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"Be war, ye wemen, of youre subtyl fo"
- A Study of Chaucer's
Legend of Good Women

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Abstract

The principal aim of this thesis is to survey the two main critical opinions which have been expressed upon the Legend of Good Women, and to ascertain the merits of each case in conjunction with an attempt at bringing about some reconciliation of the two.

The thesis begins by pointing out the relatively cursory critical attention that the Legend has in fact received. The Prologue alone has appealed to critics generally because of its two versions, Chaucer's use of courtly love conventions, and because Queen Anne may have commanded him to write it. The weight of critical opinion maintains that the legends themselves are generally monotonous and tedious, and that Chaucer himself was bored. A survey is made of the development and entrenchment of this, the bored thesis. A rare and recent case against this thesis is then examined in detail. As this essentially rests on the recognition and assessment of the rhetorical technique abbreviatio, a brief survey of medieval rhetorical theory is then made. This is followed by an attempt to set the work in its wider medieval context as a counter to prejudice against the Legend due to a modern perspective.

It is possible then to endeavour to look at the poem from Chaucer's viewpoint. It is concluded that the poem was essentially an experiment for him. Also, the smallness of scale and repetitious theme of the legends must have bothered Chaucer as much as they do modern critics. This comes out in the ambivalent position of the narrator and it is here that a possible reconciliation of the opposing theses is suggested. Finally, Chaucer neglected the rather flat Legend for the infinitely more varied and human Canterbury Tales.

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Chapter 1 The Whirlpool of the Prologue

Be war, ye wemen, of youre subtyl fo,
Syn yit this day men may ensauple se;
And trusteth, as in love, no man but me.

Just who is the "subtyle fo" women need beware of? Is it the false lover, love itself, or Chaucer himself having a sly dig at the ladies of the court? Is Geoffrey really to be trusted? Many questions of this nature are raised by the elusive Legend of Good Women and none of them can be answered with complete certainty - a not unusual difficulty in Chaucerian criticism.

Over the years Chaucer's Legend has received relatively cursory critical attention. It has not stimulated modern criticism in the way, for instance, that the Canterbury Tales has. When it has aroused any interest this seems to have largely centered on the prologues while the legends themselves are dismissed as being rather tedious and monotonous. After all, Chaucer himself did them in a perfunctory spirit, or so it is claimed.

Critical material on the Prologue has been concerned with two major questions. Which of the two prologues was written first, and how does one interpret the Prologue anyway? As John Livingston Lowes points out the Prologue is "rich in interest, but in one respect it is unique. For it exists in two distinct versions, of which one is a thoroughgoing revision of the other".¹ Walter W. Skeat produced the first genuine scholarly edition of the Legend of Good Women in 1889, and argued for the priority of what he termed the A text prologue over the B text.² Now the latter is usually accepted as the earlier version largely due to the work of Lowes and Tatlock, and the versions have been re-named F(B) and G(A), F being written about 1376 and G possibly as late as 1395. In our study we will be largely concerned with the Legend of Good Women as a whole, however, rather than concentrating on the Prologue and neglecting the legends. The Prologue itself has largely received its critical due. As Nevill Coghill

wisely puts it "a highly intricate and scholarly controversy has for many years centered around the former [the Prologue], and it is as well to keep out of that whirlpool if possible".³ Nevertheless, we do need to take a look at the Prologue because there are some points to be made which will be relevant to our later discussion of the Legend of Good Women.

There is first of all, the conventional courtly setting of the Prologue. Chaucer here returned to the love-vision convention of his earlier works. The Prologue follows the love-vision pattern by beginning with the mention of books and their relevance to life. Instead however of an insomniac poet eventually lulled to sleep by his book, we have an invigorated narrator setting his books aside to go and worship the daisy. At the end of the day, though, he does fall asleep and the dream vision begins. True to convention the vision concerns love and the God of Love is present. Many love-vision elements are there: It is a fine May morning in spring, there are beautiful flowers, birds sing happily, there are personified abstractions like Danger and Pity, and beautiful people as the God of Love, Queen Alceste and all the attendant ladies arrive on the scene. There is gentle devotional singing and dancing. Furthermore it is very much a vision. It is richly visual and largely an account of what the poet sees rather than thinks.⁴ Other courtly love conventions, namely the Flower-Leaf debate and the cult of the marguerite, are alluded to. In Chaucer's time, a subject for courtly poetic debate was that of the relative merits of the flower and the leaf. The ladies and gentlemen of the court divided themselves into two orders, one devoted to the Flower and the other to the Leaf.⁵ Chaucer refuses to take sides. With regard to the marguerite cult however, he is a devoted follower of the marguerite (the daisy), paralleling the French court poets Deschamps, Machaut and Froissart.

J.S.P. Tatlock points out that the Legend of Good Women combines two conventions: "the love-vision and the adaption of church language to the religion of love"⁶ Prologue F he maintains has much more "happy emotion" in it than any of Chaucer's other love-visions. The courtly love code

developed in analogy to medieval Christianity. Cupid was the god of the religion of love which also had its mediator and intercessor (Alceste in the Legend), its saints, legends and a system of repentance, penance and satisfaction. The medieval meaning of 'legend' was the recounting of the life of a Christian saint who was often also a martyr to the Christian religion. By analogy then, Chaucer, who is accused by the God of Love of heresy towards the religion of love, is to write as a penance a legend of women "who were martyrs to love because of their devotion to a definitely conceived religion of which the god Cupid is the head".⁷ Furthermore, Tatlock points out that the "rubric at the beginning and end of each of Chaucer's legends, as 'Incipit legenda Cleopatrie', Martoris Egipti regine', follows the usage of Christian saints' legends".⁸ He gives other examples of the analogy: the God of Love's mother is referred to as Saint Venus, ballads are hymns for his holy days, the daisy is his beloved relic, Alceste is the charitable intercessor in analogy to the Virgin Mary.

Interpretative problems in the Prologue have mainly arisen over the daisy, Alceste and the God of Love and the question of allegory. Is any of them an allegorical representation of anybody or anything, and if so, of whom or what? Ten Brink seems to have begun the argument by stating: "It is clear that the Alcestis of the Prologue represents Richard's Queen Anne".⁹ Skeat agreed and so have many other scholars.¹⁰ At times the Alceste-Anne link has been extended: if Alceste is Anne it is argued, then the God of Love must be Richard II. More recent scholarship has, however, tended to veer away from any precise identification. It has been pointed out a number of times that Alceste could hardly be Anne, since Alceste makes specific reference to Anne in the third person:

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

(F496-497)¹¹

Besides this there is always risk involved in attempting historical identification with no conclusive evidence to go on 600 years after the event. For instance, D.S. Brewer suggests that "there seems no need to suppose any allegorical

significance",¹² because of Alceste's reference to the Queen, and because of Chaucer's somewhat flippant treatment of the God of Love; King Richard can hardly be interred.

The Alceste-Anne interpretation was probably prompted in the first place by the possibility that Chaucer was actually commanded by Queen Anne to write the Legend of Good Women as a palinode for Troilus and Criseyde in which he had defamed womankind by writing of the false Criseyde. This is the second important point of which we need to take note. At the end of the Troilus Chaucer seems aware that he may have offended the ladies of the court, and even seems to anticipate the Legend itself:

Bysechyng every lady bright of hewe,
 And every gentil womman, what she be,
 That all be that Criseyde was untrewe,
 That for that gilt she be nat wroth with me.
 Ye may hire giltes in other bokes se;
 And gladlier I wol write, yif yow leste,
 Penelopees trouthe and good Alceste.

(V 1772 - 1778)

This of course could be evidence that Chaucer was planning to write the Legend anyway. However, the possibility that Anne commanded him to do so arises out of the claim Lydgate made in the Prologue to the Fall of Princes, his translation of Boccaccio's De Casibus Virorum Illustrium. In this Prologue Lydgate provided a list of Chaucer's writings, including the Legend of which he had this to say:

This poet wrot, at request off the queen,
 A legende off parfit hoolynesse,
 Off Goode Women to fynde out nynteen
 That dede excelle in bounte and fairnesse;
 But for his labour and his bisynesse
 Was importable his wittis to encoumbre,
 In al this world to fynde so gret a noumbre¹⁴

Many scholars have of course regarded the existence of the two prologues as a unique opportunity to study the poet Chaucer at work on the process of revision and several

arguments have been advanced as to why he should have felt it necessary to make any revision. These are often connected with the Alceste-Anne problem we have just noted. Of course, the very first thing that must be done, before conjecturing any reasons for the revision, is to decide which in fact was the first prologue and which the revision. As we have already seen Skeat thought that A was earlier. Now it is generally accepted that B was earlier and so we have F (B) and G (A). F is closer to the sources and contains a reference to Queen Anne (496-7) who died in 1394. G adds to the list of Chaucer's own writings (414-15) a book he used in the Prologue to the Man of Law's Tale, makes two references to his old age (261-2; 400-1), and removes any reference to Queen Anne. These points do seem good evidence for accepting F as the earlier version. It is regarded as the more intense personal piece, while G it is argued, reflects tighter, more logical and more mature construction and expression.¹⁵ Here, however, we must leave the Prologue and broaden our horizons to encompass the legends themselves.

Notes.

- (N.B. In all Notes, the following method will be used: first references will be cited in full, if this has not already been done in the text, and thereafter the author's surname only. In cases where two works by the same author are cited, the lesser used work will be cited in full each time).
1. John Livingston Lowes, Geoffrey Chaucer (Oxford, 1961), p.129.
 2. The Legend of Good Women, ed. Walter Skeat (Oxford, 1889), pp.xii - xiv
 3. Nevill Coghill, The Poet Chaucer (London, 1964), p.89.
 4. For a full discussion of dream visions, see Constance Heiatt, The Realism of Dream Visions (The Hague, 1967).
 5. See The Flooure and the Leafe, ed. D.A. Pearsall (Nelson's Medieval and Renaissance Library, 1962), especially pp 20-29 of the introduction.
 6. J.S.P. Tatlock, The Mind and Art of Chaucer (Syracuse Univ. Press, 1950), p.71.
 7. D.D. Griffith, "An Interpretation of Chaucer's Legend of Good Women", in Chaucer Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Edward Wagenknecht (New York, 1959), p.369.
 8. Tatlock, p.76.
 9. B. Ten Brink, History of English Literature, trans. W.C. Robinson (London, 1901), II p.112.
 10. Most scholars in the earlier part of this century accepted this view, except for Lowes and Kittredge. See, for example, Emile Legouis, Geoffrey Chaucer, trans. L. Lailavoix, (New York, 1961), p.98. Some like Margaret Galway have suggested other historical identifications for figures in Prologue. Several arguments are summarized and original articles are noted in George Williams', A New View of Chaucer (Durham, North Carolina, 1965), Chp. VII. For a somewhat doubtful reconciliation of arguments both for and against the identification of Anne and Alceste see B.L. Jefferson, "Queen Anne and Queen Alcestis" in Wagenknecht, op cit, p.405 ff.
 11. All quotations from Chaucer in my text are from The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. F.N. Robinson, second edition, 1957.
 12. D.S. Brewer, Chaucer (London, 1953) p.54ff.
 13. See, for example, Tatlock, p.73 who sees an association of the daisy, Alceste and Anne which "heightens the charm of all three", but suggests that the identification of the three is indefinable. He suggests further that as Chaucer **nowhere** in the Prologue made clear that the God of Love was in fact Alceste's husband, there is no need to try and identify him with Richard II. See also Marchette Chute, Geoffrey

Chaucer of England (New York, 1946) p.190, and John Speirs, Chaucer the Maker (London, 1960), p.86. Bertrand Bronson, In Search of Chaucer (Toronto, 1960), pp.54-59, questions the whole Daisy -Alceste-Anne hypothesis and casts grave aspersions on its validity. For a recent re-interpretation of the whole hypothesis which suggests that the daisy is the symbol of literary creation, Alceste is Duchess Blanche, and the God of Love is by and large just that, see George Williams, loc. cit.

14. "Prologue", pp.330-36; ed. Henry Bergen, EETS, ES 121 (London, 1924).
15. See, for example, Brewer, pp.117-121; Bronson, pp.52-53; Kemp Malone, Chapters on Chaucer (Baltimore, 1951), pp85-89; and Speirs, pp.86-88. For an alternative interpretation, namely that the purpose of the revision was to remove the most definite references to an analogy between Christian service and the worship of Cupid, see D.D. Griffith in Wagenknecht, pp.397-404.

Chapter 2 "I am agroted..."

When critics have considered the Legend of Good Women as a whole, there has come to be one over-riding conclusion. The Prologue is a delightful, charming and challenging piece of work, but the legends themselves are for the most part monotonous and lifeless. What is more, Chaucer himself indicated his boredom at several stages throughout the legends and eventually broke off never to finish the work. This argument we will refer to as the bored thesis and this chapter will attempt an historical survey of it to see when it began and how it has continued to be developed and accepted.

For a survey of the very beginnings of the thesis we are indebted to R.W. Frank's article "The Legend of the Legend of Good Women".¹ The thesis seems not to have begun until the late nineteenth century. Of several references to the Legend in the decades after Chaucer's death none contain any suggestion that he found the work irksome. Lydgate is the only one to provide some explanation as to why Chaucer did not finish the Legend. He said that the task of unearthing nineteen good women "was importable his wittis to encoumbre"². There is possibly a hint here of some boredom on Chaucer's part, but the more likely explanation is that this is "simply a joking remark out of the anti-feminist tradition".³ During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries it seems that the legends were quite popular. They were alluded to and imitated often.⁴ Derek Pearsall points out that the most popular works among the English Chaucerians were the Parlement of Foules, Troilus and Criseyde, the Knight's Tale and the Legend of Good Women.⁵ Interestingly enough, The Canterbury Tales in general was less highly regarded then.

The Legend continued to be popular during the nineteenth century.⁶ However, in 1889 Skeat's edition of the Legend was published and with it the bored thesis seems to have begun. In his preface, Skeat assigned "the conjectural date of the spring of 1385 to both forms of the Prologue", and continued, "and I suppose that Chaucer went on with one tale of the series after another during the summer and latter part of the same

year till he grew tired of the task, and at last gave it up in the middle of a sentence. The expression of doubt as to the completion of the task already appears in 1.2457".⁷ Furthermore Skeat appended a note to the line: "And eek to haste me in my legende" (1.2456) that "This is a hint that Chaucer was already getting tired of his task".

This same idea (though possibly arrived at independently of Skeat) was given extension and greater expression in 1892 by Thomas Lounsbury in his Studies in Chaucer, III⁸. Lounsbury's thesis seems to have been the main well-spring of the bored thesis, and thus we must view it at some length. Lounsbury's thesis was not just based on a reading of the text, but also on premises about Chaucer's development as a literary artist. The major premise was that Chaucer's literary life should be seen as "a story of steady growth, in which he gradually rose superior to the taste of his time"⁹. Lounsbury saw this growth as involving the criticism and rejection of such genres as the medieval romance (as in Sir Thopas) and medieval tragedy (as in the Monk's Tale). The Legend of Good Women provided for Lounsbury a most convincing example of this process.¹⁰ Lounsbury says "we can go back to a period in which he [Chaucer] was still swayed by the taste he came in time to censure...back to the very work written under its influence, and observe during the progress of its composition the change that was gradually coming over his opinions. It is in the 'Legend of Good Women' that we can trace the alteration in his point of view". Lounsbury accepts the notion that the Legend was undertaken at the command or request of someone in authority, most likely Queen Anne, and that Chaucer began it enthusiastically. In fact Lounsbury feels that Chaucer probably intended "to make it the crowning achievement of his literary career". He sees evidence for this in the command which Alceste gives to the poet (F481-485). Lounsbury suggests that a major stumbling block for Chaucer as he continues with his tales will be the basic lack of variety inherent in them:

"There is nothing more peculiar in the 'Legend of Good Women' than the steadily growing dissatisfaction of the author with his subject which marks its progress. It was not

long before Chaucer began to see the folly of what he had set out to accomplish. His keen artistic sense could not fail to recognize the insufficiency of a plan which permitted him to deal only with the variations of a single theme. He was hampered still further by the limitations imposed by the legendary stories he was versifying. The necessity of adhering to their details prevented him from giving any wide play to his imagination. He knew at the beginning of every one precisely what he had to do, just as his reader would know in the same case that it was a dismal ending which he was to expect. It is therefore not at all strange that the inevitable monotony wore upon him speedily. It made him at last careless and indifferent in the choice of these stories. He was, in consequence, not always justified in his selection [for example, the tale of Philomela is not about a woman's martyrdom for love] ...His increasing lack of interest is openly displayed in the hasty and reckless manner in which his work is done towards the end". Lounsbury maintains that Chaucer's increasing impatience is plain to see as the work continued. "At times he was prompted to relieve its inevitable monotony by the introduction of a humorous element. [F 1383 is cited] ... By the time he reached the eighth story - that of Phillis - he makes no pretence of concealing the disgust he has felt, and is continuing to feel with his subject, and his desire to be done with it as soon as possible. It is in the following words he explains his reasons for not giving the particulars of what passed between the heroine and Demophon:

But for I am agroted herebeforn,
 To write of hem that be in love forsworn,
 And eke to haste me in my legend -
 Which to performe God me grace send -
 Therefore I passe shortly as I can.

(2454-2458)

The very conclusion of this tale, with its mock advice to women to beware of men, and in matters of love to trust no one of them but Chaucer himself, is ample proof that the element of seriousness was departing rapidly from the work. Nothing of that nature could well be imputed to a professedly tragic poem... The taste which made collections of stories of

this kind popular came to be recognized as essentially vicious, and therefore transitory. It shows how thoroughly developed was the critical side of his intellectual nature that he should have reached such a conclusion, while this style of composition was not only fully in fashion, but had before it centuries in which to exist and flourish".

The bored thesis has continued to be largely accepted, although not all of Lounsbury's argument has. Especially to be criticised in his thesis is the statement that the literary taste of Chaucer's time was "vicious". Frank points out that we understand better now the role of convention in art and do not label the conventions of Chaucer's day as necessarily crippling. "We recognize the taste of his time as more sophisticated than Lounsbury allows" and we realise that we do not know enough about taste in that age "to permit such dogmatic assertions about its character".¹¹ It is not our purpose here, however, to criticise the bored thesis generally. This we will deal with later. Suffice to say that Lounsbury's attitude to Chaucer was in harmony with that in vogue at the time, and thus he continued to influence criticism of the Legend of Good Women. For instance, early in the century, J.B. Bilderbeck and Robert K. Root saw evidence of Chaucer's weariness in the poem.¹² George Lyman Kittredge, furthermore, maintained this too. The bored thesis still remains with us and accounts largely for modern neglect of the legends. Let us therefore examine the continued development of the thesis up until the present day.

In 1909 that eminent Chaucerian scholar John Livingston Lowes wrote an article refuting a claim that the Legend of Good Women is a travesty.¹³ In his concluding comments about Chaucer's attitudes to the ladies in the Legend, Lowes says authoritatively that Chaucer "grew very tired of them to be sure".¹⁴ Over twenty years later Lowes had not changed his view.¹⁵ He feels that it is not possible to read the legends without perceiving that the repetition of the same set theme grew increasingly perfunctory, until in the last complete legend Chaucer frankly declared himself "agroted" (overfed) with his work. Whether or not we agree with this view we cannot help but smile at Lowes' wry analogy of Chaucer's boredom with

Fra Lippo Lippi's "saints and saints/ And saints again".

As we have seen Lounsbury accepted the notion that the subject of the Legend was imposed upon Chaucer probably by Anne. A number of critics have used this as a reason for Chaucer's alleged boredom. Because he had to keep repeating a theme not of his own choosing he quickly lost interest. Emile Legouis writing in 1910 takes such a position.¹⁶ He says that the Legend was "forced" upon Chaucer and that it was a "somewhat monotonous task". Legouis does make some good points about the legends however, because he views them in a balanced way and does not dismiss them out of hand. These points we will take up in Chapter Six. Grace Hadow in 1914 sees the sameness of treatment as the cause for Chaucer's tiredness.¹⁷ She points out that of the twenty or so legends Chaucer planned, he only got as far as the ninth. This has often been used as part of the evidence for the bored thesis and it is of course necessary to note here that Chaucer never explicitly stated how many legends he intended to write. Lydgate gives a figure of nineteen but presumably he got this from the fact that Alceste had nineteen attendant ladies.¹⁸

Right through the 1940's and 1950's critical attitudes towards the Legend of Good Women remained substantially the same. Even those who defended the legends nodded, if not bowed, to the bored thesis. Percy Shelly was quite enthusiastic about the legends, even taking the somewhat unusual step of finding them preferable to the Prologue. He was of the opinion that the legends, because they dealt with the mythology of the ancient world, were in fact likely to mean much more to the modern mind than the Prologue with its medieval allegory. Far from suggesting that Chaucer gave his ancient material cursory treatment, Shelly maintained that "Chaucer treats his matter in such way as to cast upon us the spell of its beauty"¹⁹. Despite his eulogies, however, he succumbed to the pressure of the bored thesis. "Here and there they [the legends] betray evidence of haste and the fatigue and even boredom of the poet"²⁰. He felt that Chaucer got off to a bad start with a rather poor rendition of Cleopatra. After a few lines, says Shelly, before the reader has had time to become interested in either

heroine or hero Chaucer says:

And, for to make shortly is the beste,
She wax his wif, and hadde hym as hire leste.

The thing which bored thesis proponents seem to miss most in the Legend of Good Women is the circumstantial detail, the careful handling of character portrayal and the realism, which they regard as Chaucer's hallmarks and the key to his success. They conclude that Chaucer must have been bored because he did not bother with the detail, or alternatively he discovered that the size of his task, the rendering of many tales with the same theme, meant that he could not give rein to his usual creative imagination, and when he realised this he got discouraged over the whole thing and eventually gave it up. Shelly holds this view although he does find much to praise in the legends too. As an example of Chaucer's realism, rendition of circumstantial detail and character portrayal Shelly selects especially Troilus and Criseyde.

D.S. Brewer frankly calls the Legend a failure for "its plan is simple to the point of boredom".²¹ He too sees the scale of the legends which resulted in their thinness of treatment and lack of variety as the reason for the failure. "Like the later project of one hundred and twenty Canterbury Tales, it was too ambitious a scheme, and had the further disastrous disadvantage of a single monotonous theme. Chaucer may have learnt from this failure the need for dramatic variety so apparent in the Tales".²² Like Shelly, Brewer lights on the problem of lack of characterisation. "The heroines are not conceived of as persons at all. It is their plight which arouses our pity - but that plight, nine times repeated, is not sufficient to sustain our interest, any more than it seems to have sustained Chaucer's"²³. Bertrand Bronson is yet another who sees the problem of scale in the Legend. This strain he suggests is evident in Chaucer's expressions of the desire for haste in many of the tales. Associated with this, Bronson too brings up the problem of lack of characterization. He makes the interesting suggestion that "all the women in the Legend are ... personifications. They owe their presence in the catalogue to one fact alone, that they

were martyrs to love. What they have in common is therefore more significant than all their points of difference".²⁴ Bronson further makes what certainly seems to be a highly relevant observation, that part of Chaucer's anxiety not to be a bore "has been recognized as the habit of a man practised in oral composition and aware of the uncertain attention of a present audience".²⁵ Chaucer betrays this anxiety in many of his works, but Bronson feels that it is more evident than usual in the Legend.

J.S.P. Tatlock is another who believes that uniformity and monotony account in large part for Chaucer's rejection of the Legend. He also accepts the notion that the whole thing was forced upon Chaucer and was not really to his own taste, "lovely women star-crossed in love, a subject of which a masculine man like Chaucer, not really sentimental, would be bound to weary".²⁶ This pronouncing of judgements upon Chaucer's temperament is of course fraught with difficulties. We really only have Chaucer's extant works to go by. This involves the perennial Chaucerian problem of how we can know whether or not an opinion being expressed in any of his works is that of a character, of Chaucer's persona, or of Chaucer himself. Chaucer seems to betray sentimental feelings at times, for example, in his treatment of Criseyde. We can make only tentative judgements about Chaucer from the overall impressions gained from reading his works.

Marchette Chute claims that the Legend fails because it has neither the "psychological reality" of Troilus and Criseyde or the "universal reality" of the Canterbury Tales.²⁷ Chute says of the Legend that "it is so French in its tone and so alien to the realism towards which Chaucer was moving that it is easy to believe it was written to order". According to Chute we cannot really understand the Legend because it is a medieval, courtly thing. By praising the reality of the Troilus and the Tales the implication is that we can understand and therefore enjoy them much more because they are in some way modern rather than medieval. Chaucer has moved away from the restraints of medieval conventions towards a realistic method of story telling which we can much more readily appreciate. Chute is obviously one of the group of critics

Frank disparagingly alludes to, those who "present Chaucer as an artist moving from artificiality to realism, the pattern so dear to Chaucerian criticism until recent years"²⁸. Frank says that, even Lounsbury, for all his faults, does not present Chaucer this way, although we do feel "that pattern hovering in the air". The artificiality/reality question raises many others which must be considered in our appraisal of the Legend of Good Women, and this we will try to do in Chapter Six. At present, however, we must continue with the survey of the bored thesis.

Contrary to all those who see the uniformity of the theme of good women as a reason for Chaucer's boredom Raymond Preston claims that Chaucer rather than presenting "sameness of female virtue" in fact "persevered to a tenth heroine" because "he had some interest in the difference".²⁹ In spite of the fact that he thereby takes away one of the main foundation stories of the bored thesis, he still ultimately concludes that Chaucer wearied. Preston believes that the subject was forced upon Chaucer and that Chaucer did do his best with it, but that he was not really interested in the whole thing. He praises Chaucer's rendition of Dido and regards this as the high point of the tales. By Phyllis he claims the Legend "descends to a tedious caterwauling".³⁰ In his discussion of the Legend of Good Women, Kemp Malone bluntly dismisses the legends themselves in one paragraph, and the last paragraph at that. He would seem to represent the most extreme extension of the bored thesis. "Of the Legend itself, as distinguished from its prolog [sic] little need be said. Chaucer wrote these very short lives because he had to, not because he wanted to. Both versions of the prolog make delightful reading, ... but the nine lives of the ten saints of Cupid were done in a perfunctory spirit and we could do without them. They are worth reading; Chaucer never wrote anything truly worthless. But they are not worth reading over and over and living with. It is just as well that Chaucer did not finish the Legend of Good Women."³¹

As we move on into the 1960's we see that the basic assumptions of the bored thesis are still entrenched, but at the same time statements about its validity are becoming a

little more cautious. Muriel Bowden suggests that it is safe to assume that Chaucer abandoned the Legend "as being monotonous and lifeless", but adds the provision "when compared to the greater works".³² On the other hand, John Speirs does not see boredom as the main reason for Chaucer's failure to complete the Legend, but rather the lack of humour inherent in his tragic materials and theme. Now and then he sees what he regards as Chaucer's hallmark, his irrepressible humour hovering around the tales. For instance, in the mock-innocence of Chaucer's stance in Dido:

She fledde hireself into a litel cave,
 And with hire wente this Eneas also.
 I not, with hem if there wente any mo;
 The autour maketh of it no mencion.

And above all in the incongruous ending of the Legend of Phyllis: "And trusteth, as in love, no man but me". This, Speirs concludes, shows that Chaucer "was unable to pursue solemnly to the bitter end a series of lamentable tragedies on the single theme of faithful or deserted women".³³

Helen Storm Corsa whose particular interest is in Chaucer's use of comedy finds that the Legend of Good Women offers little for a fruitful study of the nature of Chaucer's comedy. She calls the poem a failure because of its theme which depends on "so serious an oversimplification of the complex reality inherent in 'true loving' that the poet's interest was bound to be unrealizable even before he can begin to comply".³⁴ There is no arrival at any kind of knowledge through the working out of the poem. She cites examples of Chaucer's reluctance to recount more than the bare essentials and his failure to finish the Legend as evidence of his discouragement. She does not actually claim he was bored with it. She finally makes a highly pertinent point that, as we have seen, has been generally true of the bored thesis: "the poem stops, its interest for the critic more in the evidence of what it lacks than the other poems of Chaucer have, than in its moments of lyricism and gay spirits".³⁵

D.C. Baker in 1963 suggested that the whole work was in fact an experiment for Chaucer - a final experiment with the

courtly love tradition which had so influenced him earlier. Baker suggested that Chaucer was also becoming concerned with the role of the poet in relation to society and to the truth.³⁶ This was the essential link between the Prologue and the legends and was central to Chaucer's failure to finish the legends. When Chaucer realised that what the convention of courtly love represented and demanded was not "trouthe in love", but an aberration of nature his experiment ended.

Thus during the last decade scholars were beginning increasingly to look at the Legend of Good Women other than from a purely "bored" viewpoint.

Notes.

1. In Chaucer Review, 1 (1966), 110-133.
2. See Chp. 1, n.14.
3. Frank, p.111.
4. For a selection of early references to the Legend, see Caroline Spurgeon, Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion: 1357-1900 (New York, 1960), Vol.1. (containing Part I) 18, 39-40, 67, 72, 108-9 and Vol III (Part IV Appendix A) 4-5, 9.
5. Derek Pearsall, "The English Chaucerians", in Chaucer and Chaucerians, ed. D.S. Brewer (London, 1966), p.202.
6. See Frank, p.112 n.5 - lists some evidence of the popularity of the Legend in 19th. century.
7. The Legend of Good Women (Oxford, 1889), p.xiv.
8. Reissued by Russell and Russell (New York, 1962).
9. Lounsbury, p.296.
10. Lounsbury, p.335.
11. Frank, p.14.
12. Frank, p.115.
13. This claim originated with a long article by H.C. Goddard, "Chaucer's Legend of Good Women", published in 2 parts in JEGP Vol. VII, No.4 (1908) 87-129 & Vol. VIII, No.1. (1909) 47-111. He maintained that the Legend was a thoroughgoing travesty and any tedium is part of the one huge joke which comprises the Legend. He sees the poem as a superlative satire against the God of Love, who was so stupid as to charge a loyal servant of his with heresy, and against the 'good' women. In fact "as a penance for an act he never committed, he commits that very act" (vii,4,100-01). Later in 1909, in the same journal was published a rejoinder to Goddard by J.L. Lowes, "Is Chaucer's Legend of Good Women a Travesty?" pp513-569. Lowes neatly summed up Goddard's argument and then effectively demolished it. He showed the inconsistency of trying to prove Chaucer is both sincere in his reverence and devotion to love and perpetuating a huge joke on Cupid, Alceste and the 'good' Women. Lowes also emphasised the problem of the critics perspective when trying to assess a writer not of one's own time. Goddard's case, he maintained, had "a total misconception of the matter-of-course attitude in Chaucer's day towards these stock examples of feminine virtue" (p.544), in its arguments that the legends cannot be taken seriously because of the infelicitous choice of heroines who had committed cruel acts themselves. This says Lowes is a 20th century attitude, whereas to Chaucer and his contemporaries, they were regarded "as stock exempla of fidelity in love" (p.546) Lowes then cited numerous examples of this usage by prominent medieval writers like Christine de Pisan. After all, he said, Chaucer's stated theme was fidelity in love.

14. Lowes, "Is Chaucer's Legend of Good Women a Travesty?", p.569.
15. Lowes, p.131.
16. Legouis, p.98ff.
17. Grace Hadow, Chaucer and his Times (London, 1914)p.64.
18. The "Retraction" at the end of the Parson's Tale merely confuses the issue. The Legend is referred to there as "the book of the ... Ladies", the number being variously given as "25", "XXI", "fyve and twenti", "XIX", "Twenty", and "XV". The majority of MSS read 25 (in various forms) and this is Robinson's reading. Skeat adopted 19 as the reading, presumably because of the reference in F283. For a discussion of the problem see Eleanor Hammond, "Chaucer's 'Book of the Twenty-five Ladies'," MLN, XLVIII (1933), 5 14-16.
19. Percy Van Dyke Shelly, The Living Chaucer, (New York, 1968). p.156.
20. ibid
21. Brewer, p.115.
22. Brewer, p.116.
23. Brewer, p.117.
24. Bronson, p.95
25. Bronson, p.96
26. Tatlock, p.78.
27. Chute, p.186.
28. Frank, p.115.
29. Raymond Preston, Chaucer (London, 1952), p.129.
30. Preston, p.144.
31. Malone, p.99.
32. Muriel Bowden, Guide to Geoffrey Chaucer (London, 1970), p.171.
33. Speirs, p.94.
34. Helen Storm Corsa, Chaucer Poet of Mirth and Morality (Toronto, 1970), p.37.
35. Corsa, p.38.
36. D.Baker, "Dreamer and Critic: The Poet in the Legend of Good Women", Univ. of Colarado Studies (1963), 4-18.

In 1966 we find a complete refutation of the main evidence upon which the bored thesis had rested - namely Chaucer's frequent expressions of haste and reluctance to expound his materials throughout the Legend, beginning with the God of Love's injunction in the Prologue that he was to "sey shortly, or he shal to longe dwelle", until the final expression of Chaucer's frustration in Phyllis in the "I am agroted..." passage. The article refuting this 'evidence' comes from Robert Worth Frank in "The Legend of the Legend of Good Women".¹ He claims, with some justification, as we have seen in the previous Chapter, that the bored thesis has itself become a Legend. As far as we can ascertain Frank's thesis presents the only major and explicit challenge to the bored thesis, and it therefore must be viewed at some length.

Frank's main aim was to examine both the history and merits of the bored thesis, which he felt had "paralyzed criticism of the Legend", before it finally hardened "into dogma unchallengeable". "Like a bevy of sleeping beauties", he says, "the ten martyrs of love dream on in their forgotten, cob-webbed, briar-covered palace, while somewhere in the distance beyond the daisy-powdered lawn the critics ride in other quests and joust in other quarrels". The thing which most concerned Frank about the bored thesis was that "it gives us what is presumably an important literary judgement by Chaucer".¹²

Frank first of all therefore makes a quick survey of the beginnings of the bored thesis, with special emphasis on Lounsbury. As we have already done this more extensively, we do not need to go into it again, other than to view Frank's main conclusions. Besides showing that some of Lounsbury's assumptions about Chaucer's materials and methods in the Legend were too sweeping, he says that it is not clear what Lounsbury meant by the "taste of the time" which he claimed Chaucer finally discarded when he did not finish the work. The bored thesis Frank saw as being well-established early in the twentieth century and from this time forward "the expected remark to be made about the Legend of Good Women is that Chaucer very early grew bored with the

project, plodded ahead for a time because he was in some way obliged to, and finally abandoned it in utter weariness".³ In seeing what case can be made against this thesis, Frank elects to examine the textual references which are the buttress of the thesis.⁴ Frank points out that most of these references are interpreted as virtually explicit expressions by Chaucer that his task bored him. Those passages of a mocking humorous tone were explained by Lounsbury as Chaucer's attempt to relieve the monotony of his task and as proof that "the element of seriousness was departing rapidly from the work". The fact that the work is unfinished is used as further evidence - Chaucer was too bored to finish it. Finally Frank points out that "the Legend is a mystery begging for some kind of explanation. It is a mystery because it comes between two triumphs, the Troilus and the Canterbury Tales. Less successful than either, and different from both, it remains a puzzle". Frank surmises that this has perhaps been an unrecognized element underlying the whole problem. He suggests that "the thesis that the task was an essentially uncongenial one, possibly imposed from outside, pursued without enthusiasm and dropped in despair, provides an explanation that has the advantage of being also rather comforting. It puts Chaucer on our side. What we do not particularly like he did not like either. And so we can go on to the Canterbury Tales with restored confidence and a sunny conscience".⁵

To begin his case against the bored thesis then, Frank produces evidence of Chaucer's interest over several years in the material and theme he worked with in the Legend. Frank takes as a matter of course Chaucer's respect for the principal sources for his Legend - Virgil, Guido delle Colonne, and especially the one Frank terms Chaucer's "beloved Ovid". For instance,, "as early as the Book of the Duchess he had tried his hand at retelling a story from the Metamorphoses, his "owne bok".⁶ Frank then lists evidence for Chaucer's continuing interest in the theme of the Legend, the heroines or martyrs of love. "As early again as the Book of the Duchess he referred to Jason and Medea, Phyllis and Demophon, Dido and Eneas, Echo and Narcissus and Sampson and Delilah as examples of violent and tormented love, and to Penelope and Lucrece as examples of feminine goodness"⁷. Similarly, he cites from the House of Fame the brief

recounting of the Dido and Eneas story, and the long complaint on the theme of lovers betrayed which included in its invocation many who were to appear in the Legend - Demophon, Phyllis, Jason, Hypsipyle, Medea, Theseus, Ariadne and Phedra. Again in the Parlement of Foules the figures painted on the walls of Venus's temple include several which were to appear in the Legend. Finally there was the reference to Alceste near the end of Troilus which we have already noted.⁸ "Indeed", says Frank, "we have here the theme, the first hint of the device, and much of the tone of the Legend established before the Troilus had quite finished flowing from his pen".⁹ Frank brings two final pieces of evidence to bear. No matter which Prologue comes first, Chaucer was interested enough in the Prologue to rewrite it. Furthermore, he alluded to the Legend as something still of moment to him a time afterwards in the introduction to the Man of Law's Tale, and reviewed "what is in part a genuine table of contents and what is in part either a spurious table or an indication of some of the other stories he was considering for the Legend".¹⁰ Thus Frank thinks that any suggestion that Chaucer was weary of his project before he had even finished the Prologue is ridiculous. The passage used in this argument Frank maintains needs no such interpretation, but merely stresses what Chaucer's main method of handling his sources is to be - to "reherce of al hir lyf the grete". It is the very nature of the project which demands relative brevity: "Whoso shal so many a story telle,
Sey shortly, or he shal to longe dwelle".¹¹

Frank concludes, "the tone is businesslike. There is no weariness at all".¹²

Having successfully discredited the bored thesis then, or at least prevented us from blindly accepting it, let us see just how Frank does explain those passages in which Chaucer clearly indicates his reluctance to go into any detail. According to Frank, Chaucer is simply making use of the perfectly legitimate rhetorical device of abbreviatio, the counterpart to amplificatio. It is necessary for Chaucer to use abbreviatio in the Legend because of the great bulk of material he is dealing with. This device of shortening or cutting one's material has as its frequent tactic occupatio, the refusal

to describe or narrate while referring briefly to a subject or scene. Frank cites passages from Gavin Douglas and Christine de Pisan as examples of the widespread use of occupatio. He sees it used in essentially two ways - one of explaining that to do full justice to a subject would be too long, or even wearisome; and the other while abbreviating suggesting the richness of material available, for purposes of intensification. Occupatio of this latter kind often serves the ends of panegyric. Chaucer himself, maintains Frank, uses occupatio throughout his poetry. He cites an example from Troilus and Criseyde where Chaucer, after describing in detail Troilus's suffering after Criseyde has departed for the Greek camp concludes the scene:

Who koude telle a right or ful discryve
 Hiw wo, his pleynt, his langour and his pyne?
 Naught all the men that han or ben on lyve.
 Thow, redere, maist thiself ful wel devyne
 That swich a wo my wit kan nat diffyne.
 On ydel for to write it sholde I swynke,
 Whan that me wit is wery it to thynke.

(V.267-73)

"Here", says Frank, "the device is used to reinforce the sense of Troilus's intense suffering and to bring the scene to a conclusion. No one, fortunately, has yet suggested that we are to take the last line literally and to conclude that Chaucer had grown weary of Troilus and Criseyde".¹³ Frank also gives examples of occupatio from the Knight's Tale¹⁴ and the House of Fame.¹⁵

Frank proceeds through the Legend demonstrating that in his opinion textual references upon which the bored thesis is founded are in fact over-literal misreadings of passages of occupatio. For example, in Cleopatra the poet refuses to describe the wedding feast. According to Frank the function of the occupatio here is "to intensify, to suggest without elaboration, a ceremonial occasion and enables him [Chaucer] to move on quickly with his narrative. Occupatio is used so often as a kind of shorthand for feasts and celebrations that it appears to be a stock device or topos: I would suggest

calling it the "feasting" occupatio".¹⁶ Frank points out, too, that the one tale in which signs of Chaucer's alleged weariness have not been detected is Thisbe which is significantly abbreviated almost not at all - it is more of a translation than an adaptation. Frank continues on through each of the other tales in similar fashion.¹⁷ He deduces that Chaucer is using occupatio for a variety of reasons: to separate the particular stories he wants out of a source which may have several stories intertwined, for example Ariadne from Metamorphoses; to fill in where his sources may be inadequate, for example Hypsipyle; to end a stage in the action; in the interests of delicacy or to bring the tale to a conclusion which suits his purpose (his theme) for example, Philomela.

Finally Frank considers the two passages which have given most support to the bored thesis. As these are important they will be quoted in full. The first is from Philomela, describing the wedding of Tereus and Progne:

This revel, ful of song and ek of daunce,
 Laste a fortenyght, or lytel lasse.
 But, shortly of this story for to passe,
 For I am wery of hym for to telle,
 Fyve yer his wif and he togeder dwelle,
 Til on a day she gan so sore longe...

(2255 - 60)

Frank points out that the "I am wery..." formula "seems to be a Chaucerian topos at the very least, and may possibly be a more general topos. Such force as the language does have reinforces an attitude toward the villain of the story, Tereus".¹⁸ Frank cites examples of Chaucer's use of this formula in Troilus, the Man of Law's Tale and in the Canon's Yeomans Tale¹⁹ and concludes that "the primary function of the device appears to be to provide a transition to cover the leap in time of five years [in Philomela] which he found in his source".

The other crucial passage is from Phyllis:

This honourable Phillis doth hym chere;
 Hire liketh wel his port and manere.
 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.
 Ye han wel herd of Theseus devyse
 In the betraysynge of fayre Adryane,
 That of hire pite kepte him from his bane.
 At shorte wordes, ryght so Demophon
 The same wey, the same path hath gon,
 That dide his false fader Theseus.

(2452 - 64),

Frank maintains that the "critical five lines (2454-58) are clearly functional. Part of Chaucer's problem in the Phyllis, ... is to tell a story where his source (the lyrical Heroides) gives him very little to go on. The occupatio suggests the nature of Demophon's wooing and provides by implication a narrative scene (and also avoids repetition) by reference to the story of Demophon's father Theseus, which he has already told. It is, in its language, a variation on the 'weariness' topos which Chaucer has used elsewhere. The 'excuse' he gives helps him solve a difficult problem".²⁰ Frank adds however that part of the problem here is tone, and this brings him to the next part of his thesis.

Frank believes that the tone of the Legend is generally serious, but at the same time he notes the characteristic Chaucerian fluctuation in tone from sober to light, "the momentary breaking of a solemn mood by a comic irreverence".²¹ This Frank observes is a good speaker's trick to keep his audience alert and to avoid restiveness. Furthermore, there is comic potentiality in the situation from which the Legend develops. The theme that women are loyal and men are false contains in it comic possibilities - the concept of love as a contest, a war between the sexes, and the exaggeration involved in the generalisation can always be deflated. Also there is comic potential in Chaucer's role - the man obliged to do penance for his crimes against the fair name of women. Thus, says Frank, the comic moments are not a sign of Chaucer's weariness or disgust but "characteristic of poetry in which women are praised, and they are called for by the device

which motivates Chaucer's telling of the legends. So we have from time to time the mocking remarks about the falseness of men and the comic suggestions that only Chaucer is a man to be trusted. And the fictive situation that makes the narratives a penance which he must perform demands that he shall groan now and then. It is part of the joke which accompanies the seriousness".²²

To complete his challenge of the bored thesis, Frank takes up one last point - the fact that the poem is unfinished. This is often claimed as further evidence that Chaucer was bored. Frank says "there is only one certain conclusion to be drawn from this fact: namely that the poem is unfinished, nothing more".²³ Chaucer did not succeed in finishing several of his works - the House of Fame, the Canterbury Tales, the Squire's Tale, the Cook's Tale. In fact, Frank suggests that it is fairly obvious from the way Chaucer broke off in Hypermnestra that he intended to return to the work, and not that he was so "agroted" that he could not even bear to add the last few lines and so finish the Legend off. Frank believes, with some justification, that the preceding scene of Hypermnestra alone with her sleeping bridegroom whom she has just been ordered to kill is quite magnificent. It is quite possible therefore that Chaucer stopped writing because he intended to work out an equally good ending. The mention of the Legend in the Man of Law's Tale certainly suggests he still had some interest in it, and he did revise the Prologue. Whatever the case, there is no justification for making anything out of the fact that the Legend is unfinished. Thus Frank denies the bored thesis, mainly by identifying Chaucer's use of abbreviatio and occupatio. The Legend he believes is "a brilliant work of selection".²⁴ Frank does not deny that once Chaucer "hit upon the scheme of the Canterbury Tales he devoted an enormously greater amount of time and energy to it than he did to the Legend...", the Canterbury Tales with its possibilities for a variety of narratives proved to be a more attractive and a more rewarding scheme. But that is a different matter from saying that the project of the Legend was a burden and a bore". Finally Frank warns, "if we condemn the Legend today, we must do so without enlisting Chaucer's judgement to confirm our own".²⁵

Notes.

1. In Chaucer Review 1: 1966, pp.110-133.
2. Frank, p.110.
3. Frank, p.116.
4. Various combinations of these have been cited by Skeat, Lounsbury, Tatlock and many other scholars. The full list of references is as follows: in Prologue F 570-77; and in the tales themselves, lines 616-23, 996-97, 1002-03, 1552-53, 1565, 1679, 1692-93, 1921, 2256-57, 2383, 2454-2464, 2470-71, 2490-91, 2513-17, 2675.
5. Frank, p.117.
6. *ibid.*
7. *ibid.*
8. See Chapt. 1.
9. Frank, p.118.
10. *ibid.*, and see also C.T. B53ff.
11. See Prologue F 570-77.
12. Frank, p.119.
13. Frank, p.121.
14. Frank, p.122.
15. Frank, p.123.
16. Frank, p.121, and see also his n.26 for examples of "feasting" occupatio.
17. Frank, pp.122-127.
18. Frank, p.128.
19. Troilus, V 267-73; C.T. B 1065-71, G 1299-1307.
20. Frank, p.129.
21. *ibid.*
22. Frank, p.130.
23. Frank, p.131.
24. Frank, p.132.
25. Frank, p.133.

In the light of Frank's thesis, it is pertinent for us to pause here and test the validity of his main contention - that signs of Chaucer's weariness in the Legend are merely overliteral misreadings of the rhetorical device of occupatio. Frank's thesis raises the whole problem of one's response to rhetoric. It is one thing to identify rhetorical colour, but another to assess its effect.

It is not disputed that there is rhetorical colour in Chaucer's works - indeed there is in any writer's work. "The basic problem is that Roman rhetoricians and grammarians managed to account for almost every possible use of language".¹ There is some debate, however, as to just what degree Chaucer was influenced by medieval rhetoricians, or for that matter just how much medieval writers and audiences were interested in rhetoric at all. Chaucer did make a satiric apostrophe to "Gaufred", Geoffrey de Vinsauf the main medieval rhetorician, in the Nun's Priest's Tale, and he obviously expected his audience to pick up the allusion. In the Canterbury Tales characters like the Franklin profess to know little about rhetoric and then give a fair demonstration of rhetorical colour. There seems little doubt that a writer of Chaucer's calibre would have thought deeply on principles and methods of composition, diction, characterisation, and it is highly probable that he was familiar with the rhetorical theories of his time.

Medieval theories of rhetoric seem to have derived from Cicero and Horace through treatises like Vinsauf's Nova Poetria which John Manly claims was a standard rhetorical textbook in medieval schools.² This rhetorical doctrine had three main divisions:³ 1. arrangement and organisation; 2. amplification and abbreviation; 3. style and its ornaments. The first did not interest medieval rhetoricians very much except for the beginnings and endings of works. The ideal beginning usually involved sententia or exemplum. The Legend of Good Women combines both: "our belief in the joys and pains of heaven and hell, says the poet, is based, not upon experience, but upon the acceptance of the sayings of 'these olde wise', in

like manner we must accept the testimony of books - these treasuries of wisdom - about the existence of good women, though we have never known them".⁴ The section of medieval rhetorical doctrine which received most emphasis, however, was that of amplification. The writer's task was essentially not to be original, but to find the means of making old, oft-told tales seem new and more beautiful. Ways of amplifying material included description, digression for the purposes of edification, and apostrophe. Abbreviation was the counterpart of amplification and most modern writers agree that Chaucer made greatest use of the form of it called occupatio.⁵ Manly points out an interesting peculiarity of Chaucer - the references to other writers for further information.⁶ This is an aspect of his use of abbreviatio and occupatio in the Legend. Manly claims, however, that the medieval writer was generally more interested to amplify his materials than to abbreviate them.⁷ Indeed the 'sin' of the medieval writer is often identified as his prolixity. Style and ornament interested the medieval rhetorician deeply and Manly calls this a "vast and tangled jungle" which ranged from simple metaphor to highly artificial patterns.⁸ Like most writers, Chaucer made extensive use of the first and very limited use of the latter. Manly sees Chaucer arriving "at the memorable discovery that the task of the artist is not to pad his tales with rhetoric, but to conceive all the events and characters in the forms and activities of life". Of course, Chaucer still remained influenced by the medieval conception of literature, that it "is of value only in so far as it can be profitably applied to the conduct of human life".⁹

Manly's assumptions about the influence of rhetorical theory on Chaucer were challenged by J.J. Murphy in "A New Look at Chaucer and the Rhetoricians".¹⁰ Murphy maintained in fact that there is little evidence of any active rhetorical tradition in fourteenth century England and that there was little formal rhetorical teaching until the next century. Murphy suggests that it was in fact the study of grammatical treatises that would have given Chaucer and his contemporaries a general knowledge of rhetorical colours, that they participated in a grammatical rather than a rhetorical tradition. Whatever the case, there is

no doubt that Chaucer possessed at least a general knowledge of rhetoric, especially in connection with poetic art.¹¹

A.C. Spearing has some helpful comments to make on Chaucer and medieval rhetoric.¹² He says that Chaucer is justly praised as the poet of human nature. He points out, however, that complementary with this view has been the view that Chaucer could achieve this by using language "bare and pleyn" as the Franklin put it, and not full of the subtleties of rhetoric. In fact, it is full of rhetoric. There was no conception in the middle ages of an artist who was ignorant of the rules of his craft. At that time "the dignity of art derived from its participation in an organized body of knowledge".¹³ There was furthermore, no distinction between 'rhetoric' and poetry. In Chaucer's time there were numerous texts on ars poetica and these were texts on rhetoric. The main interest was not in the overall organisation of the poem, but in the techniques used. The poet retold old stories by amplification or abbreviation. Spearing points out that Chaucer appears to show awareness of this in the lines from the Troilus, where he offers what he has written for correction by those who have had more experience of love than he, "To encesse or maken diminucioun/ Of my language..."¹⁴

E.R. Curtius presents a concise survey of the brevity formula in the middle ages.¹⁵ He says that the brevity formula dates back to the beginnings of Greek rhetoric, but that in the middle ages "brevitas-formulas were often used only to show that the author was familiar with the precepts of rhetoric - or else as a pretext for ending a poem". He makes a further point that is of particular interest concerning the Legend of Good Women and its analogy with Saints' Lives. The authors who practised the literary genre of the saint's life typically used the brevity formula, says Curtius, "assuring us that the saint worked more miracles than they can enumerate. Here the brevitas-formula enters the service of panegyric".¹⁶

R.O. Payne conveniently summarises several modern scholars' interpretations of Chaucer and his knowledge and use of rhetoric.¹⁷ More significant for our purposes, however, are some points he makes which are particularly relevant to the Legend of Good Women. He says that Chaucer responds to the demands of medieval rhetorical theory. Chaucer follows his

'auctours' with general faithfulness, but utilises "the rhetor's time-honoured privilege - or obligation - to select the most useful 'sentence'... and to decorate it attractively and instructively." Payne continues that "in Chaucer's view the rhetorical process... was a continuing interaction among what one man could see, what he could make others see, and how they in turn could repeat and amplify that seeing".¹⁸ He points out instances of Chaucer's use of various rhetorical devices including what he terms "the hoary 'modesty topos' ('I'm not really up to this job')"¹⁹. Chaucer makes use of this topos in the Legend, especially in conjunction with his use of occupatio.

From our short survey of medieval rhetoric it would seem that we can fairly safely conclude that Frank was largely justified in identifying and explaining Chaucer's use of abbreviatio and especially occupatio in the Legend of Good Women. Always of course we come up against the problem of Chaucer's ambivalence, as Frank admits the problem of tone in Chaucer's works - the fluctuation between humour and seriousness, light and sober tones, the degree of irony present at various times. The passages in the Legend which some say show Chaucer's weariness and boredom are without doubt utilising the rhetorical technique of occupatio. The question is - to what end? The frequency of its appearance, coupled with words which suggest feeling like "wery" and "agroted" seem to suggest more than just plain, straightforward occupatio. It is time we attempted to make our own appraisal of the elusive Legend of Good Women.

Notes.

1. J.J. Murphy, "A New Look at Chaucer and the Rhetoricians", RES 1964, p.16.
2. J.M. Manly, "Chaucer and the Rhetoricians", in Chaucerian Criticism, Vol I, ed. Scheock & Taylor, p.269.
3. Manly, p.274.
4. Manly, p.275.
5. Manly, p.282 and also see, for example, Lawler, p.94.
6. Manly, p.276.
7. Manly, p.281.
8. Manly, p.282.
9. Manly, p.286.
10. RES, 1964 pp.1-20.
11. See Dorothy Everett, Essays on Middle English Literature, (Oxford, 1959), Chpt VII.
12. In Hussey, Spearing & Winny, An Introduction to Chaucer (Cambridge, 1965), pp.102-114.
13. E. de Bruyne, Études d'esthétique médiévale (Bruges, 1946), II, 374. Cited by Spearing p.104, see n.12 above.
14. For a most readable and informative account of medieval rhetoric and poetic, see A.C. Spearing, Criticism and Medieval Poetry (London, 1972), Chpt 3.
15. E.R. Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. W.R. Trask (New York, 1953), p.487ff.
16. Curtius, p.488.
17. See R.O. Payne, "Chaucer and the Art of Rhetoric", in Companion to Chaucer Studies, ed. Beryl Rowland (Oxford, 1968)
18. See also Payne's book The Key of Remembrance (New Haven, 1963) Chpt 3. Payne believes that Chaucer was deeply interested in problems regarding the nature of poetry and its techniques, and that he expressed this in his poems, above all in the Prologue to the Legend of Good Women. Medieval rhetoricians had charged poets to present works for the moral edification of man and poets like Chaucer realised that mortal man cannot fulfil this requirement completely satisfactorily. This is the light in which Payne views the Prologue to the Legend. He sees Chaucer bringing this problem out in the situation of the Prologue - the poet on trial for having produced effects he did not intend.
19. *ibid.*

The prevalent attitude towards the Legend then, almost a legend in itself, has been that Chaucer got bored with the work, as demonstrated by his explicit and regular refusal to go into any detail or prolong things more than necessary, and so he gave it up. Frank has shown, however, that Chaucer was making use of the perfectly legitimate medieval rhetorical device of abbreviatio.¹ What does that leave us with then? The whole problem seems to be one of modern taste. Frank has suggested this - that because the work does not appeal to us, we conclude that it could not have proved very interesting to Chaucer either. Also we must recall the various critics we have already looked at who prefer to see Chaucer moving away, as his art developed, from medieval conventions and taste (which Lounsbury termed "vicious") to a more modern, realistic style - this being his greatest achievement. We must remember that we cannot help but be affected by our pleasurable knowledge of the infinitely more varied post-Legend work, the Canterbury Tales. We naturally tend to compare any Chaucerian work with this ultimate one and try to see his progressive development towards the Canterbury Tales. Also we must take into account the appeal of the Legend to Chaucer's contemporaries. The tales were less well worn than they are now. Furthermore, the work was probably the first considerable collection of tales from the Graeco-Roman classical world rendered in English poetry.² It does seem that the legends were popular with Chaucer's audiences and succeeding generations.³

In our appraisal of the Legend of Good Women we shall attempt some reconciliation of the various views already expressed in this study. We must not forget that Chaucer was a medieval poet, and thus in this chapter we will look at the Legend as a medieval poem, or as J.A. Burrow would see it more specifically - a Ricardian poem.⁴ J.W. Lowes emphasises the problem, in any interpretation of the poem, of the critic's perspective; the problem of dealing with "any writer who is not of one's time".⁵ We need to understand the medieval viewpoint on the 'good' women Chaucer chooses. Some may seem to us an

infelicitous choice, like Medea and Philomela known for their cruel infanticides. Lowes reminds us that the women of the Legend were regarded by Chaucer and his contemporaries "as stock exempla of fidelity in love". He cites a wide range of this usage by prominent medieval writers.⁶ Thus the women were good in the only sense that was relevant for the purpose - they were faithful followers of the God of Love.

In the course of a study of Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the Gawain poet, "the four chief poets of Richard's reign as a group"⁷, with special reference to features common to all of them, J.A. Burrow looks at the Legend of Good Women against the background of contemporary poetry and makes several points relevant to our study. Ricardian poetry, he points out, consists above all of poems of narrative and description, concerning happenings experienced, dreamed, read and learnt about. The audiences of the time retained an appetite for "olde approved stories" told in verse, such as the story of Jason and Medea in the Legend. Dream poems were popular and in the Legend Chaucer experimented with the dream form by using it as a prologue to a set of stories.

Burrow shows too that in devising his story from the "olde approved stories" the medieval writer would choose between amplification and abbreviation. He suggests that Chaucer, when he moved from Troilus to the Legend, "recognized the obvious fact that his new scheme required, in general, an abbreviated, small-scale method of story-telling".⁸ This is evidenced by the God of Love's instructions to "sey shortly" because he has "so many a storye" to tell. Burrow agrees that it was Chaucer's adoption of the abbreviatio method which has led modern critics to the conclusion that he was bored with the project. He too sees this as essentially a problem of modern taste. "Most people's appetite for the sheer gross matter, what Chaucer calls 'the grete', of stories such as those of Cleopatra or Thisbe is now hopelessly impaired. These stories bear for us much less 'effect and charge' than they did for a medieval audience not yet glutted with history and fiction".⁹ What we are concerned with here is one of the few terms in which we know Ricardian poets thought about their art. This is the verb to 'point', meaning to describe in detail, and is obviously a form of amplification. Involved

with this was a concern for the scale of the narrative, the level of detail to be used. Chaucer's Troilus is a narrative on the large scale and parts of it represent the Ricardian art of 'pointing' at its most elaborate.¹⁰ Burrow believes that the elaborate 'pointing' of the Troilus and of Gawain accounts for some of their popularity today, because the method has some affinity with the modern novel. It is the small-scale, light pointing and consequent lack of vivid story detail which have contributed to modern neglect of the Legend of Good Women. Chaucer was able to use skilfully all degrees of point - for instance the Canterbury Tales range from the tiny scale of the Monk's tragedies to the rich elaboration of the Knight's Tale. Within an abbreviated Ricardian narrative, Burrow points out, there often appeared enlarged and literary descriptions "on some time-honoured topic... simply for the love of it: topics such as the armed man and the beautiful woman, the spring landscape, the feast, the voyage and the hunt". A remarkable example of this sort of thing is Chaucer's detailed description of the sea-fight in Cleopatra. Similarly, the hunting scene in Dido.

Another point about the four Ricardian poets, especially Chaucer, is that they worked within the didactic mode, challenging the intelligence and imagination of their readers, not as preacher but as poets. The favoured mode was exemplification and this idea might often be stated quite explicitly, as in story collections like the Legend of Good Women. With Chaucer, however, there is an elusive working within the exemplary mode so that at the end of a work like the Legend we are left asking - what is the morality? In the Prologue to the Legend, the poet defends himself by pointing out that there can sometimes be an accidental discrepancy between the poet's "entente" and his "ensaumple" - a lot can depend on the interpretation of others. Alceste dictates the content of the legends but leaves the poet free in the critical matter of "entente". Thus the meaning of the set of examples in the Legend remains elusive and equivocal.

Burrow's final point is that in Ricardian poetry, women played an important part. The women were not Amazons or Valkyries, but like Criseyde, they were womanish.¹¹ Ricardian poets generally showed little interest in heroic feats of arms. In their works the warriors were seen mostly living the civilian

phase of their lives, and much in women's company. This accounts for the "civilian or 'chamber' quality"¹² of most of Chaucer's works, including the Legend of Good Women where there is a distinct medievalisation, in the terms of the courtly love convention, of the classical materials. This quality distinguishes Ricardian works from the heroic poetry of the Anglo Saxons and the Middle English minstrel romance.

Let us now look briefly at Chaucer's use of medieval conventions in the Prologue to the Legend, which we touched on at the beginning of this study. The particular medieval convention Chaucer used here was, as we have noted, the dream-vision. This provides the link with the tales for it explains how the poet came to write the group of non-dream stories that follow. It is thus an introduction to a group of poems, setting the unifying theme of the group and establishing a frame for a series of time-honoured stories about women true in love. In the dream he is accused of writings which have cast a general aspersion on women's fidelity and as a penance he is therefore to write year by year, so long as he lives,

a glorious legende
Of goode wymmen, maydenes and wyves,
That weren trewe in lovyng al hire lyves;
And telle of false men that hem bytraien...

This penance is the *raison d'etre* of the poem.

Within the prologue and the legends we see the typical medieval mixture of the sacred and the profane, what has been called the schizophrenia of the Middle Ages. We have already discussed the analogy between the Christian religion and the religion of Love which the whole work is built upon - the Legend of Saints' lives.¹³ Other instances include Alceste's list of Chaucer's works of "holynesse" which includes both love poetry and serious devotional works. Also Dido is described as being so good and beautiful that if God Himself were to choose a lover, it would be she.

The legends themselves show a distinct process of medievalisation. The men and women in them are described in the terms of heroines and heros from the courtly love convention. We see a lusty world of young, fresh, beautiful ladies and

vigorous, youthful, handsome knights. The women have warm, generous natures. Cleopatra is a typical medieval courtly lady, "fayr as is the rose in May", and she loves her "knyght" Antony for his "chyvalrye" and his "gentillesse". The features of the battle in this tale were apparently taken by Chaucer from descriptions of sea battles of his own time too.¹⁴ Brewer calls this a virtuoso-piece, in which Chaucer "imitates the rougher movement of alliterative verse within the limits of his own ten-syllable line, in order to get the effect of battle".¹⁵

Dido is probably the best legend from the work. It is the longest and could perhaps be regarded as the climax of the poem. Again we see Chaucer's skilful addition of medieval colour to his antique subject and the whole tale is a clever piece of abbreviation of the story of Troy, the wanderings of Aeneas, and his sojourn and love-affair with Dido. Chaucer's narrative art works well here with the story moving neatly from point to point. Dido is courtly and medieval, she is:

holden of all queenes flour,
Of gentillesse, of fredom, of beaute.

High points in the tale include the description of "dawenyng up-rist out of the se" and Dido and Aeneas going hunting in a glowing medieval tapestry scene. We also see in this tale Chaucer clearly changing his materials to suit his purpose which is to tell of faithful women and false men. In Virgil's Dido there is tragic conflict between the new desire and the old duty. In the Legend, however, Aeneas gets little credit for his heroic destiny to found Rome. He is just a false lover. Once more Chaucer skilfully abbreviates his source in the passage describing the deserted Ariadne. The details are from Ovid's parallel scene in Heroides X, but Chaucer's account is briefer and superior in its power of suggestion. It is a masterpiece of dramatic presentation from the beginning, "And in an yle, amyde the wilde se..." In the passage a scene, a person, and an action are dramatically presented. An additional dimension is the realization of the sense of loss at the heart of Ariadne's distraction, and the sympathetic rendition of distracted human behaviour:

and hire her torente,
 And to the stronde barefot faste she wetne,
 And cryed, "Theseus! myn herte swete!
 Where be ye, that I may nat with yow mete,
 And myghte thus with bestes ben yslayn?"
 The holwe rokkes answerde hire agayn.

In Hypermnestra too the details are drawn from Ovid's Heroides XIV for the scene in which the timid brides rises in the night to slay her husband. Chaucer uses abbreviatio again to striking effect. The scene is more concentrated and dramatic, for instance the intensity and economy of the line: "Allas! and shal myne hondes bloody be?"

A further medieval aspect that it would seem important for modern readers to be mindful of is that Chaucer would have been essentially an oral poet. Frank says that this could account for the fluctuations of tone in Chaucer's works - a method of maintaining a listening audience's attention.¹⁶ Bronson thinks this could help to explain any anxiety on Chaucer's part not to be a bore, to keep things moving. A.C. Spearing shows that "the audience is extremely important, because... most medieval literature was written to be read aloud to a group of listeners".¹⁷ The medieval poet could therefore be seen as a mediator between his story and his audience and this would naturally tend to give the medieval poet some prominence in his own work. Thus, says Spearing, "in reading a medieval narrative poem, we are often very much aware of the narrator's presence, as someone who calls himself 'I' and addresses us as 'lordings' or 'this fair company', or simply 'you'... The narrator is always bustling around, moving us from one part of the narrative to the next, making sure we are listening, offering his own suppositions about the characters' motives and so on".¹⁸ This is all certainly true of the Legend of Good Women, for example, the narrator peers with exaggerated detail into the source at a crucial moment, as when Dido and Aeneas go into the cave where their love is about to be consummated. The narrator ponders:

I not, with hem if there wente any mo;
 The autour maketh of it no mencion.

Or when he decides he does not think it necessary to describe

the feast Dido prepared for Aeneas, he speaks directly to his audience and asks, "What nedeth you the fest to describe?" At the end of Cleopatra, he draws his audience directly in, "I preye God let our hedes nevere ake!" There are many more examples of this sort of tactic in the Legend - a distinctly medieval poem.

Notes.

1. See Chpt 3 for a discussion of this thesis.
2. Gower's Confessio Amantis, also a collection of classical stories in English, may have just superseded the Legend. However, because of Chaucer's greater popularity it seems fair to say that he began the great tradition of classical story in English poetry.
3. See Spurgeon - as in Chpt 2, n.4.
4. See J.A. Burrow, Ricardian Poetry (London, 1971), for a particularly informative and stimulating account of poetry during Richard II's reign.
5. Lowes, "Is Chaucer's LGW a Travesty?", JEGP, VIII, 1909, p452.
6. *ibid.*
7. Burrow.p.9.
8. Burrow, p. 73.
9. Burrow, p.74
10. Burrow cites, for example, T&C ii 262-78.
11. Burrow, p.95.
12. *ibid.*
13. See Chp. 1.
14. See the note in Robinson's edition of Chaucer's Works, p.847.
15. Brewer, p.117.
16. See Chp. 3 n.21.
17. Spearing, p.77.
18. *ibid.*

Chapter 6 Experiments and Problems

We have seen that it is possible to account for many things that seem strange to us, or that do not appeal to us, by setting the Legend of Good Women in its medieval context. But are we simply to leave it there? Surely not. Chaucer's poetry is great literature, literature that does live on and can continue to be a challenge and a pleasure. By setting it in its medieval context we enhance our understanding, but that same context should not be a barrier that prevents us from attempting to deal with the problems that arise out of the Legend. Spearing identifies the most important fact we get from its context as being that the poet's role is not to be creator or inventor. He is to begin with pre-existing material, and his task is to rework and reinterpret that material for the benefit of his audience.¹ This seems a humble role, but with a poet like Chaucer, it becomes itself part of the dramatic fiction of the poem - the narrator who is both very much a part of the poem and a part of the audience. Spearing suggests that the mediator was also therefore the literary critic of the middle ages. He was a critical commentator who might rewrite a work in such a way as to show where his predecessors had gone wrong and how they might be improved upon. Thus the medieval poet, the mediator and commentator, had freedom to 'colour' the outline as he chose and could establish a personal rapport with his listeners. Chaucer carried out this function with particular skill.

There is very likely some justification in the view that there was a progressive development in Chaucer's literary art culminating in the Canterbury Tales. We can see him learning to use the various conventions and materials available to him, and then once he reached the Canterbury Tales he appears to have settled on them and been prepared to spend the rest of his life working with them and incorporating in them the varied experience and materials he had gathered throughout his poetic development. While playing the poetic role his times assigned to him, however, it is surely a mark of his creative genius that he did not simply follow blindly the literary conventions of his time, but actually used them. In fact he seems to have been

something of an experimenter throughout his literary career - trying many different methods and materials, translating verbatim at first, and then increasingly adapting materials and formulating his own particular style. It seems, therefore, that it may be valid to regard the Legend of Good Women as above all an experiment for Chaucer: a last experiment with courtly love conventions and associated with this a look at the authority/experience antithesis, a first or very early experiment with a series of related narratives introduced by a prologue, and the first experiment with the heroic couplet in the English language.

Some of the problems that modern readers grapple with in the Legend quite conceivably could have concerned Chaucer too - such as the necessity for smallness of scale and the single repetitious theme. Especially as an oral poet he could not afford to bore his audience, and the bored thesis proponents do seem to have a good point when they suggest the extreme difficulty any writer would face in attempting to write interestingly and with much dramatic variety an indefinite number of stories with exactly the same theme, with the conclusion reached before each tale had even begun. There are certainly moments of poetic fire and intensity in the legends. We have noted some in the previous chapter. However, Chaucer's claim to be "agroted" probably has an element of truth in it. The equivalent modern expression would presumably be "I've had it up to here", with appropriate movement of hand across the throat, which is fairly strong language. Even allowing for the freshness of the material, as far as Chaucer's audiences were concerned anyway, the tales without doubt do become somewhat monotonous. And note what happens in the Canterbury Tales when someone attempts to tell a series of tales on a single theme, not fidelity this time, but tragedy. The Monk uses abbreviatio drastically, but even then his audience cannot stand to have him go on, and on. More significantly it is the exemplary and highly respected Knight who interrupts him:

"Hoo!" quod the Knyght, "good sire namoore of this!
That ye han seyde is right ynough, ywis,
And muchel moore; for litel hevynesse
Is right ynough to mucche folk, I gesse.

(VII 2767-70)

One could imagine an audience listening to the Legend of Good Women beginning to feel a little like this as they heard of one faithful woman after another receiving lamentable tragedy as her reward. The poem is certainly puzzling and one cannot help wondering why Chaucer wrote it.

I

One possible answer is that the poem was something of an experiment for him. In the Legend, Chaucer seems to be deliberately experimenting with the courtly love convention and dream vision that had been his earliest materials.² In this experimentation, he is concerned with the role of the poet, his relation to society, to truth and to the real world. The final rejection of the court of love seems to have been the result of this experiment. The materials of the Legend were not the materials of life. Chaucer's preoccupation with the theme of truth and literature (which runs throughout the poem in conjunction with the one Alceste demands) is established in the very first lines of the poem:

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;
 But natheles, this wot I wel also,
 That there ne is non that dwelleth in this contre,
 That eyther hath in helle or hevene ybe,
 Ne may of it non other weyes witen,
 But as he hath herd seyde or founde it writen;
 For by assay there may no man it preve.

(G. 1-9)

Heaven and hell are meant literally here, but we also recall their use as courtly love terms. For example, Chaucer's borrowing of the inscription of Dante's gate for his garden of love in the Parlement of Foules. A thousand times we have heard men tell of heaven's joy and hell's pain - but we have to take it all on authority because no one has been to either and returned to tell about it from experience. However, as the poem continues, we see that there can be heaven and hell within life itself. Later in the poem, the poet describes the birds' joyful song about the

triumph of spring over the dangers of winter. The fowler who had tried to trap them during the winter "betrays the birds with his 'sophistrye' - false subtle arguments - as the Devil betrays the souls of men with his nets and snares. The poet, with his medieval sympathy for the creatures, can rejoice at their escape from the winter and death, and can realize a correspondence between their escape and that of the soul from the Devil".³ In each of the legends we see a woman descend from her heaven, her "blysfyl place" of love and happiness, to a hell of anguish and despair. Also note that most of the women kill themselves and this in the Christian religion is a sin punishable by banishment to hell. Each of these tales of the misguided but faithful woman is an experience which the authority (the book) records so that it is not forgotten. Books are of "remembraunce the keye". Legouis says of these experiences recorded in the bookish authorities that "they relate the eternal adventures of the heart, and, with the names changed, they become applicable to sorrows which are ever renewed."⁴ Chaucer was deeply interested in the relative trustworthiness of authority and experience (the heaven and hell question is just one instance of this). If the truth of an opinion cannot be tested by experience, we seek it in authorities - the ancient books.⁵ Bronson suggests that this authority could be regarded as the realm of experience at second hand.⁶ He believes that Chaucer and his contemporaries probably set vast store on the weight of ancient authority. People in the middle ages acknowledged that they lived in a world of wonders, that there was much they did not know. The things preserved in books were obviously things that former ages had considered worthy of remembrance. Chaucer seems to profess his orthodoxy in this regard, "And to the doctryne of these olde wyse/ Yeven credence..." Here we have the familiar self-portraiture of the remote and ineffectual bookish little man reverently accepting the "olde aproved storyes" which were aproved (confirmed) not by demonstrative evidence but by sufficient testimony. In contrast to this portrait, however, Chaucer raises by implication the question of truth in literature. His intent he says is:

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! (A 86-88)

Nevertheless, his constant diversion remains old books and what they can teach us, but in spring, the season of love (and experience) they must take second place. When Chaucer is charged with heresy against Love, however, the theme of the function and duties of the poet, particularly the poet in the courtly love tradition, is emphasised. It is made clear that the duty of the love poet is to offer slavish, unquestioning service in praise of the deities and themes of courtly love. When Chaucer defends himself,

what so myn auctour mente,
Algate, God wot, it was myn entente

To forthere trouthe in love and it cheryce..., he is telling the truth. The difficulty arises from his realization of the incompatibility of being a poet of courtly love with its Christian-pagan conflation, and a Christian and serious poet. What is at issue is just what is meant by "trouthe in love". We have already observed the close analogy between medieval Christianity and the development of the courtly love code. R.O. Payne recognises this in his examination of the Prologue. He suggests that Chaucer borrows from the courtly love convention in order to use this fundamental ambiguity. Even when a poet "may have been sufficiently instructed to comprehend Alceste as the apotheosis of the daisy, [he] can hardly be expected to manage a set of characteristics which identify her as an ectype of Venus and the Blessed Virgin simultaneously."⁷

Furthermore, the very figure of authority in the Prologue, the God of Love, is shown up as not knowing as much about bookish authorities as he pretended. For one thing, the Roumaunt of the Rose was no heresy against Love, unless the reference is to Jean de Meun's additions - but so far as we know, Chaucer had not translated that part. The question of authority is brought forward by the God, thus linking the main body of the Prologue with the philosophical introduction. The god recounts the books Chaucer ought to have used to find stories of faithful women:

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

(G 281-81)

Valerye is almost certainly Walter Map who wrote the Epistola

Valerii ad Rufinum ne uxorem ducat. His attitude is seen in the anecdote Valerius tells Rufinus of a man who wept because three of his wives had hanged themselves on a tree in his garden. His friend begged for a cutting! St. Jerome, in order to recommend celibacy, collected together all he could find against the female sex in general. What Jerome said against Jovinian is touched on in the Wife of Bath's Prologue.⁸ He and Walter Map were perhaps the most satirical and effective of all the many slanderers of women in the antifeminist Middle Ages. Such were the God of Love's authorities on the fidelity of women that were to be trusted when the experience failed! Coghill calls this a bit of Chaucer's "ironical buffonery" and suggests that he was playing the same joke on the court audience as Chanticleer was to bring off against Pertelote:⁹

For al so siker as In principio,
Mulier est hominis confusio, -
 Madame, the sentence of this Latyn is,
 'Womman is mannes joye and al his blis'.

(C.T. VII 3163-6)

There are several examples of implied criticism of the courtly love convention throughout the Legend, especially in relation to how much it represents "trouthe in love". In the Prologue when Alceste prescribes the penance she says that it is to reveal men who betray women and do nothing all their lives but try to shame as many women as they can:

For in youre world that is now holden game.

As we have noted, the men and women are all portrayed as heroes and heroines from the courtly love convention. Yet all of the handsome knights prove false in one way or another. Aeneas seems so full of all of the requirements of chivalric love and his betrayal seems worse when Dido's generosity to him is remembered. Jason is another chivalrous knight, at least in all the outward observances of knighthood and courtly love. He is a lord of great renown, as royal as a lion in his bearing, famous above all other knights for "gentillesse", freedom and strength. He speaks well and knows all about the art and craft of love. Yet he is false to the core. Again in Ariadne we have

a courtly hero whose treachery is made doubly base by the debt he owes his lady. Chaucer has always tended to remain detached in his attitude to courtly love, but it seems fair to say that here he is becoming downright critical towards it. He has always adopted the persona of the bookish little man, inexperienced in the ways of love and a bit past it anyway. The God of Love accuses him of being an enemy to Love - and there may be a grain of truth in the accusation, that is with reference to courtly love. Howard Patch has made this suggestion. He says that it is quite possible in each case Chaucer's poems of Courtly Love "were meant to celebrate devotion, not of a secret lover for his sime but, within the bonds of matrimony, of perfectly domestic attachments."¹⁰ Examples include the Book of the Duchess which mourns the death of a beloved wife, the Parlement of Foules which presents tidings of a betrothal, Alceste in the Legend, whose special merit is loving wifeness, and faithful wives like Dorigen whose real "trouthe in love" to her husband is jeopardised only by a courtly love "trouthe". Furthermore, Patch points out that "according to the Troilus amorous preoccupations of a worldly sort carry their own peril and are not ultimately satisfying". Speirs suggests that Chaucer came to criticise the courtly love convention because it lacked real human feeling and this was what Chaucer was particularly interested in.¹¹ Chaucer is able to render human feeling delicately, for instance, in the lament of the deserted Medea:

Whi lykede me thy yelwe her to se,
More than the boundes of myn honeste?

Chaucer's objection to Tereus, as he asks God the Creator why he allowed such a corrupted person as Tereus to be born (2228-2237) seems to apply to most of the heroes of the legends. Baker makes this point. "This is not love, neither is it nature. This annoyed and doubtful attitude seems to prevail especially throughout the last three legends..., this cannot be "trouthe in love". Yet, Chaucer seems to be saying these are the stories of love that I find in my books; they are what the convention of courtly love represents and demands, and are, for the most part, sterile imaginatively and spiritually. Chaucer could no longer serve willingly such aberration of nature".¹² Baker concludes

that with this realisation, Chaucer ended his experiment with the courtly love convention and the Legend of Good Women. He realised that "the tradition may be respected and admired at a distance (for it has given birth to the artist) but it has now no serious place per se among the materials of the poet".¹³ Of course, Chaucer does still make use of the materials of courtly love, but not in the service of courtly love, for instance, note the treatment of the convention in the Franklin's Tale. The marriage of Arveragus and Dorigen is endangered because they have tried to incorporate in it ideals from two completely contrasting orders - Courtly Love and Christian marriage. Alongside "maistrie", "soveraynetee" and "humble trewe wyf", we find "hire obeye, and folwe hir wyl in al, / as any loverhis lady shal". Arveragus and Dorigen love each other sincerely and have all the requirements for a highly successful marriage except that they try and retain attitudes and actions from the system of courtly love. The impossibilities of such a combination cause incongruities which almost ruin their marriage.

Tatlock suggests that "more epochal in literary history than anything else in the Legend is the verse",¹⁴ for it was here that Chaucer abandoned the short octosyllabic line for the longer decasyllabic line in rhymed couplets - the first known use of the heroic couplet in the English language. That Chaucer was aware of his innovation is shown at the end of Prologue F when Cupid charges him to, "Make the metres of hem as the lest". The development probably proceeded from the Troilus where Chaucer would have become accustomed to moving in the ampler line of its stanzas. The lengthening of the line was a small technical adjustment but Speirs points out its "far-reaching consequences; it involved the fullest acceptance by Chaucer of a speech norm in place of the earlier song-and-dance (or 'carolling') norm. The short octo-syllabic line rhyming in couplets, as in the Romaunt of the Rose, tended to cause even conversational poetry to slip readily back into the earlier association with song - as the intricately metrical, assonantal poems of the troubadours had been associated with song. Poetry dominated too long by music tends to become conventional in a limiting sense, to be deprived of robustness and scope in handling

life. The establishment of a conversational norm gave a chance to the steady and ordered Chaucerian observation and dramatization of life to develop."¹⁵ Chaucer was able to use the heroic couplet with great versatility all the way from the Miller's Tale, to the Wife's Prologue, to the Franklin's and Pardoner's Tales. The Legend was, furthermore, Chaucer's first attempt at a new shape of poem, the shape that was to grow into the Canterbury Tales - the succession of tales and the practice at short story telling. Chaucer learnt the self-control necessary for composing a series of tales. Thus, in the Legend of Good Women Chaucer abandoned the court of Love per se, but found the narrative form and metre which suited him best.

II

As we have seen, medieval rhetorical theory taught that a writer should retell the "olde aproved stories" according to his own purpose (which should be for the edification of his audience), choosing one of two methods - amplificatio or abbreviatio. In the Legend of Good Women, because he was setting out to tell an indefinitely large number of tales on the same theme, Chaucer of necessity chose abbreviatio. His purpose, ostensibly anyway, was to exemplify good women (martyrs in love), and to condemn the men who betrayed them. We cannot help asking, however, if this is in fact always the effect of Chaucer's use of abbreviatio and its associated technique occupatio in the Legend. For example, in Cleopatra, he drastically abbreviates the wedding feast and instead becomes interested in the sea battle which he expands to fill one fifth of the tale. Surely the wedding feast was much more relevant to his ostensible and assigned purpose. In trying to deal with this problem we need to see if we can determine what interested Chaucer most, and what is involved in his best work. Chaucer's greatness is most often said to lie in his ability to present character, along with the necessary circumstantial detail; to dramatically present humanity in all its varied guises, to ultimately present real and enduring human nature.¹⁶ The truths about humanity he portrayed in the fourteenth century, we can readily recognize in the twentieth. This is the basis of his appeal to the twentieth century. It is an attitude which seems to be largely

justified and we will look now at the Legend in this light.

Because he was using abbreviatio, Chaucer proceeded with very little attention to detail or character portrayal - this is in fact explicitly avoided. In this respect it would seem that we must agree with those critics who see the Legend as a failure because of the rigidity of the plan in which variety of form and matter was excluded. Chaucer was attempting the very difficult task of telling a large number of legends of good women in which he had to paint all of the heroines white and all of the heroes black. A further aspect of this lack of variety in the Legend, say compared with the Canterbury Tales, is of course the varied tellers of the tales themselves, who reveal in their different tales their own diversity of character and background. That Chaucer recognised the size of the task is evident from the God of Love's instruction to "sey shortly" and also it is emphasised in the tales themselves. For example, in Cleopatra:

To me, that have ytake swich emprise
 Of so many a story for to make,
 It were to longe, lest that I shulde slake
 Of thyng that bereth more effect and charge;
 For men may overlade a ship or barge.
 And forthy to th'effect thanne wol I skyppe,
 And all the remenaunt, I wol lete it slippe.
 (617-623)

In Dido:

I could folwe, word for word, Virgile,
 But it wolde lasten al to longe while.
 (1002-3)

And of course finally in the "agroted" passage. This is not to say that Chaucer was becoming bored, but rather that he was showing that he was using abbreviatio. Nevertheless, it would probably be true to say that Chaucer did find the Legend an increasingly cramping and frustrating business as he proceeded. He must have realised that he could not do so many stories artistically on the scale he had set. He could not tell them fully and with all the detail and proportion good story-telling demands. Before undertaking the Legend, Chaucer had told one

great love story (Troilus and Criseyde) and possibly another (Palamon and Arcite). In these, he used all the breadth of canvas necessary for full narration. Details of scene and character were especially abundant in the Troilus where he displayed his great ability for creating vital and complex emotional relationships. In contrast he must have found the comparatively small canvases of the individual legends very restricting. Chaucer would seem to have been a writer who needed a fairly large area to work in and he understood the necessity of circumstantial detail, of interesting the reader, or rather his audience, because he was essentially an oral poet. In the Legend, however, there were so many tales that he had to be comparatively brief. Again and again he had to omit things because it would have taken too long to tell them. Bronson expresses well what must have been the result for Chaucer. He suggests that there must have been "a radical conflict for him between means and matter: the prescribed scope indicated brevity as an essential condition, the prescribed theme demanded expansion. The poet who could create Troilus knew all too thoroughly the innermost reality of longing, in man, or woman".¹⁷ But that emotion could not be adequately evoked by flat personifications all standing for the same quality. One reason for the comparative failure of the tales then, is that the heroines are not conceived of as persons at all. The only thing they do is share the same plight, repeated ten times. In Ariadne Chaucer comes closest to portraying a character. Ariadne is seen as an impulsive, scheming, wise yet naive and charming young woman. The character of Theseus is sketched only in outline, and so the poem is distinctly her's. Chaucer evokes with skill, distracted human behaviour as he describes the deserted Ariadne. There is tenderness in Cleopatra's last soliloquy which is only less touching than Criseyde's sorrowing expressions because Cleopatra's tale "has been too brief for us to credit or even care for her sincerity".¹⁸ We have not had a chance to become engaged deeply in her character and in what she says. At times too, Chaucer seems to express genuine wrath against cruel ravishers like Tarquinius and Tereus; but he cannot be serious with some of the other false men like Theseus and Jason who were libertines rather than criminals.

Chaucer must have realised his predicament arising out of the rigidity of his task. Even if he did manage to successfully depict the poignancy of true love in his tales, the work would become increasingly intolerable in its unrelieved gloom. There was no provision for any kind of interlude. Furthermore, bias was a necessity. His assigned task demanded that reality should be set aside. "What had to be done was to create a new humanity, composed of perfect women on the one hand, and entirely faithless and heartless men on the other..., few poets ever had a temperament less suited for lengthy litanies than Chaucer. He could describe the feelings of a woman's heart..., its meekness, its purity, its self-abnegation, its devotion, its anguish. But his nature was such that to see nothing but that, and to express nothing else, was quite impossible to him. Inevitably, while looking at one side, the reverse is ever present with him".¹⁹ For instance, in the Canterbury Tales and their link passages shrewish wives are several times shown, but so too are constant, patient, submissive and devoted wives. It is possible therefore to surmise that Chaucer neglected the Legend of Good Women because it did not begin with a consideration of what Cleopatra, Dido and the rest were really like. The set task depended for its fulfilment on a profound oversimplification of the complex reality inherent in 'true loving'.²⁰

Considering all these difficulties which an experienced writer and story-teller like Chaucer could hardly have failed to recognise, we may wonder why he embarked on the project at all and certainly why he persisted with it as long as he did. Of course, as we noted at the very beginning of this study, he may have been assigned, or at least encouraged, to do the work by Queen Anne. Such evidence as we have does suggest that this is a distinct possibility. In the Prologue the task is represented as being imposed upon him and there is the explicit reference in the F version to giving the work to the Queen either at Eltham, or her favourite residence Sheene. Besides this, there is the statement by Chaucer's disciple and younger contemporary Lydgate, who would most likely have been well informed about him, and may even have known him personally.²¹ So Chaucer set out to defend the fair name of women. The mood is at all times somewhat ironic, however, beginning in the Prologue with the

insinuation that faithful women must be looked for in books because they are not to be found in real life. If he was writing at his Queen's behest, his irony could not be too overt, but we certainly sense its presence. The Prologue is conventional in situation as we have seen, but it is also slightly mocking in its treatment of the conventions, for instance, in the treatment of the God of Love. His portrait is exaggerated, (Chaucer added a halo), and furthermore we see that he is somewhat ignorant of the bookish authorities he pretends to know all about. The irony which suffuses the Prologue, sometimes spreads over the legends themselves and it is always at the expense of the necessary idealisation. We come away from the Legend with the pervading impression that Chaucer is rather indifferent to his heroines. He is in a semi-comic hurry about them. Of course we know that the passages which lend weight to this impression are using abbreviatio. But Chaucer emphasises his haste so frequently that we cannot help smiling, and presumably this is what Chaucer intended we should do. He makes use of rhetoric for obvious comic effect. For example, his attack on the rascally Jason with a piece of hyperbolical bombast in the introduction to the legends of Hypsipyle and Medea. As we have noted, the choice of heroines capable of cruel revenge like Medea and Philomela is acceptable because they stood as stock examples of feminine fidelity for the Middle Ages. This, of course, as Coghill suggests, need not preclude Chaucer from inward irony. "The private joke at the expense of 'authority' was very much to Chaucer's taste, especially when delivered with solemnity".²² At times the laughter is quite open, such as in the incongruous ending to Phyllis's tragedy when the poet says:

And trusteth in love, no man but me.

It may even be possible to agree with Paull Baum's contention that some of the women, like Ariadne, are so forward that they invite trouble.²³

This somewhat cavalier treatment of the good women does not mean that Chaucer was anti-feminist.²⁴ Rather it serves to buttress the point already made regarding Chaucer's inability to be completely one-sided and idealistic. This is demonstrated

in most of his works when we consider his narrators who usually find themselves in some situation where they do not quite know which way to turn. If they do take a stand on what they think is firm ground, it is soon undermined. This brings us right back to our very opening remark when we touched upon the problem of Chaucer the narrator and the difficulty of knowing whether it is Chaucer himself speaking through his work or just simply his narrative persona. We come up against the perennial Chaucerian problem of ambivalence and, paradoxical as it may seem, it is here that we can attempt some reconciliation of both the argument that Chaucer became bored with the Legend and the counter-argument that bored thesis proponents make overliteral misreadings of a rhetorical technique. Without doubt abbreviatio is very hardworked in the Legend and this must have been to some specific purpose over and above the fact that the number of tales necessitated a small scale for each individual tale. A queen has imposed a task on the poet who surely uses the hardworked abbreviatio to undermine the official courtly facade, and intentionally leaves the narrator floundering in his usual ambivalent position with half of him drawn towards the good women and attempting to faithfully carry out his task, while the other half finds it all rather tedious and boring. Always the narrator, thinking he is doing quite a good job, is undermined. This happens in every tale. For example, in Cleopatra, he neglects the wedding feast for the sea battle, yet at the end he can present a tender scene; in Dido he appears to be doing his job as narrator well, paying close attention to the story, when he innocently wonders if Dido and Aeneas had any company in the cave, yet the effect is of mock naivety; again in Lucrece he is telling his story carefully, explaining how Lucrece had the decency to cover her feet as she fell down dead, but the picture created borders on the realm of slap-stick. There is too, his loud rhetorical flourish in condemnation of Jason, which again we cannot take seriously. Thus, the narrator seems pulled in two directions, trying faithfully to carry out his task but finding it a bore, and thereby mocks it. Which one represents Chaucer's view? It is impossible to say with any certainty, but our study does allow us to make the conjecture that initially he might have tended towards the former, but gradually

as he found it increasingly difficult to carry out such a rigid, monotonous plan, he must have moved towards the latter.

Of course he must have realised that women are neither particularly extolled, nor their virtues enhanced by exposing men's wickedness.²⁵ Chaucer has more to say about women in the Canterbury Tales, and here various ladies of distinction are richly and sympathetically described. He does not present the sex as faultless; he sees both good and bad. The motif of heroines deserted even recurs in the Canterbury Tales. Dorigen by the sea shore is in part a variation of Ariadne by the sea shore. Chaucer is interested in human beings, in both exposing human weakness and establishing human dignity and forbearance.

Chaucer is undeniably at his best when dealing with his material in terms not merely say of plot or humour, but of character. He may begin his narrative with other things, but usually he gravitates toward character and its concerns. The reason he did not make much of the Legend is that he began not with a character, but with a proposition. Beginning this way injured the work for it was too simple and not stimulating enough to his artistic imagination. The result is that Chaucer seems cramped in the Legend. He was working with a single repetitious theme, perhaps not of his own choosing and not of his own taste. It meant that Chaucer could not give rein to what is essentially Chaucer - his gift of remarking truthfully on human character, of depicting the complexities of human emotions and relationships, and the very ambivalence of the whole human situation. He realised that "trouthe in love" was no simple, straightforward matter, but lay at the complex core of the most important human relationship. It could not be adequately evoked by some courtly game of artifice. Thus, Chaucer made the transition to the Canterbury Tales, his masterpiece, the work in which he looked penetratingly at his fellow citizens, his fellow pilgrims in life, and gave expression to what he must by now have recognised as his essential genius, his skill at portraying human nature with all its various contradictions. With this realisation Chaucer neglected the Legend of Good Women, never to complete it.

And so, "Farewel my stodye..."

Notes.

1. Spearing, pp. 74-78.
2. This is the view taken, for example, by Baker and Payne.
3. Speirs, p.89.
4. Legouis, p.108
5. P.T. Overbeck in "Chaucer's Good Woman", *Chaucer Review* 1967, pp. 75-94, suggests that the whole thematic unity of the Legend arises out of the authority/experience question. He says that in the Prologue "Alceste asks the poet for time-tested heroines from old "auctours" to countermand the "preve" of experience in "youre world". What she gets is a woman who lives for experience and flouts authority". (p.90).
6. Bronson, p.92.
7. Payne, p.108. See Chap. 4 n.17.
8. ll.673-685. It is significant that the Wife's anti-feminist husband Jankyn should prize this work.
9. Coghill, p.103.
10. Howard Rollin Patch, On Rereading Chaucer (Cambridge, Mass, 1959). p.139.
11. Speirs, p.92.
12. Baker, p.16 and see also Payne, The Key of Remembrance, p. 109.
13. Baker, p.18
14. Tatlock, p.76.
15. Speirs, p.90.
16. Many of the bored thesis proponents suggest that the necessary limitation on detail and character in the Legend was what resulted in Chaucer's boredom with the whole project. See Chp 2.
17. Bronson, p.97.
18. Coghill, p.90.
19. Legouis, p.103.
20. Corsa, p.37.
21. Tatlock, p.79, suggests as further evidence that Chaucer had "the happy young queen in mind", is that he postpones "the good women ill-used by traitor-men, and begins with a queen and another woman (Cleopatra and Thisbe) happy in their love, whose only enemy is Fate. This evades the tactlessness of at first ignoring Anne's congenial marriage".
22. Coghill, p.89.
23. Paull F. Baum, "Chaucer's "Glorious Legend", "MLN June 1945, p. 387.
24. Patch, Chp V, looks at the Legend against the background of the whole controversy about women in the Middle Ages. He concludes that while Chaucer was certainly interested in the controversy he preferred to look at women as human beings rather than judging them frail and fickle because of their sex.
25. Baum, p.381.

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