narrator and characters name other classical deities, the indeterminate God can be taken as the Christian God. As well as the distinction between the Christian God and the classical gods, the Christian God shown in the *Legend of Good Women* is strongly influenced by Platonic ideas about God as the maker of forms. The synthesis of Christianity and Neoplatonism was encouraged by Augustine (Marenbon, pp.14-15).

In the F Prologue, religious and courtly ideas are mixed when the narrator prays for the daisy: "I pray to God that faire mote she falle,/And alle that loven floures, for hire sake!" (F 186-187). Next, he prays for his unidentified lady: "So passeth al my lady sovereyne,/That ys so good, so faire, so debonayre,/I prey to God that ever falle hire faire!" (F 275-277). This prayer is changed in the G Prologue to refer to Alceste (G 180). These images link the representation of the daisy and Alceste to those of most of the heroines. At the same time, the narrator's prayer to the Christian God, on behalf of a courtly abstraction and a classical myth, is an anomaly.

The Prologues have an inbuilt inconsistency; the relationship of the God of Love with the Christian God. This confusion culminates in the G Prologue, with the God of Love's casual reference to God and theologians: "This knoweth God, and alle clerkes eke/That usen swiche materes for to seke." (G 278-279). There seems to be no way of accounting for his familiarity with a system which denies the very possibility of his existence. It may be argued

that in combining courtly conventions into a medieval Christian framework, the narrator is doing nothing unusual, but I contend that there is a repetitive emphasis to his juxtapositions that brings them to the forefront of the text.

In the *Legend of Cleopatra*, Antony's rebellion is attributed to the vagaries of Fortune: "as Fortune hym oughte a shame" (589). Patch has traced the origins of the Fortune-as-goddess symbol (Patch, p.4). He considers that it began as a Roman goddess cult. Medieval clerics tried to claim Fortune as the servant of God, with only partial success. In some cases the idea of Fortune as the goddess of irrational blind chance was a pre-Christian survival. The personification of Fortune here and elsewhere in the legends, while it is not specifically a portrayal of a goddess, probably conjured up goddess images. Its presence here indicates some kind of classical survival, and works against monotheism.

The narrator's excision of the metamorphoses in the original sources has already been considered in the light of trying to close off the stories to interpretative possibilities. In the *Legend of Thisbe*, the removal of the mulberry tree, a symbol of the continuity of life which counteracts the despair of the death of the lovers, indicates the removal of the tangible evidence of mythical renewal, integral to the original story. The superficial overlay of Christian interpretation imposed where the metamorphosis is removed does not have the same resonance.

King Nynus' burial under a tree, which Thisbe approaches (802), is the first allusion to the mulberry tree in the *Legend of Thisbe* (785). In Ovid's

Metamorphoses, Thisbe sits under the tree when she arrives at the meeting place: "sub abore sedit" (she sat beneath the tree).²³ However, in the *Legend of Thisbe*, she sits down beside the well. This deflects attention away from the tree, which is given no further prominence.

In Thisbe's death speech in the *Metamorphoses*, she entreats their absent parents to put them in the same grave, and implores the mulberry tree to keep its bloodstained colour as a memorial to their deaths. However, in the *Legend of Thisbe*, she addresses their fathers and God:

We preyen yow, withouten more envye,
That in o grave yfere we moten lye,
Sith love hath brought us to this pitous ende.
And ryghtwis God to every loveire sende,
That loveth trewely, more prosperite
Than evere yit had Piramus and Tisbe! (902-907)

Using the word "preyen" links the appeal to the fathers with the prayer which follows it, and replaces the entreaty to the mulberry tree. In the original, the gods heard her address to the tree, and out of pity effected the metamorphosis of the tree's colour. The story is Christianized, but deliberate traces of its classical origins are left.

King Nysus's burial outside the city is explained by the narrator: "For olde payens that idoles heryed/Useden tho in feldes to ben beryed" (786-787), a

²³ From *Metamorphoses* IV, 95; Frank Justus Miller, (trs.), *Ovid Metamorphoses* vol.1 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1946) pp. 184-185.

reference that sits oddly with the frequent naming of God in the speech of the characters. This is found in both reported and direct speech: "wisshe to God" (755), "ryghtwis God" (905) and "God forbede" (910).

In the *Legend of Dido*, the narrator demonstrates an ambivalent attitude towards the classical deities, which he links continually to literary sources. When Venus makes Eneas invisible, the narrator is obviously uncomfortable:

I can nat seyn if that it be possible,
But Venus hadde hym maked invysible -

Thus seyth the bok, withouten any les. (1020-1022)

The scepticism of the narrator conflicts with his impulse to trust literary authority. By carefully reserving judgement, he manages to cover his position as a Christian writer, who does not believe in pagan deities, while assuring us of the truth of books. The narrator is also unsure about "Cupido" taking the place of Ascanyus, Eneas' son, and infecting Dido with love. Despite the fact that "oure autour" (1139) has told us this, the narrator says: "but as of that scripture,/Be as be may, I take of it no cure." (1144-1145). By foregrounding this classical allusion, the narrator casts doubt on the validity of supernatural powers. Furthermore, we are reminded of the supposedly listening ear of the God of Love, and our attention is focused on the problematic relationship of the Prologues to the legends.

The narrator's inability to accept the classical gods and goddesses as a literary convention is what marks him out from other narrators and writers. His careful attribution to sources draws attention to textual references to them. Ironically, his very scepticism inclines us to take the classical gods and

goddesses as a more serious rival to the Christian God than if he had allowed them to pass without comment.

In Virgil's *Aeneid*, Books I-IV, there is a major classical goddess, whose influence is only hinted at in the *Legend of Dido*. Juno is Dido's patroness, and wars with Venus on Dido's behalf. There are four potential references to her in the legend. The first is when the narrator declines to narrate Eneas' journey across the sea (953-955). In the *Aeneid*, Juno plays a major role in that section. She diverts Eneas from his destination of Latvium, because of her resentment of the judgement of Paris, and her jealousy at the prophecy that Trojan descendants in Italy will one day prove the downfall of the people of Tyre in Libya.

The temple at which Dido worships is clearly stated in the *Aeneid* as dedicated to Juno, yet in the legend it is merely: "The mayster temple of al the toun" (1016). Significantly, this is where Aeneas in the *Aeneid* is moved to tears by the sight of the story of the loss of Troy, which is painted on the wall below the temple. In the legend, the motivation for his tears is changed from sorrow at the loss of Troy to shame and humiliation at this display of their defeat, plain for all to see. We can only speculate as to whether the narrator's suppression of the knowledge that this is Juno's temple has anything to do with this change of motivation for Eneas' tears.

In the *Aeneid*, Juno organises the thunderstorm when Dido and Eneas make love in the cave. It is described as "hevenes fyr" (1221) in the *Legend of Dido*, with no reference to Juno. This is also part of the fire imagery mentioned in Chapter Five.

The final oblique allusion to Juno is Ovidian rather than Virgilian. At the end of the *Legend of Dido*, there is a reference to the white swan which sings before it dies (1355-1356). This piece of proverbial lore is from the *Heroides*, but it has a special resonance, as the swan is Juno's bird. By the omission of all these opportunities to mention Juno, a powerful goddess figure who is in support of Dido is removed from the text. Again, traces are left behind to draw attention to her suppression.

The *Legend of Dido* has not been overtly Christianized with references to God. Fortune makes another appearance, with reference to the survival of Eneas' followers: "Fortune, that hath the world in governaunce,/Hath sodeynly brought in so newe a chaunce/That nevere was ther yit so fremde a cas." (1044-1046). In the *Aeneid*, this is not attributed to any classical god or goddess, which may be why it was singled out by the narrator of the legend for this reference.

There is one very curious reference to the Christian God in the *Legend of Dido*. The narrator claims that if God was looking for a lady as a lover, he could do no better than Dido (1039-1042). In the Virgilian context, the superiority of Dido's beauty over other women is compared to that of Diana over other goddesses. The allusion to God's imagined favour is a clumsy narrative interpolation.

At the end of the legend, Dido prays to Jupiter for the release of her soul, as she has fulfilled the course of fortune. This is immediately followed by her *Heroides* letter. In the Ovidian original, she states that writing the letter is

against God's will: "adverso movimus ista deo" (with God's will adverse).²⁴ This is strengthened in the legend as the gods become plural: "Syn that the goddes been contraire to me" (1360). Even the support of Juno, which is not enough in the *Aeneid* to keep Eneas in Carthage, has been taken away from Dido in the legend.

The *Legend of Hypsipyle and Medea* is composed of two classical traditions, to which anachronistic references to the Christian God have been added. Hercules, much reduced in heroism since his rescue of Alceste from "helle" in the Prologues, refers to God (1538). The narrator is keen to take longer to describe Jason's false wooing, but is pushed on apparently by divine imperative: "As wolde God I leyser hadde and tyme/By proces al his wowyng for to ryme!" (1552-1553).

In the *Legend of Hypsipyle*, "God" (1571) is substituted for the name of Jupiter in the *Heroides* (*Heroides* VI,152). The narrator has switched the references to imply the presence of the Christian God. There is only one reference to God in the *Legend of Medea*. In his vow, Jason substitutes "God thanke yow" (1625) for the rites of the three-fold goddess Hecate, the divinity of the grove they are in and King Aeëtes' father, by which he swears in *Metamorphoses* VII, 94-97.²⁵

²⁴ From *Heroides* VII, 4; text and translation from Grant Showerman, (trs.), *Ovid I Heroides and Amores* 2nd edn. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1977) pp.82-83.

²⁵ Frank Justus Miller (trs.) *Ovid Metamorphoses I* (Loeb Classical Library, London: Heinemann, 1916, rpt.1946), pp.348-349.

In the *Legend of Lucrece*, the heroine prays to God for the safety of her husband, as we have already seen in this chapter. Her prayer "God wolde the walles were falle adoun!" (1726) echoes the prayers of Piramus and Thisbe to the wall. Tarquin's religious affiliations are somewhat vague. He swears both "As wisly Jupiter my soule save" (1806) and "By thilke God that formed man alyve" (1792). Despite the naming of Jupiter in the first of these vows, both prayers seem to involve formulaic Christian phrases. This unsettling and disturbing religious context, taken in conjunction with the misquotation of scripture at the end of the legend, and the attempt to all but sanctify Lucrece, juxtaposes the potential systems of religious meaning.

The *Legend of Ariadne* focuses on the role of the classical gods, with one or two anachronistic references to the Christian God. Theseus' faithlessness causes the anger of "the goddes of the heven above" (1891). This credits them with the power to influence the events of the story. Yet shortly afterwards the narrator describes the way in which Ariadne and Phedra overhear Theseus' lament as either accidental or caused by fate: "Noot I not how, it happede par cas," (1967). It is unclear whether the universe of the story is controlled by an over-riding principle or deity.

These ambiguities are deeply rooted in Theseus' vows to Ariadne. He uses the phrase "As wolde God" (2056), but immediately afterwards prays to Mars, the god of war (2063), which does not bode well for his priorities as a courtly lover. Theseus swears again by Mars at line 2109. This is appropriate for his preparation for his test against the Minotaur the next day, but not for his conversation with the heroine. Ariadne, in contrast, invokes only God:

"God shilde it" (2082). The single reference makes her consistent in her religious affiliations.

At the end of the *Legend of Ariadne*, the narrator comes as close as he ever does to describing a metamorphosis, which reflects the greater emphasis on classical images in the legend as a whole:

The goddes han hire holpen for pite,
And in the signe of Taurus men may se
The stones of hire corone shyne clere.

I wol no more speke of this mateere (2222-2225).

This refers to the tradition that Bacchus helped Ariadne by turning her into a constellation. However, this is not uninflected by irony. Putting the coronet of stars into Taurus is a narrative addition from the *Metamorphoses*. It links back to the imagery of Ariadne's half-brother, the Minotaur, half-man and half-bull, the result of Ariadne's mother Pasiphae's relation with a bull.

The story of Pasiphae was glossed over during the rest of the legend, but the Taurus reference indicates an ironic subversion of Alceste's insistence that all women are good. It also strengthens the presence of the classical gods in the legend. The gender-specific pronoun marker emphasizes that men will see Ariadne in the stars, reinforcing the narrator's assumption that only men are granted the subjective position of the observer.

The *Legend of Philomela* develops the reference in the *Legend of Hypsipyle and Medea* to the interaction of matter and form, by introducing the neo-Platonic concept of God as the originator of forms. The legend starts with the

Latin tag: "Deus dator formarum." (God is the giver of forms)²⁶, and then immediately translates this:

Thou yevere of the formes, that hast wrought

This fayre world and bar it in thy thought

Eternaly er thow thy werk began...

Whi sufferest thow that Tereus was bore... (2228-2230, 2234)

This question probes the problem of God and the causation of evil, as the rest of the *Legend of Philomela* does as well. The overriding indication is that God does not act to protect the innocent, but allows evil to take place. The narrator's indignant reaction to this is somewhat negated by his concern for the reputation of men, rather than the suffering of women. His anxiety about his own masculine identity is demonstrated through his desire for God to stabilize and regulate gender relations. He is deeply implicated in Tereus' attitudes by his narration of this legend. This is strengthened by the association between the role of God as the maker of forms and the poet, who is a "maker" as well.

After casting doubt on God's processes of organising the universe, the narrator complicates his account by foregrounding several classical god and goddess figures. Tereus is related to Mars, god of war, which identifies him with Theseus of the preceding legend. Classical figures are used as ominous portents for the wedding of Procne and Tereus: Juno and Imeneus do not preside over the marriage as is customary, but the three Furies do attend. This use of gods and goddesses as portents unsettles the proposition in the introduction, which presents God as the creator and ruler of the universe.

²⁶ *Riverside Chaucer*, p.624.

There is quite a lot of unstable religious imagery and allusion in the legend. Procne is associated with prayer, but it is to her powerful husband rather than to God: "But to hire husbonde gan she for to preye,/For Godes love," (2263-2264) and: "She preyde hym that he wolde after hire sende;/And this was day by day al hire preyere," (2267-2268). This excessive imagery portrays Tereus as a God figure, which is a most unsettling association, given his later actions.

Tereus himself feigns not courtly behaviour to get what he wants, but piety: "Unto his fadyr-in-lawe gan he preye" (2272), "And with his wiles kneled and so preyde" (2294). This turns him into a false supplicant to a rival power figure, the father of Procne and Philomela, who are the objects of his desire. This analogy is as damaging as the image of him as a substitute for God.

When Philomela is raped, she appeals to the absent for help: "She cryeth 'Syster!' with ful loud a stevene,/And 'Fader dere!' and 'Help me, God in hevene!'/Al helpeth nat;" (2328-2330). Philomela is inaccessible to her sister and her father, but the narrator implies that God could have done more to help her. Coupled with the introduction which questions why God allowed Tereus to be born at all, the legend provides a critical view of God's role in causation of events, a challenge to God's supposedly all-beneficent and all-powerful nature. The presence of the classical deities increases this challenge.

The narrator's uneasiness about the role of God in Philomela's story is clear from the ironic twist to the pious hope that God will revenge Philomela,

followed by the narrator's intention to finish quickly (2339-2341). This covers up the violent revenge undertaken by Procne and Philomela, which challenges their construction as passive good women who are always faithful in love. It also hides their metamorphoses, which resist narrative closure of their stories. However, God's status as an authority is called into question. The events of the story are ostensibly beyond God's control, but the narrator persists in attempting to attribute them to God. As we have seen this is redolent with implications for the narrator's own role in causation.

In Phyllis' letter, derived from the *Heroides*, the narrator presents the God that Phyllis prays to as the Christian God, although in the original source it was Jupiter: "God wot" (2512)," To God," quod she, "preye I, and ofte have prayed"," (2533) and "Thanne preye I God" (2538). Ambiguously, she also alludes to "the goddes that ye han forswore" (2522) in her letter to Demophoon.

The *Legend of Hypermnestra* contains only one direct reference to the Christian God : "God wot" (2651), but it also has two indirect references from the speech of Hypermnestra's father, Egiste, who does not name God, but refers to "hym that al hath wrought!" (2642) and swears "by hym that I have sworn!" (2662), somewhat of a circumlocution. Egiste's reluctance to name God indicates guilt of some kind, in contrast with Hypermnestra's innocence.

Near the beginning of the legend there is abundant reference to the gods who have assisted with her horoscope by their influence, Venus, Jupiter,

Mars and Saturn. There are also two references to the Fates: "The Wirdes, that we clepen Destine" (2580), which seems to be a rare attempt to contextualize a classical reference to contemporary times, and "the fatal systren" (2630).

This disruption of the stable production of religious meaning in the text is part of the narrator's anxiety. The destabilization of religious imagery in the legends contradicts the possibility that the women are seriously intended to be portrayed as saints. The presence of the classical gods and goddesses disrupts the attempt to make them conform to the requirements of Christian piety.

By making the heroines into martyrs, the irony around the construction of the narrator's persona implies that ultimately, it is irrelevant which literary conventions are chosen to represent women. As long as women remain the other in the masculine system of signification, masculine authors will continue to represent their deaths, which symbolise the death of the cultural feminine values. In this portrayal of the textual behaviour of the masculine narrator, we have seen his efforts to extinguish the stories of all women, by reducing his examples to one totalizing pattern. But a faint indication of the survival of the feminine remains, through the paradigm represented by Hypermnestra.

In the *Legend of Hypermnestra*, which like the other legends contains multiple references to classical gods and the Christian God, the narrator forewarns us of Hypermnestra's death in prison: "As I shal after make mencion" (2599). But his legend ends before he has time to place it within

the narrative. Hypermnestra, already rebellious against her father's wishes, escapes death in the narrative, although she is imprisoned. Similarly, her legend remains unfinished. When the narrator breaks off abruptly, making a promise of interpretation that he is unable to keep, he too is silenced: "This tale is seyde for this conclusioun - "

In themselves, the survival of Hypermnestra, and the unfinished nature of her legend, do not symbolise women representing themselves, or constructing a system through which they could be represented. Both the story and the heroine, however, have resisted the closure of masculine representation. Through the irony surrounding the figure of the masculine persona, space is left in the text for the potential of women to construct their own subjectivity.

Conclusion

Irony is a subversive strategy. Hidden meanings can undermine discourse which appears to be complicit with the dominant order. Recent scholarship has retrieved the *Legend of Good Women* from obscurity and validated its worth through ironic interpretations of the narrator. The double ironic perspective, both from and around the narrator is the key to contemporary evaluation of the poem, as it allows us to presuppose authorial intention. Instead of a text enslaved to historical readings, or completely decentred, modern scholarship has permitted the construction of a "Chaucer" distinct from the narrative persona, and ironically engaged with him.

Subversiveness is evident in both levels of irony. When the narrator uses irony in his representation of the heroines, he reveals a different story to the paradigm of women's faithfulness in love set out by Alceste and the God of Love. Multiple possibilities for the personalities of the heroines are explored, although there are overtones of misogyny. The narrator betrays through his irony his awareness of women who are active, aggressive, sexual and independent.

The second level of irony, constructed by the author around the figure of the narrative persona, reveals the narrator's anxiety about these women who cannot be defined within his narrative paradigm. Looking to authoritative sources of the past, yet attempting to construct his own text in writing, the narrator determinedly covers up knowledge which contradicts the paradigm he affirms. At the same time, he covertly identifies with the members of his own sex. He uses conflicting models to represent women, but subordinates

them all to his overall pattern, which leads to the death of these representatives of cultural feminine qualities.

This death, however, is not a total victory for the narrator. His own anxieties become more pronounced in the text, until he himself is silenced through the inconclusive ending to the *Legend of Hypermnestra*. Only when the dominant narrative voice stops speaking, promising a point of closure which is never reached, does the subversive possibility of a different story unfold; fulfilment of this inarticulate potential, however, eludes this particular text.

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