

Chaucer and Virgil

A paper given to the Virgil Society on 22 October 1994

I

Go, litel book, go, litel myn tragedye,
Ther God thi makere yet, er that he dye,
So sende myght to make in som comedye!
But litel book, no makyng thow n'envye.
But subgit be to alle poesye;
And kis the steppes where as thow seest pace
Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace.

Troilus and Criseyde V 1786–92

Literary expressions of modesty go back to antiquity and in his *Envoy to Troilus and Criseyde* Chaucer is doubtless imitating the classical tradition to which he defers. Yet he also speaks as a poet writing in the late fourteenth century, in England, in English and in Christendom. He sees himself as inheriting the great classical genres of tragedy and comedy but he is using the terms in a medieval, perhaps individual, way. Having written his tragedy and having some doubts about its reception, he hopes, indeed prays, to write a comedy. Perhaps he was already thinking about *The Canterbury Tales*. He is taking his leave of this poem and its tragic picture of human love. Its characters, whose sufferings have been so deeply felt, are, a few stanzas later, to be distanced to mere 'payens' whose story demonstrates 'what alle hir goddes may availle' (TC V 1850). Constancy is not to be found in any thing or person in this world but only in the Christian god, and the poem ends, like many of Chaucer's other works, with a prayer. He expresses his admiration and humility before the great writers of antiquity. The intertextuality of his reverence is dramatized in that he is imitating the end of Statius' *Thebaid*. His

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little book is not to be envious or presumptuous but to kiss the footsteps of its great predecessors and masters. One can almost visualise a miniature Chaucer kneeling, like a donor in a late medieval painting, with his miniature book.

This vignette has a double frame: Chaucer places himself in the contexts of classical tradition and of Christian faith. The list of names perhaps suggests another which is not there: Dante. In Canto IV of the *Inferno* Dante and Virgil meet in Limbo, with the souls of the unbaptized and the virtuous heathen, the poets Homer, Horace, Ovid and Lucan. They welcome Virgil and honour Dante by inviting him into their company. Chaucer is not as prone to self-congratulation as Dante: self-deprecation is more his style. But perhaps his allusion to Dante suggests a similar doubleness of attitude: reverence towards the great poets of antiquity, reservations about the great pagans.

Perhaps Chaucer also associates himself with Dante in the modern project of writing in the vernacular. It was not a project which would obviously increase his audience and their understanding of his work. In the next stanza of the Envoy to *Troilus* he expresses anxiety about the poem's transmission and accessibility when it goes out on its own in a language in which there is such diversity, hoping that it won't be misread or 'mismetred'. Perhaps its danger will be to envy not only the excellence of the great classics but also their classic status. It is venturing out into a fluid and chaotic world of discourse. They are safely enshrined in the curriculum: children are taught how to read, translate, interpret and 'metre' them. The resounding last line of this stanza, 'Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace' (though Homer was virtually inaccessible in Western Europe), constitutes a canon.

Chaucer's Latin, like that of any educated European of his time, was fairly good.¹ He presumably learnt it at a grammar school which he would have attended from the age of about seven. Already it would have sounded familiar to him from liturgical use and he probably knew some prayers by heart. The nearest school, less than five minutes' walk from the family house in Thames Street, was the Almonry School of St Paul's Cathedral, which had, by fourteenth-century standards, a good library. In 1358, after Chaucer's time as a schoolboy, it received a bequest of 84 books, which included texts of such standard Latin authors as Virgil, Ovid and Statius. Chaucer continued to read Latin as an adult, sometimes through the resources of anthologies, miscellanies, *florilegia*. He

translated several Latin works, most importantly Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, also *De Maria Magdalena*, written in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century but attributed to Origen, and Pope Innocent III's *De Contemptu Mundi*, which he calls 'Of the Wretched Engendrynge of Mankynde'.

However, some of his knowledge of works in Latin was via French intermediaries. He was bilingual in English and French—it was indeed a bold and innovative decision to compose most of his poems in hick insular English rather than elegant international French. In translating Boethius he worked with Jean de Meun's French prose version, though he was evidently dissatisfied with Jean's rendering of the metra and went back to the Latin to work on them. Jean was also the author of most of the *Roman de la Rose*, a major influence on many aspects of Chaucer's work: the dream vision form, the centrality of love, the philosophical and moral problems of free will and sexuality, the creative imitation and adaptation of Virgil. He knows the *Metamorphoses* primarily through the medieval allegorised *Ovide Moralisé*. He is inclined to give his references to the original text, even when he has used secondary sources. In the *Physician's Tale*, the story of Virginia, he gives Livy as his source but he is actually using the version of Livy in the *Roman de la Rose*. After his visits to Italy in the 1370s, Italian poets become a major influence on his work but are not always acknowledged. The *Knight's Tale* is based on Boccaccio's *Teseida* but this is never mentioned; instead it parades an epigraph from Boccaccio's source, Statius' *Thebaid*. Similarly, Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*, the main source for *Troilus and Criseyde*, is not acknowledged. Chaucer continually emphasizes his dependence on his 'auctour', his source, particularly when he is departing from it, but he twice names this 'auctor' as Lollius. This otherwise unknown poet presumably materialized out of a misunderstanding of the opening line of Horace, *Epistles* 1.2: *Troiani belli scriptorem, Maxime Lolli...*

Chaucer is devious with his audience in many other ways. He is disingenuous through his ingenuous narrators. He disorients us, as in a hall of mirrors, through his multiple narratives and perspectives. He is the most ironic and the most ambiguous of English poets. In *Troilus and Criseyde* he even seems to be experimenting with the word 'ambiguity', to be on the verge of introducing it into English. Criseyde tells Troilus that 'Goddes speken in amphibologies' (IV 1406) and she may be able to talk her father Calchas out of his belief that Troy will fall;

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Diomedes tells her that it certainly will, unless ‘Calchas lede us with ambages— | That is to seyn, with double wordes slye, | Swich as men clepen a word with two visages’ (V 897–9). Chaucer presumably found this word in *Aeneid* 6.29 in the description of the Cretan labyrinth and it proved a resonant image for him. [It is used of discourse at *Georg.* 2.46 and *Aen.* 1.342. Ed.] His own versions of prophecy and catabasis are ironic, his portraits of Dido and Aeneas unstable and the labyrinth—to whose complexities there may be no solution—recurs in various forms in his poetry.

II

Another rage

Had Dydo, the quene eke of Cartage,
That slough hirself for Eneas
Was fals—which a fool she was.

The Book of the Duchess 731–4

Chaucer’s main Virgilian interest is in *Aeneid* 4 and the story of Dido. Then, as now, this was one of the most popular books of the *Aeneid* and there are many reasons why Chaucer should be particularly drawn to it. Most obviously, his favourite subjects are love and the relationships between the sexes. He always treats these as problematic, often as potentially tragic. His poems are full of women who have been abandoned by men, of men and women who die or threaten to die for love, of conflicts between love and duty. His longest poem on the subject, *Troilus*, tells the story of a man who has been abandoned by a woman.

Dido is treated rather unsympathetically on her first appearance in his poetry. The *Book of the Duchess* is thought to be an elegy for Blanche Duchess of Lancaster, the first wife of John of Gaunt, who died of the plague in 1368. It is a dream vision. After reading the story of Ceyx and Alcyone in Ovid, the narrator dreams that he wakes up in a room whose stained glass windows depict the story of Troy and on whose walls are painted the text and glosses of the *Romance of the Rose*. This décor both adumbrates the story of love and personal tragedy we are to hear and suggests the character of the dreamer-narrator as a man who sees life through books. He encounters a Man in Black who tells him about his love for a lady and his grief at her death. The narrator does not realise—

or seem to realise—until the end of the poem that the lady is indeed dead. Perhaps he is slow on the uptake; Chaucer's *personae* in his poems are often ironically naïve, stupid, inexperienced or bad at writing poetry. Perhaps he feigns incomprehension in order to encourage the mourner to tell his story and effect a talking cure. At any rate he understands—or seems to understand—literally the Man in Black's allegory that he played a game of chess with Fortune and lost his queen to her. The narrator is rather sharp with him. He shouldn't make such a fuss over a chess piece. If he had lost all his chess pieces and committed suicide, he would be condemned, like those unhappy lovers of antiquity who destroyed themselves and others. Dido—like Phyllis, Echo and Sampson—was a fool to kill herself for love. Here we see stern Christian standards applied to passion and to suicide, together with a tendency to attribute a romantic motive to any catastrophe. Misogyny is the other side of romance; it seems rather a misrepresentation of the story in *Judges* to claim that Sampson slew himself for love but he was a standard example in the Middle Ages of a man ruined by a woman.

Dido seems here to be relegated to a catalogue of *stulti amantes* and dismissed rather briskly by the confident Christian *confidant*. But the multiple framing, the *ambages* by which we reach this *exemplum* potentially complicate the dreamer's interpretation. We have approached it via his complaint about his own lovesickness, his account of his own imperfectly understood bedtime reading, his 'waking' into the dream environment of the Matter of Troy and the *Roman de la Rose*, his meeting in the forest with the man whose story he finds an enigma.

III

But as I romed up and down,
 I fond that on a wall ther was
 Thus writen on a table of bras:
 'I wol now synge, yif I kan,
 The armes and also the man
 That first cam, thurgh his destinee,
 Fugityf of Troy contree,
 In Itayle, with ful moche pyne
 Unto the strondes of Lavyne.'

The House of Fame 140–8

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In two later poems Chaucer tells the story of Dido in terms that are altogether more friendly to her. The first is *The House of Fame*, his next long poem after *The Book of the Duchess*, though there is quite an interval between them, and also a dream vision. It is structured in three books (this is the introduction into English poetry of the classical system of division into books) and, like several of Chaucer's poems, is unfinished. After a quick review of theories about the significance of dreams, a favourite Chaucerian topic, and an invocation to the God of Sleep, whose acquaintance was made in *The Book of the Duchess*, the narrator falls asleep and dreams that he is in an elaborate glass temple of Venus. Here he sees a tablet of brass, on which is written the story of the *Aeneid*. We may also be reminded of a particular episode in the *Aeneid*. Chaucer's dreamer looks at a work of art, a visual narrative, on a temple wall. So do the Trojans in Book 1 of the *Aeneid*, when they see the story of their own sufferings and are reassured that they will meet with fellow-feeling in Carthage. The new beginning in Book 6 also contains a temple with a work of art on its doors, the story of Daedalus and the *ambages*. We may also think of the description of Aeneas' shield in Book 8, a *mise-en-abîme*, for Aeneas prophetic of the future, for Virgil a record and interpretation of the past. Chaucer also creates such structures: a work of art within a work of art, both self-reflexive, a microcosm of itself, and gesturing outwards to the past and the future to place itself within a cultural tradition.

Chaucer's account of most of the *Aeneid* is highly perfunctory, in style as well as in brevity. Book 1 summarizes the whole of the *Aeneid*, though everything except the story of Dido is given very summary treatment. The recension has an 'and then...and then...and then' quality. 'First sawgh I...next that sawgh I...and I saugh next... Ther sawgh I... Ther saugh I... Ther saugh... Ther saugh I' (150, 161, 174, 193, 198, 209, 212). Sometimes Chaucer even sounds a bit impatient with the subject and recommends that you turn to the original or to other authors if you want to know more. Here is his treatment of Book 6 of the *Aeneid*:

And also sawgh I how Sybyle
And Eneas, besyde an yle,
To helle wente, for to see
His fader, Anchyses the free;
How he ther fond Palinurus,

And Dido, and eke Deiphebus;
 And every turment eke in helle
 Saugh he, which is longe to telle;
 Which whoso willeth for to knowe,
 He moste rede many a rowe
 On Virgile or on Claudian,
 Or Daunte, that hit telle kan. 439–50

For all my emphasis on Chaucer as a Christian poet approaching classical culture, he here virtually equates the Underworld of Virgil and the meticulously codified Christian scheme of Dante, with all its divisions and subdivisions, rewards and punishments, and theological justifications. But perhaps he is deliberately stepping back from this subject. It is one on which, in later poems, he is overtly agnostic. The spirit of Troilus ascends to the eighth sphere, looks down at the earth with contempt, laughs at the grief of those who are weeping over his body, realises that all this is vanity compared with the felicity of heaven and then goes ‘Ther as Mercurye sorted hym to dwelle’ (*TC* 1827). Chaucer doesn’t know where that may be, though Dante would. There is a story that people used to point Dante out on the street as the man who had been to hell. Chaucer opens the *Legend of Good Women* by asserting that he doesn’t know anyone who has done that:

A thousand tymes have I herd men telle
 That ther is joy in hevene and peyne in helle,
 And I acorde wel that it ys so;
 But, natheles, yet wot I wel also
 That ther nis noon dwellyng in this contree,
 That eyther hath in hevene or helle ybe,
 Ne may of hit noon other weyes witen,
 But as he hath herd seyde, or founde it writen;
 For by assay ther may no man it preve.

LGW Prologue 1–9

‘In this contree’ might well be a filler, a makeweight phrase to fill the line and provide a rhyme for ‘ybe’. Or could it be a joke about Dante? ‘I don’t know anyone in this country who’s done it but they order these things better in Italy...’ For Chaucer the after-life is to be accepted on

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authority; it cannot be tested by experience. Experience and authority are one of his favourite antinomies, terms which are continually debated and contrasted in his poetry, sometimes provisionally reconciled, sometimes as here abandoned as an *aporia*. Chaucer is not going to commit himself about heaven and hell; his arena is this life, so Book 6 of the *Aeneid* is dismissed in a dozen lines. However, this is relatively generous, compared with what he does to the second half of the epic: six books flash past in fifteen lines.

Book 4 gets far more space than any other. Even here, however, Chaucer's treatment is patchy; he is overtly less interested in some parts of the book. He actually introduces his version of it with the line 'And, shortly of this thyng to pace...' (239). The development and consummation of Dido's passion is narrated thus:

...shortly for to tellen, she
Becam his love, and let hym doo
Al that weddyng longeth too. 242-4

Even the tragic climax of Dido's suicide doesn't seem to inspire him:

But what! When this was seyde and doo,
She rof hirselve to the herte
And deyde thorgh the wounde smerte.
And al the maner how she deyde,
And alle the werdes that she seyde,
Whose to knowe it hath purpos,
Rede Virgile in Eneydos
Or the Epistle of Ovyde,
What that she wrot or that she dyde;
And nere hyt to long to endyte,
Be God, I wolde hyt here write.

But wel-away, the harm, the routhe,
That hath betyd for such untrouthe,
As men may of te in bokes rede,
And al day sen hyt yet in dede,
That for to thynken hyt a tene is.

The House of Fame 372-87

What engages Chaucer is the figure of the deceived and deserted woman and the generalisations that may be drawn from her. Instead of Virgil's great queen, magnificent, formidable, vengeful, frantic, Chaucer presents Dido as his version of Everywoman at her most wronged and piteous. Here his own interests produce variations on Virgil's:

In suche werdes gan to pleyne
 Dydo of hir grete peyne,
 As me mette redely;
 Noon other auctour allegge I. 311–14

For once, he seems to be telling the truth about his treatment of sources. This assertion follows Dido's complaint about male fickleness which follows the narrator's diatribe against male falsity. 'Loo, how a woman doth amys ! To love him that unknowen ys! ...this shal every woman fynde' (270–1, 279). To him Dido is an exemplary figure and he supports his reading of her with proverbs and generalisations.

She sees herself in these terms too. The subject of Fame bulks larger in her speech to Aeneas than in Virgil. *Fama* in *Aeneid* 4 plays a fairly practical role: she helps the plot along, bringing to the jealous Iarbas, who can pull strings with Jupiter, the news of Dido's affair, bringing to Dido the news of the Trojans' preparations for departure. Dido herself uses the term twice in her denunciation of Aeneas: amid her welter of accusations she charges him with destroying her good name and she concludes by wishing all sorts of misfortune upon him and vengefully predicting that she will receive news of them among the shades. She ends her speech with a kind of vindictive equation: the *fama* of Aeneas's sufferings can be balanced against hers. Chaucer's Dido ends her speech with a consideration of Fame, but it is her own, and she sees herself not only as the victim of gossip but as the subject of literature:

O, welawey that I was born!
 For thorgh yow is my name lorn,
 And alle myn actes red and songe,
 Over al thys lond, on every tonge. 345–9

This anticipates the lament of the guilty Criseyde:

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Allas! of me, unto the worldes ende,
Shal neyther ben ywriten nor ysonge,
No good word, for these bokes wol me shende,
O, rolled shal I be on many a tonge!

TC IV 1058–61

It is also proved true by her appearance in Chaucer's poem, a kind of *mise-en-abîme* itself. *The House of Fame* produces a Chinese boxes effect: a poem containing, in Book 1 alone, a dream containing a temple containing a tablet containing a story containing a microcosm of the poem. Dido is also a subject of Fame in the sense, larger than rumour, in which Chaucer uses it in this poem. Good fame and bad fame, as Philosophy told Boethius, are not necessarily justly awarded. Fame, when we meet her in Chaucer's Book 3, proves capricious and arbitrary. The doubts she raises in the context of this poem are not only about reputation but about the sources of knowledge themselves. All sources—our own perceptions ('experience'), oral reports ('tidyngs'), written authorities ('books')—come to seem equally unreliable. They may be as indiscriminate as Virgil's Fama: *tam ficti pravique tenax quam nuntia veri...pariter facta atque infecta canebat* (*Aen.* 4.188, 190). And, at the very least, fame such as Dido's is open to interpretation. Chaucer recommends you to read Virgil or Ovid if you want to know more, but, of course, these authors will give you very different representations. Chaucer's Dido often seems more Ovidian than Virgilian. The *Heroides* were certainly in his mind. Later he was to use them as his main source for the legends of good women. Here he alludes to some of them to support his generalisation about the treachery of men to women: Demophon was false to Phyllis, Achilles to Briseis, Paris to Oenone, Jason to Hypsipyle and Medea, Hercules to Deianeira, Theseus to Ariadne. His description of the House of Fame in Book 2 derives from *Metamorphoses* 12.39–63 as well as from *Aeneid* 2.

The story of Dido, as well as exercising an emotional attraction for Chaucer, excites his critical scepticism. He knows that it has been differently interpreted by such different authors as Virgil and Ovid, he knows the pre-Virgilian account and he knows the view that it is fiction, not history.² His sympathy and scepticism are another version of the ambiguous relationships between experience and authority. Here, as elsewhere in his work, women are a *locus* of this epistemological instability.

Epistemology runs into more trouble in Book 2. After the narrator leaves the temple, he finds himself in a desert which makes him think of Libya. He looks up at the sky and sees descend a golden eagle. This visitant seems to be modelled on the eagle in Canto IX of the *Purgatorio* and he does indeed take the dreamer on a celestial journey. But the eagle is a wonderfully comic character, one of these informants who insist on telling you more than you want to know, and Geoffrey, as this psychopomp addresses him, is not altogether appreciative. He finds it absolutely terrifying to be borne up into the sky in the eagle's claws, particularly when the bird makes an adverse comment on his weight. He wonders if Jove means to stellify him but the eagle says that is not the plan. As Geoffrey is such a bookworm, always reading and writing about Love although he has no experience of it, Jove thinks he should have some tidings of Love's people. At home he is so wrapped up in his books that he doesn't even hear tidings of his next-door neighbours but now he is to be taken to the House of Fame, to which all sounds levitate and the eagle gives a 'scientific' explanation for this at length to his sceptical passenger. Geoffrey looks down on the aerial view of the earth—fields, rivers, cities—as if from an aircraft but, as they ascend, it diminishes to a dot and the eagle enthuses that they're flying at twice the height reached by Scipio in the *Somnium Scipionis* or by Icarus (not an allusion one would care for at that altitude). The didactic bird invites him to look up at the heavenly bodies and asks if he would like a lecture on them. 'Nay,' says Geoffrey, 'ryght naught...for y am now to old.' The disappointed guide says (in Middle English), 'You're always reading about them, you love those poems about stellification, don't you want to see the real thing?' 'No,' says Geoffrey, 'I'm happy to take it on trust from books and anyway they're too bright to look at.' So the ascent into the heavens proves a parody of the celestial revelations of the masters. Far from soaring with the feathers of Philosophy, as Boethius recommended ('I have, forthi, swifte fetheris that surmounten the heighte of the hevene' IV metrum 1, Chaucer's translation), Geoffrey has been treated by his feathered philosopher to a materialist account of the heavens and seems unwilling, literally or spiritually, to look up. So at the end of Book 2 he lands at the House of Fame.

The House of Fame stands on a great rock of ice—not an awfully good foundation, thinks Geoffrey—on which are written many names, but while those on the cold northern side are preserved, the others melt in

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the sun. It's a dazzlingly beautiful and elaborate palace and all the great musicians are playing there, from Orpheus down, including Misenus 'Of whom that speketh Virgilius' (1244). In a golden hall Fame holds court and the description of her is clearly based on that in *Aeneid* 4, though she is also related to the goddess Fortuna. From the dais to the doors stretch lines of pillars and on these stand authors, holding up their subject matter: Josephus, Statius, Homer, Dares and Dictys, Lollius, Guido delle Colonne, Virgil, Ovid, Lucan, Claudian and many more.

Tho saugh I stonde on a piler
That was of tynned yren cler,
The Latyn poete Virgile,
That bore hath up a longe while
The fame of Pius Eneas.

The House of Fame 1481–5

There is some contention between the authors who bear up the story of Troy, because they offer different versions and some dispute the truth of Homer's account.

Various petitioners come to Fame. First good people who want good fame; some are consigned to oblivion; some are given slander; some receive good fame. Next come good people who acted well for the love of God and want no glory for it; Fame grants this to one group and refuses it to the next. Next come the villains and some get bad fame and some good. Geoffrey sees that there is no attempt at justice but shrugs: 'what! hyt moste nedes be' (1635). Then somebody ('oon') comes up behind him and asks if he has come in search of fame. 'No,' says Geoffrey, 'I don't want fame, I'm here to hear tidyngs, "this or that, | Of love, or suche thynges" and I haven't heard any.' So he is taken to another building, a house in a valley under the castle, more wonderfully made and more complicated than 'Domus Dedaly, | That Laboryntus cleped ys' (1919–20). This is a kind of wickerwork house, made with twigs of many different colours and with lots of gaps and holes in it, from which comes the most almighty noise and it whirls around. It recalls not only the labyrinth of Daedalus but also the cavern of the Sibyl described in *Aeneid* 6.42–4, with its hundred orifices for the *ambages* (6.99) of the prophetic voice, *obscuris vera involvens* (6.100). For Chaucer truth is involved with falsehood as well as obscurity. Inside the wicker house

everybody is talking and gossiping. Some people whisper to their neighbours, some people speak out loud; they all pass on what they have heard and stories circulate, growing and getting more garbled by the minute. When they're fully grown they fly out, through windows and crevices, and Geoffrey sees lies and truths competing to leave first and, when neither will give way, emerging simultaneously, locked together for ever. The scene is one of ultimate chaos and confusion, but at last a commanding figure enters:

Atte last y saugh a man,
 Which that y [nevene] nat ne kan;
 But he semed for to be
 A man of gret auctoritee... 2155–8

There the poem ends.

You never know where you are with Chaucer, and the end of *The House of Fame* might be a comic gesture of epistemological despair. Who is this anonymous man of great authority?³ Is there any solution to the problems posed by the poem? And, looking back to the story of Dido and Aeneas in Book 1, the classic text seems no more immune to these doubts than any other source of knowledge.

IV

Thow shalt, while that thou lyvest, yer by yere,
 The moste partye of thy tyme spende
 In makyng of 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...

The Legend of Good Women F 481–6

The Legend of Good Women comes between *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales*. Like *The Canterbury Tales* it is a collection of stories but it is hardly the comedy Chaucer prays to write at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*. It presents itself as another kind of reaction against *Troilus*. In the last stanzas of *Troilus and Criseyde* the narrator distances himself in various ways from his poem, its pagan characters

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and its subject. He diminishes their tragic story by placing it *sub specie aeternitatis* and, bounded by time and space himself, looks forward and outward to the transmission and reception of his little book:

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

TC V 1772–8

We do not know whether the women in Chaucer's contemporary audience were offended by the story of Criseyde's infidelity but the poem made one powerful enemy. In the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women* the poet dreams that he meets the God of Love, who is furious about it. He complains that the poem has made 'wise folk' (a revealing description) withdraw from love. He is accompanied by Queen Alceste, who pleads that clemency be shown to the poet. But her defence of Chaucer is rather backhanded and her proposal about his future work is very questionable. She points out that, although he's not much good at poetry, he has written poems in praise of love and edifying poems on religious subjects. In *Troilus* he was probably just following his source without understanding it. She suggests that he make amends to the God of Love by doing penance; he can atone for telling the story of a woman unfaithful to a man by writing poems on women betrayed by men. What an awful programme! After the Prologue, which is radiantly beautiful, subtle and comic, the Legends are, as the prescription would suggest, boring and repetitive. And, logically, reversing the roles of the sexes makes no difference to the argument. The stories of women betrayed by men make the same case against love as one of a man betrayed by a woman, if you take such a simplistic view of literature as the God of Love and assume that the basic plot is the whole story. In the Prologue the dreamer tries to argue that, whatever the meaning of his source, his own 'entente' in *Troilus* was not what the God of Love understands by it, but Alceste warns him that, right or wrong, this God doesn't brook opposition. She proposes that he spend the rest of his life writing these

stories, but *The Legend of Good Women* is unfinished. Many readers, including me, are tempted to think that Chaucer grew bored with it. There are many expressions of *occupatio* which may support this view. It is not so much that the stories are boring in themselves as that the prescription to approach them all from the same point of view makes them boring. Indeed, the view that there is a story in itself, independent of treatment, the ‘naked text’ as the Prologue calls it, seems so reductive that one imagines Chaucer was glad to escape to the ‘sundry folk’ of *The Canterbury Tales* with their sundry stories and their multiple points of view and relationships with each other. The image of the ‘naked text’ in connection with the violence done to female bodies in the Legends is disturbing. And Alceste’s idea backfires in that the *Legend* is not in the least the feminist work she wanted or its title suggests. Its heroines are merely victims; indeed, the more villainous the men, the more stupid they look to believe them. I keep wishing this narrator would exclaim, like his predecessor: ‘which a fool she was!’ (*The Book of the Duchess* 734). Some scholars have indeed thought the project a deliberately ironic one. The earliest critic to present such a reading suggests that the poet takes his revenge on the God for misreading *Troilus* as an attack on women and love. As his alleged penance he writes a work that really is that: ‘as a penance for an act he never committed, he commits that very act’ (H.C. Goddard, 1908–9).

The Legend of Dido presents an essentially similar interpretation to that in Book 1 of *The House of Fame*. Chaucer’s opening lines celebrate Virgil but refer also to a very different treatment of her story, that of Ovid:

Glorye and honour, Virgil Mantoan,
 Be to thy name! and I shal, as I can,
 Folwe thy lanterne, as thow gost byforn,
 How Eneas to Dido was forsworn.
 In thyn Eneyde and Naso wol I take
 The tenor, and the grete effectes make.

The Legend of Good Women 924–9.

Again, Chaucer presents Aeneas as a cynical seducer, an example of men’s untruth to women, which his female audience can both see from their own experience and read of in books like this. He is merely

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a 'traytour', 'wery' of Dido, 'false', and the visitation from Mercury is reported only in his speech to Dido, as if it were an excuse, rather than in the narration. The poem ends on an Ovidian note, with the opening of the letter from Dido to Aeneas, but Chaucer seems to tire of that too and ends:

But who wol al this letter have in mynde,
Rede Ovide, and in hym he shal it fynde. 1366–7

A fine recent study argues that the Legend of Dido explores the 'nature of female desire' with a 'more coherent focus' than the 'anxious specularity' of *The House of Fame* but admits that 'no reader can miss the parodic nature of the Legends as *exempla* that do not work' (Desmond, pp. 160–1). I would suggest that for Chaucer no topic, text or *exemplum* can 'work' *without* the exercise and awareness of 'anxious specularity'. The Legend 'works' much better as examples of literary tradition than *exempla* of female virtue.

The whole collection, as we have it, ends abruptly with the unfinished Legend of Hypermnestra. It never reaches the Legend of Alceste in which it was presumably meant to culminate. Instead, Hypermnestra is abandoned by her new husband on their wedding night. Her father commanded her to murder her bridegroom. She has spared his life, and he jumps out of the window and escapes, leaving her to her father's revenge:

For whan she saw that gon away was he,
And that she myghte nat so faste go,
Ne folwen hym, she sat hire doun ryght tho,
Til she was caught and fetered in prysoun.
This tale is seyde for this conclusioun—

And with that *The Legend of Good Women* apparently breaks off, as if Chaucer couldn't think what on earth it added up to, or as if the project would logically lead to conclusions quite unacceptable to its patron or its audience.⁴ It teasingly reminds one of the gap that yawns when the man of authority is introduced at the end of *The House of Fame*. It's the ultimate conclusion in which nothing is concluded, or labyrinth from which there is no escape. The poem, like the bridegroom, deserts the 'good woman', abandoning her to her prison cell without the Boethian consolation of philosophy.

V

Of smal coral aboute hire arm she bar
 A peire of bedes, gauded al with grene,
 And theron heng a brooch of gold ful sheene,
 On which ther was first write a crowned A,
 And after *Amor vincit omnia*.

The Canterbury Tales I 158–62

Like most readers of Virgil in late medieval England, Chaucer was more interested in the *Aeneid* than in the *Eclogues* and *Georgics*. But a quotation from the *Eclogues* (*Eclogue* 10.69) may well be his last allusion to Virgil. This occurs in the portrait of the Prioress in the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*. The narrator, her fellow-pilgrim, is another of Chaucer's naïve *personae*. He describes most of his companions with apparently innocent approval or neutrality, leaving his audience to read between the lines or hear behind the voice and make their own judgements on the evidence he provides. This is full of compromising details, such as the Prioress's brooch. The Prioress is—by worldly standards and to the male gaze of the narrator—an attractive lady. But she has theoretically renounced the world, and her use of jewelry, her beloved pets, her presence on the pilgrimage, are against the rules of her order. Her portrait culminates in this famously ambiguous motto. Presumably the Prioress understands 'Amor' as divine love, but human love, as it meant in its original context, seems suggestively present. The nun misreads the Virgilian text as Christian, the Christian poet re-reads and re-contextualizes Virgil. The brooch seems like an emblem of *The Canterbury Tales*, of Chaucer's relationships with Virgil or even of Chaucer's whole poetic career.

VI

My mastir Chauser gretly Virgill offendit.
 All thoch I be to bald hym to repreif,
 He was fer baldar, certis, by hys leif,
 Sayand he followit Virgillis lantern toforn,
 Quhou Eneas to Dydo was forsworn.
 Was he forsworn? Than Eneas was fals:
 That he admittis, and callys hym traytour als.

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Thus, wenyng allane Ene to have reprevit,
He hass gretly the prynce of poetis grevit;
For, as said is, Virgill dyd diligens
But spot of cryme, reproch or ony offens
Eneas for to loif and magnyfy;
And gif he grauntis hym maynsworn fowlely,
Than all his cuyr and crafty engyne gais quyte,
Hys twelf yheris laubouris war nocht worth a myte...
But sikkyrly of resson me behufis
Excuss Chauser fra all maner repruffis:
In lovyng of thir ladeis lylly-quhite
He set on Virgill and Eneas this wyte,
For he was evir (God wait) all womanis frend.

Gavin Douglas, Prologue 409–24, 445–9, to his
translation of the *Aeneid*, 1513.

Chaucer's own authority is questioned by the poets he influences so powerfully during the next century or two. Is he authentic? 'Quha wait gif al that Chauceir wrait was trew?' (64), Robert Henryson asks in his poem *The Testament of Cresseid* and proceeds to give his own continuation and conclusion to her story. Is he biassed? In the Prologue to his translation of the *Aeneid* Gavin Douglas complains that Chaucer was partisan: his sympathies were with Dido and he did not present adequately the imperatives which drive Aeneas on his mission; he was ever, God knows, 'all womanis frend'. This description of Chaucer has been much quoted, considered and sometimes contested in the recent explosion of feminist criticism of his work.

Feminist criticism and deconstructive criticism have given a new prominence to the poems which retell Dido's story, *The House of Fame* and *The Legend of Good Women*, and have paid particular attention to Dido. Does the instability of her story—indeed of all stories—in *The House of Fame* co-opt Chaucer as a medieval deconstructionist? Does the narrator's sympathy for her qualify him for posthumous baptism as a feminist? His revisionary approach is more acceptable to a generation which questions the concept of the literary canon than to Gavin Douglas for whom Virgil is 'the prynce of poetis'. This regal title suggests larger political issues than does the somewhat dismissive personal explanation that Chaucer was 'all womanis frend'. Recent studies have considered

the *Aeneid* as imperialist and phallogentric history, a transmission of male genealogy, heroism and gains in warfare in which Creusa is forgotten, Dido abandoned and Lavinia the victor's prize. Yet many readers of Virgil, before and after Chaucer, have felt the cost of this and thought that Virgil made it clear. The Sibyl had a hundred voices and Virgil at least two. The *Aeneid* is a patient classic in the sense described by Kermode, possessing 'inherent plurality', open to interpretation and re-interpretation (Kermode, p. 139). Like Chaucer's *Troilus* it survives readings and re-readings in a world of 'diversite'.

VII

I shall close, not with a conclusion, but with a postscript, an extract from a notable piece of imperialist criticism delivered as Presidential Address to this Society in 1944.

I have always thought the meeting of Aeneas with the shade of Dido, in Book 6, not only one of the most poignant, but one of the most civilized passages in poetry. It is complex in meaning and economical in expression, for it not only tells us about the attitude of Dido—still more important is what it tells us about the attitude of Aeneas. Dido's behaviour appears almost as a projection of Aeneas' own conscience; this, we feel, is the way in which Aeneas' conscience would *expect* Dido to behave to him. The point, it seems to me, is not that Dido is unforgiving—though it is important that, instead of railing at him, she merely snubs him—perhaps the most telling snub in all poetry—what matters most is that Aeneas does not forgive himself—and thus, significantly, in spite of the fact of which he is well aware, that all he has done has been in compliance with destiny, or in consequence of the machinations of gods who are themselves, we feel, only instruments of a greater inscrutable power. Here, what I chose as an instance of civilized manners, proceeds to testify to civilized consciousness and conscience.

For Eliot Virgil is *the* classic, perhaps the only classic, the mature voice of Rome and the Empire which preceded Christian Europe. This passage,

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like Empire and Church, performs some skilful feats of appropriation. Dido herself is not only put in the shade but virtually effaced by Aeneas as 'almost a projection'. His attitude is 'more important'. Dido's suffering is appropriated by Aeneas, her injury appropriated by his 'conscience' and testimony to his moral fineness. His conscience is indeed too fine, tormenting him for guiltless actions performed in obedience to the gods or even 'a greater inscrutable power'. For Eliot the Roman Empire heralds the Church, its providential successor, and the gods of the *Aeneid* prefigure the Christian God. We, individual readers, are subsumed into Eliot's response in the repeated 'we feel'. To indulge in a dismissive personal explanation myself, I suggest that this generality may be an evasive post-traumatic manoeuvre; the behaviour of the first Mrs Eliot, when the poet left her, was very much less 'civilised'. How comforting to privilege 'civilised' over 'poignant', general over personal, male over female, Christian over pagan, and label the resulting hierarchies 'classic'. Chaucer's interrogation of the classic text is less self-righteous and more self-questioning.

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Notes

1. Estimates of Chaucer's competence in Latin vary. For cautious accounts of his knowledge, see Harbert (*passim*) and Pearsall (29–34).

2. See Minnis (1995) 232–3.

3. Various candidates have been proposed as the man of great authority: Virgil, Boethius, Boccaccio, Christ (see Minnis, 1995, 239–40). Minnis, half-playfully, proposes the pseudo-source Lollius as 'highly appropriate'. For Baswell: 'Every exegete is allowed one guess...Virgil's Aeneas' (398).

4. For a very different view see Alastair Minnis, who inclines to think that the *Legend* was completed and wishes that 'the "boredom" theory' would 'pass gently away from Chaucer criticism' (Minnis, 1995, 326–7).

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