

NAUGHTY BY NATURE: CHAUCER AND THE (RE)INVENTION OF FEMALE  
GOODNESS IN LATE MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

By

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To Marguerite A. English and Juanita J. Shearer,  
beloved grandmothers—  
May you both fly with the angels

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Abstract of the Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School of the University of Florida in  
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The women in Chaucer's stories are not content to live life in the margins, and these characters are neither as good as they should be according to medieval standards of proper female behavior, nor are they as bad as these same standards would have one believe. In this sense, Chaucer is an author who is ahead of his time, and one can determine from his poems that women, in all of their myriad incarnations, are, for him, meant to be seen *and* heard.

In "Subverting Rape, Romance, and Religion in *Troilus and Criseyde*," I examine the most common mistranslation of Criseyde by modern scholars, namely I argue that Criseyde's betrayal of Troilus for Diomedes is as necessary as it is inevitable. Thus, Chaucer rehabilitates his heroine, a feat he manages without harming either her reputation or Troilus' masculinity.

In my chapter on *The Legend of Good Women*, I often disagree with contemporary critical reasoning as to why Chaucer-as-author would choose to (re)translate Classically "bad" women into rather dull examples of "good" womanhood. It is my contention that he uses these women and their tales to show that, no matter how much either sex tries to play the victim when "true" love sours, there are often few real victims to be had in such tragic scenarios.

My fourth chapter examines how *The Man of Law's Tale*, when taken in conjunction with two other *Canterbury Tales*, provides the best answers to some of Chaucer's most challenging questions. Indeed, he (re)invents Custance as the exception to many of the rules for proper female behavior in the fourteenth century, even as she is paradoxically the perfect embodiment of authority's claim on women in general.

In essence, this dissertation's over-arching aim has been to show just how adept Chaucer is at (re)translating women from their often one-dimensional "Lady-like" portrayals in courtly literature into something that is wholly unique and, most important of all, memorable – even to a modern world. Few male authors (re)invent women as Chaucer does, and while many scholars argue that he was simply a man of his time, I contend that, in reality, his work remains timeless.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Courtly love appears as simply the most radical strategy for  
elevating the value of the object by putting obstacles to its attainability.  
—Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment*

We only know if we truly want something when someone tells us we can't  
have it. It's what makes us strive for the "thing". . .  
—Aranye Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*

Why by the cow when you can get the milk for free?  
—Sandra E. Shearer, my mother

Chaucer is one of the foremost observers of human life. For him, humanity in all of its myriad incarnations is the stuff of fiction, and even though he is not adverse to fantasy world building where chickens can speak in refined poetic meter, or where parliament can be composed of birds, or even where the spirit of a woman can dictate to a male author both the content of his own writing and the literary course of his imaginative ecstasy, the human realm often provides his most controversial material. Indeed, it is Chaucer's all too perceptive observations of human life in general, and the interactions between the sexes in particular, that most directly informs this project, for it is my contention that Chaucer, while not a proto-feminist, was still more concerned than most male authors of his day with the accurate portrayal of women, wifehood, motherhood, and female sanctity.<sup>1</sup> Even though he is not precisely feminist, at least not by any contemporary definition of this word, he goes a long way toward a more equitable treatment of

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<sup>1</sup> In arguing that Chaucer is not a proto-feminist, I mean to say that, as a person living in the fourteenth-century, he would have had no vocabulary to either comprehend or translate this term as well as its various meanings. However, in spite of this gap between medieval and modern, it is possible to assert that he would have been cognizant of the profound inequities that women faced both legally and spiritually compared to men. It is this perception that informs much of Chaucer's writing in the sense that he frequently plays with notions of what constitutes "good" and "bad" as they are often falsely constructed by those in power, and it is in his humorous reversals of these categories that renders him more sympathetic than most towards women, even if he isn't quite feminist in any modern sense of this term.



women in literature. But Chaucer, like all human beings, is far from perfect. He has his own flaws, one of which includes the much debated and rather disturbing accusation of *raptus* made against him by Cecilia Chaumpagne. While the charge is later dropped, one has to wonder why it was ever made in the first place. After all, the charge of *raptus* did not always mean sexual violence or violated virginity (Phillips 83). Around the late thirteenth and early fourteenth-centuries, it could be translated as “seizing,” “carrying off by force,” as well as “rape” within the common-law, and courts often asked accusers “‘what’ is being seized and ‘from whom’” (Phillip 83)? In essence, it was sort of a catchall term that applied to any questionable sexual advances towards a woman, whether she was abducted and ransomed back by her family, or whether she was caught in the throes of a consensual act, or whether she was in fact raped. Any of these scenarios could be classified as *raptus*. And, as one critic explains, these multiple translations lead to “the notoriously low rate of convictions for *raptus* throughout [this] period . . . Judges were reluctant to impose penalties of life and limb, but forcing payment of compensation for loss of virginity seemed more reasonable” (Phillips 86), which is a disturbing state of affairs on a number of levels. The foremost of which being the fact that the courts were letting actual and/or potential rapists off the hook with little more than a slap on the wrist and a fine that was calculated based upon a particular woman’s perceived level of purity.

As a result, virgins were far more expensive to violate sexually than wives or widows. In turn, the woman herself received little compensation in return because any accusation of *raptus* no matter what the circumstances or the outcome would irreparably harm her reputation, and in the case of a young woman, it would seriously damage any chance for her to make an advantageous marriage, if such were her goal. The reason for this harm originates from medieval notions of both female purity and chastity as well as the professed need of the law to

regulate both, for while “marriage placed women in an inferior role” (Carson & Weisl 2), there was, in actuality, some small power to be had in both virginity and in a former virgin’s chaste widowhood. Cindy Carson and Angela Jane Weisl explain:

Virgins . . . were held to stricter standards of behavior; if widows gained a kind of community status and mobility through their active choice to remain chaste, virgins were seen as being in need of protection to prevent them from the temptations of the world. The widow’s fortitude was measured by her will; having rejected the carnal world, she was able to live within it. By having rejected sexuality before experiencing it, the virgin was less able to defend herself against seduction. (3)

In other words, since the widows had gained carnal knowledge within the confines of a sanctioned union, they were thought better protected from any attempts by men to compromise their chastity because, at the very least, they would have the sexual experience that the virgins were supposed to lack. And, in order to compensate for this gap, virgins were supposed to rely on authority in order to protect themselves from gaining such experience at inappropriate times, which sadly includes instances of rape. Thus, as a measure of protection, society often sanctioned the enclosure of virgins from the outside world until such time as they were ready for either marriage or for the taking of final vows within a Holy Order.

Now, not all prosecutions for *raptus* were on behalf of an unwilling “victim,” for it has been noted by scholars that “abductions” were sometimes used by young women to avoid a marriage dictated by their families for social, monetary, and/or political gain (Phillips 83). A woman following this course could arrange to be abducted, preferably by the young man she wished to marry, and once his “prisoner,” her family would have no choice but to consent to the marriage. In return, they often would not have to pay as high of a dowry due to her compromised virtue. However, any set of laws can be used for good as well as ill, and such is the case here. Obviously, not every abduction or tryst was consensual. And many women were

faced with the possibility of marriage to their rapists in order to preserve not only their reputations, but also the “good name” of their families as well. On the other hand, if their attacker already had a wife or was unwilling to marry his victim, then these women often faced public ridicule, loss of status within the marriage market, and/or banishment to a religious life whether or not they had such ambitions. These unfair standards were based on the notion that Eve tainted all of womankind with her vanity and carnality; thus, a woman’s mere existence is tainted by this maternal history, and so a man’s desire to commit such a violent act against any woman was considered partly her own fault, for if she were truly chaste and pure, she would not inspire such desire from the male gaze. In other words, an accusation of *raptus* against any man often raised more questions about circumstances and about female virtue than it ever provided justice for victims of any of these crimes, largely due to the fact that the act of rape itself was aligned with desire and not, as it should be, with power and dominance.

This disturbing trend in medieval common-law begs the question: how could a man like Chaucer, who is so generally even-handed in his treatment of women in fiction, be so potentially callous towards a woman in real life?<sup>2</sup> It would seem to be an unsolvable paradox, and to a certain extent, this evaluation is correct; yet, there are clues in the poems discussed in the subsequent chapters that Chaucer fully realizes he has a horrific crime to atone for, which leads one to ponder the idea that perhaps *The Legend of Good Women* is not his only *mea culpa* to women. He may have been guilty at one time of an appalling crime, and it will never be my

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<sup>2</sup> When I use the term “even-handed,” what I ultimately see in Chaucer’s writing is an equitable representation of both women who are “good,” and not just because they are silent and pure, as well as women who are “bad,” more so because they have collectively chosen to love the wrong men than in their being unrepentantly amoral. This term also means that Chaucer uses as many examples of “good” and “bad” men as he does women, and it is this consistent balancing of the scales of both an individual’s sex as well as his or her sexual desire that truly sets his writing apart from most other male authors in the fourteenth-century.

intention to excuse such behavior. What I do intend to do here is examine just how much women and their desires affect this author and in what ways, for he treats Criseyde far differently than he treats the Wife of Bath, and he develops Alisoun far differently from the way he does Custance. Each of these women has a unique story to tell, and perhaps in giving them their proper chance to speak, he is atoning for a time in which he denied a voice to a woman in his actual life. The answer to this idea proves elusive, but still the question persists: what is one to make of this author and his all too human characters? No one knows for certain, as generations of criticism has proven, but in my analysis of Chaucer in the pages that follow, I hope at the very least to bring some new possibilities to a well-loved and oft written about author and his texts.

At the outset, I do not want to be perceived as reading too much of Chaucer's personal history into his characters and stories, therein lies truly dangerous territory—along with the chance for a critic to venture too far into the realm of fiction. However, what the above question accomplished for me within the scope of this project is that it focused my analysis of Chaucer with regard to how, on the one hand, he (re)invents his source materials, and on the other, how he translates the women from these old books into something new. When so many male authors of Romance and courtly literature are content to simply refer to their female characters as “Lady” or to gender the personifications of less flattering human traits such as “Envy” or “Vanity” as female, Chaucer stands apart in his representations not only of memorable women, but also in his willingness to let many of these exceptional women have the last laugh, often at the expense of their male counterparts—a view that even modern critics can see is unusual for a writer using this form. As Fradenburg notes: “courtly love designs the future of amorous European subjectivity by subliming the sublimation. The technique of raising the object to the dignity of the Thing is itself exalted, as a consequence of which its object—the Lady—is doubly

fascinating, as not only ‘she,’ but the artifice that makes her, now points us towards *jouissance*” (*Sacrifice Your Love* 18–19), and in *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, Žižek takes this idea even further when he claims courtly literature is, in reality, the literature of masochistic desire: “our ‘official’ desire is that we want to sleep with the Lady; whereas in truth, there is nothing we fear more than a Lady who might generously yield to this wish of ours—what we truly expect and want from the Lady is simply yet another new ordeal, yet one more postponement” (96). But in Chaucer’s narratives, “the Lady” is often rendered both human and attainable, and for this reason, she is frequently damned by his audience as being immoral or unworthy of the “good” men she leads astray. Consequently, in allowing the women in his texts to make their own decisions about who they desire—that is, by giving them sovereignty, Chaucer reinvents the world of courtly literature so that desire and pain are only synonymous when one makes the wrong choice, when one does not choose his or her similitude—as opposed to when a person simply desires in any capacity whatsoever. In other words, Chaucer himself is no masochist, and he generously creates fictional worlds where his readers do not have to be either. I do not mean to imply here that Chaucer creates fictional narratives devoid of tragedy, but rather what he does do is make all this suffering serve a didactic purpose. In the works I have chosen for this project, all of his characters—some male and some female—need to learn valuable lessons about life, love, and desire. Those who prove to be apt pupils are rewarded with happiness, and those who remain stubbornly at odds with their author always seem to get their just due in the end. Although they do not always physically suffer, they are usually humiliated in some way so that their failure to abide by their author-cum-narrator’s rules is obvious to even the most casual of readers. In this manner, Chaucer shows just how costly it is for the lion to simply repaint the

same portrait. In such a scenario, no one wins, no one learns, and ultimately, no one creates a work of art worthy of any lasting scrutiny.

It stands to reason that such a unique author would, in many way, be no better or worse than the characters he writes, and one could gather from Chaucer's translations of women that he does have a certain sympathy for their plight in a patriarchal world. On the other hand, it is still difficult to imagine that an accused rapist would have any sensibility about "what thyng is it that women moost desiren" (*Wife of Bath's Prologue* 905). Perhaps Chaucer writes such a variety of distinctive women as a form of authorial penance, or perhaps he does so in order to show that all people, male and female, are capable of ghastly acts. In other words, as the sexual violence portrayed in courtly literature and *fabliaux* often shows, women alone do not possess the capacity for deviant conduct. This fact does not excuse bad behavior, nor should it, but what it does do is create a unique frame for much of Chaucer's writings. In his narrative world, there is no one, either male or female, who is without sin, and because everyone is equally capable of sin, no one should ever cast stones, at least not within the lines of his poetry. Women may get the short end of the stick in life, law, and religion, but in his narratives, Chaucer allows many of them to tip the scales in their favor at least some of the time, which is far more often than they could ever expect in real life. In this fashion, Chaucer proves, even to a modern world, that while society rarely behaves the way it should, all can be set right in fiction—meaning that a miller can talk back to a knight without fear of punishment, Classical heroines can have a proper defense in the God of Love's court, women can marry for love instead of for money, and the lion can have the chance to paint a more accurate portrait. Chaucer also maintains that courtly love stories and Romances are no exception in this regard because, in these works, there is often much more emphasis on the proper execution of plot elements and conventions than there is any real

justice for characters who are not noble, not knighted, and/or not male. In this sense, even a potential rapist, such as an author who is himself neither noble, nor a knight, can understand just how restrictive silence can be. After all, sovereignty only ever seems to be acknowledged when it is denied, and it is an undeniable aspect of the human psyche that we all want what we cannot have. This aspect causes both the desire for the “Thing” as well as the paradoxical impulse to deny ourselves the “Thing.” Our desire subsequently creates our need for sacrifice, and sacrifice, in turn, purifies our desire so that it is worthy of the “Thing” which began all of this desiring in the first place. Fradenburg explains this idea by saying, “Sacrifice means to get back, with interest, whatever it renounces. Like apocalypse, the aneconomic moment suspends, even violates, time so that the time after will be different from the time before—more dignified, more sublime: excoriated” (*Sacrifice Your Love* 15). However, in a society where kings were considered divinely appointed, desires will vary according to both class and gender, and no matter how much one sacrifices, certain desires will remain unattainable due to strict regulation by law: secular as well as ecclesiastical. Therefore, as a person, albeit a male one, in the service of those considered his “betters” merely by an accident of birth, Chaucer understands perhaps more than most just how significant it is for one to be able to determine his or her own future—to be able to make all of the involuntary sacrifices worth more.

In this manner, Chaucer illustrates the basic dichotomy that develops in such a society—that is, authority will tell everyone that the sacrifice of personal sovereignty is a necessary “Good,” and experience teaches you that authority isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. “Good” will not always be good, and “Bad” will not always be bad for everyone to the same limit. Obviously, both sides in this debate have far different criteria for each of these categories. Neither side is prepared to give up, and neither side will easily surrender their definitions. Thus,

this eternal argument begins the true lesson behind all of Chaucer's most indelible stories, where authority and experience must find a way to equitably co-exist; otherwise, life will contain nothing more than thwarted desire, spiritual crisis, and excommunication from authority's favor. Depending on which side you take, most people end up damned some of the time; however, women typically end up damned all of the time. Therefore, the overarching idea of this project is to show just how often in his writing Chaucer manages to create a much-needed grey area where authority and experience can be balanced in such a way that his female characters are not always left to suffer for sins they did not commit. In highlighting just how jaded, cynical, and hypocritical individuals become when all they ever do is divide everyone else into such narrow categories, Chaucer's female characters get the chance not only to have their say, but also the ones who take his lessons about balance, sovereignty, and similitude to heart are invariably rewarded with honest, equitable love and romance apart from any restrictive literary conventions that would normally relegate them to the margins.

The main problem Chaucer must contend with in rehabilitating women such as Criseyde, Alisoun of Bath, Cleopatra, and Medea, among some of the more problematic women to (re)translate, are the qualifying factors of goodness that are often inconsistently wrought in the fourteenth-century. As I have previously stated, women could be labeled "chaste" and, thus "good," and not be virgins. I am, of course, referring back to those chaste wives and widows, who are nonetheless considered proper examples of womanhood even though their very participation in the sacrament of marriage mandates consummation for the practical purposes of securing inheritances, regardless of what St. Paul may say when he argues in favor of marriage purely for the sake of performing the sacrament and not for sexual pursuits or for producing progeny. Therefore, even though virginity appears to be a requirement prior to marriage, the



proof of its absence in the bearing of children is necessary for a woman to be considered “good” after a marriage ceremony has been performed. Indeed, it is in the proof of her fertility that a woman gains status after marriage, just as the proof of her abstinence before marriage allows her to make an advantageous match in the first place. It is a paradox fraught with myriad problems; nevertheless, it is the framework within which Chaucer must initially set his stories. And there is little doubt that Chaucer is most adept at luring his readers into thinking one set of rules is in play even as he is introducing a whole new game. In this fashion, he takes the conventions of a male-drawn world and repaints the portrait from an entirely new perspective, even while it seems to simultaneously inhabit the same frame. And yet, even in his use of conventional forms, there is a difference.

Take, for example, his delicate treatment of a notoriously indelicate woman, namely the Wife of Bath, who is the truest champion of experience in all of Chaucer’s writing, versus St. Cecilia, who is one of Chaucer’s more virulent defenders of authority. In this battle, contained within the Dantesque framework of the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer subtly advances his most provocative critique of how masculine society inevitably categorizes “good” and “bad” women. “Good” women communicate with actions, and “bad” women communicate with words and in writing. Consequently, “bad” women are labeled as such because they try to translate their discontent using the same means as men—that is, writing, rhetoric, and most damning of all, authority itself. The Wife of Bath, whose extensive *Prologue* uses many techniques of medieval argumentation and rhetoric in order to claim that her experience in marriage is far superior to anything celibate monks might have to say on the subject, is the perfect illustration of such female “badness.” And, for her practical observations about marriage and the unequal treatment of women therein, she is condemned as nothing more than a rapaciously sexual female

monstrosity by generations of Chaucer's readers and critics. The same sad fate has also befallen other notoriously "bad" Chaucerian women, such as Criseyde and many of the heroines in *The Legend of Good Women*. In contrast to this view, characters such as St. Cecilia, Constance, and Griselda, have until the last twenty years or so fared much better under critical scrutiny. These women are considered categorically "good" because they do precisely what the others do not, namely they know when to keep their mouths shut and simply *perform* without having to argue. Their experiences are no less profound, but their allegiance to male authority is such that they seemingly never even think to question whether or not their actions have any purpose other than in satisfying the dictates of a society that considers them more sinful, and thus, less worthy of salvation than their male counterparts. Their source of wealth and success is tied to their marriageability, their virtue, and their adherence to patriarchal norms. Women who are motivated by speech as opposed to action are more inclined to point out the holes in these obviously skewed arguments, and because of their astute critiques of male-ordered society, they bear watching.

In this manner, one can see that, unlike male authors prior to and even in later centuries, Chaucer uses his more vocal female characters as texts, and in having them speak with such passion and conviction about their own "experiences" he shows just how often real women are mistranslated, misread, and misused by a predominantly male literary audience. Consequently, not only who Chaucer chooses to translate, but also how he does so, or more accurately, what he chooses *not* to translate about them from his source material is as significant a discussion for scholars today as it was when the first fans and/or critics of Chaucer's work began to surface in Early Modern literature. It is important that modern critics acknowledge this rich history; however, they must also be careful not to consider this road too well-traveled to

continue upon, especially when arguments regarding Chaucer's work remain largely philological, structural, and historical. It is essential for scholars not to forget the value Chaucer placed upon simple human observation and its ability to help him build strangely familiar, albeit slightly improved, worlds within fiction from the chaos of real life. At least in this regard, no one can claim that Chaucer ever became so bored with his topic that he ceased writing on it entirely. And so, in deference to such authorial precision, I will turn now to the works I have chosen for this dissertation, for as I frequently note, Chaucer is most adept at adapting and transforming his source materials so that he consistently (re)invents the heroines in these stories in unique and surprising ways. Accordingly, I would like to begin my study of Chaucer with *Troilus and Criseyde* and its much maligned and frequently mistranslated heroine.

What makes *Troilus and Criseyde* initially intriguing from a scholarly point of view is that it is one of Chaucer's few major works in this time period not to follow the dream-vision form. For example, *The Book of the Duchess*, which was composed prior to *Troilus and Criseyde* in roughly 1368; *The Parliament of Fowls*, composed around 1380 and possibly inspired by the Parliament's negotiations that year of the betrothal of Richard II to Anne of Bohemia; and finally *The Legend of Good Women*, composed after and, arguably, because of *Troilus and Criseyde*, are all written using this form. Chaucer also chooses around this time to translate several works into the English vernacular that favor this form as well, namely the *Roman de la Rose*, the first portion of which was composed by Guillaume de Lorris in 1237 as well as Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*.<sup>3</sup> All of these works are influenced by the dream-vision format to varying degrees; though, only *The Legend of Good Women* seems to show, as I

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<sup>3</sup> For more detailed summaries of these works, the debates over their composition dates, and the historical events that may have inspired them, one should read the introductions to each of these texts in *The Riverside Chaucer*: third edition, ed. Larry D. Benson, Oxford University Press, 1987.

will argue in my third chapter, Chaucer's transition from the dream-vision into the more versatile style that appears in *The Canterbury Tales*, where the author becomes both a narrator and a wayward pilgrim who has returned from a long journey with many new tales to tell—all of which were supposedly told by someone else. Therefore, if any reader happens to be offended by the sometimes bawdy content of these stories, then he or she cannot blame the author for dutifully reporting what he has heard and recorded elsewhere. In this vein, the other provocative aspect of *Troilus and Criseyde* lies with the extreme emotional response inspired in readers by its titular female character. Indeed, Criseyde is the first of Chaucer's heroines to receive almost universal critical scorn, and in certain cases, a patronizing sort of pity.<sup>4</sup> Neither of these readings are particularly fair to this woman, and even though the latter argument claims to have the best of intentions, it is the proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing, for it does nothing more than deny Criseyde the agency to make reasonable decisions regarding her future, which Chaucer has given to her from the outset of this story. Granted, outside circumstances do interfere, and she is often forced to adapt; however, her decisions in love, with regard to both Troilus and Diomedes, are not nearly so mercenary as these critics maintain. Consequently, while Criseyde is not the earthly equivalent of a succubus leading Troilus' pure, male soul into perdition as Robertson would have one believe, neither is she innocently duped into her supposedly immoral behavior by cold, cruel, and uncaring men. In this manner, Chaucer shows that his Criseyde is neither too innocent, nor too experienced when it comes to romantic endeavors. And, while she is often forced by outside forces to make decisions she might not otherwise, Criseyde's intentions are never malicious, and her betrayal of Troilus for Diomedes is, in Chaucer's estimation, both inevitable and necessary.

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<sup>4</sup> See for example the scathing Augustinian derision of D. W. Robertson, Jr. in *A Preface to Chaucer*, or the more insidious, hollow sympathy displayed by David Aers in "Criseyde: Woman in Medieval Society." *The Chaucer Review* 13.3 (1979): 177-199.

Yet, in order to (re)write her this way, Chaucer must first make some rather significant changes to her from his primary source in Boccaccio's *Il filostrato*. As I stated earlier, *Troilus and Criseyde* represents an early departure from the dream-vision format, and it also represents one of Chaucer's first forays into Italian literature. It is, on its most basic level, a translation of Boccaccio, but Chaucer makes some significant changes to his characters, so that, while the basic series of events follow those of his source, Chaucer's characters reach, and indeed are capable of reaching, far different ends than in Boccaccio's far more world-weary tale of jaded lovers.

Part of the reason for Chaucer's division from Boccaccio's story is predicated on just how adeptly he (re)translates the conventions of both courtly love and Romance literature, for while Troilus and Criseyde are the very definition of the sort of lovers depicted in these stories, Criseyde and Diomedes are not, and therein lies the difference. Troilus is a soldier and a confirmed bachelor who is quite literally struck by Cupid's arrow, and once he has conceived of this grand passion for Criseyde, he approaches their romance with the zealous devotion the newly converted. He can't eat; he can't sleep, and whenever he thinks about Criseyde he practically convulses with the heat and intensity of his passion (*Troilus and Criseyde* I.358–364). Unfortunately, because he is a soldier and not a lover, he suffers in silence. Enter Pandarus: Criseyde's uncle and the enthusiastic go-between in this story. He gets Troilus to write Criseyde a letter as only the most refined lovers in courtly literature can, with effusive praise of her beauty and virtues, with an entreaty for her to take pity on his sorry state, and most importantly, he writes it while in tears and seals it with kisses (*Troilus and Criseyde* II.1086–1092). The problem here is that what Troilus and Criseyde have, and arguably what Troilus, Criseyde, and Pandarus have, is a romance that lives on paper but that has no potential to last in the "real

world.” What Chaucer shows in *Troilus and Criseyde* is that the *ars dictaminis* is precisely that, an art. In the practical function of everyday life and in everyday love, it is far too structured and grand in its language and execution to ever inspire the throes of passion and romance it always generates in courtly literature. Moreover, it works in this case because both Troilus and Criseyde are far too inexperienced as lovers *not* to fall for the false passion defined by this art. After all, the intensity of such feeling is difficult to resist, and it is only the translation of these sentiments into the human realm that wears away that its bright, fiery veneer. Lovers must eventually mature, and such superficiality rarely leads to longevity or true depth of feeling. It is because Troilus and Criseyde rely on Pandarus, who is almost militant in his adherence to the Romance structure that dooms their relationship from the start. Furthermore, they are so easily manipulated by him because, even though Criseyde is a widow, and Troilus obviously knows what to do with a woman once he is literally thrown into bed with her (III.1247–1253), neither of them has ever encountered love in its mature incarnation. Thus begins the series of mistranslations of Criseyde and her desires, for it is the consistent misreadings of Criseyde by both Troilus and Pandarus that leads to the inception of this grand love affair worthy of any proper *fin’amors* tale, but because it has such an unstable foundation, it is not built to last.

Therefore, as I will show in this chapter, such tales are not meant for realistic application. From the highly impractical plans of Pandarus that bring these two people together, to the extreme highs and lows of their passion reminiscent of one’s early adolescent experiences with a first crush, to Criseyde’s eventual forsaking of Troilus for a more mature and adult bond with Diomedes once she has been ransomed to the Greek camp by her father, Calchas, Chaucer shows his audience what happens when one tries to translate Romance into reality. The injustice here, though, is that, in a situation where no one in particular is to blame for how this story ends,

Criseyde traditionally receives the lion's share of it. Ironically, when scholars, such as Elaine Tuttle Hansen and Jill Mann, set out to correct this interpretive folly, they do not really resolve the issue. Rather, they merely reassign the blame from Criseyde to Troilus, often at the expense of his masculinity, and to Diomedes, whom they despise for what they perceive as his calculated, aggressive seduction. The problem with these theories is that, in trying to rehabilitate Criseyde from generations of misogynist condemnation, they inevitably commit the same interpretive crime as their predecessors in that they also take away much of Criseyde's agency as a woman in command of her sexual destiny. Indeed, she may not have chosen her husband, or to be traded to the Greek camp, or to any lasting romantic connection to Troilus, but she does make two very important choices that should not be overlooked or dismissed as they are by these critics as merely made by a woman, living in a man's world, doing what she has to do to manipulate the system for her own survival.

The most significant of these decisions is Criseyde's choice of Diomedes as her lover and protector when she is unwillingly traded to the Greek camp in exchange for other prisoners of war. In choosing to accept Diomedes's pursuit, Criseyde is, in actuality, choosing a lover who translates her properly from the beginning, who gives her exactly what she wants when she wants it without having to rely on a rather inept go-between. In other words, Diomedes is the mature lover Troilus can only ever pretend to be, and once Criseyde is outside of the walls of Troy, she immediately recognizes the difference. In this sense, Chaucer uses *Troilus and Criseyde* to give his audience an insightful treatise on the proper orientation of love, and he does so not only by showing how ridiculous Romantic conventions truly are in teaching anything useful on this topic, but also he ultimately reveals just how impossible it is to live up to the ideal of love demanded by courtly literature, for if one were interested in finding the sort of love that could actually

survive outside the confines of fiction, then Criseyde and Diomedes become a far more practical model to follow. And, if this story does not prove to be enough of a cautionary tale on choosing the appropriate object for one's affection, then one can see that Chaucer takes the lessons taught here a step farther in *The Legend of Good Women* in order to show just what profound tragedies can occur when his advice is willfully ignored.

In my next chapter, I examine Chaucer's final foray into the realm of the dream-vision form with *The Legend of Good Women*. Although this work is intriguing on multiple levels, most critics seem content to concentrate on the two "drafts" of the Prologue and give only passing attention to the legends themselves. One can hardly blame them on this score, for after the exquisite poetry and complicated tropes in both the F and G versions of the Prologues, the rather mundane translations of the Classical tales of women scorned that follow—borrowed almost wholesale from Ovid's *Heroides* and *Metamorphosis*—them seem to fall flat in comparison. Indeed, there is such a large gap between these two distinct halves that many critics have often interpreted the narrative voice in the *Legend* as growing bored with his task, hurrying it along, and ultimately, abandoning it before completion for a much more entertaining enterprise, namely the *Canterbury Tales*. To this end, almost every scholar who devotes any time at all to the *Legend* spends it performing three very specific readings: 1) an examination of the changes to the order of the Prologues as well as what is added and/or deleted in F and G in order to prove which is the *ur* text; 2) the examination of the various personifications of flowers, birds, and so forth in F and G in order to show how such Chaucerian tropes are reminiscent of the French *marguerite* poetic tradition—this option, of course, applies most specifically to the Alceste/Daisy conceit; and finally, 3) the use of both Prologues to reveal just how enamored the Narrator is with his dream and how unenthusiastic he is about writing the legends themselves,



thus resulting in the most frequent accusations of authorial abandonment due to boredom with his subject. And, while I do not mean to imply fault with such readings—either individually or in combination—it does seem apparent that most contemporary critics are once again finding it easy to ignore the *Legend* in favor of Chaucer's more finished or more universally appealing texts. Dismissing this work in such an offhand manner does it a grave injustice, almost as much as ignoring the legends themselves in favor of the Prologues, which denies the women in these tales the chance to tell their side of the story. Sure, the Prologues command the more graceful poetry, but despite what most scholars state to the contrary, the legends themselves have more substance than they are given credit for. It is in the legends that Chaucer gives the first indicator that he is capable of a work like the *Canterbury Tales*. For, in the *Legend*, Chaucer paints a vivid picture from the perspective of experience, and he deftly shows the dangers that “real life” has to offer, whereas both of the Prologues represent an homage to authority that one would expect to encounter in the “olde apprevd stories” and not from this author (F/G 21). In this manner, Chaucer finally puts a specific name to the central argument in much of his writing. It is the very argument that preoccupies the Wife of Bath, namely that experience and authority each create desire, but they both require very different sacrifices.

As Aranye Fradenburg notes, “*The Legend of Good Women* fantasizes that good women, despite their suffering, have really been rescued, worthy of their textual resurrection because of their capacity for sacrifice. The narrator is their redeemer; though chivalric rescue fails within the legends, the legends are produced by a chivalrous rescuer of the reputations of women—at no small cost to himself . . .” (*Sacrifice Your Love* 196). And while to a certain extent this statement is true, in that the Narrator seems genuinely shocked to learn that his stories have not been well-received by women, I disagree with her assumption that the *Legend* as a

whole is a text about women in need of rescue. As I will argue in this chapter, *The Legend of Good Women* is a text supposedly about victims, but in reality there are few victims to be had. The main reason for this incongruous structure is the fact that these women claim their status as victims only after they have knowingly chosen to love the horrible, lying, and treacherous men who subsequently victimize them. This is not to say that these women deserve their harsh treatment, but if one has even the slightest knowledge of their original Classical stories, then he or she would be aware of the fact that these women do not take their husbands' mistreatment lying down. In this sense, Chaucer demonstrates that women, no matter how victimized they may be by these devious and amoral men, are frequently no better or worse than the men they have chosen to love, and anyone would know this after one glance at the "olde bokes" Chaucer draws from for these stories. And so, the definitions of "good," "bad," and the very nature of victimhood itself prove to be as mutable as the editing process of a less than diligent translation allows them to be. Moreover, while these words are given meaning by a masculine world, this meaning often proves to be as ephemeral as the words themselves. For, in the *Legend*, Chaucer takes some notoriously "bad" women, such as Cleopatra, Medea, and Ariadne and puts them in the same pantheon as classically "good" women, such as Lucretia, Hypermnestra, Philomela and Thisbe, who typically inspire far more sympathy than they do scorn with a modern audience. The first group of women is often demonized in medieval literature as vile seducers and betrayers of men, marriage, and, most despicable of all, the family; whereas, the later group receives mixed reviews. Most are seen as inherently good, but they are frequently used as cautionary tales, due to the manner in which each of these women are abandoned, brutalized or killed—or in some cases, all three. Thus, while they are not irrevocably evil or concupiscent seductresses, they do commit some sin of one kind or another that leads to their downfall, except

perhaps for Philomela and Hypermnestra who most closely represent the very definition of the word “victim” in the entire *Legend*. In spite of these common perceptions of both groups, Chaucer uses *The Legend of Good Women* to edit out much of what makes all of these women “bad”—that is, he concentrates solely on Antony and Cleopatra’s love as well as suicide, which makes it a far more Romantic plot than in the Classical tale; he ends Medea’s legend before she kills her children in revenge for Jason’s betrayal; and in Philomela’s story, Procne merely hints that she plans something dark and devious to avenge her sister’s rape and torture by her husband, Tereus, but this tale abruptly concludes before anything gruesome is done. Hence, in (re)inventing these women in this manner, Chaucer makes a very important distinction from both Ovid and the “olde bokes” praised by the Narrators in both Prologues in that he translates a series of narratives about women who are victimized but who refuse to be victims, and he stops (re)writing their stories at the exact moments when their classically bloody and destructive revenges can be perpetrated upon their despicable husbands. In this sense, not every woman in this text can be so easily rehabilitated with some clever editing; however, in order for Chaucer to achieve the balance he requires between experience and authority here, not all of them can be transliterated and still be considered “good.” There are some problematic characters in the *Legend*—some vocal women who refuse to let their suffering go unavenged, which as we all know is some decidedly “bad” behavior. And so, by including them in this work, Chaucer-as-author has little choice but to allow them their say—even if he has to do so more in hints and suggestions than he is able to with direct words.

Indeed, as I have stated above, Chaucer often retranslates his more notoriously “bad” women in such a way as to prove that any category does not exist in a pure, immutable state. “Bad” can be turned “good” as easily as one can turn the page and read another tale, and this idea

functions for both sexes within Chaucer's canon. For as many morally ambiguous women Chaucer writes, he often presents an equal number of questionable men, as he shows in the *Legend* in tale after tale, but Chaucer relies on his audience to fill in the more unsavory narrative blanks when he cannot, due to the nature of his penance as prescribed by the God of Love and Alceste. Thus, even though he ends many of these stories before the "bad" women can enact their gruesome revenges and/or he begins their tales in such a manner that famous seductresses like Cleopatra become sympathetic heroines, Chaucer drops huge hints to his audience that there is more to these legends than he has chosen to (re)write. In fact, he often has his narrator directly reference authors such as Ovid and Virgil by name, so that it practically begs his audience to turn to the original sources in order to get the whole story. In this manner, Chaucer uses *The Legend of Good Women* and its various narratorial voices as the bridge between the style found in his earlier works and what seems unique to the *Canterbury Tales*. The *Legend* is the bridge between the "olde bokes" privileged in his earlier writing and the something new hinted at between the lines in these tales of hard won experience. And, rather than beginning my dissertation with the *Canterbury Tales*, I decided instead to focus my fourth chapter on this poem in order to show that, even though Chaucer's writing in this work is considered by critics to be his most mature, one can see that, even in an earlier, less renowned narrative like *The Legend of Good Women*, his characters are as human in end as they were in the beginning.

In order to truly understand the transition Chaucer makes from his largely dream-vision poetry to the *Canterbury Tales*, one need only look to the individual tales themselves in order to see how far Chaucer has come artistically, thematically, and ideologically from his other narratives. Consequently, in "A Virgin, A Wife, and A Martyr Walk into the *Tales*," I examine three types of women found most frequently within this collection of tales—that is, the virgin,

the wife, and the martyr. These three types of womanhood were considered the most “good” by medieval society, and so they represent Chaucer’s experiment for the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole with medieval categorizations of proper womanhood. It is my contention that Chaucer uses Custance from *The Man of Law’s Tale* to illustrate how one woman could inhabit all of these categories almost simultaneously, and yet never be firmly relegated to any one of them permanently. Custance, of all the women in the *Tales*, manages to begin her journey as a virgin bride desiring to become a martyr, and instead, she becomes a wife and mother, all of which she accomplishes while maintaining a rigorous faith. And because she is so diligent in her faith, Custance is rewarded in the end, not with death, but rather with both life and a happy ending. For this reason, she deserves more individual critical attention than she has received in the past—no matter how much more intriguing her erstwhile narrator, the Man of Law, may appear to be at first glance.

Fradenburg gives perhaps the most penetrating reason for much of the critical apathy concerning Custance when she writes: “despite what they do for others, good women seem helpless largely because they cannot help themselves; it is also noteworthy that, despite their goodness, their acts of pity can seem ethically equivocal” (*Sacrifice Your Love* 196). Fradenburg’s astute observation in this quotation illustrates an important flaw in Custance’s character that Chaucer takes great pains to correct at the end of *The Man of Law’s Tale*, namely her helpless, and seemingly hopeless, naïveté that often threatens her very survival. It is because Custance is so distracted by authority that she fails to learn anything from her experiences until it is almost too late, and by remaining so constant in her ignorance of the secular world for so long, she is perceived by many contemporary scholars to be a largely unappealing character. In other words, her faith, fortitude, and innocence are seen as merely virtues of the past with no modern

relevance whatsoever. However, such judgments are a bit premature, for when her adventures and follies are examined in relation to other notable female characters in the *Canterbury Tales*, her prolonged innocence becomes far more intriguing. Therefore, my fourth chapter could not simply be about Custance or *The Man of Law's Tale* on their own, but rather I was compelled by the irrepressible narrative voices of two other women who were clamoring to be heard and for very different motivations. I am speaking, of course, of the vocally and sexually unrepentant Wife of Bath and the spiritually indomitable St. Cecilia. Neither woman would give me any peace until I gave them their due and for good reason. Indeed, when one takes these other two tales and characters into account, a far different view of Custance comes to light. She transforms from suffering ingénue into a savvy political manipulator worthy of Alisoun of Bath within the space of a few hundred lines, and she manages to accomplish this rather radical transformation without having to sacrifice the religious devotion that is reminiscent of Cecilia, albeit with one significant difference, as Custance is never meant to be a martyr. The major disparity between these three women occurs within their status as wives, for while Alisoun is rebellious in her multiple marriages and carnal joy, Cecilia maintains St. Paul's ideal of a chaste marriage with her husband. In contrast to this, Custance manages to lose her virginity to marriage, become a mother, *and* still appear to be worthy of God's favor. In fact, none of Custance's wanderings and exiles appear to be the result of divine punishment, but rather they seem to be intended to circulate both her and her remarkable conversionary abilities to pagan lands, an obvious sign to any medieval Christian that her loss of physical purity has in no way damaged her soul, for unlike the Wife, Custance embodies the one quality that authority prizes in such a "good" woman: she knows how to be silent in her suffering. And, in an interesting reversal from Alisoun's multiple marriages, Custance receives more of her woe from her two mothers-in-law

than she ever does from her husbands. In Custance's case, the importance of her marriages is compounded by the fact that they both depend on a conversion to Christianity. To add further complications, both conversions result in betrayals at the hands of women intent on maintaining the status quo. Custance's arrival represents a shift in this hierarchy of power and political influence for these women, and so both of them remove the threat Custance poses in different ways but with the same result—that is, Custance placed in a rudderless boat to hopefully perish before she reaches another pagan land that needs converting.

The problem here lies not with Custance's experiences, as disturbing and outright torturous as they may be, but rather the difficulties in *The Man of Law's Tale* are predicated on her prolonged secular innocence. After all, while one can excuse this heroine from falling for one betrayal at the hands of a powerful woman, the fact that she so easily trusts her second mother-in-law seem unfathomable. It is as if she is so intent on spiritual threats that she forgets the very real ones that necessarily accompany the political intrigue engaged in by members of the nobility. In this manner, Chaucer shows his audience that blind allegiance to authority can lead to a dangerous naïveté—something that society encourages for its virgins in order to protect them but that, in reality, only places them in further danger. While devotion to a higher power is a noble endeavor, Chaucer deftly shows his audience what can happen when one forgets to live in *this* world. And this inevitable fact of life is what Custance must learn because, while she is understandably cautious around men, she is often entirely too trusting of women. It is difficult to break such deeply ingrained cultural conditioning; nevertheless, once Custance has been banished from Northumbria and returned to Rome, one can see that she has learned the most profound lesson life has to teach, namely that one cannot live by the dictates of authority alone. Therefore, what makes these betrayals so integral to my argument as a whole, is that as the tale

progresses, one can see both the intellectual and emotional transformation of a character, who is initially moved only by authority, into someone who learns to heed the valuable life lessons experience has to offer. And, unlike the Wife, Custance does not have to become cynical in order to survive the process. In fact, Custance ultimately fights for the husband and the marriage that she desires most, and because she has chosen her similitude, Custance succeeds where Alisoun is doomed to failure, regardless of how much she loves Jankyn and his well-developed physique.

In this manner, when Custance is returned to Rome by serendipitous circumstances and is reunited with her second husband, Alla, Chaucer's audience discovers something new about this character that not many critics give her credit for: she proves through her newfound cautious attitude towards both the men *and* the women she encounters that this once naïve maiden has finally learned her lesson. Due to the fact that she is now able to see secular politics and power structures without sacrificing her adherence to her faith, Custance is granted the means to manipulate certain events in order to generate the ending to her tale that *she* desires most, and it is a far different ending than the martyr's death she craved in the beginning. In this way, she actively claims sovereignty over her own life without having to lie, cheat, steal, and/or murder to get what she wants. She is still committed to her faith and defers to divine Will, but now she has learned how to manipulate secular authority in order to achieve her goals as well. In this way, even though Custance concludes her tale more like Alisoun of Bath than she does like St. Cecilia, Chaucer uses her tale to show that experience and authority truly can coexist. Indeed, Custance finds the balance that these other two women lack, for she is able to be both a wife and a mother and still receive divine favor whenever she needs it most. Thus, despite the fact that Custance is often dismissed by critics as similar in her suffering and silence to a character like



Griselda, I maintain that she warrants a closer look. In doing so, I realize that I am reading her tale separated from the influence of *The Man of Law's Prologue*. In fact, I have consciously divorced teller and tale, when most critics are striving for a way to better marry the two. This separation is *not* meant to imply that the tellers and their tales are ultimately interchangeable. Far from it. However, it is my contention that just as the pilgrims can be discussed on their own merits as well as in relation to each other independent of the characters in their tales, so too can the characters within the tales have their own conversations with each other apart from their narrators. There are elements in these stories that will always connect them to whomever tells them, but the characters in these tales are often as vivid as the pilgrims themselves. For this reason, I have extracted *The Man of Law's Tale* as well as Custance herself from their link to both the Man of Law's *Introduction* and his *Prologue*. Both of which provide varying readings of Custance, but neither of which preclude her from doing precisely what she does at the end of her tale—that is, she stands alone and claims both the man and the marriage she desires most—and she does so in a manner that reveals not only what she has learned during her travels, but also how far she has come.

In a similar independent spirit, this dissertation has developed far differently than it began in the initial stages of my research. And, as I began to narrow my scope from an interest in the later Middle Ages, to the fourteenth-century, to Chaucer, and ultimately to Chaucer's relationship to women as an author, a narrator, and finally, as a man, my analysis of both literature and theory became, on the one hand more intricate, and yet on the other, I kept remembering the phrase my mother used to always reiterate, mostly in jest, and with which I began this introduction. All of these complicated constructions of desire, sacrifice, "Things," masochism, phallocentrism, and all sorts of other "-isms," and I kept remembering some silly

phrase that conflates women with cows and, of all things, milking. But, then again, it is always the most difficult to forget the simple lessons that life, or in this case mothers, teach—no matter how trite they seem to be at first. Authority and its jargon in many ways seems obtuse in comparison, not that I am calling theory obtuse; however, one must admit that rarely is theory as succinct in making any point as this one, rather irritating, rhetorical question. After all, I am a woman, not a cow. But the fact that such a simple question about what makes an object precious, sought after, or more precisely, desirable, continues to be passed from mother to daughter from generation to generation is interesting in and of itself, and although this project is specifically about Chaucer, I also would argue that so too is this question. What Chaucer accomplishes with more frequency, more care, and greater subtlety than almost any other author is the answer to this quandry about why we desire and what we are willing to sacrifice in order to be desirable, for these notions tie directly into whether or not one is labeled “good” or “bad.” Let’s face it, in Chaucer’s day as well as in our own, it is far better for a woman to be the aloof cow – or at least to maintain a façade of aloof cowness. The former is the prescribed behavior of authority, and the latter is what experience tells us we need to do in order to remain accepted, or more precisely, to remain “good” in the eyes of that same authority.

In many of his works, Chaucer teaches his readers the same lesson, and he does so most adroitly with his female characters. These women, whether they are sinners or saints, are something to behold, and once they have been read, they are not soon forgotten. In his testing of authority through these women, Chaucer manages to (re)invent not only what it means for these women to be labeled “good” or “bad,” but also he tests the boundaries of these categories so that, by the end of many of his poems, it is difficult to remember where the lines were drawn in the first place. In this manner, these women, from Alisoun to Alceste, and from Criseyde to

Custance, all reveal just how important it is to balance authority and experience; otherwise, there is no chance that any amount of sacrifice will render one's desires attainable, and as many of his stories and characters show, Chaucer sees little fun in that. And because he is so intent on translating his female characters in such human terms, they fail as often as they succeed, and for this reason, we as readers cannot help but relate to them with a familiarity that should be impossible with fictional constructions. These are not the unattainable and interchangeable "Ladies" of courtly literature; these are "real" women, with names and distinctive personalities that we remember, and in (re)inventing these classic women in this way, Chaucer gives them strong voices with which to tell their side of the story, a gift that is not taken lightly by either the author or by these women. And so, whether or not Chaucer (re)writes women and their goodness as a form of penance for his earlier crimes, one can have little doubt that his desire to do so is worthy of their sacrifice.

CHAPTER 2  
SUBVERTING RAPE, ROMANCE, AND RELIGION IN *TROILUS AND CRISEYDE*

Blissed be love, that kan thus folk converte!

—Narrator, *Troilus and Criseyde* I.308

As many theorists, theologians, and historians have clearly shown, women, in the medieval world, had far more work to accomplish with regard to their potential salvation than men, as they were, and often still are, considered directly responsible through Eve for mankind's original fall from Grace. It is the folly of Eve that makes Christ's sacrifice necessary, and so she is, ironically enough, the author of both human salvation as well as damnation. Yet, most Church fathers choose to concentrate on her role in the latter act as opposed to redeeming her by referencing the former. And it is through Eve that all women come to be the authors of male sins in the eyes of the medieval Church—at least those sins associated with the flesh. Most male authors in this era are often quite willing to reinforce this misogynist norm for their audiences, and they are not alone. Indeed, several notable scholars also seem content to reiterate this norm, albeit from a supposedly "removed" critical perspective. It makes no difference whether these critics are like D. W. Robertson, Jr., who overtly condemns Criseyde and her Eve-like tendencies; or more like E. T. Donaldson, who ultimately agrees with the narrator that Criseyde is definitely flawed, but he inexplicably loves her anyway; or even if they are more modern and implore readers to pity Criseyde her faults because she is an unprotected woman in a patriarchal society and has nothing but her body and sexuality to barter for protection. In deference to this third school, David Aers often states, "In these circumstances [Criseyde's] only asset, her only leverage on the powerful, is her sexuality" ("Criseyde: Woman in Medieval Society," 181). And while the latter two arguments seem to be sympathetic to Criseyde on the surface, they are in fact more than a little misogynist, if unconsciously so, for they reiterate the same basic core rationale,

namely that *someone* has to be the villain in what they view to be a tragedy disguised as a Romance, and Criseyde becomes for them the most logical choice, despite any initial protest they may make to the contrary.

In any case, the fact remains that, unlike male characters who are often evaluated in many shades of grey, female characters are placed in one of two clearly defined categories—they are either good or bad, Madonna or Eve. And, in this regard, the judgments leveled at Criseyde over the years are no exception. Feminist criticism has been quick to point out the limitations of this dichotomy almost from the beginning, but while there has been much insightful scholarship, many of these same critics have continued to work within this dichotomy themselves. It is not that they clearly define female characters as “good” or “bad,” but rather their project becomes a reclassification game. In order to refute the misogynist critics of previous and current generations, feminist scholars are often forced, if subconsciously, to work within the dominant paradigm, and as such, many of them take the patriarchal notions of “good” and “bad” and seek to redefine these strict categories as opposed to subverting them. Thus, it is not simply that these female characters are either “good” or “bad,” as critics will vociferously disagree as to which characters are placed in which category, but rather it becomes a question of degree—that is, just *how* good or bad are these women, and based on textual evidence and critical history, are they in any way redeemable if they should happen to fall into the latter category? While this sort of categorization works with the unquestionably saintly characters, such as St. Cecilia, what happens when we have female characters like Alisoun of Bath or Criseyde—i.e. female characters that we *should* define as “bad” but who, in reality, seem more often than not to be good, if a bit misguided at times? These women hardly seem deserving of utter damnation, but generations of critics and readers—both male and female, misogynist and feminist—have done

so. And while these “bad” women appear to lack the moral substance of the more spiritually hardy St. Cecilia, they often refuse to be so easily categorized or silenced. These women, for all of their “bad” habits and flaws, also possess good qualities as well. In the case of Criseyde and Alisoun, both women possess savvy political minds and a social awareness that is only ever derailed by love, and it seems a rather flimsy reason to so thoroughly demonize them. In other words, Chaucer shows his audience just how perfect these “bad” women are in their imperfections, and therefore, they are seemingly more “real” than a militant martyr, who is a degree of good that we all wish we were but that we have no real hope of ever achieving.

These women are grey area incarnate, and this greyness is precisely what Chaucer-as-author is attempting to (re)invent for his readers. He is attempting to show that “good” and “bad” are as fluid concepts as “reality” and “illusion” or “true” and “false.” All of these categories lack substance, and yet everyone tries to definitively pin them down. Thus, what Chaucer accomplishes in *Troilus and Criseyde* is far more important and far-reaching than many critics have previously thought, for he is not merely rewriting the story of a notoriously bad woman so that his audience is moved to sympathize with her in spite of her sins. He is, in fact, changing how his audience is supposed to read and interpret women possess a bit more experience and have learned to be cautious of authority. As with all of Chaucer’s writing, one begins expecting one outcome and ends up encountering something completely different, and in this case, the “something completely different” is Criseyde herself. Much like Alisoun of Bath, one either loves Criseyde or hates her, but one must nonetheless acknowledge her presence and her endurance as a fictional character of note. One cannot deny the fact that she has substance, and it is the attempts by critics to define that substance with certainty that has led to Chaucer’s endurance as a writer. Accordingly, Chaucer-as-author owes much to his women-as-characters,

and in making them so difficult to classify, he seems to acknowledge his debt to them. Chaucer could have easily retold Boccaccio's story with all of its typically misogynist warnings about women and their wiles. Instead, Chaucer retranslates *Il filostrato* in order to give his audience a far more complex and compelling female character—one who refuses every attempt by men to dictate her every action. Yes, she must occasionally bend to the powers that be; her exchange to the Greeks is a notable example of this fact. But she refuses to let them entirely break her. She always seems to find success and happiness despite what hardships life and masculine society throw at her. By (re)inventing Criseyde in this way, Chaucer uses her defiance of conventional notions of “good” and “bad” not only to rewrite masculine perceptions of women as more than simply representations of Madonna and Eve, but also to (re)invent the harm done to women in the Romance genre as a whole. This genre never allows women any release from these two categories other than death, and most often, even silence and death are not enough to turn a “bad” woman “good” in these prescriptive stories.

## I

In this manner, it is not surprising that when Chaucer would choose to translate the Romance of a great hero's fall, he chooses one where a woman's betrayal is seemingly the reason for that hero's demise, for this is the exact story that his audience would expect him to tell. It is, in essence, the stuff a good Romance plot is made of. Consequently, on the surface, Chaucer gives his audience exactly what they desire from this type of story—that is, a knight and a lady, their love, and that love's ability to be either fair or foul. More often than not, the final element in the above sequence is based upon the “trouthe” of the tale's heroine. Such are the assumptions concerning *Troilus and Criseyde* as well as its “bad” heroine to this day. Critics have either demonized Criseyde for her seeming vanity and moral flightiness, or they have

twisted and turned the text in endless rhetorical circles trying to rationalize her perplexing behavior in order to find ways of forgiving her eventual infidelity not only to Troilus, but also to the dictates of the Romance genre as a whole. And, as I have previously highlighted, these are the arguments most notably made by D. W. Robertson, Jr. and E. Talbot Donaldson. The former condemns Criseyde for her vanity, which he sees as the direct cause of her flightiness and weak spirituality; whereas Donaldson, who Carolyn Dinshaw points out in *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, is "in love with Criseyde," seeks any means necessary to forgive her (30). These two men fall neatly into the two camps I seek to redefine in this chapter; Robertson finds Criseyde to be irredeemably bad, and Donaldson will twist himself into rhetorical knots trying to deem her good despite her infidelity to Troilus, which just further confuses the issue and which has led to generations of confused critics, feminist and otherwise, who want to place Criseyde firmly in one of these two categories but find them as well as her placement within them ultimately problematic and wholly unsatisfying. But whatever tactics scholars have taken with *Troilus and Criseyde*, the same ideology still underlies their arguments: Criseyde is inexplicably and callously unfaithful to Troilus, regardless of her reasons and situation. Simply put, she claims that she will be faithful to him or die, but in the end, she does neither, and no matter how much critics want to excuse her behavior, no one can refute this fact.

For this reason, Criseyde becomes, for many critics, the deceitful Eve to Troilus' unsuspecting Adam, no matter how much they claim to find her endearing as a heroine in spite of her flaws. In this sense, she becomes much like the Wife of Bath in *Canterbury Tales*, in that whether or not you find her entertaining, nymphomaniacal, prophetic, or borderline demonic, you cannot ignore what she is trying to say or deny that her unshakeable practicality has led to her gaining wealth and status beyond that of the average woman in the fourteenth-century. Thus,



like Criseyde, she seems undeserving of either the status given to a “good” Romance heroine or happiness with the lover of her dreams, and much like the young Alisoun in her early marriages, Criseyde is acted *upon* by the male characters in this work. She often speaks her own mind, but her wishes are frequently ignored—first by Pandarus in his capacity as go-between in an affair that Criseyde does not initially desire, and then by Troilus who purposefully misreads Criseyde’s letters in order to rationalize her unwillingness to participate in his imaginary romance. It is only in her betrayal of Troilus that Criseyde is finally able to act of her own free will and choose for herself whom she will love and be faithful to. However, even modern readers who are sympathetic to her plight, want to deny her right to this choice—a choice that is predicated on a man other than Troilus. Surprisingly, many significant feminist critics, most notably including Elaine Tuttle Hansen, Carolyn Dinshaw, and Jill Mann, are also often troubled by Criseyde’s relationship with Diomedes because, once Criseyde enters the Greek camp, “any hope that Criseyde had of trusting to the good intentions behind men’s words, or of transcending words altogether, is even more emphatically dashed . . . Another male speaker, Diomedes, takes over; he successfully reads the meaning that others try to conceal while obscuring his own intentions in order to revise Criseyde” (Hansen 172–173). And, it is in Diomedes’s seduction in Book V, that these scholars find a sinister cast to the revision of Criseyde by not only the male characters in this work, but also by their male author and his narrator. To these critics, Criseyde is somehow diminished without Troilus, and the blame for her becoming “less than” rests firmly on the author’s shoulders.

I would argue that perhaps this “minimizing” is in actuality the result of her movement out of the fictional Romance in Troy into the more “real” world of Diomedes and the Greeks. Thus, she has traveled outside the narrator’s ken, for he is only capable of telling a traditional

Romance. Therefore, the narrator often seems both uncomfortable with as well as confused by the events of the narrative as it appears to travel beyond the scope of his limited story-telling talents. While Chaucer-as-author proves by the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* that he is capable of much more, his narrator here proves just how limited he is by convention. And so, the story and its rather unconventional heroine seems to run away from him in the pursuit of something greater—a something greater that Chaucer-as-author can only hint at knowing in this fictive space but that his narrator cannot even comprehend. Furthermore, Criseyde, in breaking out of her pre-set mold as Romance heroine, has unconsciously transformed the narrator in to an honest man. He is now forced to present her as she actually *is* as opposed to the pre-fabricated figure of the Romance heroine he has tried to force her to be. With Diomedes, Criseyde is for the first time in this tale well and truly herself, and she is no longer an absolute, or more precisely, an absolute convention for the narrator. Consequently, he can no longer construct her with any real clarity, for now she is in charge of her own fate despite the narrator's rather half-hearted attempts to reign her in and explain her actions using traditional Romance language at the end of this story. Indeed, he is far more successful in this regard with Troilus, whom he can, rather sardonically, send to the eighth sphere because Troilus, for all of his physical strength and prowess, is an emotional lightweight and, thereby, far more easily controlled by the narrator and his insistence on a proper Romance end to this often-problematic story. Perhaps the only way for Troilus to see the error of his romantic ways and to become a proper reader of both the text as well as the text-as-woman is for him to die. In order to gain the proper distance from his rather juvenile love of Criseyde, he must transcend the human realm before he can truly understand the flaws and pitfalls inherent in his type of love. The irony here is that Troilus is finally able to properly read and interpret romance, love, and female desire only when he no longer cares about any of it,

which is the real tragedy inherent in this Romance, as opposed to any betrayal on the part of Criseyde. In contrast to this, Criseyde, at the end of this story, is still in the mortal realm, which makes her actions subject to the often-condemnatory judgments of Chaucer's readers—even the modern ones. Thus, it is my contention that Criseyde and Diomedes are both, for the most part, being misread by contemporary critics. I maintain that Criseyde's infidelity is both inevitable and necessary, for Diomedes is able to see Criseyde for who she actually is as a woman and not through the myopic lens of fevered dreams, letters wrongly translated by an emotionally fragile lover-knight, or false pictures painted by a rather cynical and potentially incestuous go-between, all of which lead to far more tragic potential than one woman's seemingly wayward desire.

Like the narrator and Troilus, Pandarus also functions under the same false perception that many later critics will unconsciously adopt, namely that despite the few changes made by Chaucer, this text and this Criseyde are interchangeable with their Italian predecessor. I do not mean to imply that the narrator, Troilus, and/or Pandarus reference Boccaccio directly or would have knowledge of this author in their world, but I am arguing that, like many readers of both texts, they are expecting a Criseyde who is as frivolous as Boccaccio's Criseida, but instead they encounter a woman who is far from typical. In other words, Criseyde is a woman who is more like the Wife of Bath in her extreme practicality, and even though she too can be sidetracked into disastrous love affairs by her romantic streak, she will always return from fantasy into reality and rely upon her own ingenuity to save herself instead of expecting anyone else to do it for her. And perhaps it is this echo of such an unconventional woman in the guise of such a seemingly proper one that makes Criseyde and her actions so unsettling for so many critics and readers. It is also why so many articles on this work focus almost exclusively on "figuring her out" because Criseyde is as difficult to categorize by the other characters in this text as she is by scholars as

well, and so she is often (mis)categorized by these same individuals. But perhaps the most disturbing aspect of this entire work is the evidence which shows that the three people in this story who should know Criseyde the best, namely the narrator, Troilus, and Pandarus, reveal that, in actuality, they have no idea who she is at all, and it is this (mis)interpretation that leads, most notably, to the perceived tragedy of Troilus' betrayal and death, more so than any deceit, intentional or otherwise, performed by Criseyde herself.

While Pandarus is, in many ways, equally responsible for what many perceive to be the tragic end to this tale, it is Troilus himself who ultimately commits the greater sin. His consistent misreadings of Criseyde are what set-up the mechanism for his self-destructive behavior. In other words, it is for the most part Troilus' own fault that he is betrayed, and not because, as many critics have asserted, Criseyde is an incurably deceitful woman. Rather because Troilus himself turns Criseyde into the object of his zealous religious devotion—an impossibly lofty position that most mortal women are unable to fill—he is, in reality, the architect of his own tragedy. Criseyde is not the means for Troilus' salvation, but he treats her as such; and so, when she abandons him in favor of Diomedes, Troilus sees himself as emotionally and spiritually damned. In essence, losing Criseyde makes Troilus lose his faith, but it is not faith in God that is lost, for one must argue that, as a pagan, Troilus would not believe in God in a Christian sense. Instead, it is his faith in love and Romance convention that is irrevocably destroyed when Criseyde fails to keep her word. And, while there are as many references to Christianity as there are to pagan gods in this text, Chaucer does something unusual here. He subverts the notion of both Romance and religion in *Troilus and Criseyde* by turning Romance *into* a religion. In doing so, Chaucer creates an all-powerful Church of Love to which Troilus becomes a devout member, and he is as militant in his conversion as most martyrs and saints are

in maintaining their faith. But, as Chaucer shows, this faith is not based upon the gift of sacrifice and salvation that underlies the Christian doctrine of divine Grace, and thus, it is bound to collapse. Therefore, it is ultimately Troilus' loss of faith and his resulting despair that causes his downfall. Granted, Criseyde's betrayal is the direct cause of his despair, but Troilus is so militant in his conversion that he is unable to replace one object of affection for another as Pandarus advises him to do. To Troilus, one woman is not as good as another, just as for the militant martyr, one god is not the same as any other—in fact, there can be only one. Consequently, on the one hand, Troilus does become a martyr for his faith, but on the other, his loss of faith and his despair make his ill-disguised suicide inexcusable in the eyes of the Christian reader. What Chaucer reveals to his readers through Criseyde's betrayal and Troilus' death is that the Church of Love, while a powerful alternative to the medieval Church for many, will not, in the end, translate into "real" life. To give in to passion without reason and to put all of one's faith in such a capricious higher power, will, as the "unsely aventure" of Troilus and Criseyde shows, inevitably result in tragedy (I.35).

Using this dichotomy of fictive Romance versus "real" love, Chaucer raises an interesting series of questions at the end of this work that continue to puzzle critics. By this I mean, exactly whom are we supposed to mourn and/or condemn at the end of this tale? If one were to take Robertson and his ilk's word for it, then the answer to the latter part of the question is, of course, Criseyde. She is the villain in this work because she "will always be true to herself; she will always seek to escape from the fear of misfortune, no matter what effects her actions may have on others" (486). In a similar vein, Robertson defines Criseyde's relationship with Diomedes as an abomination of all that is good about Romance, which oddly enough, he defines as her relationship with Troilus. Her relationship to Troilus is accepted by these critics as

“good,” in both the Romantic and the salvific senses, but why is this so? In order to be with him, Criseyde must violate her own vow of chaste widowhood. So, what makes her relationship with Troilus excusable to readers and renders her relationship with Diomedes condemnable? Does Pandarus’ involvement in the former somehow render Troilus’ pursuit of Criseyde more pure, and thus more acceptable to a morally conscious audience? How Chaucer answers these questions creates the lion’s share of critical confusion because, as with much of his writing, the answers are often as perplexing as the questions themselves. But, as I will show in the remainder of this chapter, Chaucer uses Criseyde and the traditional Romance formula, as used by Boccaccio, to turn his audience’s perceptions of “good” and “bad” on their proverbial ear. It is not so much that I want to claim that Chaucer is either a typical misogynist or a proto-feminist, but rather I intend to show that, in (re)interpreting the social, political, and theological notions of female goodness, Chaucer accomplishes what no other author in his time is able to with their female characters, namely that he paints them in varying shades of grey, as opposed to solid black or white. By having Criseyde simultaneously fit the qualifications of both “good”/white and “bad”/black, he renders her fictional substance more multi-dimensional—that is, more “real”/grey than any other character in this work save for Diomedes. In other words, she ceases to be easily definable by fictional standards, and we begin to speak of her as if she has as much moral and spiritual “grey area” as the average person. She is neither wholly good, nor is she entirely bad; she simply is. And, for this reason, Chaucer uses her to subvert the typical conventions of phallogocentric Romance, as written by Boccaccio and maintained by the narrator, Troilus, and Pandarus in this work; he creates a fictive world that is more “real”—a world (re)invented for Criseyde and Diomedes, where people are not perfect saints, but rather where they are well and truly human.

## II

Before I begin looking at Troilus, Pandarus, and their relationship to Criseyde more closely, I would like to examine the temple scene, where Criseyde implores Hector for aid after her father's traitorous defection to the Greek camp. This scene has received much critical attention, and most critics uniformly agree that, in asking Hector for protection, Criseyde makes an excellent political move and demonstrates that to a certain extent she is more than just a pretty face. Aside from this singular agreement, most critics fall into two groups with regard to this moment; they either see Criseyde's political acumen as a sign of her capacity for calculated actions and generally bad behavior, or they see her as a highly sympathetic figure, who as David Aers is quick to point out in his article "Chaucer's Criseyde: Woman in Society, Woman in Love," is simply working with the hand she has been dealt and is, therefore, generally good, if a bit misguided at times (198). However, this scene is far more intriguing than a simple either/or scenario. As I have previously stated, *Troilus and Criseyde* begins like a traditional Romance story, but its ending is far from expected for this genre; so, one must ask what exactly does Chaucer change from his more traditional sources that makes his version so much more memorable? The answer begins in this opening scene, where Criseyde's political motives are not as important in a larger sense as Chaucer's representation of their effect on the men around her. Thus, when she falls on her knees before Hector in the temple and begs for his protection (I.110–112), one does not assume that her decision to do so is a spontaneous one; however, one should not make the mistake of over-reading her intention here. While her keen sense of the dramatic is readily apparent, with her choice of widow's clothing and to kneel in supplication before Hector, she has not used her body to gain the upper hand here. And, even though her male audience gives the prescribed response to her request—that is, Hector vows to be her

protector—Criseyde’s performance is far more pitiable than it is sexual. Therefore, up to this point, the reader cannot rightly claim that either the author or the narrator has deviated from the appropriate Romance formula. However, Chaucer does not leave the audience comfortable for long, especially when one pauses to consider Criseyde’s motives for choosing Hector as her knight-protector. After all, Priam and Hecuba have many sons who are capable warriors. Troilus even has the titular role, and yet, at this pivotal moment, it is Hector who becomes Criseyde’s hero because Troilus is too busy scorning love and lovers to be of use to her here. And herein lies the significance behind this much-debated scene, for Criseyde’s choice is predicated on more than just political scheming on the part of one social climbing woman. Rather, Chaucer uses this scene to show a profound insight into how women in general operate within a masculine world and its prescribed notions of “good” feminine behavior. Chaucer uses Criseyde’s plea to Hector to reveal that, while a man in Criseyde’s situation would be evaluated based on purely political motives, Criseyde, as a woman, will always be regarded both politically and sexually. Chaucer may be condemned for his potential to offend his “betters” with his *intellect* and progressive imagination, but because Criseyde is a woman, she is almost always condemned by critics for offending her “betters” with her *body*.

Paradoxically, these same critics and readers who demonize Criseyde for her wayward sexuality almost universally praise her political foresight in this opening scene; however, they tend to use it as merely another example of her inherent ability to assuage her own fears by manipulating male desire. And, to a certain extent, these scholars are correct, but only in the strictest sense. Yes, Criseyde does manipulate the expectations of the men in this scene to gain political asylum; nevertheless, her choice of Hector over Troilus demonstrates that she is willing to do so only through her words and actions and *not* by bartering with her body. Consequently,



this situation is cleverly highlighted by Chaucer because it makes Criseyde's decision to approach Hector interesting both politically and sexually since, as most all of Classical literature shows, Hector is in love with and scrupulously faithful to his wife. Thus, he would have absolutely no designs on Criseyde sexually, and because of his tenderness towards his wife, he would be more inclined to help a damsel in distress. As he states, "And al th'onour that men may don yow have,/As ferforth as youre fader dwelled here,/Ye shul have, and youre body shal men save . . ." (I.120–123). It is important to note that, in this moment, Hector grants Criseyde "al th'onour that men don," and as a result, Criseyde gains through Hector the same promise he would give to a man to protect her physical body as well as her body politic from harm. Indeed, Hector proves to be the stronger ally for Criseyde in Book IV, when Troilus remains conspicuously silent—a silence that only serves to further highlight not only Troilus' eventually feminized position in this work, but also the fact that Hector was the better choice for Criseyde as a political ally in Troy, for Hector will protect her to the best of his ability without any personal reservations or sexual designs on her physical self.

For such a brief moment, this scene takes on added significance when compared to the entirety of *Troilus and Criseyde*, for Criseyde's purely political alliance with Hector is reflected in her alliances, both romantic and otherwise, with both Troilus and Diomedes. With Hector, Criseyde has the promise of political protection and nothing more, but with Troilus, Criseyde curiously asks for a purely sexual relationship. She wants above all else to keep her relationship with Troilus a secret in order to protect her good name, and marriage to Troilus, who is also a prince of Troy, does not even cross her mind. Certainly, she seems confident enough in Hector's vow of political protection that she does not seem to want Troilus on any terms but the sexual, and in fact, the morning after their tryst, the lovers merely exchange tokens, instead of discussing

marriage (III.1365–1371). I do not mean to imply that Criseyde's love of Troilus is part of a calculated seduction—it is on the part of Pandarus and Troilus, but not on Criseyde's. However, once Criseyde has decided to love Troilus, she appears to do so more for romantic reasons than for political ones, even if she does briefly take his status and position into account. Part of this difference could be due to Troilus himself; his letters are full of effusive outpourings of romantic desire, where he “syede/That love it made, or elles most he die,/And pitousli gan mercy for to cry” (II.1073–1075), as opposed to benevolent offers of political asylum. But, whatever the start of the relationship, it is obvious that Hector does not cause Criseyde to blush or to have prophetic dreams, and neither does he wind-up naked in her bed. For these reasons, while in Troy, Criseyde has the double luxury of Hector's political alliance and Troilus' sexual one. It is only when Criseyde must go to the Greek camp that she is well and truly alone. In this sense, Diomedes represents the merging of Hector and Troilus into a single body, in that he provides Criseyde the combination of sexual fulfillment and political protection in the guise of one man. Thus, he is able to satisfy Criseyde's needs on both levels, something that neither Hector, nor Troilus are able to do, which ultimately makes Diomedes' offer impossible for Criseyde to refuse for several key reasons. Consequently, the changes Chaucer makes here to the Romance genre, as exemplified with subtle precision in this opening sequence, creates a far more complex political and sexual world for his characters, and as such, it is only this text's most savvy social and sexual politicians—that is, Criseyde and Diomedes—who inevitably survive the perils that this narrative throws in their way.

With the above scene in mind, I would like to take a closer look at Troilus' courtship of Criseyde, which often seems to be, on the one hand, a boiler-plate Romance and, on the other, the beginning of a tragedy. Prior to seeing Criseyde, Troilus is the consummate warrior—proud,

impartial, and able to kill without an attack of conscience or guilt. However, upon seeing Criseyde in the temple, he is irrevocably changed from a callous warrior into a devoutly religious man. As one critic states, “Troilus is transformed by the religion of erotic love into a life of virtue . . .” (Cigman 388), and the narrator describes this momentous transformation by saying:

So ferde it by this fierse and proude knyght:  
Though he a worthy kynges sone were,  
And wende nothing hadde had swich myght  
Ayeyns his wille that shuld his herte stere,  
Yet with a look his herte wex a-fere,  
That he that now was moost in pride above,  
Wax sodeynly moost subgit unto love. (I.225–231)

This moment encapsulates the almost textbook description of an individual receiving direct communion with divine power. A similar example to this episode, in spite of the anachronism, occurs in the sixteenth-century writings of St. Teresa of Àvila, who most famously describes her visions of the divine as burning arrows piercing her heart and providing almost orgasmic spiritual pleasure. While Chaucer and St. Teresa are a century and more apart, the descriptions here are too similar to ignore, and in reality, Teresa is not alone in her experiences. The notion that direct contact with the divine begins with the piercing of the human heart and ends with the setting of that heart on fire is not a new one and is most notably exemplified in the moment when the Holy Spirit settles as tongues of flame above the heads of the gathered disciples, which then allows them to preach God’s word and be understood by all peoples throughout the world despite any language barriers. This ceremony, given the name Pentecost by the Christian Church, is celebrated forty days after Christ rises from the dead on Easter Sunday. What Troilus has received here is, in the plainest terms, a moment of both divine revelation as well as translation. It is an action that occurs “sodeynly” and, once it is finished, “his herte wex a-fere” with the power of love (I.229, 231). As in the case of St. Teresa and Christ’s disciples, Troilus is

overcome by the power of his experience; however, unlike these other individuals, he is not already a believer receiving a reward and/or mission of sorts. Rather, this fire is in Troilus a method of total conversion, and so it changes the very essence of his being. He is no longer the dedicated and reserved warrior he has always been; he has been transformed into a zealous lover, and Criseyde has become not only the vehicle for such a powerful conversion, but also she has become the object of his exclusive devotion.

The narrator furthers the above idea by saying, “Right with hire look thorough-shoten and thorough-darted” (I.325). In other words, Troilus’s heart was not merely transformed, or rather set on fire, by simply a look; instead, his heart was *pierced* by her look. And, in this manner, martial imagery serves to extend the conceit of Troilus’ transformation from fighter into lover. He has not been shot with an arrow in battle, but his heart nonetheless has been pierced. Though he has not “died,” as it were, he has been irrevocably changed by the experience. He is no longer the cold, dispassionate warrior who scoffs at love and lovers. Now, he is in the throes of a divinely orchestrated passion, and he is ill-equipped to deal with such an intense experience. Troilus has devoted his life to war and not to love; therefore, his transformation is as surprising as it is debilitating, and it is why Pandarus’ help is necessary. Troilus is unable to deal with the after-effects of his conversion on his own, and what Pandarus shows this new convert is that, unlike the divine arrow that will later pierce the welcoming heart of St. Teresa, Troilus’ dart comes from the Church of Love, which means Criseyde’s divinity is no less awe-inspiring, but it is attainable. In the Church of Love, Troilus can consummate his relationship with the divine both physically and spiritually; however, his object of worship is an all too mortal woman in whom Chaucer will engineer Troilus’ demise. It is not that Criseyde is exclusively at fault here,

but rather it is Troilus' misplaced notion of faith that will, in the end, lead to the tragedy the narrator mourns over at the beginning of this tale.

Nevertheless, before Troilus is willing to listen to Pandarus, he engages in a series of almost mystical encounters with his new-found faith. He behaves as if he is seriously ill, and in this state, he receives visions of Criseyde:

And whan that he in his chambre was allone,  
He doun upon his beddes feet hym sette,  
And first he gan to sike, and eft to grone,  
And thought ay on hire so, withouten lette,  
That, as he sat and wook, his spirit mette  
That he hire saugh a-temple, and al the wise  
Right of hire look, and gan it newe avise. (I.358–364)

This episode is much more intense than those found in typical Romance tales where the knight first spies his lady and then falls into a depression of sighs when she ignores him. In fact, his vision of Criseyde not only leads to his determination to serve her, but also it results in a song of devotion, in which Troilus says to the God of Love:

“O lord, now youres is  
My spirit, which that oughte youres be.  
Yow thanke I, lord, that han me brought to this.  
But wheither goddesse or womman, iwis,  
She be, I not, which that ye do me serve;  
But as hire man I wol ay lyve and sterve.” (I.422–427)

At this moment, Troilus has not even spoken to Criseyde; nevertheless, he is willing to devote his life in service of her. It is such vows that reveal just how violent a spiritual conversion he has undergone. For a man who showed little or no emotion initially, and who even mocked those individuals who do, he has now become the sort of man he once openly despised. The sort of man who can show nothing but emotion—all for a woman with whom he has only exchanged the briefest of glances. It is in this scene that Troilus enacts the rhetoric behind his later argument against free will in Book IV because, unlike the Christian Church, the Church of Love cannot

operate under this doctrine. If a character could choose whether or not to ignore such powerful emotions in these Romances, then they would become very short stories indeed. Troilus would have been able to exchange his glance with Criseyde and then go about his life as a soldier without emotionally torturing himself. However, the intrinsic notion of love and sexual conquest/possession in this situation requires the complete absence of free will on the part of Troilus. In other words, he has no choice as a faithful member of the Church of Love but to fall in love, and the only way in which he can find his escape is through death; for it is through his death in battle that Troilus defies his faith and transforms himself from the rather pathetic, immature lover into, arguably, the tragic hero of this tale.<sup>1</sup>

### III

As previously stated, the transformation of Troilus from fighter into lover is not an easy one, and it is only Pandarus' promises to help Troilus gain the reciprocal attentions of his niece, Criseyde, that ultimately cures this warrior's "illness." Unfortunately, Pandarus' meddling often creates more problems than it solves. Pandarus' form of "help" quite frequently comes close to sabotaging the entire relationship, rendering it dead before it has begun to live. His ineptitude as a go-between is best exemplified in the bedroom scene in Book III when he concocts the lie about Troilus being jealous of Criseyde's attentions to the imaginary Horaste.

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<sup>1</sup> By making such a claim, I do not simply reiterate the arguments of past critics, such as G. L. Kittredge, who assert that it is fate alone which governs all of the characters' actions in this text. There is a substantial gap between the notion of free will and fate, and *Troilus and Criseyde* does not present an either/or scenario with regard to these ideas. Simply because Troilus does not believe he *has* free will does not mean that, in reality, it is absent. Indeed, Pandarus tries to show him just the opposite idea, but it is my contention that the Church of Love blinds Troilus to the existence of his free will, which leads him to believe he has no choice but to live and die for his faith. Thus, it is not fate, as many past critics are wont to believe, but rather, as I intend to argue, misaligned faith that is often the factor in Romance narratives that creates the fallacy behind Troilus' argument, which inevitably results in his loss of Criseyde to Diomedes and his death in battle.

Yet, before I examine this moment in more detail, it is essential that I discuss both Troilus and Pandarus' personas as lovers in this story, for how these two men view women in general and Criseyde in particular directly influences the outcome of not only this bedroom scene, but also it serves to foreshadow the conclusion to this fabricated, formulaic Romance tale as well as to anticipate the beginning of the real love story.

Troilus, as a new convert to love, is often overly dramatic in his pursuit of the object of his desires. I do not mean to imply that Troilus is an ineffectual lover per se, as Jill Mann has admonished many critics for doing, especially since he does eventually acquire the affections of Criseyde. Rather, in this section, I will show that, although Troilus does accomplish this end, he goes about this affair in an over-the-top, immature way. He throws himself into his relationship whole-heartedly, but this sort of utter Romantic abandon only serves to render him a passionate lover and not a long-lasting one. The entire situation commences when, on Pandarus' advice, Troilus writes Criseyde a letter detailing his desires in flowery language and then "with his salte teris gan he bathe/The ruby in his signet, and . . . Therewith a thousand tymes er he lette/He kiste tho the letter that he shette" (II.1086–1089), just as any earnest lover is required to do in these sorts of stories. Compared to Troilus' effusive praise and affections, Criseyde's letter is quite restrained, in that she tells Troilus she will "guerdon hym with nothing but with sighte" (II.1295), and she will love him "but as his suster" (II.1224). Here, once again, Criseyde establishes herself as not your typical Romance heroine, and her responses to Troilus further illustrate this fact. She is far too practical to fall for flowery words, and even though she is flattered by Troilus' intense emotions on her behalf, she well knows that "Men loven wommen al bside hire leve,/And whan hem leste namore, lat hem byleve" (II.734–735). As a woman in a precarious position—i.e. as the daughter of a traitor and as a widow with no male presence to

reaffirm her position in Trojan society, she must be extraordinarily careful of her reputation as a chaste woman. She cannot be seen by Trojan high society engaging in a passionate love affair with a king's son and maintain her status as a "good" and, therefore, non-threatening woman.

Thus, while she can be respectfully flattered by Troilus' attentions, she cannot, in her initial estimation, do more than love him from afar. But this rather restrained response is not good enough for Troilus. He is far too enmeshed in his romantic fever and Pandarus' plots to ever be satisfied with mere sisterly affection from Criseyde, and unlike Hector, who has a loving wife to return to, all Troilus has is Pandarus, who is determined to satisfy Troilus' craving for Criseyde by any means necessary. In order to accomplish this end, Pandarus and Troilus willfully misinterpret Criseyde's direct arguments to the contrary in two distinct ways: Troilus' judgment is clouded by an all-consuming passion that renders him deaf to any negative arguments stated in Criseyde's letters and actions. Likewise, Pandarus is determined to enact his role as romantic go-between to perfection, which also does not allow for any resistance from the woman in question. Consequently, none of these social nuances and concerns translate from Criseyde to either Pandarus or Troilus, for despite her vocal protests, Pandarus tells Troilus to write his letter to Criseyde proclaiming his love to a ridiculous degree, and in turn, Troilus knowingly misinterprets Criseyde's words to suit his own ends. Instead of respecting her wishes to be left alone, Troilus: "took al for the beste/That she hym wroot, for somewhat byheld/On which hym thoughte he myghte his herte reste,/Al covered she tho wordes under sheld" (II.1324–1327). What Pandarus and Troilus fail to recognize in this scenario is that Criseyde is a woman who means what she says; even if she is ultimately unable to follow through with her promises, she is not inherently a liar. So, when she says that she cannot return Troilus' love, she means it. But Pandarus and Troilus both neither hear, nor read what Criseyde actually claims to want for



herself. They each place her into an inappropriate category—that is, Pandarus sees Criseyde much the same as he does every other woman, and Troilus makes her the object of his fanatical devotion. Both men are wrong. In the end, Criseyde defies their expectations as to her behavior, and in contrast to Boccaccio's Criseida, she is not a coy flirt who is only playing hard-to-get for the sake of appearances or for some feminine game of sexual cat-and-mouse. Chaucer's Criseyde subverts this traditional role by always remaining restrained and practical no matter what these men try to turn her into. And so, while Pandarus is trying to reinvent the Romantic wheel, Chaucer-as-author is clearly using Criseyde to reinvent the genre as a whole, just as Criseyde is clearly (re)defining herself as anything but the typical female lead, and the moment that best exemplifies this conflict is the bedroom scene in Book III. Although, even this moment does not work itself out in the manner that Pandarus and even the reader expects because Troilus is equally unconventional in his role as the masculine lover, a claim that is substantiated by his unexpected swoon when presented with a romantic situation that he is, once again, ill-equipped to handle.

In Book III, Pandarus attempts to expedite the affair between Troilus and his niece by ambushing Criseyde one night with accusations of infidelity to a man with whom she has never even met. In this sense, Chaucer-as-author sets-up a situation that is more than a little reminiscent of Lucretia's rape in Livy's *History of Rome*. In Livy's account, Lucretia is surprised in the middle of the night when Tarquin sneaks into her bedroom and holds a sword to her throat, threatening her, first with bodily harm and then with dishonor in death if she does not grant him her sexual surrender. Pandarus' dramatization of this event is remarkably similar, for on the one hand, he surprises a sleeping Criseyde and makes harsh accusations concerning her sexual fidelity, but on the other, Pandarus' sword is only a metaphorical one. He is not

attempting to rape Criseyde, but he is setting up the scene in which Troilus quite possibly could if he were so inclined. Pandarus has already awakened Criseyde from her slumber and trapped her in her room; all Troilus would need to do is commit the act itself. However, their reenactment of this famous rape is thwarted for two reasons. First of all, as Elizabeth Robertson asserts, Criseyde herself transforms the situation: “Criseyde could enact Lucrece’s story as a victim of the unwanted sexual advances of a ruler . . .” (292), but “Criseyde’s subjectivity, we shall see, emerges under the constraint of both kinds of rape, forced coitus and abduction, but it is her identity as one whose consent matters that ultimately both defines and condemns her” (292). Instead of crumpling under the weight of Pandarus’ lies and intimidation, Criseyde fights back. She does not passively accept her role in this situation and, with Troilus as a witness, she not only denounces Pandarus’ accusations, but also she berates Troilus for falling victim to the “wikked serpent, jalousie” (III.836). In doing so, Criseyde subverts her potential rape and reclaims her power in this situation—in spite of the harmful effect having two men discovered in your room in the middle of the night could have on her valued reputation. She even goes so far as to question Troilus’ love for her by saying, “youre passioun/I wol nought calle it but illusion/Of habundaunce of love and besy cure,/That doth youre herte this disese endure” (III.1040–1043). Here, she reverses Troilus’ earlier claims of devoted love by calling them merely “passioun” or, even worse, a “disese.” Criseyde cannot fathom how Troilus could claim to love her and then storm into her bedroom with Pandarus to make unfounded accusations about her fidelity—such are the actions of someone in lust as opposed to love. In this manner, Criseyde makes it very clear to Troilus that she will not permit such uncalled for behavior in the future; for she has absolutely no patience for a man who, unlike her, cannot temper his love with reason. Unfortunately for Troilus, he had no idea what Pandarus’ plans were, and he can see the

object of his desire slipping away due to her ire before he has even had the chance to become intimate with her; in other words, because of Pandarus' misinterpretation of Criseyde as a woman, he is also being accused of a crime he did not commit. Troilus is also intelligent enough to realize that simply denying Pandarus' story of his purported jealousy will not remedy the situation in the least because it is highly unlikely that Criseyde will believe his claims to the contrary. And so, quite by accident, he stumbles upon the perfect response to Criseyde's fury—he faints. One critic explains this unconscious act as such: "Troilus' mind is turned in on itself, trapped in deadlock, and this condition of his mind is so acute that it transfers itself to his body. . . . The swoon is an expression of Troilus' acceptance of—and indeed absolute identification with—the contradictory and destructive implications of the situation, to which, unlike Pandarus, he is fully alive" (Mann 327). And while I cannot argue with Mann's claim that Troilus' swoon recovers, for the moment, this Romance and its lovers from certain failure, it is my contention that Chaucer does more here than simply save Troilus from disaster because, when one compares his actions to the story of Lucretia, Troilus' swoon becomes even more significant.

The problem with this scene is that we have two possible Tarquins and only one potential Lucretia. However, Pandarus, as Criseyde's uncle, cannot portray Tarquin here, for though he possesses the right attitude towards women and vituperative language, he cannot be the physical aggressor in this situation without committing incest. And, while Troilus could be the body, especially since he desires Criseyde to the same degree as Tarquin did Lucretia, his swoon assures both Criseyde and the reader that Troilus is incapable of sexual violence during this highly emotional scene. As a result, it is not simply Criseyde's unexpected defiance that subverts the possible rape here, but also it is the potential rapists themselves who prove to be incapable of reenacting this famous scenario. Therefore, rather than simply rewriting Lucretia's

rape, albeit with two Tarquins instead of one, Chaucer utterly subverts it with Troilus' faint. What Chaucer has done here is give us two bodies capable of performing rape on Criseyde/Lucretia, but these bodies are, for separate reasons, unable to do so. What could become a moment of sexual violence is transformed into one of sexual power for both Criseyde and for Troilus. She is given sovereignty by Troilus to decide for herself what her sexual destiny may be, and thus she, in turn, returns that power to him because she *chooses* to do so. In this manner, one more would-be rapist is transformed into the lover of this woman's dreams, only in this story, Criseyde is already young and beautiful—no magical transformation necessary to acquire, for the moment, a happy ending. Unfortunately, Criseyde has no experience to really compare the genesis of her relationship to Troilus within a "real-life" context. What she has here is a Romance of mythic, if typically mythic, proportions, all of it ultimately contrived by Pandarus and his steadfast adherence to the dictates of traditional Romance form.

One has to wonder if Criseyde's marriage was as dramatic or as complicated as Troilus' courtship. Knowing the political, monetary, and social motivations behind noble marriages in Chaucer's time, the answer is probably a rather firm no. In a time when noble marriages were made to form alliances as well as for profit, the burning whirlwind of Troilus' romantic overtures and emotions would truly seem the stuff of fiction, and Criseyde's own commentary on marriage lends itself to this interpretation. She does not view marriage in terms of a grand romance, but rather as a game of chess, where she must maneuver around the petty jealousies of a husband who can say, "'Chek mat!'" once she is legally under his rule (II.752, 754). It is no wonder that a woman who previously had no choice in the outcome of her life would be loath to sacrifice her hard won freedom based on a man's promises of devotion. Furthermore, it stands to reason that such a woman, for all of her experience with marriage,

would have very little real knowledge of love. Consequently, it would be very easy for her to confuse a whirlwind passion with honest feelings of love, especially when one's wooer has someone as cunning as Pandarus in his corner. As the Wife of Bath had to be literally hit over the head to realize her mistake with Jankyn, so too is Criseyde only able to think rationally for herself and truly exchange her heart with someone of her own free will once she is outside the sphere of both Troilus' intense worship and Pandarus' machinations. Thus, with Diomedes, Criseyde is able to have for the first time the best of both worlds; with him, she is not trapped into a marriage that would take away all of her wealth and personal sovereignty, and she also has a lover who has gained her affections in exactly the way she wished from Troilus—that is, to be loved nonsexually as a “suster” and political ally first before pushing for more. Troilus never bothered to pay attention to Criseyde's desires. Diomedes does, and because of this, he wins Criseyde's trust *first* and then her heart. Of course, one could argue that Diomedes' wooing of Criseyde is entirely too calculating to be honest; however, I wonder what part of seduction is *not* calculated? Even ever-honest and true, Troilus, with his letter writing campaign and midnight bedroom appearances followed a cohesive, Pandarus-inspired plan of attack with regard to his pursuit of Criseyde. Diomedes is no different; he is just far more adept than Troilus at this particular game.

And because Diomedes is so romantically sophisticated and because Criseyde allows him to triumph over Troilus in this battle, they are both condemned by modern readers and critics as vain and immoral, but I question such harsh judgments. How many people can honestly say that they have the same romantic tastes now as they did when they were teenagers? Almost no one. Therefore, why punish Criseyde for finally having the freedom to grow up and choose for herself the man she truly desires? And we, as readers, should not be ashamed to

approve of Criseyde in spite of her change of heart, for what Chaucer has cleverly emphasized in Troilus's pursuit of Criseyde is its intense emotional whirlwind that sweeps Criseyde up so that, even when she seems to be making informed decisions while in Troy, in actuality she is not. She gets caught up in the moment, as engineered by Pandarus, and with the ideal of Romance itself, as represented by Troilus, both of which cause her to forget all of the vows she makes to herself in private. Thus, perhaps Criseyde's infidelity is not the proof of her moral perfidy, spiritual corruption, or unfortunate circumstances as a woman in a world controlled by men, as many critics have asserted, but perhaps it is, in reality, the proof of her romantic maturation of which Troilus sadly becomes a casualty. Criseyde's mistake is in making promises that she is unable to keep, but who in the throes of "true love" has not also done so? It does not render Criseyde inherently evil or an unrepentant liar; it makes her human. And so, what Chaucer-as-author has accomplished here is far more penetrating than Boccaccio's story and characters ever could be because these characters engage each other on a far deeper level than what can be accomplished in a standard Romance. Chaucer may have begun this story in typical fashion, but his (re)invention of Boccaccio's text and especially of Boccaccio's Criseida shows his readers that, when trying to find "true" love, reality is always better than fiction.

#### IV

Troilus is a divided man; he cannot simultaneously love and fight. He is only either a warrior who scoffs at foolish lovers, or he is a foolish lover who is unable to even think of returning to the war and defending Troy from the Greeks. But, as with all tragic love stories, life must always intrude upon paradise. In Book IV, Criseyde learns that she will be traded to the Greeks for Antenor, and neither she, nor Troilus takes the news well. However, not even the great Hector can dissuade King Priam and the Trojan elders from their decision, and at this

fateful moment, Criseyde chooses not to reveal her relationship with Troilus to the world. And why not? Having such an important lover might have overridden her father's attempts to secure her from Troy, but both Troilus and Criseyde are unwilling to take the chance of irrevocably damaging her reputation. Thus, we must look more closely at what Chaucer-as-author does in Book IV to illuminate the reader's imaginative darkness, especially in light of this tale's Italian source.

Troilo and Criseida are much more frivolous in their emotions and much more experienced as lovers than Troilus and Criseyde appear to be, and so when their relationship falls apart, it seems more inevitable than tragic. So, what happens in Chaucer's translation to make it a much more legitimate and heartfelt tragedy that leaves readers so divided as to which character to side with in the end? What makes Criseida's actions so much more acceptable to generations of critics than those of Criseyde, who is far more morally conscious throughout this story than her Italian predecessor? First of all, in Chaucer's version, we have a narrator with such a strong and intrusive voice, who begins a story about Troilus and ends this same story with a begrudging defense of Criseyde. But his opinionated presence is not the only change that affects how one perceives this text and its characters. There is also a more clearly constructed Pandarus in Chaucer's story whose role as go-between and as Troilus' confidant is far more substantial here than in Boccaccio, but again, this change is not significant enough on its own to warrant such a drastically different reception. And so, for a reader to find the most direct answer to the above questions, he or she must look at Troilus and Criseyde themselves. These two lovers are so far removed from their Italian counterparts that it is almost as if Chaucer has constructed an entirely new tale about two brand new characters. And, in this regard, the problem that plagues these characters is also changed from Boccaccio to Chaucer. While it is no great surprise when

Criseida betrays Troilo, many readers are inexplicably shocked when Criseyde does the same to Troilus. And, because of the way in which Chaucer has subtly (re)written his characters, such a powerful emotional response to how his characters behave should not be as surprising as it is for many critics. What Chaucer has done in this seemingly straightforward chivalric poem, is to subvert the entire notion of Romance itself so that even the most atypical characters in this type of story will be perceived as doing something new, even when their actual story is almost exactly the same as any other. Therefore, just as Criseyde herself defies the false categorizations the men in this tale try to place her into, this entire work defies the title of “typical Romance” by transforming how the major characters arrive at their inevitable ends, and perhaps the most well-defined evidence for this notion occurs in Book V when Criseyde finally rejects Troilus’ all-encompassing love and succumbs to Diomedes’ far more skilled seduction.

Many critics try to turn the seduction of Criseyde by Diomedes into a devious and dispassionate act, which to a certain extent it is in the beginning. After the intense emotions of Troilus’ wooing, Diomedes’ efforts at romance seem, at first, to pale in comparison. However, to condemn Diomedes for his terse seduction of Criseyde demonstrates the readers’ own need for Chaucer-as-author to fulfill, as opposed to subvert, the conventions of the Romance genre. In other words, despite the many arguments to the contrary, Chaucer’s audience wants Troilus’ fiery passion and zealous devotion to translate into a “happily-ever-after” ending for him and Criseyde. But this conventional ending does not occur, and there is obviously something compelling enough about Diomedes to make Criseyde forget her promises to Troilus, which is what causes her to be demonized throughout much of literary history. I contend that the answer to this quandary lies in the very notion of Romance itself, for compared to the rather exhausting drama that Troilus creates, Diomedes shows both Criseyde and the reader what it truly means to



love a woman like a man, a realm of love that Troilus never enters. In this manner, Chaucer fulfills Romance form by making both warriors physically similar; still, he handily subverts this convention by making these men far from interchangeable. The right man wins the woman of his dreams at the end of this work, even if Criseyde has far more substance than either Emelye or Criseida are ever permitted to have. This idea does not mean that Troilus himself is entirely devoid of originality, but one has to wonder if he would have been able to get the girl as handily as Diomedes does without Pandarus. I would argue that the answer is no; although, the famous swoon does create a unique situation for both Troilus and Criseyde. She was able to witness the literal collapse of a powerful warrior, which in turn, gave her the power to take charge of her role in their relationship. She was able to determine not only if Troilus would have access to her sexually, but also when and where this would happen. Despite Pandarus' meddling, Troilus salvages a disastrous situation by fainting, and in giving Criseyde the sovereignty to decide her sexual destiny, he gains physical access to the object of his spiritual devotion.

In comparison to this heightened drama, it is no wonder so many critics have found Diomedes' wooing of Criseyde to be almost callous in its nonchalance. Diomedes begins his courtship of Criseyde with an offer of friendship, something that Troilus refused to do. And one must also remember that Criseyde is in the Greek camp far longer than ten days. Therefore, what begins as friendship and an offer of political protections reminiscent of Hector's in Book I, develops into something more at a later time. Thus, when Diomedes decides to press his suit further, he does so in a manner far different from Troilus. He tells Criseyde how becoming his lover will benefit her. He says:

“And thenketh wel, ye shal in Grekis fynde  
A moore parfit love, er it be nyght,  
Than any Troian is, and more kynde,  
And if ye vouchesauf, my lady bright,

I wol ben he to serven yow myselve,  
Yee, levere than be kyng of Greces twelve!” (V.918–924)

There is no need for theatrics, no need to faint, and most importantly, no need for the troublesome antics of a rather inept go-between. Diomedes has no need of a Pandarus; he is perfectly capable of approaching and wooing a woman all on his own, for unlike Troilus, he is able to balance his notion of love with that of reason. Thus, he is able to continue his suit in a much more reserved way. Instead of fainting, he merely “gan to waxen red,/And in his speche a litel wight he quok,/And caste asyde a litel wight his hed/And stynte a while . . .” (V.925–928). Here, Diomedes seems so affected by Criseyde as to blush, and he appears nervous while waiting for her response. When she does not reply immediately, he adds: ““I am, al be it yow no joie,/As gentil man as any wight in Troie”” (V. 930–931). Diomedes feels the need to assert his pedigree as a Greek nobleman and warrior so that Criseyde cannot discount him simply because of status. And, as Diomedes’s language has shown, he too is leaving the decision entirely up to her. He has plighted his troth, but he will not force her against her will. In this sense, Diomedes is as unique of a lover as Troilus, in that, rather than simply taking what he wants, he also is willing to give Criseyde sovereignty over her own body. In this manner, Diomedes instinctively does what Troilus does not; he offers Criseyde friendship first and *then* offers her the sovereignty to make her own decision about her feelings for him.

Diomedes has made his offer to Criseyde, and if she accepts, then he will be happy to return her affections in kind and give her equal possession of his person as he will take of hers. Conversely, if she should refuse him, then one gets the idea that he will simply move on—without being thrown into an all-consuming despair or having thoughts of suicide. Diomedes also does not need to faint in order to prove his powerlessness in this situation; he is not content to love Criseyde from afar, but he has clearly stated that the decision is hers alone. This man is

nothing if not practical, and obviously, Criseyde is not the only woman in the world. It is the sort of a relationship that an experienced widow should be engaging in, as opposed to what Criseyde actually has with Troilus. In Diomedes, Criseyde finally has her similitude, and this gift proves too powerful to resist. He will give her the sovereignty over her sexual self that she requires, and unlike, Troilus and Pandarus, he has read her correctly from the beginning. In light of such an adult relationship, Troilus' attempt to rekindle his dramatic, love-letter romance with Criseyde falls on deaf ears. Thus, Troilus is finally forced to "read" Criseyde correctly, and he realizes the sort of woman she has been from the start—that is, a woman who has not the heart to tell him no even if "she ne wolde hym holden that she hyghte/For with ful yvel list him to leve/That loveth well, in swich cas/though hym greve" (V.1636–1639). Consequently, Criseyde is not "bad," as many critics and readers would have one believe, but rather she is a woman who needs to be loved by only one man, and not by one man divided into two well-meaning but, ultimately, clueless bodies. And so, in the end, Criseyde's dream of exchanging her heart with someone powerful and worthy has become a reality, and the truth behind Cassandra's prophecy that "This Diomedes hire herte hath, and she his" can no longer be denied by either the characters in this text or by its readers (V.1517).

## V

In this final section, I would like to take a closer look at Criseyde's dream in relation to Lucretia's legend and Cassandra's vision, as all three of these moments bear a strong influence on the events at the end of this work. In Book II, Criseyde has a rather disturbing dream of an eagle while she is contemplating Troilus' troth. This dream, which she has after being lulled to sleep by the song of a nightingale, shows Criseyde having her heart ripped out by the talons of an eagle, at which point the eagle replaces her heart with its own—all of which occurs so that "ne

nothyng smerte” (II.930). And, as many critics have rightly noted, the nightingale outside Criseyde’s window also has an intriguing history, especially when one considers Ovid’s tale of Tereus, Philomela, and Procne. So, what we have here is the heroine of this work rather peculiarly falling asleep with “hire herte fressh and gay” to the song of a bird made most famous by an incestuous rape (II.922), and once she is asleep, she dreams of her heart being savagely ripped out of her chest but feels no pain. It is no wonder that many feminist critics have seen fit to align this dream and the eagle’s actions with rape, especially when one considers the Lucretia-esque scene that will soon follow. However, if Chaucer-as-author were so interested in making Criseyde into a rape victim, then why choose to replace her heart with that of the eagle? Why not have her exchange hearts with the nightingale instead? The answer lies with the eagle itself, as opposed to the violent action inherent in the exchange of the creature’s heart for Criseyde’s. In choosing an eagle, Chaucer has replaced Criseyde’s heart with that of a warrior, or more precisely, a powerful bird of prey. By doing so, he has given her the metaphysical upper hand, rather than taking away her agency and rendering her powerless. To have done the latter would have changed the entire outcome of the seduction scene, and Criseyde/Lucretia might very well have been raped a second time. Nevertheless, because Criseyde has been given the same instincts and will of a predator, she is now the one who controls both the tenor and the vehicle of her relationship with Troilus. She scolds him, makes demands upon him, and gets everything she wants. And, it is perhaps because Criseyde is most definitely *not* Lucretia, or rather not a victim, that she is ultimately demonized. Criseyde does not exchange hearts with the nightingale because the thought of being loved by Troilus makes her happy, and she does not commit suicide like Lucretia because she is able to transform her seduction from masculine into feminine terms; in spite of this, her ability to do so with the heart of an eagle beating in her breast makes her

unworthy of praise and redemption for many. It is this common misinterpretation of Criseyde that leads her to be affected by the same curse that plagues Cassandra, who always tells the truth but who is never believed. Circumstances always seem to conspire, often vis-à-vis Pandarus, which prevent Criseyde's will to be carried out with regard to Troilus. And, for this reason, she often appears wishy-washy and/or untruthful, but in reality, her will is habitually sublimated by Pandarus' and Troilus' misreadings of her. It is not until she encounters Diomedes and can truly exchange her heart with someone on equal terms that the precise language of Cassandra's vision becomes clear. Criseyde first metaphorically exchanges her heart with an eagle because Troilus, as a victim of love, is unworthy of her. She is able to exchange her heart with Diomedes because he is the reality of mature love, while Troilus is merely the facsimile of it created by fictional Romance. In this manner, we as readers are encouraged by Chaucer, through both Criseyde's dream and Cassandra's vision, to understand the real feelings behind Criseyde and Diomedes's relationship, even if we too are momentarily affected by Apollo's curse and want to disbelieve what we read.

Consequently, Troilus is quite simply no match for Diomedes in the romance department. To borrow an example from the *Canterbury Tales*, Diomedes is more like Nicholas to Troilus' Absolon, and as *The Miller's Tale* demonstrates as clearly as any of the other *fabliaux*, a couple that does not have similitude in its relationship, no matter how fond they may be of each other, is destined to fail.<sup>2</sup> Diomedes may be more of a playboy and less earnest in his

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<sup>2</sup> By this comparison, I mean to say that both Absolon and Troilus adopt the role of Romance hero when they are so obviously ill-equipped to do so. And even though Troilus is far less comical and, in many ways, far less tragic than Absolon, they both make the same mistakes in love—that is, they both adopt personas and pursue women who are not their similitude—and so, ultimately, they prove incapable of handling either one, which leads to their rather epic heartbreak, in that they each lose their chosen heroines to far more capable lovers, as well as to their tragic ends, namely Absolon's public shaming and Troilus' death in battle.

initial pursuit of Criseyde, but one should not mistake early intensity for a lasting affection; regardless of his “calculated” seduction, he proves to be the better man for her—and Criseyde knows it. Troilus is a man who loves like a boy; he is so new to the idea of love that he has turned to it with the religious zealousness of the newly converted. Undeniably, his fervor has created a church out of love, and Criseyde has become his savior. Very few women can live up to such impossible expectations, and in this regard, Criseyde is no exception. However, Troilus and Criseyde are torn apart by outside circumstance before their lack of similitude can have a noticeable effect while Criseyde is still inside Troy’s walls, and even though Chaucer truncates the timetable in order to make Criseyde’s reversal in affection seem far too quick, one cannot help but see that, while it may be difficult to forgive Criseyde’s betrayal of Troilus outright, it is as inevitable an occurrence as it is necessary. For it is only because of Criseyde’s infidelity that Troilus is finally able to return to his life as a warrior, but even this transformation is not able to ease his despair. He becomes a warrior who has no control over his emotions, and so Achilles quickly fulfills Troilus’ death-wish. In this manner, the ending of this tale truly becomes the tragedy the narrator claims it to be in the beginning. Troilus’ fictional Church of Love has collapsed, and now, quite literally, he has nothing else to live for. Thus, he commits the two greatest sins in the eyes of the medieval Christian church, namely despair and suicide. And, because Troilus is never able to temper his love with mature reason, as both Criseyde and Diomedes do, his death seems far more tragic as the lover who has irrevocably lost his faith than it ever would have had he remained the aloof, consummate warrior.

Indeed, the narrator himself must also turn away from Troilus’ type of love at the end of this tale, and his final intrusion produces a much-debated Epilogue to Chaucer’s story. The overt change in tone from romance to religion at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* has sparked

much critical interest, but most critics, most notably D. W. Robertson, Jr., see this narratorial transformation as a chance to convert the audience from impure, human love to the purity of divine love (*A Preface to Chaucer* 496–497). And, to a certain extent, such critics are correct. The narrator is trying to inspire a conversion, but I must disagree with Robertson’s scope. I contend that the conversion is from immature, conditional, adolescent love to the purest form of mature, unconditional, adult love known to the Christian world—that is, Christ’s sacrifice on the cross for the sins of all humankind. The turn from Romance to religion here is reflected elsewhere in this genre, usually in failed Romances where one or both of the lovers have broken fidelity and must enter into religious life to atone. But, in the Epilogue, the narrator, whose voice seems more like the author’s in these final lines, does not address the characters in this tale for his final moral note. Instead, he addresses the audience by saying, “Swych fyn hath false worldes brotelnesse!/And thus bigan his lovyng of Criseyde,/As I have told, and in this wise he deyde” (V.1832–1833). The narrator is admitting his sins to the reader; he promised a traditional Romance, but he has seemingly delivered a tragedy. But what initially appears to be a sin is, in actuality, his salvation, for the narrator too has been manipulated by the author into telling a completely different tale than the expected Romance of his source material. Thus, the statement: “O yong, fresshe folks, he or she/In which that love up groweth with youre age . . .” takes on an added significance when one contemplates the types of love presented in this work (V.1835–1836). The command here is specifically to the young that their “love up groweth with youre age.” And so, what is requested of the youth in the audience is the maturation of their love so that the tragedy of Troilus’ passion can be transformed first into a more adult, but still human love, as demonstrated by Diomedes, and then transformed again into the highest and most sustaining form of devotion through God and Christ. According to this new, more insightful

narrator, Christ's sacrifice is the truest form of love to which every person should aspire, but alas, human concerns often intrude and, like Troilus, most realize this only when it is too late to rectify their mistakes. Therefore, the narrator, and through him the author, uses the end of this tale to implore the young to mature not only as to *who*, but also as to *how* they love before they too become tragic victims of Romantic fiction.



CHAPTER 3  
“THE MAISTRESSE OF MY WIT, AND NOTHING I”: CHAUCER AND THE  
(MIS)TRANSLATION OF LEGENDARY WOMEN

For this werk is al of another tonne,  
Of olde story, er swich strif was begonne.  
—G Narrator, *The Legend of Good Women* 79–80

Chaucer’s deception of his audience in *The Legend of Good Women* begins where all stories do—at the beginning. His speakers experience a dream-vision that seems rather standard at first glance; however, once one compares both of the Prologues to the legends that follow, a far more intricate scenario becomes apparent. The reader is given, on the one hand, Narrators’ voices that practically dare his audience to read only on the literal level, and on the other, an authorial one that is subtly encouraging everyone to do the opposite. In fact, the general intellectual malaise encouraged in the *Legend* can be felt throughout its critical history. Many scholars seem to side with the speakers in the Prologues and ultimately dismiss this work as merely an unfinished stepping-stone on the road toward the greater, yet equally unfinished, *Canterbury Tales*. But, to be so dismissive of this collection of legends is a mistake that needs to be rectified in contemporary criticism, and while some authors have begun this process, even they eventually concede that, aside from the meaty metaphorical bits found in the two Prologues, the actual legends themselves are merely lack-luster Classical anecdotes that serve to detract from the intellectual interest generated in the Prologues. It is, therefore, popular to discuss the Prologue of *The Legend of Good Women* and the legends themselves as if they are two independent entities—to render the Prologues a singular, “coherent, self-contained dream poem rather than a simple prologue” and later to claim that the legends do not carry a comparable amount of literary weight (Cherniss 183). In other words, the *Legend* seems to suffer from the same critical conflict as *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale* where there is a substantial

buildup to a story that, for many scholars, is not nearly as entertaining as its introduction. Such a gross misconception needs to be corrected, and in this chapter, I will be reexamining this problem. I shall endeavor to show that *The Legend of Good Women* is in reality an *intentionally* dull text, as opposed to the accidentally monotonous one contemporary critics often mistake it to be; for Chaucer uses both the F and G Prologues as well as the legends to show his readers, yet again, that the question of whether or not authority should dominate experience, or vice versa, is as eternal as it is inherently unsolvable, no matter how many “olde bokes” would argue otherwise (F/G 25).

Judith Laird claims that, in the *Legend*, Chaucer: “marches good pagan women through a-historical time” (58). This assertion is correct in a sense because many of these pagan stories are indeed given fourteenth-century touches, which was standard practice for authors in Chaucer’s time. In spite of this, the difficulty one should have with Laird and myriad other scholars is their casual use of the word “good.” The *Legend* contains several stories of women who are most decidedly *not* “good,” but the Narrator either conveniently leaves out the rather violent ends to their tales, as he does with Medea and Philomela, or as in the case of Cleopatra, the rather salacious beginning, middle, and end. Therefore, the problem that confronts readers in this work is very similar to the one discussed in the previous chapter, in that there are elements of all of these women and their stories that cannot be termed wholly “good,” but neither are they easily quantifiable as “bad.” We, as readers, may not agree with their final choices, but many of these women have justifiable reasons for committing some pretty heinous crimes. Thus, these women, in their highly edited Ovidian reductions, present a similar dilemma for readers as Criseyde; she did not enter into her relationship with Troilus intending to betray him, but outside circumstances create a situation where that betrayal becomes as necessary as it is inevitable. In

this sense, the choices made by Chaucer himself, not only as to which women to include in the *Legend*, but also as to what bits of their stories to include, ignore, and/or rewrite from his Classical sources, often gives an entirely new meaning to just how very boring and uninspiring it is for everyone to be perfect—at least the sort of perfect mandated by the medieval Christian Church. As we learn from Criseyde’s sad ending, casting the first stone is difficult when one can understand the humanness of her behavior, as opposed to simply being appalled by the nature of her sins.

In completing the penance demanded of him by the God of Love and his companion, Alceste, Chaucer’s narrator commits an even greater sin—that is, he gives his detractors exactly what they have asked for. In order to do so, he must thoroughly edit, and in some cases almost wholly rewrite these tales. He often unapologetically mistranslates these texts so that these women and their legends become palatable to masculine society even though this poem is supposedly written about women at the behest of a woman. Consequently, one must assume that the women in the *Legend* are “good” because they *act* like it, just as the best sort of women, as determined by patriarchal authority, always do. These unquestionably good women are most commonly seen in hagiography as martyrs, and martyrs are always known for their actions more so than their words, which is especially true in the case of women. Female martyrs often endure the most horrendous physical tortures without ever saying a word—their actions having the power to convert masses of people in a way that their preaching alone cannot. And so, their silence is praised by theologians and the rest of the masculine Church as a sign of their strength and conviction to their faith. Women who speak before they act, such as the Wife of Bath, are condemned as “bad” women simply because they speak, and for this reason, they are irrevocably damned in the eyes of male society.

However, as he demonstrated in *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer is not content with such a strict dichotomy because what is “bad” can often be turned “good” with the right spin placed upon the authorities found in “olde bokes.” What Chaucer does of the most significance in the *Legend* is to take his source material and translate it through the lens of fourteenth-century critical and religious authority. By doing so, he points out the inherent flaws in interpreting women based upon fixed categories of “good” and “bad.” Chaucer uses *The Legend of Good Women* to quite knowingly repaint the lion, and in the end, he shows just how problematic it is to have a male narrator, who is all too attached to his “olde bokes,” writing a text that Alceste should really be writing herself. In other words, it seems more than a bit ridiculous to have a man write a text that seeks to rehabilitate women, especially when he must do so at the expense of other men, regardless of whether or not these men are often liars, cheaters, and thieves in their own right. Thus, on the surface, the *Legend* teaches its readers that the only good woman is a wronged woman, who eventually will be left with nothing and no one but herself. Therefore, she must *act* because she has no other recourse. Any time she has tried to speak, she has either been silenced or misunderstood, and so, like many a female martyr, the only way her story gains any significance is through her death. Even though not all of the women in the *Legend* physically die, the Narrator’s rather indifferent treatment of their lives and “goodness” effectively kills the essence of what makes them memorable compared to those women who do not commit suicide. In this respect, Chaucer is true to the main authority he cites time and again throughout this text, namely Ovid. Most of the stories in the *Legend* can be found in Ovid’s *Heroides*, though a few do come from the *Metamorphosis*, but it is more important to note that Chaucer relies heavily on Ovid’s translation of these myths because more often than not Ovid does not present himself as a great champion of women. To be sure, the *Heroides* presents the one-sided accounts of

victimized women, who write letters to the men who have either betrayed or abandoned them or both. Ovid also does not stop with this change in form; he significantly alters many of these stories so that the women are absolved of any crime—i.e. Medea’s letter stops before she kills her children—and he sometimes adds elements that are absent from his source material, i.e. Dido is not pregnant at the time of Aeneas’ departure in Virgil’s *Aeneid*. In this manner, it is rather crucial to note the similarities in the tone and scope between Ovid’s *Heroides* and the *Legend*. Chaucer-as-narrator approaches the notion of translation from the same angle as Ovid in that, through the careful, if rather unsubtle, (mis)translation of these legendary women and their stories, both of these authors ensure that these women are far more likely to be absolved of any crime than condemned. Now, whether or not this redeems either author as champions of women I cannot say, but it does reveal some rather interesting insights into myth-making and purposeful (mis)translation that I will continue to explore in the remainder of this chapter.

While such a wholesale approach to translation may create the desired effect upon both the texts and the audience, one has to wonder about the inevitable problems such an approach creates. How could these women ever claim that these tales are theirs? How could a female audience ever be comfortable with the *Legend*, when everything that makes the women included in this work interesting, unique, and worthy of study is rather conspicuously left out? Indeed, what makes many of these women so intriguing is the fact that, in Classical myth, they are quite unremorsefully “bad.” They knowingly defy patriarchal rules and expectations, and they have no problem getting revenge for wrongs done to them. For that reason, what makes them unique is the fact that they do not behave in the same way as the “good” Christian women of later centuries. Their deaths do not follow the typical martyr script and are often as unconventional as they are. And Chaucer-as-author is well aware of the fact that he is making

victims out of women who, quite frankly, do not know the meaning of the word. So, perhaps what is most significant about *The Legend of Good Women* is not that Chaucer does something surprising, but rather that he chooses to do something so absolutely expected so that what he has chosen to leave out of these legends by following the letter of the law begins to speak at a louder volume than what he includes. In doing so, Chaucer shows his audience and his critics, including Alceste, that one should be careful about making demands upon an author, for the danger is that one might get exactly what he or she has asked for, albeit in this case, the equivocally bad as opposed to the unarguably good.

## I

Most scholarship on the *Legend* has until recent years been content solely with the dissection of the two Prologues. As one scholar notes: “The poem lacks an ethic to bind it together: the courtly ethic is only feebly and intermittently gestured at, and no substitute replaces it” (Frank 45). Consequently, many contemporary critics often discuss not only the Prologues and the legends separately, but also, as can be seen in the above comment, they tend to discuss each legend as its own separate narrative entity rather than as having a common binding ethic. And, because there are two Prologues, there has been much debate as to which one is the intended beginning of this work as well as which one best reflects the tone and subject matter of the text that follows. Often, critics cite the G Prologue as the revision of F since, overall, the G prologue seems to present a better focused and more rhetorically confident Narrator than the rather dreamy and long-winded voice in F. Still, the F Prologue has its defenders as well, and their major claim is that: “despite the preponderance of evidence that the G-text represents a revision of the Prologue . . . the F-version is aesthetically the more appealing poem” (Quinn 25). This raucous debate is still underway elsewhere, but the focus of this section is not going to

center on this well-established conversation. I find it much more intriguing to examine these two Prologues not only in relation to each other, but also to investigate what the revisions in G signify in the remainder of the *Legend*. The more significant argument is not which Prologue is aesthetically better or more rhetorically erudite, but rather it is with the two Narrators themselves. One must consider the fact that: “‘F’ and ‘G’ are not only a problem of literary history. Anyone proposing to analyze them is going to have to decide whether to take them as two different poems built of quite similar (often identical) materials, or as two related states of the same person” (Payne 198). And this analysis is precisely what I intend to accomplish in the following chapter, with one major deviation. I see the two Prologues, not simply as revisions of each other and/or as different sides of a singular personality, but rather they are two separate narrative entities with two entirely different ideas on what it means to read, write, and translate. What we as readers are dealing with in F and G are two ways of narrating and translating the same text from two independent voices, and Chaucer himself seems undecided as to which speaker should ultimately be placed in charge of the *Legend*. Therefore, with two such different Narrators, it is much more significant to explore these differences as an intentional change in voice, as opposed to simply privileging what many refer to as the “revision” and the “rough draft.” Thus, what the reader is faced with is, depending upon Chaucer’s ultimate choice of narratorial personality, two divergent translations of the same text, which will lead one to (re)read these women and their stories using two separate sets of metaphorical tools. It is not my intention to suggest that Chaucer meant for this text to have two Prologues permanently; however, simply because this poem remains unfinished and possesses, in essence, two introductions does not mean that one must be forced to privilege one Prologue over the other. Consequently, in the remainder of this section, I will not argue whether or not one Prologue is

“better” than the other, as much of current scholarship continues to do; instead, I will discuss exactly what changes occur to the scope, tone, and overall focus of this poem due to the presence of more than one Narrator. For, despite some of their inherent similarities, F and G advance far different ideas with regard to authorial responsibility and suggest far different methodologies for the legends that follow. It is the ensuing confusion between the F and G voices that seems to cause Chaucer himself to step in as narrator in order to give cohesiveness to the legends that the Prologues themselves lack. In this manner, Chaucer-as-author and his narrator self give their audience a far different translation of the text they command, and because of these dramatic changes, the author performs his penance to the God of Love and Alceste in a way that not only makes a mockery of established authority and its views on “good” women, but also it reveals that the rehabilitation of these women at times comes at the expense of a “good” story as well. And so, in this text as well as many of his others, Chaucer once again inserts his presence into the narrative as well as into the narrator’s voice in order to show that experience and authority cannot be mutually exclusive if one truly wants to create a reality that is more tangible than fiction.

Since both Prologues begin with the same argument that seemingly praises experience over authority, it is rather easy to fall into the trap of viewing these Narrators as inherently similar—if not as the same—voice. For instance, both Prologues begin with few changes to the rather bold statement that:

A thousand tymes have I herd men telle  
That ther ys 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 dwelling 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. (F 1–9/G 1–9)

In these opening lines, we find a confident narrative voice who claims to desire the proof of authority through experience. Church Fathers have long written about the “joy in hevne and peyne in helle,” but such an experience is considered beyond the reach of human ken without the intervention of some form of divine intervention or enlightenment. Thus, faith in the knowledge of heaven and hell as written by the Fathers is all the “average” person has in the way of evidence as to the veracity of these authorities and their claims. And yet, one can see that neither the Narrator of F, nor of G is particularly satisfied with the prospect of following the ideologies of these authorities by faith alone. On the other hand, neither narrator seems entirely opposed to the authority found in these “olde bokes” either; they simply want the value of their own experience to be appreciated as an authority in such matters as well. After all, it is difficult to discount what “men han seen with ye” (F/G 11), and the fact that this debate appears in prominent places in several of Chaucer’s poems reveals just how unresolved it is—even in a fictive space.

Accordingly, what Chaucer cleverly does is enter into this debate using two Narrators, who at least initially seem to advance the same argument, but who in reality, are very different men with entirely different literary and rhetorical agendas. For, while the F Narrator seems content to be distracted by the appearance of Spring, daisies, singing larks, and other such dream constructions, the G Narrator is determined from the beginning to stick to the “facts” and avoid such “rehersynges” (G 24). As he explicitly states, “myn entent is, or I fro yow fare,/The naked text in English to declare/Of many a story, or elles of many a geste,/As autours seyn; leveth him if yow leste” (G 85–87). This Narrator is not to be distracted from “the naked text”; and thus, he is understandably far briefer in his Prologue than the F Narrator. There is nothing in

this dream world that can divert the speaker from his task as Narrator, and so his experience is confined to the text itself. As Sheila Delany asserts, “A detailed comparison of difference between F and G shows G to be drier and more austere in tone than F. It strikes one as a work on the whole less subjective than F, less insistent on art in general, and more modest in its presentation of the Narrator as poet” (*The Naked Text* 36). In contrast to this, the F Narrator seems far more affected by the dream sequence, and as such, he is a more willing participant in the dream-vision experience as a whole. Rather than clinically dispatching his surroundings in favor of more concrete authority, the F Narrator seems to enjoy being in a dream. However, such a perspective has its drawbacks. Indeed, the F speaker seems far more willing to fall into Romantic convention, rather than creating a “naked text” of his own. For example, in the F Prologue the Narrator does something rather significant that the G Narrator does not—that is, he asks for lovers to help him translate the flowers and other natural images in his dream. He says, “Ye lovers that kan make of sentement;/In this cas oghte ye be diligent/To forthren me somewhat in my labour,/Whethir ye ben with the leef or with the flour” (F 69–72). In this manner, the F Narrator has firmly situated his text within the context of love poetry.<sup>1</sup> He has prescribed a Romance frame for his text, and he has done so because he found himself lying in a blooming meadow of a dreamscape. And so, authority dictates that he fall into Romantic convention and call upon lovers to help him not only to translate his surroundings, but also to serve as the muse for the entirety of his *Legend*.

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<sup>1</sup> It has been well-established by such *Legend* scholars as Sheila Delany, Robert O. Payne, Robert W. Frank, Jr., Lisa Kiser, and others that the F Prologue’s insistence on prolonged daisy imagery has more in common with the French *marguerite* tradition than does the more reserved G Prologue. Both do make note of the Alceste/daisy metaphor, but F’s voice dwells upon this relationship with far more attention and obvious relish than does G’s speaker.

In direct contrast to this, the G Narrator has no such interest in debating the merits of leaf versus flower or of corn versus sheaf because he is far more economical with his imagery and tropes than his F counterpart. Therefore, he knows that in reality all these elements are individual parts of whole plants, and if there is one problem with “olde bokes,” then, for him, it’s the flowery imagery and overused conceits that cause these sources to (mis)translate their tales. For, as he explicitly states, “I not who serveth lef ne who the flour./That nys nothyng the entente of my labour./For this werk is al of another tonne” (G 77–79). Indeed, such firm statements of intent are what drastically differentiate the voices of these two Narrators. The doubts about his ability to tell a proper story are not present with G as they are with F, and such confidence in his narrative abilities are perhaps what makes so many critics gravitate to the voice in G as the revised, and thus more believable, authority, as opposed to F, who seems entirely too caught up in his dream to tell his audience an accurate story. As one critic states: “If in the earlier F-version of the Prologue, the poet claims a stable authorial identity based on a transparent literary intention—the works’ motivation is identified with his master’s will—the G-version witnesses the difficulty in determining the ‘entent’ behind any work that acknowledges that the labor of fiction-making is subject to a variety of hermeneutic abuses” (Robertson 132). And so, the F Narrator becomes the victim of the same critical detractions most often experienced by the Wife of Bath. Even though many of her points are sound, she takes entirely too long in reaching them. So, by the time her arguments reach their end, her audience has long ceased to pay attention. It is only with the appearance of the loathly lady, who in essence advances the exact same arguments as the Wife but in a far more succinct manner, that the reader can see the wisdom of the Wife’s tidal wave of words. In a similar manner does the G Narrator triumph over the F voice in this case, for while the F Narrator is perhaps the better poet, he seems all too content to

spend his time dreaming; whereas, the G Narrator cannot wait to wake-up and resume his task—a practical move that turns his experience into a far more believable, if more imaginatively lackluster, authority in the eyes of Chaucer's audience and critics.

Perhaps the best example of this situation in the *Legend* occurs with the appearance of Alceste and her retinue of women, and it is intriguing to examine how Alceste—and through her, Chaucer—chooses to present her identity to the Narrator in each Prologue. In F, Alceste does not identify herself until almost the end of the Prologue, and the only entities or creatures that know her identity are the larks and the God of Love himself. The G Prologue has no such sanction on Alceste's name and the heroine identifies herself multiple times from her very first entrance into the narrative. Thus, in this Prologue, we know the identity of Alceste apart from the daisy prior to the ballade, but in F, the Narrator does not separate Alceste from her metaphorical relationship with the daisy until after he sings his ballade. Therefore, the G Prologue gives Alceste a unique identity apart from the other women accompanying the God of Love—to the extent that he proclaims: "Hire name was Alceste the debonayre" (179). And, in doing so, the "Balade" in G is also rewritten to include the line "Alceste is here, that al that may desteyne" (216), a line that becomes the refrain and conclusion for this particular song. In contrast to this relatively open reference to Alceste, the audience is left in the dark in the F Prologue, for Alceste saves the revelation of her identity until *after* the God of Love speaks by saying, "I, your Alceste, whilom queen of Trace" (431), and her name does not appear anywhere in the F "Balade." It is as if the G Narrator is once again unwilling to allow a simple metaphor to extend into a conceit; whereas, the F Narrator seems content to let all of the metaphors and their human personifiers separate themselves at their leisure. In this manner, the F Narrator appears determined to let the story tell itself—as if it were happening *to* him and not, as in the case of

G, *because* of him. Donald Rowe explains that F's oversight is purposeful, for "it undermines the god's criticism, since it suggests that the 'my lady' of the *balade* may have referred to Alceste all along. Most important, it reminds us that the Prologue is not just a description of a dream but a reaction to it as well, itself the beginning of the penance demanded in the dream" (144). This quotation rehabilitates F's blunder; however, it does not acknowledge its conflict with the *balade* in G, which is sung by Alceste's retinue of women and not by the Narrator himself. As a result, the interesting product of all of this narratorial conflict is that, even though Alceste names herself earlier in G, neither Narrator seems to recognize and/or react to her name until the God of Love references her story from the "olde bokes." And, as one critic argues, "It adds another fault that the God of Love can blame the Narrator for intensifying the guilt-and-expiation theme that fictionally motivates the composition of the legends" (Delany 42–43). Both Narrators fail to recognize Alceste until after they have been reminded that they have read about her before, and thus, her ability to name herself and to have that name communicate meaning is lost upon Narrators who seem content to reference their characters in terms of established authority, despite all of their earlier claims to value experience in equal measure.

In fact, neither Narrator seems capable of explaining the very essence of metaphor and looks to the God of Love for clarification by asking: "Yis,/Now knowe I hire. And is this good Alceste,/The dayesie, and myn owene hertes reste?" (F 517–519/G 505–507). Here, both Narrators acknowledge that they know who Alceste is, but they did not until this moment connect her as the transformed vehicle for their already established daisy conceit even though she appears in their presence crowned with the very flower they have been waxing poetic about from the beginning. So, regardless of the fact that both Prologues begin with a defense of experience, one can clearly see that, through their inability to recognize Alceste for who and

what she is, experience to both of these Narrators is merely the individual translation of authority and not what “men han seen with ye.” And this construction becomes problematic because, when one examines the legends that make up the remainder of this text, it becomes apparent that the Narrator of this part of the *Legend* is pretending to be equally clueless in his translation of these women and their stories. These women do not have someone to identify who they are to readers except for two rather inept, if well-meaning, Narrators and their questionable (mis)translations. It is this lack of a definitive narrative voice that necessitates a turn by readers from the F and G Narrators to the author himself for the voice of the legends in order to see that, despite their ambiguous interference in the Prologues, he will always find a way to include what they ignore—either by oblique reference or by almost flirtatious implication. And so, it is Chaucer’s narrative voice that speaks in the legends, and not the speakers from the two fragments of the Prologue. Chaucer-as-speaker was drowned out earlier by his warring Narrators in F and G, but in the legends themselves, his strong presence returns to maintain some sense of order. In this manner, he too actively participates in the penance assigned by Alceste, and while experience may have taught Chaucer that the “olde bokes” often lie, ironically, he must rely upon them throughout the *Legend* in order to tell the parts of the stories that he cannot, unless he wishes to incur the wrath of the God of Love, Alceste, and quite possibly, his own queen.

While the above conundrum provides several interpretive difficulties, which I will return to at a later point in this chapter, the remainder of this section is dedicated to the other major translational problem that many critics have encountered within this text, a problem that is created by Alceste herself. Alceste requires that all of the stories in the *Legend* tell “Of goode women, maydenes and wyves,/That were trewe in lovyng al here lyves;/And telle of false men that hem betrayen” (F 484–486/G 474–476). And, regardless of whether or not her intentions are

benevolent, the resulting legends are seen by critics of all genres and generations as being as largely untruthful as they are lackluster. In essence, it seems as if the author's penance does not fit his crime, for at least in (mis)translating Criseyde's story, he was able to make it *more* indelible. However, there are several factors that determine the rather stale and uncomfortable result that leads many critics to find the *Legend* to be merely the stepping-stone for the far more provocative *Canterbury Tales*, as opposed to a meaningful work in its own right. The first of these difficulties occurs in the "Balade." In the F Prologue, as I have previously stated, Alceste has not yet identified herself, and so her name does not appear in this song. Yet, the names of all of the other women whose stories will appear in the *Legend* do, along with the names of several women who do not. The two major changes made to the G Prologue are that Alceste's name appears in a refrain that echoes in two of the ballade's stanzas, and it is sung by the retinue of ladies instead of by the Narrator himself.

These changes are more significant than they first appear because they tie Alceste's identity to all of the other women who appear with the God of Love. After the F ballade, the Narrator states: "Behynde this god of Love, upon the grene,/I saugh coming of ladyes nyntene,/ . . ./And trewe of love thise women were echon" (282–83, 290). However, in the G Prologue, the Narrator merely observes: "Upon the softe and sote grene gras/They setten hem ful softly adoun,/By order alle in compass, enveroun" (225–227). This revision shows that Chaucer was indeed deciding between two distinct Narrators because, while the F Narrator is unable to identify the women in Love's retinue as the same women who appeared in the "Balade," the G Narrator has had this arduous task accomplished for him. And, thus, for the G Narrator, there is more pressure with regard to his retelling of these legends because the very women he will be translating have been specifically identified as part of his audience. Considering his already

expressed desire to tell the “naked text,” there is a certain onus placed upon this Narrator to “get it right.” In contrast to this, the F Narrator appears as unaffected by the presence of these ladies as he is by Alceste herself—the very woman who calmly asks a rather angry God of Love to be more understanding, but who conversely dictates the restrictive parameters of the Narrator’s penance.

In the course of the God of Love’s vituperation of the Narrator, Alceste interrupts in order to defend the Narrator, using an argument that seems curiously similar to the arguments that masculine society often uses to rationalize their control of female behavior, namely that women do not necessarily *intend* to act sinfully, they just can’t help themselves because of Eve’s poor example. However, Alceste’s interruption seems far more pointedly directed at Chaucer, the author, than at any other point in the Prologues—including the God of Love’s rant that precedes hers. Consequently, Alceste defends Chaucer in both Prologues in a manner that will echo Guinevere’s interruption of Arthur’s sentencing of the knight/rapist in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*. Thus, one can be assured that Alceste is looking to *reform* the Narrator with regard to his translational crimes committed in both the *Romance of the Rose* and in *Troilus and Criseyde*; however, despite her defense, she does find him guilty of a major crime against women—that is, in her estimation, he has dutifully translated the old clerks’ misogynist stories about women without even questioning the veracity of his sources. Chaucer may not have intended malice, but malice has been perpetuated nonetheless due to his carelessness. She explains, “And eke, peraunder, for this man ys nyce,/He myghte doon yt, gessyng no malice,/But for he useth thynges for to make;/Hym rekketh noght of what matere he take” (F 362–365/G 341–343). So, perhaps it is not *what* he has chosen to translate that becomes his greatest fault in the eyes of Alceste and the other women present, but rather it is *how* he has chosen to assume his responsibility as



translator that has caused such grief. And, even at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* we can see a speaker—infused with a strong authorial presence—conflicted by his project because it is rather obvious that this narrator too has developed a certain sympathy for Criseyde despite the less flattering details of her story. Nevertheless, he chooses, in spite of any personal sympathy, to translate the whole tale, tragic end and all. Perhaps this is the real reason for the ire of the God of Love and the rather backhanded defense of Alceste. Both characters believe the Narrator to be at fault, but the God of Love argues that the Narrator's transgression has made love into something akin to a villain, while Alceste argues that the crime is actually that he has been too true to his sources which only show female love as rapacious and evil. Therefore, just as the knight/rapist must answer for his misdeeds and give the proper response to his penitential question of what women desire most, so too must the author/narrator face the equally daunting task of justifying his *Legend* to a gallery of women who are unhappy with his previous behavior. He also must seek redemption from the very women he has offended, and such redemption cannot come solely at the hands of the two Narrators in F and G. And so, like the knight/rapist's quest, the *Legend's* Prologues are not ends unto themselves; they are merely the beginning of the lesson that must be learned not only by the Narrators themselves, but also by those living in the all too real world of men.

One scholar describes the purpose behind such a bifurcated narratorial presence by saying, "since the narrator is in significant measure an ironic device in both Prologues, a means of projecting two attitudes towards the poem's matter, the implied audience is similarly doubled. In these terms, the poem's rhetorical intent is to move the actual audience from the initial naïve point of view assigned it by the narrator to the more inclusive view gradually intimated" (Rowe 149). In this manner, as the personalities of the Narrators in F and G seem inherently different,

so too is their interpretation of the penance assigned by Alceste—and it is in analyzing the effect that this translational quest has on these two different men that the reader gets the first solid clue as to which Narrator Chaucer might ultimately leave in charge of his *Legend*. The F Narrator states, “And with that word my bokes gan I take,/And ryght thus on my Legende gan I make” (578–579); whereas, the G Narrator says, “And with that word, of *slep* I gan awake,/And ryght thus on my Legende gan I make” (544–545, emphasis mine). The difference here is subtle, but it is significant because, unlike the F Narrator, the G Narrator specifically states that “of *slep* I gan awake” *before* he begins his “Legende.” In contrast to this notion, the F Narrator proceeds to make the very error he has been berated for by Alceste and the God of Love—that is, before he writes, he immediately turns to the authorities for his material, which seems to imply that he has really not listened to his own, earlier advice. And, like the knight/rapist who goes to his marriage bed as unrepentant of his crime as he was a year before, this Narrator has not really heard anything Alceste has said. He has been given a reprieve from the wrath of Love, but he has not truly examined the flaws and biases that inform his trusted authorities. In other words, he is still far too content to dream, and his experience has failed to affect his reliance on authority, regardless of his own defense of experience provided in the opening of this Prologue. In fact, this defense seems as perfunctory as the “olde bokes” themselves, and like many of those false clerks and clerics, the F Narrator remains satisfied to mouth the words without any real belief in their meaning. Conversely, the G Narrator does not consult the authorities he once depended upon before beginning his translations of these women and their stories. He appears to awake from sleep in more ways than one, and so when he begins to write, it seems with more deliberate purpose, as opposed to the simple completion of an unwanted penance. Consequently, even though the G Prologue is shorter, it is more complex because its Narrator seems to retain far

more knowledge upon waking than the F Narrator, who could arguably still be asleep at the end of his Prologue.

In this manner, depending upon which Prologue as well as which Narrator one uses to begin the legends that follow, there is a vast difference in tone and emphasis that I will discuss in the remainder of this chapter, and because Chaucer adds his own voice in the construction of two Narrators who are superficially similar but who, in reality, share little in common, he challenges and retranslates the very notions of innocence and guilt, love and betrayal, as well as authority and experience in the rest of *The Legend of Good Women*. And, depending upon which Narrator would have ultimately been granted the responsibility of this *Legend*, or if Chaucer himself would have eventually taken more direct credit, the critically acknowledged boredom and dissatisfaction with these stories could, in reality, be the result of the author's own epiphany about the very nature of translation itself. For it is not simply the conversion of words and phrases from one source to another, but rather it often results in the transformation of lives from fiction into reality—a reality that all the women in the *Legend* and throughout history will be held unjustly accountable to, no matter how improbable or antiquated the advice given in the “olde bokes” may be.

## II

Judith Laird levels a common accusation against Chaucer's editing of the *Legend* when she says, “in Chaucer, we cannot escape the hierarchical placement of men above women because the portraits are shaped in terms of masculinity and femininity, and the dependency of the latter upon the former for valuation and identity” (68). Laird and many other scholars feel justified in leveling such charges at both the author and his work not only due to Chaucer's

thematic choices, but also because of his historical ones as well.<sup>2</sup> After all, the fact does remain that the “good” pagan women Chaucer has chosen for his *Legend* are not always so good, and indeed, it takes quite a bit of excising from Classical sources to turn these notoriously bad women, such as Medea, Phyllis, Cleopatra, etc. into virtuous martyrs for love. However, in doing so, the author-as-narrator is merely fulfilling his duty to both the God of Love and Alceste, for one is hard pressed to find the men in these Classical tales to be above reproach themselves. Thus, the real difficulties inherent in interpreting the *Legend* come not from any flaw in Chaucer’s portrayal of weak women—or as Laird might argue, hyper-feminized women who are too poorly defined as characters in their own right and are thus naively duped by equally hyper-masculinized men—but rather with a faulty perception of proper behavior for both sexes. In this manner, Chaucer uses the legends themselves to reiterate the same argument he advanced in *Troilus and Criseyde*, namely that notions of martyr and sinner, betrayer and betrayed, good and bad are all as mutable as how the various sources translate them. After all, it only takes a little creative revision and careful editing to turn a notorious seductress into a secular martyr, or an unrepentant child-killer into simply one woman in a long line of women abandoned by the same man, or even to turn several great queens into tragic losers in the game of love and sexual politics. Nonetheless, Laird and many other scholars often misrepresent Chaucer-as-author here when they imply that he uses *The Legend of Good Women* to reaffirm the notion that masculine endeavors will always triumph over the feminine. Such arguments are a bit too simplistic in their approach. If one were to take a closer look at how these legends interconnect and play off each other, then as is the case with *Troilus and Criseyde*, there is a much more intricate subtext

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<sup>2</sup> The most prominent scholars engaged in this discussion are, among others, Sheila Delany, Florence Percival, Elaine Tuttle Hansen, Lisa Kiser, Donald Rowe, Robert W. Frank, Jr., and William Quinn.

to explore. Indeed, Chaucer often uses his legends not solely to “telle of false men” as Alceste commands, but rather to show that neither men nor women have cornered the market on innocence and experience and that, if one pays exclusive allegiance to either state over the other, then regardless of his or her sex, the end result will always be tragic.

Consequently, instead of discussing these legends in their given order, I will use the remainder of this chapter to engage these tales based upon the common categorical divisions of their heroines—categorical divisions that I will reveal to be inherently flawed based upon Chaucer’s purposeful (mis)translations of them in *The Legend of Good Women*.<sup>3</sup> By this I mean to explore the division of the legends into the categories of either “innocence” or “experience,” and more specifically, I will consider how these categories have come to represent for many critics not only the content of the legends, but also the moral character—that is, the inherent “goodness” or “badness”—of the women highlighted in them. And, at least in the critical realm, Chaucer cannot escape literary history, for as much as he has to edit to make some of these women “good,” his audience knows from other literature that they are not. Moreover, the knowledge that many of these “innocent” women are in actuality very experienced leads many critics to then dismiss the entire *Legend* as a failed joke that even Chaucer himself could not muster up the energy to finish. However, such a dismissal is undeserved, even if the *Legend* is more of a work-in-progress than a finished masterpiece. For, there are several instances when

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<sup>3</sup> While many critics use such arguments to then explore Chaucer’s source material, I do not intend to use a similar methodology. Other scholars in contemporary Chaucer studies, such as Robert Payne, Peter Allen, Gila Aloni, Donald Rowe, Sheila Delany, Lisa Kiser, Michael Calabrese, and John Fyler have thoroughly cited both the Classical and medieval sources available to Chaucer for his *Legend*, among them Ovid’s *Heroides* and *Metamorphosis*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Boccaccio’s *De mulieribus claris*, and the *Ovide moralisé*. This list has been thoroughly recounted and analyzed by countless scholars over the years, so I will refer to Chaucer’s source material in more general terms knowing that his literary predecessors and influences for the *Legend* are both well-known and well-documented.

the men in these tales are not quite as false as they should be, just as there are women who behave far better here than they ever have in Classical mythology. In this manner, I will divide these women based upon the tacitly accepted critical consensus as to which women are “innocent,” and therefore, “good,” and which are “experienced,” or rather “bad,” in order to show just how dissatisfied Chaucer himself was with such binaries as well as to show just how subtly he defies them in order to rewrite the very “olde bokes” he falsely and cleverly claims to use verbatim.

As we know from the Prologues, the task commanded by Alceste is to “telle of false men,” but it does not take the Narrator long to defy this mandate. Even though the God of Love chooses the first “good” woman for him, the Narrator continues to pick women whose lives, and in some cases deaths, are as perplexing as Cleopatra’s—the first tale of female woe in this poem. However, despite Eros’ choice of a notoriously experienced woman to begin the *Legend*, the Narrator and through him Chaucer makes an interesting choice in telling this tale, for instead of concentrating on Cleopatra’s problematic and politically deceptive relationship with Julius Caesar, he chooses to focus this legend on her passionate love affair with Antony. In fact, the Narrator goes so far as to praise Antony as a “persone . . . of gentillesse,/And of discrecioun and hardynesse,/Worthi to any wyght that liven may . . .” (610–612). Unlike the men featured in later legends, the Narrator has more to praise Antony for than simply his handsome features or his noble lineage; he is apparently also able to praise his good character. Now, given a man engaged in an adulterous affair with an historically “bad” woman, one has to wonder at the Narrator’s approach here, as this description of Antony paints him as anything but a false man. One could argue that the Narrator did not pick this story, the God of Love did; yet, he or she must also never forget that Chaucer is the ultimate architect here, so why, in a *Legend*

supposedly about good women and false men, would he choose to include such a historically “bad” example of womanhood that ends with both Cleopatra and Antony committing suicide? As we know from Classical sources, they do so not for love as they do in Chaucer’s story, but rather because they do not want to be captured by Octavius’ troops. And so, based upon literary history, what makes these lovers, and Cleopatra in particular, worthy of such attention and praise? The answer to this question is actually found in the next legend—the first the Narrator chooses for himself. It is only after one reads the sorrowful tale of Pyramus and Thisbe that Chaucer reveals to his audience the true nature of his project for the entire *Legend*. Thus, in order to answer the above question, we must first look at *The Legend of Thisbe* because it is only in the comparison of Cleopatra’s tale of experience to Thisbe’s story of innocence that the reader is finally given the key to unlocking the other tales as well as their “good” heroines and “false” heroes.

What most complicates *The Legend of Thisbe* is that it seems to depict both masculine and feminine innocence. Pyramus and Thisbe are very young, as exemplified by the fact that they are still firmly under the rule of their fathers who have a great enmity toward each other. Their children happen to meet by accident, divided by a wall; nevertheless, they succumb to their fantastical garden setting and fall in love through the all-too-famous chink in the stones of said wall. On the surface, the legends of Cleopatra and Thisbe appear to have nothing at all in common other than the end result of suicide for both the male and female characters. Yet, there is one governing principle that affects not only these two vastly different heroines, but also the *Legend* as a whole—that is, Chaucer will continually use both the heroines as well as the heroes in these legends to question the very notion of martyrdom itself. I do not mean to imply here that Chaucer is being impious or that he does not believe that martyrs should be exalted. What he

does seem to want his audience to question is the very criteria that creates a martyr in the eyes of the medieval Church, a criterion that, for women, seems to hinge almost exclusively on physical purity. Even Dante, in the *Paradiso*, denies several notable female saints access to the circles closer to God because they sacrificed their purity to the marriage bed before entering into religious life.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, what these first two legends immediately show Chaucer's audience is that, while the women in these tales might be either "innocent" or "experienced," they are all equally capable of dying in a state of complete faithfulness and devotion, and as Chaucer will continue to show throughout the *Legend*, it is not physical purity that makes a martyr what he or she is, but rather it is that complete conviction that his or her death will do more good as a conversionary tool than will his or her life.

The final lines of Thisbe's tale gives the reader the most blatant expression of this idea, for when the narrator injects: "But God forbade but a woman can/Ben as trewe in lovyng as a man!" (910–911), he is not talking about the lives of Pyramus and Thisbe, or even of Antony and Cleopatra for that matter. He is instead speaking of their deaths. Lisa Kiser argues, "the *Legend of Thisbe* relates a tragedy in which no single character can be blamed for the misfortunes that occur. Yet in this 'retelling' . . . we learn that the tragic consequence of earthly love is still the same with or without a culpable character; in fact, one might say that it is greater, for love causes the downfall of two lovers rather than one" (120). The same sentiment can also be applied to

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<sup>4</sup> I am referring here to *Paradiso*, Cantos II–III where Dante the pilgrim encounters the first sphere of heaven. The souls in this sphere move the slowest because they are the furthest from God, and even though they are Sanctified, the women who reside here have committed no greater sin than becoming wives, as their social positions and families compel them to be, when what they truly desire is the Religious life. Therefore, the paradox enacted in these Cantos is that these women are, in essence, rewarded for their secret desires and spiritual purity even as they are punished for breaking their oaths to God regarding their chastity—an act they are forced to commit by patriarchal society. Thus, in being obedient daughters and wives, they are still somehow less worthy to be closer to God than the martyrs, who for the most part never marry, or women like Beatrice, who never desired the Religious life in the first place.



*The Legend of Cleopatra* based upon how Chaucer (re)tells this famous, if tragic, tale of seduction, war, and death. Both of these first two legends present the stories of two women who prove themselves equal in love to their men through death, and it does not matter that Thisbe is an innocent young virgin or that Cleopatra is an experienced seductress. Both women love like their men, and both women are willing to die to prove their fidelity. And, in doing so, they reveal the major governing principle of the *Legend*, namely that the woman in each of these tales, for good or ill, is inherently a reflection of the man she loves. When he is faithful, so is she; when he is mutable and deceitful, then so too is she. It does not mean that any one woman is rendered “good” or “bad” because of her love, but rather, for better or worse, these women have made their choices, and now, they must live or die for them. Thus, contrary to many critical arguments, while there are myriad unworthy men featured in the *Legend*, there are also curiously few clear-cut female victims—at least none that Chaucer himself does not have to manufacture with obvious editing and highly creative (mis)translation.

For this reason, it is imperative that scholars begin to separate their analysis of *The Legend of Good Women* from that of *Troilus and Criseyde* because Chaucer’s approach to female love and martyrdom is vastly different in these texts. Even though there is an obvious allusion to the *Legend* at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* as well as Alceste’s direct reference to *Troilus and Criseyde* in the Prologues of the *Legend*, Chaucer holds the women in the *Legend* to a far different standard than he does Criseyde. This difference could simply be the result of a Narrator who must now cater to another audience, an audience that is far from pleased with the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*; however, as I have shown in my previous chapter, Chaucer’s apparent authorial interruption at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* seems more concerned with educating young people not to make the same mistakes in love as both Troilus and Criseyde do.

So, what then is to be made of a text about victims with, in all possibility, no real victims to be had? Especially given the fact that in the *Legend* many of the women are praised for doing exactly what Criseyde is condemned by critics for *not* doing—that is, loving enough like a martyr that she is willing to die to prove her fidelity. Perhaps the desire Chaucer is able to satisfy for his audience with the women in the *Legend* is the very one that requires many of them to become martyrs for love in the first place. One critic rightly states, “[Chaucer] shows us that women are indeed as capable of living up to their promises in love as men; but in order to live up to those promises, they have to be as foolish as the men who make them” (Spisak 209). The audience wants women who are equal in love to men, but in order to be so, these women must never commit the sin of loving more than one man as Criseyde does. And this is where Chaucer-as-author begins to edit and retranslate these texts. Experienced women like Cleopatra must now be perceived as innocent in their love as the virginal Thisbe; however, this means that their men must be equally innocent in order to maintain the balance between the women and their lovers that Chaucer sets-up from the very first legend. This balance becomes quite problematic when one encounters such notable scoundrels and betrayers as Tarquin, Jason, Tereus, and Demophoon. Accordingly, it is only in the later legends, where there is absolutely no way for the disparate levels of innocence and experience between the women and the men they love to become equalized, that Chaucer must do his most significant editing—an act that has him accused more often than not of ultimately abandoning this work due to disgust or to boredom. But, in order to prove that these “innocent” women are *not* Criseyde, they must die, and they must do so like a man, or more precisely, they must do so like the men they have chosen to love. Just as Antony and Pyramus commit suicide, so too must Cleopatra and Thisbe. And, in so doing, they can now rightfully claim their status as martyrs. For, on the one hand, like good

pagan women they have martyred themselves for the God of Love, and, on the other, like good Christian women they have defied their heritage to Eve by remaining scrupulously faithful to the men they love. Although the suicides themselves are problematic within a Christian context, as we shall see more clearly with Lucretia's legend, no one can doubt that, whether or not she happens to be an experienced seductress or an innocent maid, these women deserve a place within the *Legend*, for they reveal most clearly from the beginning that Chaucer finds the notions of "innocence" and "experience" to be as fluid as he does "good" and "bad." All one has to do is "Turne over the leef and chese another tale;/For he shal fynde ynowe, grete and smale,/Of storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse,/And eek moralitee and hoolynesse" (*The Miller's Prologue* 3177–3180).

### III

*The Legend of Dido*, like Cleopatra's legend, presents the tale of a powerful and exemplary queen who is reduced to suicide by the man she loves; however, in Dido's case, she commits suicide because Aeneas spurns her love and leaves her good name in tatters when he abandons her to continue his divine mission. Like Virgil before him, Chaucer effusively praises Dido by saying, "she was holden of alle queens flour/Of gentillesse, of fredom, of beaute,/ . . ./She stod so wel in every wightes grace" (1009–1010, 1014). Though, in relying on Ovid more heavily than Virgil as source material for the *Legend*, Chaucer makes his Dido seem far less pitiable and far more pathetic than Virgil's proud queen. And this choice is perhaps due to the fact that Ovid's Aeneas is also far different from Virgil's creation. In the latter case, Aeneas is a man who, even though his god-given task is to found a new city, always seems content to remain in someone else's kingdom. He is a follower who has been turned by fate and circumstances into a leader; whereas, Dido represents his complete opposite. After her

husband's death, she has continued to ensure Carthage's prosperity. Thus, for Virgil, it is essential that Aeneas, who is a soldier and not a statesman, encounter Dido because he must learn from her not only how to build his new city, but also how to rule it and to make it prosper. She knows how to build and maintain a city literally from the ground up, and it is only after she meets Aeneas that her city falls into disrepair and her people lack for a strong and dedicated queen. Virgil's Dido is a means to an end, and therefore, as an author, Virgil is far less concerned with their love affair or the potential ramifications of Aeneas' abandonment of Dido. Ovid, on the other hand, concentrates solely on the love affair. He even compounds the tragedy by adding a pregnancy into the mix. Hence, while Virgil's Dido commits suicide like a vengeful queen, Ovid's Dido commits suicide like a depressed, rejected lover. Conversely, in his *The Legend of Dido*, Chaucer manages to combine these two Didos in such a way that she begins this legend as a powerful queen, and ends up committing suicide like a woeful victim. The Narrator himself marks this transition by beginning this tale with a praise of Virgil (924) and ending it with a note to readers to consult Ovid if they doubt the veracity of his (re)telling (1367).

However, why is this amalgam of Didos necessary to the *Legend*? Since Chaucer has so obviously favored Ovid throughout this work, why not simply use his rendition of events exclusively and leave Virgil out of it? The problem remains that Dido seems to be a perfectly good woman and queen before Aeneas arrives to throw everything she has built into chaos. But, while Dido may initially appear to be the hapless victim to yet another conniving and scheming man, the audience must remember that the *Legend* is far more complex than Ovid's simplistic rendition allows. Dido is presented as she is in this work to lay bare to the disapproving masculine world that she, Cleopatra, and other such powerful women are neither alone in their sorrow, nor are they as "bad" as they seem in much of patriarchal literature. Dido has risen to

and maintained power in the same manner as Cleopatra, through marriage and war; however, while it is easy for many authors and critics to condemn Cleopatra for her overt and unapologetic sexuality, the same cannot be said of Dido. Even though she meets the same end, Dido is always perceived in a different category than Cleopatra. In other words, for all of her experience, Dido is still represented by many as innocent, whereas Cleopatra is never represented as anything *but* a rapaciously sexual woman.

Anyone attempting to falsely imprison Chaucer as well as his characters into certain fixed categories should be careful, especially with regard to the *Legend* where Chaucer has taken great pains to be perceived as writing one work while, in actuality, he is doing quite the opposite. Therefore, one must take care to remember that, while Cleopatra's love for Antony was reciprocated in kind, Dido's love for Aeneas in both Ovid and Chaucer is entirely one-sided. And, as I have previously stated, Chaucer-as-author uses each action taken by a couple in the *Legend* as a mirror for the romantic relationship itself. Consequently, just as Cleopatra's suicide is portrayed in the *Legend* as something akin to her tribute to her love for Antony, so too does Dido's suicide become the reflection of Aeneas' abandonment of their "marriage." In this manner, Chaucer cleverly uses *The Legend of Dido* to show that no amount of translation or combination of source material can change one immutable fact of the human condition—that is, "good" and "bad" have more to do with the perceptions of authors and audiences than they ever have to do with the moral conduct of the characters within the myths themselves. Dido has always had a better reputation than Cleopatra, but ultimately, she meets the same fate. And so, Chaucer once again shows his readers that facts are always inherently more complicated than fiction, no matter how often one tries repainting the lion.

With the above thought in mind, I would like to turn to the final, and perhaps the most controversial, suicide in the *Legend*, namely that of Lucretia. Historically speaking, Livy's *History of Rome* renders Lucretia's rape synonymous with the destruction of Rome's corrupt monarchy and the foundation of the Republic, and as Livy and countless historians after him instinctively understood, her suicide following the rape is far more significant in a cultural sense than the rape itself. Indeed, had Lucretia been merely a rape victim, her story may not have had the same lasting effect. It is her subsequent suicide that cements her place in literary history, for Lucretia commits suicide not to absolve herself, but rather she does so to ensure that those women who willingly commit the sin of adultery cannot find an excuse for their immoral behavior by citing Lucretia's story in their defense. Thus, in perhaps the greatest paradox to trouble male authors and critics from Livy to St. Augustine and beyond, Lucretia seemingly commits suicide in order to prove her innocence. And, while these authors appear content to argue from this perspective, the real reasoning behind their problematic discussions of Lucretia's suicide actually *does* stem from the fact that she was an unquestionably good woman who was raped by a very bad man. As St. Augustine argues in *Confessions*, the question of Lucretia's innocence is not easily solved because, if she were truly blameless, then why would she need to commit suicide? If there is no willing adultery, then there should be no need for her to die.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the real dilemma here is sadly the same one that rape victims still face in modern courtrooms—that is, how can we be *sure* that Lucretia never in any way consented to Tarquin's

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<sup>5</sup> For a fuller discussion of the debate between Classical versus Christian views on rape/suicide, especially with regard to the “problem” of Lucretia, Ian Donaldson's *The Rapes of Lucretia: A Myth and its Transformations* is most informative. Donaldson accurately shows in much fuller detail than this space permits how the Church Fathers turn the perception of Lucretia's suicide from the celebrated act it is in pagan mythology into a sin. And so, in the eyes of the Christian church, Lucretia's suicide, or rather her self-murder, incriminates her in her own rape in a way that the pagan mind would have found incomprehensible.

sexual advances? It is inherently a ridiculous and offensive question, for how would any woman ever deserve to be raped, either by her actions, proximity, sexual history, speech, or even her clothing choices? But the sad truth remains that the onus for preventing this violent crime is always placed upon the woman in the scenario and not on the man. In other words, the question everyone tacitly asks is what did she do to *provoke* the man into raping her, instead of why did this man *choose* to commit such a heinous act in the first place? A man simply has to prove by whatever means necessary that the act was in any way consensual; a woman has the far more arduous task of proving why she deserved not to be raped. And herein lies the problem with Lucretia's suicide, for if she were truly innocent—or more precisely, if she truly did not consent in any way to Tarquin's advances—why would she need to commit suicide? While historians in Livy's camp see Lucretia's violation and death as more of a political means to an end, theologians like St. Augustine are far more troubled on a spiritual level. For, while they often deny Lucretia's culpability in the act, suicide is always a sin no matter what the circumstances, and this “bad” act subsequently stains the rest of Lucretia's claims to her status as innocent. Lisa Kiser explains this theological maze by saying, “As hard as our narrator may work to make Lucrece fit the molds of a chaste Christian, she is still saintly only by the standards of her own pagan culture, dying, as Augustine says, not for Christian truth but through shame over the result of someone's violent and lustful desire” (106). As a consequence, it becomes difficult to praise Lucretia as a “good” woman in the eyes of the medieval Church, and thus, her inclusion in the *Legend* is a bit more complicated than it initially seems. If one goes by the Classical reasoning, then of course she should be included in a canon of good women, but if one subscribes to the more Christian mindset, then her presence in such company is problematic at best because the ultimate purpose of hagiographic example is to give good Christians model people to emulate.

And, while one can have sympathy for Lucretia's plight, he or she could never emulate her and not be eternally damned.

In order to subvert some of the larger problems here, Chaucer uses the same tactic he does in Book III of *Troilus and Criseyde*, when Troilus is about to botch his chance with Criseyde due to Pandarus' mishandled midnight seduction. In other words, Chaucer has Lucretia faint at the moment of her rape. Instead of being conscious for the act as she is in Livy's version, in *The Legend of Lucrece*: "She loste bothe at ones wit and breth,/And in a swogh she lay, and wex so ded/Men myghte smyten of hire arm or hed;/She feleth no thyng, neyther foul ne fayr" (1815–1818). The last line of this quotation is perhaps the most relevant in this case because one no longer has to wonder whether or not Lucretia secretly found pleasure in the act, as is the underlying argument used by many a rapist and theologian. Many critics like to get sentimental with their arguments here and assert that Chaucer has Lucretia faint out of pity. They claim Chaucer is saving her from having to be a conscious witness to the violence of this act. While this may perhaps be true in part, I find the reason behind the faint to be far more practical than sentimental in its purpose. Since the Narrator firmly asserts that "she feleth no thyng neyther foul ne fayr," Lucretia has now been released from the task of proving her innocence in this case. She has at the moment of her faint as well as for the entirety of her rape all of the animation, or lack thereof, of a dead body, and so she cannot be blamed for what happens to her corpse, as it were. And while some critics find her corpse-like appearance to be rather disturbing, it turns out to be as redeeming in this instance as it was for Troilus. Chaucer-as-author can never rehabilitate Lucretia's suicide in the eyes of medieval society, but he can and does rehabilitate her innocence by literally writing her out of her own body while the rape itself takes place. In this manner, Lucretia's suicide is unique to the whole *Legend* because she commits this act not



out of love or out of a sense of betrayal, but rather she does so in order to ensure that she will never be perceived solely as a victim. Lucretia did not willingly, and in Chaucer's case consciously, engage in an adulterous act, and with her suicide, committed on her own terms and with her own witnesses present, she subverts her victimhood by dying like a warrior, with a rational decision to act and without regret as to the rightness of her action. In the end, Lucretia sheds her blood in order to reclaim her "goodness" and innocence in the eyes of the secular world, even if it means forever damning her soul in the uncompromising eyes of the Church.

#### IV

From *The Legend of Lucrece*, I would like to turn my attention to perhaps the two most innocent women in the *Legend* who seem far more content than Lucretia to retain their status as victims, namely Philomela and Hypermnestra. In doing so, I realize that I am skipping ahead a bit; however, scholars far more detailed than I have discussed at length the inherent problems with including women such as Hypsipyle, Medea, Phyllis, and Ariadne in a work with the designation of "good" in its title. For, while Chaucer-as-narrator has kindly left the more salacious parts of these women's Classical myths out of his collection, he has also given enough hints here and there to suggest to a knowledgeable audience that he is very much aware of just how many scandalous bits he has cut out. For instance, he does not begin Medea's tale with the murder of her brother, nor does he end it with the murder of her two sons by her own hand. He does not need to; his source material has already taken care of this burden for him. As a result, he need only include the stories of Hypsipyle and Medea—both duped by Jason—in order to evoke the memory in his audience of the violent end to these tales as presented by Ovid in the *Heroides*, which includes Hypsipyle's curse that foretells Medea's bloody revenge. These passages also refer to the other stories about Medea found in the *Metamorphosis*, which reveal

Medea's awesome powers as both a sorceress and manipulator when she convinces Pallas' daughters that murdering him will save his life. The Narrator admits to his omissions quite cleverly in *The Legend of Hypsipyle and Medea* when he states, "We can Ovyde hire letter in vers endyte,/Which were as now to long for me to wryte" (1678–1679). In this quotation, the Narrator handily releases the responsibility of accurately (re)telling the content of his sources to the sources themselves by coyly saying, "if you want to know the truth, then you must discover it on your own as I have neither the time nor the inclination to do so here." In this fashion, Ovid is left with the unpleasant telling of infanticide, patricide, and familial betrayal. The Narrator here is only concerned with Jason and his seduction of two women under false pretenses. It is in this (re)translation of events that these women can truly maintain the title of "martirum" given at the end of their legend because, in this case, they are indeed martyrs for love. However, as I have previously stated, the Narrator has carefully selected what myths to include in *The Legend of Good Women*, and when one considers the man Hypsipyle and Medea both choose to place their love and faith in, then one can see why Chaucer chose to include their tales, regardless of the copious amount of editing needed to make either of these women remotely "good."

The same can be said of both Ariadne and Phyllis. The former falls for the hollow promises of the father, Theseus, who eventually deserts her to run away with her sister, Phaedra, and the latter falls in love with his son, Demophoon, who reenacts his father's betrayal of Ariadne almost exactly. One could as easily misread these two legends as they could dismiss Hypsipyle and Medea as mere shadows of their Classical selves, but the legends of Ariadne and Phyllis are a bit more complicated than dismissive examples of a "like father, like son" male betrayer. The problem with all four of these legends is the same from the narrator/translator's perspective. He must transfer the pity and fear required for audience catharsis from the victims

of these women and their equal disloyalty onto the women themselves. In the Classical narratives, these women are not victims. They may appear to be on the surface, but they do not take the betrayal of their trust by the men they supposedly love in passing. Though Lucretia is the victim of a violent crime and commits suicide in order to reclaim her honor and good name, these women betray their countries, families, and maternal relationships all for the sake of pleasing duplicitous men. Even with the Narrator's oh-so-careful editing, the audience knows that these four women are far from "good," but his job is to show false men in all their deceitful glory. And, in these legends he succeeds, but he also accomplishes something far more cunning than Alceste or the God of Love would ever allow. He is able to hint at his sources in such a way as to show that, even with strenuous editing, some women, like some men, can never be rewritten good. Hypsipyle, Medea, Ariadne, and Phyllis are ultimately reflections of the despicable men they love, as they have been since Classical times. These women are cut from the same treacherous cloth as are Jason, Theseus, and Demophoon, and in loving such men, they have, at least in the Narrator's estimation, earned their betrayals at the hands of these same men. In this manner, the Narrator gives the audience just enough information from his "olde bokes" to show that, no matter how much Alceste may want to "Turne over the leef and chese another tale," the next tale may, in all probability, not be any better with regard to the rehabilitation of women than the one before it.

In contrast to the above women, Philomela and Hypermnestra are perhaps the two most innocent female characters in the *Legend*. By this statement, I mean both sexually and with regard to their victimhood; for while one could argue that Lucretia is equally innocent, one could never say that she tacitly accepts her status as victim. The manner of her death as well as her reasoning for such a public suicide negates any sense in her audience that she is committing this

act because of despair or guilt. However, Philomela and Hypermnestra are a different story. Neither of these women commits suicide, but they also are not the sole architects behind their descents into victimhood. In the case of Philomela, her triumph over her tormentor – a triumph composed and perpetrated by her sister, Procne, is as effective as it is gruesome, but such is the content of her Classical myth. In *The Legend of Good Women*, she receives a much more abrupt treatment by the Narrator. Indeed, as is the case with Medea, the Narrator ends Philomela's legend rather abruptly – that is, he concludes with Philomela receiving her sister's comfort after Tereus has thoroughly brutalized her and not with Procne gaining the ultimate revenge on her husband by killing their only child, Isthis, and serving him to Tereus for dinner. He ends *The Legend of Philomela* with Procne's thought: "nevere harm agilte ne deserved/Unto this crewel man, that she of wiste./Ye may be war of men, if that yow liste" (2385–2387). In this quotation, one can see that the Narrator rather explicitly hints that he knows exactly the Classical ending he has made his audience remember without ever having to write it down. And so, I advance the notion that the real focus of this legend should not be on Philomela, but on Procne instead. No one could ever doubt Philomela's status as victim, and if she were the one to perpetrate her revenge upon Tereus, it would be difficult to deny her this right. Then again, it is Procne who famously takes revenge upon Tereus, and in this manner, she appropriates her sister's victimhood and revenge as her own—an appropriation that leads to the slaughter of her innocent son. And, while many could easily identify and even sympathize with Procne and her actions on behalf of her sister, her inclusion at the end of this tale hints at the greater purpose which governs the entirety of the *Legend* itself, namely that even with very careful editing and translation, even the most innocent of victims is capable of great evil, much like the men who have betrayed, hurt, or otherwise mentally, physically, and emotionally abused them. Hence, what the *Legend*

accomplishes in the tales of each woman with a complicated, Classical past, using innuendo and allusion more often than direct statements, is the overwhelming sense that simply repainting the lion will once again only tell half of the story. For, in order to achieve true equity in male/female relationships, one cannot simply change the perspective of the painting; he or she must, as Chaucer has done here, rebuild the entire frame that contains it.

In a similar vein, *The Legend of Hypermnestra* presents the final tale in this unfinished series, and this legend has received the dubious distinction of being the final straw for a quite possibly bored author. Indeed, the Narrator appears to be so bored with this legend that he seemingly trails off mid-thought, but I do not intend to argue whether or not the Narrator or even Chaucer himself was so fed-up with this work as to leave it purposely unfinished as many other scholars are wont to do. One must be careful at such sweeping judgments because, while Hypermnestra's legend does at first seem to be yet another tale of one more interchangeably good woman, her position in this work seems in fact more like a turning point than it does an ambiguous ending. In this legend, the narrator finally gives his readers their first true, uncomplicated victim, who is the sole subject of her tale. With Lucretia, we have a victim who is transformed into a warrior with her death. With Philomela, we have a victim whose story is ultimately sublimated by the murderous revenge of her sister, but with Hypermnestra, we have a woman who is the sole focus of her sad end. Her story begins when she is commanded by her father to kill her new husband, Lyneus. However, when she is unable to commit this heinous act and admits her father's duplicity to her new husband, Lyneus throws *her* into jail. At first, the revisions made to this myth seem beneficial to Hypermnestra's status as a good woman and martyr. As one scholar articulates, "Submitting one virgin for the forty-nine others who appear in the sources, investing the value of fifty virgins in one, Chaucer increases the exchange value

of this virgin forty-nine fold” (Aloni 75). But what Aloni and many other scholars miss about this profound change is that the injustice here is compounded and not reduced by what Chaucer-as-author edits out of this legend. Instead of Hypermnestra being one of fifty siblings *and* the only one of her forty-nine sisters not to kill her husband, he makes a rather vague reference to other siblings and includes none of them in this murderous marriage plot. Therefore, Hypermnestra’s value as an exchangeable commodity does increase (Aloni 78), but her status as a “good” woman becomes rather atypical with the absence of her emphatic stance against her father as well as her forty-nine other, more obedient, sisters. *Of course* a good woman would refuse to murder her husband, otherwise she wouldn’t have the right to call herself such. Furthermore, in rewriting Hypermnestra’s legend in this way, the author appears to be fixing that which was never broken. Such was not the case with Cleopatra or Medea, who required some real editing in order to turn their far too experienced selves into more innocent pictures of womanhood; nevertheless, even with such revisions, it seems all too clear that Chaucer’s Narrator is allowed to hint at the major discrepancies Chaucer himself cannot write on paper due to the constraints placed on his task as author in the Prologue. On the other hand, by rewriting Hypermnestra’s defiance in a similar manner, her actions become more like those of an emotionally weak woman, as opposed to those of someone like Lucretia whose actions reverberate with a defiant strength that practically dares anyone to ignore them. Accordingly, in this final legend by default, Chaucer-as-author finally gives in to Alceste’s demands and presents his audience with a truly pathetic victim, but he cannot make Hypermnestra *more* innocent than she already is. And so, instead of rendering her more innocent, he makes her less pitiable. Her seeming weakness makes her as unsympathetic to her husband as she seems to the readers of her legend. In this manner, *The Legend of Hypermnestra* appears to be more of a transition than it

does a conclusion. It is at this moment that Chaucer-as-author and as-narrator finally (re)turns to the original premise of this work—that is, to show a good woman wronged by a false man. But, to accomplish this end, the Narrator must finally ignore the stories in his sources in order to turn an already good woman so good that she is ultimately rendered mute, indistinguishable, and utterly inconsequential, just as his critics and the “olde bokes” have demanded his female characters be written from the beginning.

## V

For many critics, *The Legend of Good Women*, while redeemable in parts, is as a whole, a failed literary endeavor. The poetic fluidity in the F and G Prologues is unmatched by the seemingly prosaic and lack-luster collection of revised Ovidian tales. Lisa Kiser best articulates this argument by saying, “Clearly, attempts to make the *Legend* easily bridge the gap between the *Troilus* and the *Canterbury Tales* are thwarted by the fact that the *Legend* is very much a backward looking poem, a work that seems to drag up the past rather than herald the future” (20). So, the question becomes: is the *Legend* the *mea culpa* Alceste demands, or is it in reality a failed stylistic transition disguised as a penance? Is Chaucer-as-author really intending to repent for his supposed literary crimes against women? Or is it perhaps that, as another critic states: “his ‘sin’ is a sin only in the eyes of the God of Love, and not in his own” (Allen 425)? The answers to these questions are more complicated than they at first appear because the *Legend* itself is also far more complex than it initially seems. And the problem is compounded by the fact that Chaucer does not choose to create, or more precisely to rewrite, characters that openly defy the dictates of Eros, Alceste, or accepted patriarchal norms. In fact, he has the arduous task of making some of these women actually *adhere* to patriarchal codes of female conduct, when in their original myths they openly defied them. Therefore, the real authorial

acrobatics come not when Chaucer (mis)translates these women from “bad” to “good,” or when he puts the men in these tales under equal scrutiny and revision, but rather it comes when the author is forced by outside dictates to justify his writing to his audience. Chaucer has been accused in his own time as well as today of writing women worse than they actually are, and while there is some sympathy to be had in his Narrators, they often are not resounding in their praise of the heroines they claim to pity. The *Legend* is no exception in this regard.

Indeed, Florence Percival condemns the Narrator of the *Legend* for not being terribly sincere in his claims of sympathy for the women in this work. She states, “It is a voice apologetic towards women, but not overwhelmingly so. It pities woman’s plight, but sees no remedy for woman’s situation beyond her return to quite traditional behavioural standards, to less wandering on the seashore, less trusting of strangers, less readiness to believe the promises of men” (15). In this regard, Kiser, Allen, and Percival are not entirely mistaken. Based on his choice of source material, his rather dry delivery, and his seeming inexhaustible canon of wailing female victims, one could easily dismiss the *Legend* as an experiment in modernizing Classical mythology gone horribly wrong. However, the *Legend* deserves more attention than a simple, cursory glance, and when one pays closer attention to the work as a whole and not to just the individual sob-stories of these pitiable women, then a far different work comes to light. The bifurcation by contemporary scholarship of the *Legend* into two poems—that is, the Prologues and the legends, has led modern critics not only to underestimate the quality of the legends themselves, but also of the Prologues as well. Many want to view the two Prologues, F and G, as merely a rough draft and a revision told by two halves of the same personality, but as I have shown in the first section of this chapter, the Prologues possess, in fact, two separate characters and not two halves of the same whole. The F Narrator is quite content to continue his dream



world. Unfortunately, this desire also leads him to be far more susceptible to the dictates of Romantic fiction than the G Narrator, who is a much more succinct and aware speaker. Furthermore, as we can tell from the conclusions of their Prologues, the F Narrator is entirely too dependent upon his books as he begins his penance, but the G Narrator cannot wait to move the dictates of his dream into the waking world that is governed by both authority and experience. Even though it is impossible to tell which Narrator would eventually have been left in charge of the legends that follow, someone had to take up the task of narrating the legends until this crucial decision was made. And it is my contention that Chaucer himself takes over as primary Narrator of these women and their stories until some sort of synthesis can be reached between F and G. Consequently, due to the author's strong presence in the later legends, one cannot easily separate either the Prologues from these tales, or the entire *Legend* from the rest of Chaucer's canon.

In this manner, perhaps the legends are more congruent and apropos than contemporary scholars believe, and not just because of Eros and Alceste's demands in the Prologue. Perhaps the real crux of the matter lies with the women chosen for this work, and the fact that Chaucer knowingly picks stories where both the women and the men are evenly matched, whether it be in passion, in duty, in commitment to love, or in betrayal. Indeed, *The Legend of Hypermnestra* seems to present the only clear-cut instance of victimhood in this entire work. By this, I do not mean to imply that she is the only wronged woman in this text; still, she is the only woman who has been written even *more* innocent than she was to begin with and who seems to actively accept her role as victim throughout her tale. In other words, all the women in this text can rightly claim that they have been victimized, but she is the only woman who never does anything to alleviate her status as victim. Lucretia commits a mortal sin to prove her virtue, and it is hinted to the reader that Philomela will turn to her sister for help with a suitable revenge

plot. Conversely, Hypermnestra does nothing but accept a punishment meted out for a crime she neither devises, nor executes. And, while none of the other women who take rather violent revenge upon their betrayers in Classical myth are allowed to do so here because of Alceste's rules, Chaucer subverts her frame for the *Legend* by coyly hinting where one should go read about what these women actually do to their false lovers and husbands.

Through sly suggestions and innuendo, Chaucer shows his audience that *The Legend of Good Women* is quite possibly the text the Wife of Bath warns everyone about in her Prologue, namely the book that will tell of wicked husbands and the evils of the mark of Adam. But it is also so much more; for no woman in the *Legend*, save for Hypermnestra, is any better or worse than the man who either loves her or betrays her, or in some cases, does both. In this sense, the *Legend* is ultimately not just a text about women. It is a naked text-as-woman, and Chaucer's abandonment of this text is reflexive of every abandonment perpetuated within its pages. Therefore, perhaps Chaucer's "boredom" at the end is not for the women's stories, but suppose it is for the translations of those stories found in his sources? Initially, like both of his Narrators in the Prologues, Chaucer finds his comfort from books, but at the quasi-end, we find an author-turned-narrator even more disillusioned with his sources than he was at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*. In this fashion, contemporary scholars are correct in their claim that the *Legend* forms a bridge between *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Canterbury Tales*; however, it is not as inferior to these other works as these same critics assume. The *Legend* is not a stylistic accident, but rather it marks the author's move from authority to experience—so much so that, by the time he reaches the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer has dispensed with using removed narrative personas and has made himself a character in his own story. In this manner, he will now dictate how his sources will fit into his experience and not the other way around, and his

female characters from *The Legend of Good Women* onward reflect this change in both his methodology as an author as well as his ideology as a man. There is always going to be good and bad in the world, but Chaucer once again shows his audience that, when it comes to behaving “good” or “bad,” we do not live in a perfect world, and neither men, nor women are above reproach simply because the “olde bokes” have always said so. Experience alone should teach us that much.

CHAPTER 4  
A VIRGIN, A WIFE, AND A MARTYR WALK INTO THE *TALES* . . .

God liste to shewe his wonderful miracle  
In hire, for we sholde seen his myghty werkis. . .

—Narrator, *The Man of Law's Tale* 477–478

For someone who wrote so often about the “wo that is in marriage,” it stands to reason that Chaucer would be more concerned than most with stories about wives (*The Wife of Bath's Prologue* 3). And no text is perhaps more focused on the myriad wives to be had by husbands, both rich and poor as well as fair and foul, than the *Canterbury Tales*. Whether one turns over a leaf to read the tale of a virgin, a widow, a martyr, a sinner, or a saint, Chaucer somehow manages to make all of these different women into wives of one variety or another—some of whom are far more desirable by patriarchal standards than others.<sup>1</sup> It is as if the *Canterbury Tales* continues the project Chaucer began in *The Legend of Good Women*, where instead of delivering the promised amalgam of independent tales about myriad themes, Chaucer-as-author defies the dictates of both narrator and text in order to reiterate to his audience in tale after tale his lessons on similitude, faith, sovereignty, and marriage. Regardless if one is intrigued or repulsed by a Wife of Bath, or awed or cowed by a St. Cecilia, or even frustrated by our understanding of a Custance, one cannot deny the fact that Chaucer presents women such as

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<sup>1</sup> This statement is intended to reveal that the wifhood of these women is not always a current state, as with a widow. By medieval standards, these women are still married, even after the death of their husbands, and for this reason, medieval society frowned upon widows remarrying, even if it was necessary to do so for financial and/or status reasons as was often the case in the middle and lower classes. The Wife of Bath and her five husbands, each of whom she marries for some increase in income and/or social position, save for the last, is the literary example Chaucer employs to illustrate how often social custom did not always follow legal or clerical mandates in the fourteenth-century. In a similar vein, Chaucer is also not above mocking the institution of marriage as a sacrament or the perception of marriage by medieval clergy. One can discern this notion in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, which is on its most basic level a tale about a loving and devoted marriage between two chickens: Chauntecleer, a literally hen-pecked husband, and Pertelote, the perfect exemplum of a fowl wife.

these – that is, women who should have lived life in the margins—with bold strokes of his pen. This rendering is a sign of masculine respect for their autonomy as women and wives not accorded to many women or female characters in the Middle Ages. Even if one chooses not to live his or her life by the standards they have set for themselves within their marriages, one cannot deny the fact that, once they have been read, these women are not soon forgotten and for very different reasons. However, as I intend to argue in the following chapter, there is one female character in the *Canterbury Tales* who manages to blend the best personality traits of perhaps the two most intriguing women in this work as a whole, namely the rapaciously sexual Alisoun of Bath and the militantly chaste St. Cecilia. I am referring, of course, to Custance, the much set-adrift heroine of *The Man of Law's Tale*, who, unlike any other woman in the *Canterbury Tales*, suffers the same torturous trials as a martyr without having to meet the same gruesome end. Indeed, Custance, at the conclusion of her tale, dictates her own destiny, her happily-ever-after if you will, as a wife. No one, except for Griselda, seems to suffer as much as a wife, but no one else seems to meld the two sides of her personality—the saint and the wife—with the same finesse as she does either. It is easy to see Custance as only a perpetual victim, especially since for much of this tale, she is victimized by people of both sexes; still, I intend to argue that all of her suffering has a purpose, and ultimately, she puts an end to her torture and wandering on her own terms, something few women in her position ever get to do. By this statement, I mean to say that Custance does not end her tale as the same naïve, easily manipulated girl she was in the beginning, and for this reason, when the time comes to claim her future potential happiness—in this case the husband she decides she wants and not the one her father chose for her—she does not hesitate. In this sense, Custance is constant in her determination to make of her life the best that she can in a world where her desires do not matter

to male authority, and despite her various trials, Custance learns one immutable truth: it is possible to remain in God's favor *and* to fulfill her duties as a wife. To find out how one can do so, he or she simply needs to read this tale.

What is initially intriguing about Chaucer's translation of Custance is that she is only ever tested with regard to her faith; she is never tested as a wife and mother. It always seems taken for granted that, as a truly devout woman, she would be the best example of wifedom and motherhood as well. Yet, to exhibit further his uniqueness as an author, Chaucer never lets these latter two roles diminish her capacity to convert others to Christianity through her faith, chastity, and constance. In the Middle Ages, both secular and ecclesiastical law divided women into two categories—the Eves, who are represented by the Wife of Bath in this work, and the Marys, as represented by St. Cecilia. Now, a woman who becomes a wife, which paradoxically requires both virginity and its loss, was supposed to spend the remainder of her life being “chaste.” This “chastity” required atonement for being transformed from a Mary into an Eve by the very demands of wifedom itself, an ironic position considering the fact that Mary too was a wife. Consequently, while Church Father's like St. Paul believed that one should not spurn the sacrament of marriage, they also preached that the highest form of this sacrament involved a marriage without consummation, as represented by Cecilia and Valerius in *The Second Nun's Tale*. However, while this was the ideal, the reality often turned out more like the pseudo-autobiography told by Alisoun of Bath in her *Prologue*—that is, women were more often than not bartered in marriage for wealth or status, usually to profoundly older men. These same women would gain, in turn, status as wives by exchanging their only real currency within marriage, namely their sexual selves and their reproductivity, for even a modicum of power. Because of this grim reality, there are few women in either medieval literature or in medieval life

whose status as a wife and as a mother does not to some degree hinder her exaltation by the Church. And, in this regard, Chaucer truly is unusual because, in bringing attention to both Custance's sanctity and her wifehood, he shows his audience that women are not so easily categorized as either Alisouns or Ceciliias. As *The Man of Law's Tale* shows, these two extremes can be combined and tempered into a Custance, whose unwavering faith and goodness as a wife still makes her pleasing in God's eyes—a fact no one can dispute based upon the number of miracles granted to her within the course of her narrative.

In order to further explore the significance of a character such as Custance in relation to the other female characters in the *Canterbury Tales*, I must first turn to perhaps the most notorious woman in this work, the Wife of Bath. Whether or not one chooses to love her or to loathe her, one cannot ever say that she is easy to forget. And, because she is so thoroughly memorable, Alisoun seems to provide as much contemporary critical controversy as she produces with her fellow pilgrims within the context of the narrative as a whole. She is the first of Chaucer's female characters to openly debate masculine perception of female desire, especially within the confines of the Church. As Michael Calebrese writes, "Throughout her *Prologue*, the Wife battles . . . the role that sacred history has assigned to her, based on the actions of her other mother, Eve, who, significantly, heads the catalog of 'wicked wives'" (95). The Wife of Bath is a rare character in medieval literature because she is one of the few who is not afraid to combat false notions of "wicked" women within the same forum so often favored by men in her day: preaching and scholarly debate. And so, what renders her absolutely indelible is the fact that, in all of Chaucer's works, she gives the most succinct and assertive homily regarding the dichotomy of experience versus authority. As she famously states in her *Prologue*, "Experience, though noon auctoritee/Were in this world, is right ynogh for me . . ." (1–2). She is

the only one of Chaucer's characters in any work to state her side in this debate in such absolute terms, and I find it significant that Chaucer would give such a direct and important stance to a woman. In *Strumpet Muse*, Alfred David states: "In *Troilus* and the *Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer is still trying to reconcile the truths of experience and authority. In the *Canterbury Tales*, he expresses their conflict more and more explicitly and deals honestly with the limitations of each" (158). Strumpet or no, David is correct in asserting that, in Alisoun, Chaucer finds his muse, for unlike the two ambiguous male Narrators of *The Legend of Good Women* or the oft mistranslated Criseyde, the Wife makes her voice impossible to misunderstand from the very beginning. No one can mistake words this explicit, and no one can deny that this woman is determined to be both seen *and* heard. In this manner, she is a bit of a departure for Chaucer in that many of his characters are written with such deft slight-of-hand that their desires, arguments, and words are often mistranslated by both their fellow characters and by critics, but the Wife of Bath will not stand for such treatment. She is not content to suffer in silence as other women do; moreover, though one might be tempted to find her bluntness more of a sin than a saving grace, one must be careful not forget her virtues. Like Custance, Alisoun is constant. She may not trust authority in the least, but this mistrust only shows that she has learned her lessons about marriage and its inequitable treatment of women well. She will not waver in her contempt for masculine authority, and in her pervasive derision of anyone who tries to silence her, there is a certain constancy. It is to these lessons that she remains true with one notable exception. Her marriage to her fifth husband, Jankyn, demonstrates the Wife of Bath's single deviation from her experience that, in marriage at least, "al is for to selle" (*Prologue* 414), and by ignoring her own advice, Alisoun literally suffers a blow delivered by Jankyn. In this sense, the Wife's sexual attraction to Jankyn makes her forget the dangers of marriage, and she, in her blind desire and



love for this man, gives to him “al the lond and fee/That evere was me yeven therbifoore” (*Prologue* 630–631). In doing so, the Wife buys herself not only all of the benefits of a young, strapping, sexually desirable husband, but also she gains all of the problems inherent in a husband who is not her similitude. In other words, the out-spoken Wife has made the same mistake as the women in *The Legend of Good Women*. She has chosen to love and marry the wrong man; however, Jankyn, just like the much-maligned “heroes” of this earlier work, reflects the Wife’s own deficiencies in his callous behavior. Alisoun is, in reality, no better or no worse than the man she has chosen to love, and if her happily-ever-after didn’t quite work out as she planned, then Chaucer-as-author shows his audience that she really has no one to blame for her folly but herself.

When Jankyn comes along, Alisoun finally has the wealth and freedom to choose any husband she desires, but unlike Custance, she does not choose wisely. On the other hand, Chaucer also seems to have certain sympathy for the Wife, in that Alisoun is allowed to regain control from Jankyn through the use of a ruse that only a truly experienced woman could pull off. Indeed, once Jankyn has delivered his famous blow to Alisoun’s head, which leaves her permanently deaf in one ear, she pretends to be dying, and in a stunning dramatic performance, she exclaims: “‘O! hastow slayn me, false theef?/. . . /‘And for my land thus hastow mordred me?/Er I be deed, yet wol I kisse thee’” (*Prologue* 800–802). By using such highly emotional language and demanding such a classically Romantic action before she “dies,” Alisoun seems to touch Jankyn’s latent Chivalric tendencies. In this way, she gets him so remorseful that he returns to her the “governance of hous and lond” (*Prologue* 814), and more important than this, he goes a step farther and grants her the governance of his “tonge, and of his hond also” (*Prologue* 815), which is a boon that the Wife is quick to seize upon. Not only does she make

him immediately burn his book of “Wikked Wives”—which is perhaps one of the tomes in the collection of “olde bokes” so favored by the Narrators in the *Legend*—but also she demands and is granted “al the soveraynetee” in every aspect of their married life (*Prologue* 818). In doing so, Alisoun believes she has won a great victory, but, in reality, she has done the reverse. The mistake the Wife makes here is in mistranslating “soveraynetee” as “control,” when in reality it is the opposite. With the sort of marriages the Wife has had, one should question her definition of “soveraynetee” from the beginning, for like Criseyde, Alisoun of Bath has quite a lot of experience with marriage but little real knowledge of love. Indeed, her one matrimonial experiment with “love” results in a disastrous power struggle. Thus, the erroneous assumption Alisoun makes, in all of her experience, is that “sovereignty” must be seized—as opposed to granted freely—and that it can only be controlled by either the husband or the wife at any one time. For her, one either possesses the sovereignty for both individuals in a marriage, or one has relinquished it in some way; there is no sovereignty without dominance, especially if one intends to be happily married. And, because of this mistranslation, the Wife makes the very same mistake she warns men against in her *Prologue*, for instead of changing the perspective of the portrait, she merely repaints the lion—only this time Jankyn must now endure the “mark of Adam” (696), when he once unfairly bestowed upon her all the sins of Eve.

The irony here is that Alisoun proceeds to tell a tale in which a young knight, who has the same view with regard to power relationships as she does, is reformed by a loathly lady, who shows this wayward knight that, without equal exchange on the part of both men and women, patriarchy simply becomes matriarchy—the consequences of which can be seen once the Wife has reversed the power dynamic at the end of her *Prologue*. Just as Jankyn tried to make Alisoun into someone who would be seen and not heard, so too is he silenced once Alisoun

stages her emotional coup. Luckily, Alisoun's *Tale* has a far different ending. Once the loathly lady has gained her young knight's promise to do "no fors" (1234), she does not take advantage of both his emotional and physical capitulation as the Wife did with Jankyn. The loathly lady does what Alisoun should have: she rewards her husband for his rehabilitated attitude towards both women and marriage. Ultimately, Alisoun cannot accept the marital accord reached by the loathly lady and the young knight. Indeed, she interrupts her own tale just as the knight-rapist has been truly reformed, the loathly lady has turned young and beautiful, and they are about to live in bliss forevermore with the parting advice:

"Jesu Crist us send  
Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde,  
And grace t'overbyde hem that we wedde;  
And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves  
That noght wol be governed by hir wyves;  
And olde and angry nygardes of dispence,  
God sende hem soone verray pestilence!" (*The Wife of Bath's Tale* 1257–1264)

Once again, it is as if Chaucer-as-author has rendered his characters better narrators than they are people, for this quotation shows that, while the Wife and the loathly lady share certain similarities as much older women married to young, virile, and initially sexist men, the Wife does not possess the same experience or "gentillesse" as her narrative counterpart. While the loathly lady takes the time to truly rehabilitate her husband, Alisoun simply regains control. In this sense, despite her arguments to the contrary, the Wife is, in actuality, repainting the lion in her own marriage, whereas the loathly lady is contemplating a different animal altogether. Consequently, it is in writing Alisoun of Bath so brash and, in a certain sense, abrasive and in (re)writing the loathly lady into so patient and calm a teacher that Chaucer-as-author makes his

case for female sovereignty as well as for joy in marriage much more palatable to the average reader—an irony that should not be lost on Chaucer’s audience even if it is on the Wife herself.<sup>2</sup>

Despite her claims to the contrary, the Wife of Bath is not the only woman in the *Canterbury Tales* to experience “wo in marriage,” but before turning to the *The Man of Law’s Tale* and its story of Custance, which presents a similar struggle for power, sovereignty, and joy in marriage depicted here, another woman’s story must be told. It is my contention that Custance cannot be appreciated on her own terms until one first views the opposite end of the spectrum of wifehood, as presented by Cecilia in *The Second Nun’s Tale*. Custance is, in this sense, the loathly lady for the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole. Undeniably, she presents the middle ground for those who cannot identify with the Wife of Bath’s hyper-sexuality any more than they can with St. Cecilia’s hyper-chastity and eventual martyrdom. Thus, on the one hand, Chaucer gives his readers the unrepentant sinner in Alisoun, even if she is on a holy pilgrimage, and on the other, there is Cecilia, who is ever the uncompromising saint. Neither is willing to bend or deviate, and in the end, each receives exactly what she has prayed for. The Wife has her husband who is “yonge and fressh abedde” and Cecilia is put to a violent death for her unwavering faith. And, even though Custance is similar to both of these women in some ways, she is also something entirely new. She finds a way to be both a wife and a woman of faith, and she always seems to receive divine aid whenever she needs it, regardless of her status as wife and, therefore, non-virgin. Unlike any other woman in Chaucer’s writing, Custance skillfully

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<sup>2</sup> I do not mean to imply by this statement that the Wife is not a sympathetic character or that Chaucer meant her to be solely an object of derision. Her outlandish sexual behavior and obvious flaws in both judgment and marriage pave the way for the loathly lady to be heard by an all too disapproving masculine audience. And so, after the audacity of a Wife of Bath, the almost serene loathly lady seems much more agreeable—even if she is in affect arguing the exact same changes to the patriarchal order as the Wife.

navigates the very narrow road between faith and folly, and in order to fully understand how she does so, I must first turn to *The Second Nun's Tale* because, now that we have discussed the sinner, we need to examine the saint before we can ever hope to understand how someone could manage, as Custance does, to be both.

## I

In the introduction to *The Man of Law's Prologue and Tale*, the Host states offhand: “Lat us nat mowlen thus in ydelnesse” (32), and this rather casual comment receives no further explanation except that he immediately turns his attention from more bawdy characters, such as the Miller and the Reeve, to the Man of Law. In this subtle maneuver, the Host has demanded the Man of Law tell a tale that will encourage the company of pilgrims not to become too “ydel” with their stories. Tale-telling is serious business and must be treated as such. And yet, even with this pointed introduction, the Man of Law only seems to listen with half an ear, as one can see with his talk of hardworking merchants, incest, and wandering ingénues. There is, however, one narrator who takes the Host’s command to heart, namely the Second Nun and her story of St. Cecilia’s devout, if brief, life and martyrdom. Indeed, the very occurrence of martyrdom inherently belies any definition of “ydelnesse” one could contrive: a martyr is by his or her very nature and spiritual project the absolute antithesis of all things “ydel”—including the desire many have for a quiet death. I do not mean to imply that Custance’s spirituality is somehow inferior to that of St. Cecilia’s; after all, when Custance prays for aid, miracles literally do happen. In this sense, she is just as much in God’s good graces as St. Cecilia, but unlike her spiritual predecessor—and, dare I say, idol—Custance is never meant to be a martyr. Chaucer uses her for a different, but no less didactic purpose in the *Canterbury Tales*. In no uncertain terms, Custance is meant to be an example of how one should live a faithful *life*; whereas, St.

Cecilia is meant to show how one should have a faithful *death*. Both women face suffering at the hands of pagan non-believers, both are able to convert these same pagans by their words and deeds; however, there is one key difference that separates Cecilia's spiritual endeavor from Custance—that is, her vigorously maintained virginity. In order for Cecilia to have the faithful death she must in order to become a martyr, she must be as pure a vessel as possible—what the Wife of Bath refers to in her *Prologue* as the dishes made of gold in God's spiritual china cabinet (100–105). While Custance is far from being one of the dishes fashioned from wood—a cheaper, more flawed material that the Wife proudly declares herself to be—she is also not made of the same untarnished, absolutely pure, and thus more costly, material as Cecilia. And I would argue that Chaucer never means for her to be. Custance is the narrative embodiment of perhaps Chaucer's most valuable lesson to his readers, namely that spirituality and sexuality are not mutually exclusive commodities. As her tale shows, one can be fashioned from a less costly, albeit more durable, heavenly material and still be considered spiritually precious. Custance is neither as sexual as the Wife, nor as chaste as Cecilia, but regardless of these differences, she is still granted divine aid whenever she truly needs it because, no matter what happens to her, she never despairs and she never loses her unshakeable faith. As Chaucer shows, such absolute constance as this will always be rewarded even though it often comes at a high price.

In this sense, Custance, like Cecilia, is never “ydel,” but there is a significant gap between these two women that must be addressed before Chaucer's true aim in including a character such as Custance in a work like the *Canterbury Tales* becomes clear. Even though Custance is as tortured and as long-suffering as other wives in Chaucer's writing, most critics do her a profound injustice by placing her in the same category and then dismissing her in the identically casual manner they do the more quietly and long-suffering women such as Griselda.

As Robert Dawson argues, “The Wife, a figure of manifest concupiscence and moral defeat, strongly elicits our understanding and respect. Custance, even if God is on her side, generally fails to enlist our complete sympathy” (295). In a similar vein, Sheila Delany in “Womanliness in the *Man of Law’s Tale*” asserts: “Unlike Chaucer’s other female characters, Constance achieves no multi-dimensional ‘reality.’ Since Chaucer never describes her physical appearance, Constance exists in the reader’s imagination as an agglomeration of virtues rather than as a recognizable person” (63). And, in an effort to make her even more generic, Delany adds: “[Constance] is ‘Everywoman,’ who suffers because that is the human condition, and her passivity is what orthodox Christianity recommends as a response to the human condition” (64). These are all understandable conclusions to draw from *The Man of Law’s Tale*—if Custance were, in fact, the nameless, faceless Everymartyr she tries to be in the beginning. However, she ends up in a far different place, both emotionally and spiritually, from where she starts and where women such as Cecilia end. In contrast to the above ideas, I maintain that Custance may begin her tale as innocent as Cecilia and as naïve as Griselda, but by the end, she is as seasoned as the loathly lady without becoming as mercenary as the Wife. It is a delicate balance to maintain, but she does so with ease. Everything that happens to her makes her naturally more cautious and less willing to give in immediately to any authority, either masculine or feminine. After all, her experience has taught her that secular authority is often as arbitrary as it is untrustworthy, but most telling of all is the fact that, in spite of her eventual disillusionment, nothing ever breaks her spirit or causes her to lose her faith. Therefore, like St. Cecilia, she is a model of fortitude and courage every Christian should follow; yet, Custance is far less intimidating to the average person than this stalwart martyr, and for this reason, she performs the same equalizing function for Cecilia as the loathly lady does for the Wife of Bath. Consequently, even if one does not

initially find Custance to be of value, her example seems much more attainable to the average, spiritually conscientious person than would the rigorous chastity of St. Cecilia or the jaded sexuality of the Wife. All of these women have extreme obstacles to overcome, and as I intend to show, Custance is rare even among Chaucer's other heroines in that, when the time comes to claim what she desires most, she does so both wisely and well. But, before I can turn more fully to a discussion of Custance, we must first take a closer look at a true martyr before her spiritual metamorphosis comes into clearer focus.

In the scheme of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole as well as throughout its critical history, the Second Nun receives little attention. The major reasons for this general disregard seems to be two-fold. On the one hand, there is the lack of physicality and narrative description for this character beyond what one would expect from a devout nun, and on the other, Chaucer assigns her a rather atypical hagiographic tale for her to tell, also precisely what one would expect from a devout nun. Unlike other religious characters, such as the Nun's Priest or the Prioress, the Second Nun does not present any real surprises for the reader. Obviously, a proper nun would speak about the evils of "ydelnesse," pray to St. Mary for inspiration, and tell a tale about a woman so dedicated to her faith that she willingly accepts a violent death, and who, subsequently, converts hundred of pagans to Christianity in the process. None of these ideas would knock any reader off-kilter who knows even the smallest amount about the medieval Christian Church and what it expected from its devout members in the fourteenth-century. In essence, Chaucer stopped just short of delivering the equivalent of a spiritual cliché to his audience when he constructed this character and her tale. Yet, such a reduction is a bit simplistic because the true significance of *The Second Nun's Tale* lies, as I have previously stated, in its subject matter and not with its teller. It is not meant to make waves, to shock, or to teach



anything new; it is meant to be no more or no less than the opposite end of the spectrum of female spiritual devotion in the *Canterbury Tales* that begins with the raucous Wife of Bath and ends with St. Cecilia. No one can doubt that Alisoun is by most standards the most sinful woman presented in the *Canterbury Tales*, and, in turn, one must equally assert that, above all others, St. Cecilia is the most dedicated to her faith, even unto death. As such, Cecilia is accorded the highest honor attainable to a woman in the medieval Christian Church—that is, she is Canonized. But neither of these women are appealing as role models for the average person, for the Wife seems almost too world-weary at times, and Cecilia maintains a level of chastity and spiritual devotion most would not desire to match. Thus, in this spectrum of the unabashedly sinful to the scrupulously sainted, Custance, for all of her suffering, trials, and wanderings, appears to be the happy medium between the Wife and the female martyr in this work. Her faith does not come easy, but her diligence is ultimately rewarded, not by death, solitude, or perpetual virginity, but rather with a marriage and a husband she alone has chosen. It is a life that both the Wife and St. Cecilia would reject out-of-hand for very different reasons; nevertheless, it is one that Chaucer includes for the average person of faith in the medieval world. A point one critic argues when she states, “*The Man of Law’s Tale* sets the hardest case of all, that of a sinless and helpless woman whose tragic fate is not of her making, and who nevertheless thanks God for all that happens to her. It demonstrates that by identifying her will with God’s she may gain the only human freedom possible in a fallen world, and so sets an example which the suffering Christian has no choice but to follow” (Baldwin 189). And while I agree with Baldwin’s statements to a certain extent, I find the conclusion to *The Man of Law’s Tale* to be more hopeful than this quotation implies, both for Custance and for those of us inhabiting, by Christian standards, a fallen world. This latter group neither completely embraces sin, nor does it possess

the same spiritual fire as a martyr, but, when tested as Custance is, it usually remains constant in its willingness to surrender to the divine Will, regardless of what tragedies may occur in life.

Perhaps the most striking difference between these three women lies in the degree to which each depend upon either authority or experience as teacher in their tales. The Wife of Bath has asserted in no uncertain terms that experience has been a far better teacher of life lessons for her than masculine authority, even though she often elects to ignore her own advice. However, at the other terminal point in this spectrum, Cecilia represents the physical embodiment of female spiritual dependence upon masculine authority in the Middle Ages. All of her life experiences are governed by the dictates of the Church and the “olde bokes,” and nothing can deter her from her set spiritual course. Indeed, Cecilia is forced by her noble birth to marry, but she convinces her husband, Valerian, not to consummate their union with a blatant threat:

“I have an aungel which that loveth me,  
That with greet love, wher so I wake or sleepe,  
Is redy ay my body for to kepe.  
And if that he may feelen, out of drede,  
That ye me touche, or love in vileynye,  
He right anon wol sle yow with the dede,  
And in youre yowthe thus ye shullen dye . . . .” (*The Second Nun’s Tale* 151–158)

There is of course an alternative. If Valerian should choose to live with her in “clene love”—that is, by what St. Paul defines as a “chaste marriage”—then he too will be loved and protected by her angel. For obvious reasons, Valerian is rather suspicious of his wife’s “angel” because, as a pagan, the idea of a “chaste marriage,” in which a man and a woman legally become husband and wife but never consummate the union sexually, seems more like a ruse by his new wife to deny him the comforts of the marriage bed than it does an act of Christian devotion. Nevertheless, what Cecilia does next to convince Valerian of her sincerity is what is truly

interesting: she sends him to someone else, specifically to Pope Urban, to receive spiritual counseling, tutoring, and ultimately, baptism. Thus, in contrast to the Wife of Bath, who discourages the reading of masculine authority on the grounds that she has already read them herself and found experience to be a better teacher, Cecilia *encourages* new converts to be taught by men and to learn from “olde bokes”—books that she neither reads, nor desires access to. Her spiritual job is one of doing, not one of verbal instruction, for it is by her actions as a martyr that she will draw non-believers into the Christian fold, and not by her being a living “prehour.” Furthermore, these new converts will be educated and baptized in their new faith by men and not by Cecilia herself. In this manner, she is meant to be purely an exemplum of how one should die for God; and thus, in the eyes of the medieval Church, she is a “good” woman. In contrast to this ideal, the Wife of Bath is a categorically “bad” woman because, unlike Cecilia, Alisoun is all talk and no action. And, when she talks, she compares masculine dictates regarding female spirituality with her own experience and finds these dictates to be seriously lacking. Most damning of all, at one point, she goes so far as to hurl pages she has ripped from one of these “sacred” tomes into the fire—something the ever-pure and ever-trustworthy Cecilia would never do. In this sense, both women are tortured for their particular faiths; however, it is Cecilia who gets the respect and praise of the Church due to her silence and Alisoun who receives its condemnation due to her blatant refusal to be anything like the Church’s definition of a “good” woman.

After examining two such different images of both womanhood and wifehood, the question becomes, where does Custance fit into this dynamic? For, as I have said before, she cannot be construed as a sinner, and yet she is also not the most perfect saint to be found in the *Canterbury Tales*. The answer to this question resides in her ability to provide balance.

Custance is meant to navigate the middle-ground in the eternal debate between authority and experience. Indeed, in her tale, she is as often harmed by authority as she is saved by it, and she is as frequently tortured by experience as she eventually uses it to get what she desires most. She does not read the “olde bokes,” but she does recognize the unequal treatment of men and women by authority when she so famously says, “Wommen are born to thralldom and penance,/And to been under mannes governance” (*The Man of Law’s Tale* 285–286). This statement shows that, like the Wife of Bath, she never confuses her faith with the men who govern it. She realizes that there is a higher power beyond written authority, and her wanderings, as I shall show in the following section, bear this out. Undoubtedly, Custance experiences the same tests of faith as a martyr, but she does not send anyone she converts to another authority or to an “olde boke” to learn of his or her new faith, as Cecilia does. However, one must be careful not to categorize Custance too quickly because, while she does not determine her faith by “olde bokes,” she also never tries to change or (re)mold authority to fit her own experience as Alisoun is so famous for doing throughout her *Prologue*. Custance navigates her life as she must within the rules of masculine society, but she always does so with an unwavering devotion to the divine Will. Consequently, she manages to acquire even greater faith based upon her experiences without having to reject authority in its entirety. No one can say with any certainty whether or not any of these three women gets it right, but in a rich literary canon such as Chaucer’s that contains many truly extraordinary women, Custance without a doubt holds her own.

## II

The key to unlocking *The Man of Law’s Tale* lies less within Chaucer’s source material than it does with what he chooses to modify and/or leave out in his version. The details of the tale that Chaucer borrows from his sources are often not as significant as what he implies

between the margins.<sup>3</sup> As I have shown in previous chapters, this same authorial device occurs in both *Troilus and Criseyde* as well as *The Legend of Good Women*, and Chaucer's literary sleight-of-hand is as active in the *Canterbury Tales* as it is in these other revisions of Classical legends. And so, for those critics who would argue that sexually mercenary women, like the Wife of Bath, and militantly chaste women, like the Second Nun and St. Cecilia, are merely caricatures that only serve to alienate the average reader, I would argue that these critics have missed Chaucer's knowing wink to his audience that is present in all of his writing. Indeed, Chaucer is perhaps guilty of many authorial sins, but the verbatim translation of others' writings into his fiction has never been one of them. His narratives are always different in some significant way. Such is the case with *Criseyde*, the women of the *Legend*, as well as the female characters and pilgrims in the *Canterbury Tales*, and these women are not alone in their "marginal" rebellions. Therefore, it stands to reason that Custance also would not be the wholly passive, saintly bit-of-fluff many critics assume her to be. Undeniably, Custance is often dismissed as a rather unappealing female protagonist in the same breath as Griselda. Take, for example, Carolyn Dinshaw's assessment in her article, "The Law of Man and its 'Abhomynacions'." She writes, "'Woman' in the ideology of the *Man of Law's Tale* is an essential blankness that will be inscribed by men and thus turned into a tale; [Custance] is a blank onto which men's desire will be projected; she is a no-thing in herself" (139). In this manner, Dinshaw, like so many other critics of this tale, see Custance as nothing more than a silent, ever-suffering victim of male political and ecclesiastical whimsy. However, I contend that

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<sup>3</sup> It has been well established by critical history that Chaucer borrows extensively from Trevelyan's *Anglo-Norman Chronicle* and Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, among others, for the content of *The Man of Law's Tale*. And, for this reason, I am assuming here readerly knowledge of the influence of these two works on Chaucer's tale of Custance, and thus, for fear of reinventing the wheel, I will not use the remainder of this chapter to compare and contrast the three, as so many critical articles on *The Man of Law's Tale* are wont to do.

Chaucer gives her much more depth than his literary sources do, and to this end, he has Custance display a definite streak of quiet defiance and emotional endurance that appears in this tale's most pivotal moments. She speaks when one expects a traditionally "good" woman to remain silent, and she remains curiously silent when one would expect this same "good" woman to speak. And it is precisely these unusual moments of silence and speech that create a far more complex Custance than can be found in either Trevelyan's *Chronicle* or Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. In Custance, Chaucer ultimately gives his audience a woman who can hold her own, spiritually speaking, with a martyr, but also she is a woman who is able to be a legitimate wife as well. In other words, Custance is a woman who is able to be simultaneously a wife *and* a saint—a state of being thought impossible by both secular and ecclesiastical standards in the fourteenth-century. And, while Custance's sort of physical and spiritual suffering still may not be terribly appealing for a modern reader, her trials and endurance would in actuality make the rigors of living a "good" life seem more attainable to a medieval Christian. Therefore, what *The Man of Law's Tale* reveals, yet again, is that human beings are more often found somewhere in the middle of the spiritual spectrum than they are at either extreme, and Chaucer-as-author uses tales like this one to show that the key to receiving divine aid often lies, not in extreme measures, but rather in constance with regard to one's actions, desires, and faith. Thus, to a modern reader, Custance may seem too passive, but to medieval Christians, she would have been as close to a perfect human being one could get while on earth without having to sacrifice either their sexuality to a chaste marriage or their lives to a violent, gruesome death.

In the beginning of *The Man of Law's Tale*, a merchant from Surrye travels to Rome for business and, while in Rome, he hears about the emperor's daughter, Custance, who is proper womanhood personified:

“In hire is heigh beautee, withoute pride,  
Yowthe, withoute grenehede or folye;  
To alle hire wekes vertu is hir gyde;  
Humblesse hath slayn in hire al tirannye.  
She is mirour of alle curteisye;  
Hir herte is verray chamber of hoolynesse,  
Hir hand, minister of fredam for almesse.” (162–168)

Not only is Custance beautiful, graceful, and a model of womanly courtesy, but also she is humble, virtuous, and kind. In other words, according to the dictates of the medieval Church and masculine society, she is the perfect woman. In fact, she is so perfect that the mere description of her by this merchant to his Sultan is enough to make the Sultan desire her and claim: “That al his lust and al is bisy cure/Was for to love hire while his lyf may dure” (188–189). The Sultan is so taken with the mere *thought* of her that he determines to marry her, and once the Emperor of Rome realizes that the Sultan of Surrye is willing to convert to Christianity in order to have his daughter, Custance is given in marriage to him without consultation or desire on her part to marry a man she has never met. But, really, such was the lot for most noble women throughout history, and Custance’s value as a saleable commodity for her father should surprise no one. Custance herself even recognizes the inequality of her position as a woman with regard to marriage when she says, ““Allas, unto the Barbre nacioun/I moste anoon, syn that it is youre wille/. . . /I, wrecche woman, *no fors* though I spille!/Wommen are born to thraldom and penance,/And to been under mannes governance’” (281–282, 285–287, emphasis mine). Now, this statement uttered by Custance to her father is the first time readers have evidence that she is not as meek and passive as she initially seems. She is not going to defy her father’s command that she marry; however, she is not going to remain entirely silent either. And so, here we have one of those moments in which Chaucer makes a significant change to his heroine from his sources. This Custance, if she were truly the perfectly “good” woman, or more precisely,

Dinshaw's utterly blank "no-thing," then at this moment, in the presence of the ultimate patriarchal figure, she would have remained appropriately cowed. What is also interesting about this moment is what she chooses to say. Curiously, she uses a similar phrase as does the knight-rapist in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, when he shows just how truly reformed he by telling the loathly lady, "I do no fors . . ." (1234). While one could easily interpret this phrase as the former rapist giving a verbal shrug to his new wife—that is, as him saying, "I don't care," or more simply, "You decide"—it seems a far more significant choice of words than this casual response.<sup>4</sup> For a former rapist to say that he would "do no fors," he is showing that not only is he giving his wife sovereignty to decide for herself what is best for both of them, but also he is returning the sovereignty to women in general that he denied them when he committed his crime. In this moment, a man guilty of seizing all power and control from the woman he callously rapes relinquishes his own control—his "fors"—to his wife, thus giving her the sovereignty to decide her sexual destiny. And, although I do not want to over-extend this analysis, it does seem to have some bearing on what Custance chooses to say in this moment where her father denies her sovereignty with regard to her fate both in marriage and in life. When Custance utters the phrase "I, wrecche woman, *no fors* though I spille," she is not making an idle exclamation, for even though it could simply be interpreted as a grieving woman lashing out at her father by saying the equivalent of: "I, as an exiled woman, would not matter even if I were dead" or perhaps even more provocatively, "I, as an exiled woman, would not matter *to you* even if I were dead," there is more to Custance's statement than this. After all, as a woman of faith, Custance does have another option than marriage. She could choose to die, to become a virgin martyr as Cecilia

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<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed examination of this pun and its larger implications, one should reference "Chapter Three: Etym-Alchemy" in *Chaucer's Body* by R. A. Shoaf (University of Florida Press, 2001).



does. But, in this moment, Custance chooses to do “no fors” to herself; she accepts her exile to Suyrre, her marriage to the Sultan, and her duty as the daughter of the Emperor of Rome.

Despite the fact that Custance elects to follow the dictates of her father, one should not mistake her capitulation for cowardice, for even though Custance is not granted the marriage of her dreams—if in fact she were dreaming of marriage in the beginning of this tale—she is not so intimidated by the patriarchal authority embodied by her father here that she cannot make her displeasure known. She may suffer, but she does not do so in silence. And therein lies the difference between Custance and some of the other “good” women in the *Canterbury Tales*. While Custance realizes the necessity of penance, she, like the Wife of Bath, realizes that she is not simply performing acts of penance for her own sins. Indeed, Custance realizes that her role in this marriage is as much about “mannes governance” and power as it is the opportunity for Rome to convert an entire country of Muslims to Christianity. Thus, whereas the knight-rapist uses “no fors” to show that he is now willing to grant women sovereignty, Custance uses “no fors” to reveal just how often women are forced to give it up—in more ways than one. In this moment, one cannot help but sympathize with Custance’s plight, and in this manner, Chaucer-as-author accomplishes something many contemporary critics do not give him enough credit for: he has made a suffering saint seem human. And, just as one cannot ultimately deny the Wife of Bath’s wisdom, so too does Custance’s words here work upon the psyche of the reader. Whether or not you love Custance or hate her, in this moment of civil rebellion, one has to admit that she’s got guts. After all, daughters are far more expendable to kings than sons. But, in spite of being born to “thraldom” as a noble woman—or simply as a woman—in a masculine world, and even with the very real potential of fatherly retribution that could follow her bold statements of discontent, Custance has enough temerity to make her opinion known. She may have chosen at

this moment to endure rather than to die; however, one should not mistake her capitulation with blankness or with absence; she has proven here that she does indeed have a will of her own, and for that, she should be given a bit more credit for the secular life she chooses to live instead of being penalized for the sacred death she is never meant to have.

### III

In this section, I would like to discuss three of the most pivotal moments for Custance in *The Man of Law's Tale*, namely her banishments at the hands of her two disgruntled mothers-in-law and her trial after the death of Hermengyld. Now, in limiting my discussion here to these three moments, I am well aware that I will be studiously ignoring one other scene that most critics tend to favor when examining this tale—that is, Custance's deliverance from rape through obvious divine intervention. Chaucer's reasons for including this scene can never be known with any certainty, but his motivation for translating it in the way he does has perhaps more than a bit to do with the complications that surround the crime of rape itself. As one critic states:

The aestheticization of rape and the emphasis on male lovesickness . . . by which violence is romanticized in French literature is written into English literature to suggest the victim's unwitting complicity in the crime committed against her. Alone, unprotected, and therefore available for the taking by the first knight to come along, she tacitly 'asks for it.' This misconception of female desire . . . informed actual judicial processes where male judges often suspected the credibility of a woman's claim of rape. (Salisbury 85)

Thus, the reason I am excluding this scene from my discussion here is the same reason that many critics, such as Salisbury, would include it. I am referring, of course, to its utter obviousness as an example of Custance's sanctity. Without a doubt, the parallels between this vignette in *The Man of Law's Tale* and hagiographic representations of the thwarted rapes of wandering female saints are unmistakable. And, just like these other holy women, Custance's potential as a victim *remains* a potential because, at the moment of her greatest fear, she never doubts that the divine

realm will come to her aid, and since she does not despair, Mary rescues her from actual victimhood. In this manner, Custance's unwavering faith keeps her "unwemmed," or "undefiled" (924). Therefore, what is perhaps the most provocative aspect of this situation is not the attempted rape itself, but rather it is this reference to Custance as "unwemmed." As a twice-married woman and a mother, Custance is far from a virgin; regardless, she has always been, by medieval standards, chaste in that she has been a faithful and constant wife. What her rape would have done is sullied her in the same way Lucretia is in the *Legend*. Therefore, the same questions regarding consent and sexual enjoyment that taint Lucretia's story would also apply to Custance, no matter how earnestly she fights her attacker. Chaucer redeems Lucretia in this regard by rendering her unconscious for the act itself. Since she is not conscious, she cannot in any way be accused of consent because Tarquin might as well be raping a corpse. In a slightly different scenario, Mary rescues Custance by having her attacker fall overboard during the struggle. Because of this divine rescue, Custance is spared the act of rape and any questions of even tacit consent, and in this way, she maintains her status as "unwemmed," which means that she remains a *desirable* woman because she is never tainted by an unsanctioned sexual act—an act she would not willingly participate in but for which she would be forever blamed. Consequently, this scene simply reaffirms what the audience already knows about Custance: her faith is as constant as her name implies no matter what tragedies and/or potential defilings she must endure. Hence, Chaucer's inclusion of this moment appears to be more a nod to the structure of the "olde bokes," which all seem to include multiple examples of a saint's chaste behavior, even when only one or two would be sufficient proof for any reader. For this reason, I am treating this moment with similar casualty, not because rape is an insignificant crime. Far from it. Rather, I am doing so because this foiled rape sequence is merely the icing on an

already rich cake of Custance's virtuous behavior. Thus, what is far more significant to Custance's progress in this narrative is her travels themselves in, quite literally, a rudderless boat, or more precisely, what necessitates people to continuously (re)place her in this boat in the first place.

The first time Custance is forced afloat, she is sent to marry a complete stranger in Surrye by her father. And, as I have previously stated, Custance is none-to-pleased with her father's rather abrupt decision. However, such was the lot of many a noble woman in the Middle Ages, whose value as currency negotiated for land, property, wealth, and even to prevent war, is well-documented. The second person to set Custance a-wandering on the sea is the Sultan's own mother, who is less than pleased not only with his son's choice of bride, but also with his decision to convert from Islam to Christianity in order to gain consent from his reluctant bride's father. The narrator lets his feelings regarding this mercenary woman be known when he exclaims, "O Sowdanesse, roote of iniquitee!/Virago, thou Semyarme the secounde!/. . . /O feyned woman, al that may confounde/. . . /Is bred in thee, as nest of every vice" (358–359, 362, 364)! He even goes so far as to call her a "serpent under femynynytee" and say that she "lik to the serpent depe in helle ybounde" (360–361). While critics are quick to point out this obvious comparison of the Sowdanesse to Satan, there is a bit more to the tenor and vehicle of this metaphor than simply the comparison of the Sowdanesse to the most famous betrayer in Christian history. Furthermore, this moment also does more than set-up an obvious dichotomy of the Sowdanesse as a bad or "feyned" woman and Custance as a "true" woman, a dichotomy that will later include Custance's second mother-in-law, Donegild. As Sheila Delany argues:

Unlike Constance, the older women seek power, are jealous of it, and do not hesitate to abuse that power to protect their private interests. . . .Most important, Constance's mothers-in-law have rejected the will of God, which has been manifested in the conversions of the two kings and especially in the miracle

performed at Alla's court. So unnatural are Donegild and the Sultanesse that they are addressed not simply as bad women, but as not truly women at all: 'virago,' 'serpent under femininity,' 'feigned woman,' 'mannish,' 'fiendly spirit.' In passing the limits of morality they have lost their sexual identity, for were they truly women they could not behave so viciously. ("Womanliness in the *Man of Law's Tale* 67–68)

These 'mannish' women, in their hunger for power and in their jealousy over Custance's hold over their sons, seemingly sacrifice their femininity in order to ensure their political legacy. And, while Delany is right to point out that this perception of female masculinity renders them inherently evil in comparison to Custance's utterly perfect femininity, this contrast also has larger implications. Indeed, what is important about this comparison to Satan is it hints that the Sowdanesse and Donegild, like the serpent with Eve, will first approach Custance as a *friend*. And, as I have stated earlier, Custance is not a complete pushover; however, at this moment, she is still a naïve, young woman—just as Eve was at the moment of her most pivotal decision. For her entire life, Custance has had more powerful people make every important decision for her, but up to this point, she has never been openly betrayed by another person—male or female. Undeniably, her only experience with strangers is that, even before they meet her, they fall in love with her and offer a proper marriage. Consequently, she has no reason to doubt the Sowdanesse's veracity, especially when her new mother-in-law "receyveth hire with also glad a cheere/As any mooder myghte hir doghter deere" (396–397). In this sense, it is Custance's utter naïveté that allows her, like Eve, to be so thoroughly duped. Quite simply, the poor girl never sees it coming. To be fair, the Sowdanesse is extremely good at manipulation, for her own son is completely deceived by her act as well. But the Sowdanesse's betrayal is as important as it is necessary because it serves to continue the conversionary project begun by Custance's father. He places his daughter into circulation for, among other reasons, her ability to convert the citizens of Surrye to Christianity—a truly advantageous marriage indeed. Yet, Custance's ability

to convert others is not supposed to be relegated to this one place, and so she cannot remain in Surrye forever. The Sowdanesse may be acting in her own self-interest, but like Satan, her betrayal does serve another, and arguably higher, purpose. By placing Custance back into circulation, the Sowdanesse is, in actuality, sending her conversionary potential outward. She may believe she has killed Custance, but any good Christian would know that she is merely following the path dictated by a higher Will. After all, such is always the case in these sorts of stories. Furthermore, just as the Fall could never have been possible without Satan, so too would Custance's ability to convert others be arrested if she were to live the remainder of her life in Surrye. Thus, once again, the audience learns that Custance is to be an entirely different example of chaste, saintly womanhood than Cecilia, for Custance's duty is not to die, but rather it is, against all odds, to live. It is by her *living* example that Custance will convert others, and her life will prove to be as powerful a conversionary tool as Cecilia's death—a fact Chaucer reiterates to his audience during Custance's encounter with her second, equally devious mother-in-law, Donegild.

From Surrye, Custance runs ashore in Northumbria, and the Constable there takes pity on her when, "In hir langage mercy she bisoghte,/The lyf out of hir body for to twynne,/Hire to delivere of wo that she was inne" (516–518). The curious part of this rather casual statement by the narrator is not that the Constable takes pity on an obvious damsel-in-distress. Instead, it should be noted that Custance beseeches the Constable here not for sanctuary, but rather for death. The audience cannot know whether or not he would ever have honored such a request because she makes this plea "in hir langage." Once again, Custance is purposely misunderstood. Yet, when her father chooses to ignore her, he places her in danger, and when the Constable cannot decipher her "Latyn corrupt," he spares her life (519). In this manner, Custance is once

again “rescued” from her desire to become a martyr, and in continuing to live, she is given the time to add to the already substantial number of converts she has inspired by her devout faith. In fact, what truly integrates Custance so easily into this new land is her fast-friendship with the Constable’s wife, Hermengyld, who becomes Custance’s first convert and trusted friend in this pagan world:

This constable and dame Hermengyld, his wyf,  
Were payens, and that contree everywhere;  
And Custance hath so longe sojourned there,  
In orisons, with many a bitter teere,  
Til Jhesu hath converted thurgh his grace  
Dame Hermengyld, constablesse of that place. (533–539)

As this quotation shows, Custance is able to affect Hermengyld’s conversion with the power of her prayers and faith, even though she is quite literally speaking a different language. It is the same miraculous powers as those granted to the Apostles and other faithful followers of Christ during what becomes known as Pentecost. The moment of Pentecost makes “noble prechours” of all of Christ’s most devout followers, and Hermengyld’s rapid conversion in spite of a communication barrier shows that Custance is no exception (*The Wife of Bath’s Prologue* 165).

What differentiates this moment of transformation from the Sultan’s is that marriage is not the motivating factor here; therefore, Hermengyld’s spiritual epiphany is the first one made for faith alone within *The Man of Law’s Tale*. Hermengyld is inspired by Custance’s faith to change her own, and since she does so for no other reason than this, Hermengyld is granted certain gifts. She is the first character in this work to perform an outward miracle by healing a blind man who asks for her aid “In name of Crist” (561). It is not clearly explained whether or not it is Hermengyld’s faith in Christ that allows her to cure this man, or if it is the blind man’s own appeal to Christ that allows him to be healed. Perhaps it is some combination of both. Regardless, this miracle is necessary because it acts both as the catalyst for the conversion of

more pagans—beginning with Hermengyld’s husband—as well as because it brings about the circumstances that will take Custance out of the small sphere of influence she would have had in the Constable’s household and places her in the much larger arena of King Alla’s court. These circumstances are, of course, Hermengyld’s brutal murder by a knight who is bent on revenge after Custance rejects his amorous advances and his framing of Custance for this murder, which accomplishes two important tasks—the first of which being that *The Man of Law’s Tale* finally has its martyr, and she is *not* Custance. Even though Hermengyld is slain in a moment of revenge motivated by masculine jealousy and wounded pride, she dies having performed a miracle, having converted others to Christianity, and most importantly, she dies with her new, unwavering faith intact. To add to this already significant list, she dies with her throat slashed—a method of torture and death that claims many martyrs in hagiography—and, as I have stated before, Custance, for all of her seeming will and desire to die for her faith, is never meant to be a martyr. A fact that is given further weight in this sequence. It would have been just as easy for this knight to make martyrs out of both women, as she and Hermengyld have fallen asleep in the same bed; however, he chooses to murder Hermengyld and leave Custance alive to take the fall, as it were. But, in reality, what the knight has done is give Custance the platform she needs to convert the entire court during her trial. Granted, Custance is not so calculating in her faith as to realize that her sufferings might be part of some larger divine plan; she experiences all of the pain, stress, and grief of this ordeal in the moment, and for this reason, she is all the more genuine and tragic an ingénue to both the audience at her trial as well as for the readers of the *Canterbury Tales*. The characters and circumstances may change, but this basic pattern remains the same. It is why Hermengyld must be the martyr in place of Custance. Hermengyld has performed her miracle, and in doing so, she has earned her place among the other saints. Now,



she must die so that Custance can be placed in a much larger arena where she can effect the largest group of people, for at her trial, not only does Custance impress King Alla with her gentleness, but also the proof of her sanctity converts others when the murderous knight is mysteriously “smoot upon the nekke-boon” to fall dead “atones as a stoon” (669–670). The knight’s death is so sudden and impressive that “the kyng- and many another in that place - /Converted was, thanked be Cristes grace!” (685–686), and Custance, as the ultimate reward for her faith and perseverance, goes from being an accused murderer to queen of Northumbria in the space of a few hundred lines.

It is at this moment that the audience first meets Custance’s second mother-in-law, Donegild, and she enjoys the influence Custance unwittingly possesses over her son even less than the Sowdanesse. And while Donegild may not be as openly blood-thirsty as the Sowdanesse, who murders her own son rather than have Christianity take hold in Surrye, she still endeavors to get rid of Custance and the threat she presents to this mother’s influence over her son. Her need to remove Custance from the picture reaches its most critical point when Custance does what any true wife is supposed to do in the Medieval world—she gives Alla a male heir. Once again, Custance has been foolish enough to become comfortable in her surroundings, and because she remains naïve to the secular politics governing the nobility in her world, she once again becomes the victim of a mother-in-law who appears in the guise of a friend, but who is in reality another Sowdanesse in Hermengyld’s clothing. In this sense, Chaucer shows his audience that, since Custance is so explicitly focused on heavenly matters, she is often easily deceived by earthly ones. Indeed, Custance is at this point still so devoted to authority that she fails to let experience teach her that men are not the only people she needs to be cautious of in this world. Admittedly, most female saints are accused, victimized, and in many cases, murdered by men,

and so it is rather jarring for Custance and also for the reader to have a saintly heroine be so thoroughly betrayed by a woman. And to have it happen more than once is almost inconceivable. For this reason, the accusation by the narrator that the Donegild and the Sowdanesse are “mannish” is not simply an insult to their apparent lack of proper gentle, feminine dispositions, but more importantly, it speaks to their roles as betrayers. In an ironic twist to the typical stories of female sainthood, Custance is consistently rescued by men, and she finds her greatest and most unexpected betrayals at the hands of women. On the other hand, this tale does contain some really bad men—the knight and the steward being the most notable examples; however, Chaucer-as-author is never content to allow his narratives and their villains to remain so obvious. He never permits either sex simply to paint the lion without giving the lion its own say in the outcome of the portrait. Thus, he presents us with two really bad women in order to provide a necessary balance that the stories on this subject matter so frequently lack. The Sowdanesse and Donegild are counteracted by the pure goodness of Hermengyld, just as the murderous knight and steward/rapist are rehabilitated by the noble intentions of the Sultan and Alla. In this succinct manner, Chaucer once again cautions his audience not to become complacent when reading his stories, for one must always remember that, in Chaucer’s tales, no one is above reproach, no matter how good, just as no one is beyond redemption, no matter how bad they may be in the beginning.

Donegild, like many of the other antagonists in this tale, is killed before she might repent, but she dies having completed her ultimate task for this story, namely she recirculates Custance just as the Sowdanesse and Custance’s father did before her. There is a difference here in that Donegild commits the act, but Alla receives the blame. The main reason for this is the fact that Donegild fabricates a letter from Alla to the Constable banishing Custance once again to

the sea with her supposedly monstrous child (794–803). What I find most intriguing here is that, even though Custance has been betrayed by a powerful woman before, she is no more cautious in her dealings with women at this moment than she was at the outset of her tale. She does not think to question the letter, or seek out her husband to verify its veracity; she simply leaves. The Sowdanesse should have taught her that not every woman is a Hermengyld, just as Alla or even the Sultan should have shown her that not every man is indifferent to her desires, or a murderer, or a rapist, or even some combinations of all three. And, even though Custance accepts her exile with dignity, she does show some dissent as she leaves by saying, “Farewel, housbonde routheless!” (862–863). This quotation shows the same strange mix of capitulation and defiance she displayed with her father in the beginning of this tale, which demonstrates that, while Custance *will* go, she does not *want* to go, a necessary distinction that not many critics make. When Custance accepts her exile, however grudgingly, she looks for comfort from a higher authority, and while she consistently receives aid when she needs it, her inability to value and/or to learn from secular experience keeps landing her in situations that require such grand, divine rescues as this one. Thus, Custance’s constant ignorance of experience keeps her in perpetual circulation, but paradoxically, her wanderings are exactly what she must do in order to satisfy the conversionary needs of her sacred authority. Consequently, the importance of the “bad” women in this tale is not simply that they are bad, or even that they represent yet another example of mercenary, improperly controlled womanhood, but rather it is the fact that their betrayals serve a higher purpose. Without them, Custance would remain static. Like Aeneas before her, whenever she arrives at a new place, she seems content to stay, regardless of the transcendental dictates concerning her journey. And so, it is because of her suffering at the hands of others that she is returned to her divine project. In this manner, it is *not* the “good” women who push

Custance from innocence into experience in this tale, but rather it is the “bad” women who teach Custance her greatest lessons about how to survive in the human realm, and it is because the Sowdanesse and Donegild are such intent teachers of secular experience that they ensure, for better or worse, that Custance remains unfailingly constant when performing her sacred duties.

#### IV

In the final section of this chapter, I will be discussing Custance’s homecoming. The primary reason for which being that her reunions with her father and her estranged husband, Alla, are quite deliberate in their calculation, something that is quite refreshing from this often all-too -innocent character. It is in these two orchestrated moments of revelation that the reader finally sees a Custance who has learned, after all of her extended wanderings, how to tread cautiously when dealing with powerful people—both male and female. Despite the fact that Custance happens to return her to her homeland almost by accident, she rather curiously chooses to remain silent, even though she is once more among a group of people with whom she can communicate freely. The group of men who find Custance and her son, Maurice, are the same men who were sent by her father to Surrye to exact vengeance upon the Sowdanesse for her betrayal. Yet, these men fail to recognize, or more precisely they mistranslate, the visage of their long lost princess because, at this point, Custance has been away from home quite a long time. In a reversal of her rescue by the Constable, where she begs for death, Custance “was in swich array, ne she nyl seye/Of hire estaat, althogh she sholde deye” (972–973). On the one hand, this statement could imply that Custance has learned from her hard-won life experience that there are some situations in life more torturous than even a martyr’s death, but on the other hand, one must realize that none of Custance’s experiences during her various exiles have ever scared her enough to cause her to lose faith. Thus, it seems that, while Custance is well aware that at any

moment “she sholde deye,” she perhaps has learned that the divine plan for her life does not include a swift and holy death. She also apparently has discovered that there is nothing she can do—by either action or plea—to change this fact. Therefore, it is interesting to note that in a tale where the heroine is constantly mistranslated *she* is not above committing this (mis)interpretive sin herself. To be sure, now that she has seemingly lost her death wish, she must go about the process of engaging the living world, something she has been ill-equipped to handle until now. But, once she has chosen to do so, she navigates the harsh waters of noble politics with all of the calculation of the Sowdanesse or Donegild; however, unlike these more mercenary women, she is able to do so in a manner that eliminates treachery and bloodshed altogether and ensures a happy ending that she can learn to live with now that she has actively chosen not to die.

Case in point, the senator who finds her boat turns out to be her uncle-in-law, and when he brings Custance to his household, her aunt also fails to recognize her, even though this aunt, like Hermengyld, feels an instant and deep emotional connection to Custance. Now, instead of feeling instant relief at her homecoming, identifying herself, and falling into her aunt’s arms in gratitude for her rescue, Custance says nothing. For such an initially transparent and easily duped woman, Custance chooses a rather significant moment to hold her tongue, and she continues her silence until she learns that Alla is journeying to Rome to atone for slaying his mother, a grave sin he has committed in order to avenge Custance and his son, both of whom he believes to be dead. The reason for Custance’s odd silence here is two-fold. On the one hand, Custance has returned to the bastion of Christianity in Europe—that is, Rome. Consequently, while the scene with the senator and his wife is reminiscent of the Constable and Hermengyld in Northumbria, the all-important task of conversion is unnecessary here. Thus, perhaps she

remains mute because, in essence, her work here was accomplished long ago. However, there is another, more compelling, possibility for her silence. Custance now has a son, and Maurice is heir to the throne in both Northumbria *and* Rome. Accordingly, it stands to reason that Custance would not identify herself until she has gained the unwavering protection inherent in Alla's recognition of his own son. The narrator tells us that Maurice's journey's with the senator to a feast held in Alla's honor comes "at his moodres heeste" (1013), and when he is at the feast, he is supposed to stand "biforn Alla . . . /lookkyng in the kynges face" (1015). As is rather typical with Chaucer, this one line of exposition carries with it a world of significance. Custance has remained perfectly mute until this moment because, in Alla, she sees not only a source of protection, but also she sees a future for both herself and her son. Custance means, in no uncertain terms, for her son to be recognized by his father, and she is absolutely confident that one look between father and son will accomplish this end. She is right. Although, what Alla recognizes in the boy's face is not evidence of his own paternity, but rather how much this child's features are "lyk unto Custance" (1030), which once again reveals the primary tenet of translation in much of Chaucer's writing. Indeed, the way in which Alla recognizes his son is less an instinctual feeling based upon his fatherhood than it is the way in which his son's features accurately *translate* those of his wife. And, to Alla's credit, he never questions the fact that, if Maurice is Custance's son, then he is also his own son as well. For Alla, Custance's chastity as a wife is unassailable, and in this manner, Chaucer finally shows his audience a tale wherein the reunion of a father and son as well as of a husband and wife can include the accurate translation of a woman by the masculine powers-that-be.

To this end, Custance requests that, when Alla goes for his official visit to her father, he bring her and Maurice; nonetheless, she wants him "unto hir fader no word of hir seye" (1085).

Custance does not reveal her identity to her father until the proper scene has been set. As one critic says, “It is certainly relevant to note . . . the extent to which Custance’s rhetoric of victimization with her father reverses the actual power-structure of their reunion. Custance completely orchestrates and dominates the scene, which occurs at the time, place, and condition of her choosing” (Dawson 299). It is essential that Custance’s identity remain a secret between herself, Maurice, and Alla until Custance has had this pivotal confrontation with her father because, in order for her to remain in a legitimate marriage so that her son will not become a bastard, her father must approve of Alla and deem their marriage valid. This situation is tricky, for while her father contracted her marriage to the Sultan, Custance married Alla of her own free will, something not many noble women were ever able to do. Gail Ashton writes of this significant moment: “When Constance speaks to her father she positions herself as his daughter . . . yet also retains her new status as Couste, wife of a man not chosen by him. She presents herself as a woman able to make independent choices, one who has reached sexual maturity and has a child as validation of that” (421). Therefore, in finding Alla, Custance has accomplished much. She has converted not one group of pagans, but two; she also has enabled former pagans to perform miracles, and she has become a mother. In other words, she has done a lot of growing-up since her father has last seen her, and for this reason, Custance, when reuniting with her father, must first identify herself and tread with caution as she does so. She says, “I am youre doghter Custance/. . ./That whilom ye han sent unto Surrye./It am I fader, that in the saltee see/Was put alone and dampned for to dye” (1107–1110). Now, this statement is interesting because it shows just how much political ingenuity Custance has learned through her tragic experiences. Even though this statement is no less pointed than her testimonial regarding women and marriage that she threw at her father before leaving for Surrye; here, Custance is careful to

be much more veiled with her intent and meaning. Custance's father is not the only one to put her out to sea, regardless of the fact that he did not do so with the explicit purpose of killing her. And, while her death could have been the result, only the Sowdanesse and Donegild exile Custance to sea with the intent to commit murder. In this way, Custance gets a subtle verbal dig on her father because, no matter what happened afterward, he is the one to place her in danger to begin with; however, unlike the early, uncomplicated statements of her youth, Custance displays considerable political savvy with this one multi-faceted statement. She is finally able to condemn her father for all of her pain and suffering, but she is able to do so without offending him, which is essential to the survival of her marriage and, quite possibly, of her son as well.

In her next breath, she fully smoothes over her accusations by saying, "Now, goode fader, mecy I yow crye!/Sende me namoore unto noon hethenesse,/But thonketh my lord here of his kyndenesse" (1111–1113). Not only does she cover-up her earlier accusatory language with an appeal to both her "goode fader[ 's]" mercy and pride—most likely a wise move with any king—but also she uses subtle language in this quotation to influence her father to let her remain Alla's wife, which is a decision that will be ultimately left up to him and not to Custance herself. According to medieval marriage laws, her union with Alla is illegal for the simple reason that her father neither arranged it, nor did he give it his blessing. Even though the Sultan is dead, he and Custance are still technically married by contract, if not by actual ceremony, in the eyes of both the medieval Church and the State. Consequently, if Custance's father, as the King of Rome, were to decide to assert his paternal claim here, Custance and Alla would have to go their separate ways or face death at the hands of her father for treason and excommunication based on the laws of both the Church and the secular government. The Church and the State often looked the other way in such matters, as exemplified in the *Canterbury Tales* by the Wife of Bath and



her five husbands; however, such exemptions were not guaranteed, especially in the case of the nobility where the wealth and fates of entire nations depended upon who married whom. It is at this moment that the reader can see just how Custance's earlier naiveté has transformed into hard won experience, for at this point in the narrative, she words her appeal to her father in such a way that he cannot, in good conscience and/or as a good king, refuse her request. She has asked her father to "sende me nammore unto noon hethenesse," which, technically, Alla no longer is due to Custance's conversionary efforts, but Surrye, as a nation, still is because of the Sowdanesse and her slaughter of all of the converted Christians in her kingdom, her own son included. It is strange to think that Custance should probably be relieved that, while the Sowdanesse wanted to get rid of the taint of Christianity, Donegild only wanted to get rid of *her*—a decision by her second mother-in-law that in hindsight leaves one land full of "hethenesse" and renders the other a newly established Christian stronghold. In this sense, if Custance's father wants to send her back among the "hethenesse," he will have to send her to yet another pagan country with an eligible, noble bachelor; although, if he honors his daughter's request, then her marriage to Alla, a proper king of a legitimate Christian nation, will have to be upheld. It is this linguistic finesse that proves Custance has finally learned how to be both spiritually devout and politically savvy because with one phrase she has deftly tied her father's hands, all of which she accomplishes by the simple act of holding her tongue and waiting for the most effective moment to speak.

The second part of Custance's plea to her father is interesting as well, for not only has she cleverly separated Alla and his kingdom from the taint of heathenism, but also she states that her father should "thonketh my lord here of his kyndenesse" (1112). In this moment, Custance has made it impossible for her father, as a proper statesman, to do anything but be grateful to

Alla if he wants to be perceived as a good king. And the only way in which he could thoroughly show his appreciation for Alla's "kyndenesse" to his daughter is to allow their marriage to stand, which is the outcome that Custance has been engineering since she discovers Alla's arrival in Rome on pilgrimage. Furthermore, we know that Custance is successful when the narrator tells us her son, Maurice, "was sithen Emperour/Maad by the Pope" (1121). In carefully choosing her moment to speak, Custance ensures her son's future, and it is even more important to note that their marriage is legitimized because Custance has chosen it and fought for it with the same zeal she gives her religious devotion. Had she not wanted to secure this future for herself or her son, she could just as easily chosen to remain an anonymous member of her aunt's household. But, when given the sovereignty by circumstances to choose her own future, she sets into motion a series of important paternal recognition scenes for both her son and herself that gain her the end that she desires most. In this manner, she uses the political experience that the Sowdanesse, Donegild, and even her own father, have given her without having to resort to violence, prevarication, or fiendish behavior. As a result, Custance is able to balance her faith in divine authority with the dictates of earthly politics, something that truly sets her apart from Chaucer's other characters, both male and female, who often become so consumed by one side or the other in this debate that they find it impossible even to entertain the thought that anyone could ever manage to be both.

In this way, Custance shows that while she has always been intelligent, the lessons she learns in life have finally rendered her shrewd as well. It also hints at just how transgressive this heroine becomes despite her earlier, seemingly unrelenting, innocence that becomes exacerbated by her initial blindness to the fact that evil comes in many guises, both male and female. While Custance always seems prepared for the former, she proves easily duped by the latter, and in

spite of critical claims to the contrary, there is an over-arching reason for her perpetual innocence with regard to secular politics. Without its continued interference, Custance would never circulate as she is meant to by both divine and authorial will. In the beginning, Custance is a woman who is constantly tortured by circulation, whether it is in marriage, in spirituality, or in translation. That being said, she should never be construed as another Alisoun of Bath, whose overwhelming experience and exclusive reliance upon it have rendered her jaded with regard to any happiness in life free from both sexual and social control. Moreover, despite her early innocence, Custance is also never meant to be the same sexlessly militant martyr as St. Cecilia. Custance, as usual, is somewhere in between these two extremes. She is a woman who lacks the immediate distinction of a Cecilia or an Alisoun, and thus, she often seems only hinted at and supposed upon from either a distance or behind closed doors. As R. A. Shoaf argues, “If I want to understand a person, then I must stand under that person, become (if only for a moment) like that person. But Custance, we know, is never like anyone except herself – ultimately a fictitious tautology (Custance is constant)” (“Unwemmed Custance. . .” 289). And, while I agree that Custance is something wholly unique among Chaucer’s heroines, I must disagree with Shoaf’s branding of her as “a fictitious tautology.” Yes, Custance is constant, and initially, she only comes into focus for the narrator and even for her own father when she behaves in accordance with patriarchal demands regarding proper female behavior. But, Chaucer allows her to be so much more than a “no-thing” at the end of her tale, even if her utter innocence made her such in the beginning. More importantly, her defiance of these norms never prevents her from receiving divine aid whenever she needs it most. In this manner, Custance accomplishes what the Wife, St. Cecilia, and most of Chaucer’s other female characters cannot; she is able to transform herself into an acceptable mixture of sinner and saint that manages to satisfy ecclesiastical law

without relegating her to virginal wifedom. Even though Custance's earlier wish to be martyred is never fulfilled, she is ultimately granted the sovereignty to choose the life and the husband she truly desires most—a gift that not many women in her position ever receive and that she does not take lightly. Consequently, *The Man of Law's Tale* shows that arguments regarding authority and experience are inevitably rendered immaterial if one has the proper faith. And so, Custance becomes Chaucer's most poignant example of this revelation because, in spite of her multiple marriages, of her becoming a mother, and of her choosing to be a wife and not a martyr, she is still just as blessed by God at the conclusion of her tale as she was in its opening lines. Thus, her tale reveals to Chaucer's audience that experience and authority can, with proper constance, eventually meet in the middle, no matter what jaded wives, militant martyrs, and the "olde bokes" may have to say to the contrary.

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

“Al that is writen is writen for our doctrine,”  
and that is myn entente.

—“Retraction,” *Canterbury Tales* 1078–1079

Like Boccaccio before him, Chaucer makes use of retractions at rather provocative times. As I noted in my second chapter, his retraction at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* serves to change one's entire reading of this text. In a similar manner, one could argue that *The Legend of Good Women* also possesses a retraction; however, this one serves as the purpose for the entire poem, instead of merely appearing at the end as an apology. Here, the Narrators of F and G must assure a reproving God of Love and Alceste that they will write women differently in order to atone for writing some women of questionable moral standards in the past. In other words, the legends themselves are to serve as an authorial apology for any offense given to women by this author-turned-narrator in his earlier writing; and yet, whether or not they actually do so is a much-debated subject. In this way, the retraction in the *Canterbury Tales* is more reminiscent of the one at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* in that it attempts to reorder the thinking of the audience towards a higher message as well as a higher power, but it also possesses the same *mea culpa* structure of the Prologues to *The Legend of Good Women*—except in this instance, Chaucer-as-author seems to be apologizing for all of his writing in general, and not just to women or for those stories that may contain morally questionable female subjects in particular. Thus, while all of these retractions help to create an almost jarring tonal shift at the conclusions to some of his most powerful poems, they also never allow the reader to forget who is actually manipulating the narrative strings. In essence, Chaucer is an author who never uses a metaphor, pun, or allusion without deliberate purpose. Thus, perhaps these retractions are meant

to be sarcastic jibes like that of Boccaccio's defense of his sweet tongue in the *Decameron*. Then again, they could also serve as the precursor for the gentle pleas for forgiveness spoken by Shakespeare's Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Is Chaucer truly worried if the shadows of his writing have offended, or is he merely being ironic about his "entente"? This question is compounded by the curious switch from poetry to prose that precedes the retraction to the *Canterbury Tales*, for *The Parson's Tale*, while not the only one in prose, seems to be the most heartfelt treatise on penance in this poem. In this sense, it represents the perfect introduction to the retraction, which reads more like the beginning of a confession with its request for mercy from "Lord Jhesu Crist" for any literary sins committed by the author, than any other tale in this collection (1072).

Consequently, perhaps Chaucer truly feels the need for penance, not in the playful manner he uses with Alceste in the *Legend*, but rather with an honest apology. As this strongly authorial voice says, "Now preye I to hem alle that herkne this litel tretys or rede, that if ther be any thyng in it that liketh hem, that therof they thanken oure Lord Jhesu Crist, of whom procedeth al wit and al goodnesse" (1069–1074). However, "if ther be any thyng that displese hem, I preye hem also that they arrette it to the defaute of myn unknownyng and not to my wyl, that wolde ful fayn have seyde better if I hadde had konnyng" (1074–1077). The credit for all of Chaucer's "good" writing is transferred by these words to a higher power, and conversely, any "bad" writing is not his fault due to his "unkonnyng"—would that all divisions were so clearly defined. Unfortunately, while Chaucer can retract any of his stories that do not meet with the approval of authority, his characters are not often given the same consideration. The writing of a "lecherous lay" or two might not cause irreparable harm to an author's reputation, but being considered a lecherous lay is no venial sin, as many of Chaucer's female characters have learned

over the centuries. Indeed, it proves to be a far graver sin for which all of womankind must atone for. And, as I have shown throughout this project, the efforts Chaucer makes in his writing to rehabilitate such women have frequently fallen on deaf ears. Essentially, these reproofing critics don't get the joke—the punch line of which can only be found in the realm of experience, where the categories themselves are proven unworkable in a “real world” context. In any case, Chaucer so often demonstrates in his tales, as he so artfully does in this retraction, that “good” and “bad” are, in reality, hollow terms, for as any “good” Christian knows, a heartfelt apology will always generate forgiveness. In this manner, “bad” becomes “good” with a genuine *mea culpa* on the part of the author for the sometimes unsavory behavior of his characters, and in writing this way, Chaucer takes the burden of this apology away from the women in his narratives. In any case, if their behavior has offended anyone, then it is really his fault for not writing them better, or more precisely, for not (re)writing them in such a way that they are redeemed—a redemption that paradoxically must be translated as separate from physical purity due to the status of many of these women as anything but “unwemmed.” Consequently, what Chaucer's works accomplish in general, and what the texts I have chosen for this dissertation accomplish in particular is the (re)invention of female goodness in such a way that, if one cannot find it in his or her heart to forgive these women their humanness, then, in the end, there is no possible redemption for anyone—in fiction or in fact. As Chaucer continually proves in his narratives, no one is above reproach, and every human being, whether male or female, has the capacity to sin. After all, Adam ate the apple too, and Chaucer shows his audience that the denial of this fact can only ever result in tragedy. Society can never advance if all it ever does is point fingers and institute unjust regulations upon human behavior, and so as the reader learns from *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Legend of Good Women*, and the *Canterbury Tales*, the search

for one's similitude and the desire for sovereignty are part of every person's existence.

Inevitably, experience teaches us that the success or failure of any one individual in this regard affects us all in more ways than authority can ever hope either to comprehend or to master.

Throughout this dissertation, the intellectual debt I owe to certain critics, such as Aranye Fradenburg, Sheila Delany, Carolyn Dinshaw, Jill Mann, Elaine Tuttle Hansen, and many others will most likely be obvious. I fully realize that, without their work in Chaucer studies, my own would most likely not have been possible. Yet, as with all scholarly forerunners, there are certainly instances where my own work must respectfully depart and/or disagree with theirs. In a time when sex, sexuality, and gender are constantly being redefined, it seems unfathomable that there would be so many conferences, not only on feminist criticism, but also on feminist medieval studies specifically, that ask the question: "Does it matter?" And, in the case of the latter group, there seems to be a conscious divide between what current feminist critics are producing and what many believe feminist medieval scholars are even capable of producing. After all, isn't bringing a feminist analysis to a text written by a male author in the fourteenth-century sort of like actually trying to get the fish to ride that bicycle? The mental image of such a process is as ridiculous as many contemporary Women's Studies programs believe the analysis of the Middle Ages to be, especially with regard to any modern questions of sexuality, gender, queerness, and/or female subjectivity. It is my reaction to this flawed assumption that really began this project, for I could not help but wonder how a series of movements and sub-movements so concerned with toppling the categorical walls society places around sex, gender, and desire be so quick to place medieval literature and its relevance to the modern world in a tightly sealed container labeled: "The Past. Do Not Reopen!" Indeed, from the first time I read Chaucer, I felt as if he were speaking directly to me, and I know I am not



alone in this regard. He may be a medieval man, and he may have at one time committed a heinous act, but his characters are so delightfully flawed that they feel strangely familiar, as if I had met them on the street just yesterday. They have an emotional and psychological weight that is unique to any other author in the Middle Ages, and the reason for such familiarity comes from his study of human nature itself. It is not that Chaucer is a proto-feminist, possessing an anachronistic sensitivity to modern problems, but rather Chaucer is simply an extraordinarily keen observer of human nature in all of its myriad incarnations. Moreover, what contemporary critics so often willfully deny is the fact that, while our ideas and thinking may have changed with regard to certain topics, our essential humanness has changed not a whit.

For this reason, Fradenburg is correct in disabusing scholars of the notion that, with a new Age comes a new psychological make-up for modern men and women. As she states: “psychoanalytic work can help contemporary medieval studies to an ethics that does not bind, nor bind itself to, the past as dead weight, but lets it loose in the historical signifiers that still trace their way through our passions” (78). Without a doubt, this statement begs the question, how can we truly say we are contemplating a new theoretical moment, if we continue to deny that the past has value? If it is all truly “in the past,” then why do strangely similar questions that Chaucer explores in his writing about male and female relationships, gender, love, and desire still recur today? Granted, there are some distinct differences in that, while Chaucer often debates what it means to be either a “good” or a “bad” woman, scholars in feminist and queer studies have discovered the far more daunting question of what it means to *be* a woman. And, obviously, Chaucer would naturally assume a heteronormative framework in his writing; however, he is not alone, and much of the frustration in contemporary criticism is still focused on removing this framework and its assumptions from our current vernacular and its literature. The

oppression and suppression of women in the Middle Ages is an undeniable fact; nevertheless, it is not a problem that has been solved in the modern era; it has been debated with more serious intent, it has also been improved upon a little, but it has in no way disappeared from all aspects of society.

Being a desiring woman in the contemporary moment continues to raise eyebrows, whether or not one chooses a hetero- or a homosexual means of performing that desire, and for all of our supposed improvements upon the “Dark Ages,” we still compare women to cows. On the one hand, we are told that a woman should feel proud that she is a desiring subject, but on the other, she cannot want to want it, or more precisely, she should not appear to want to want it. If she does, then she is a whore; regardless of whether or not she engages in a sexual act or not. It is this logic that still makes the majority of society conflate sexual violence against women with desire, when in actuality such acts are about power and control. It is about knocking the “Lady” off of her pedestal and rendering her attainable, by force if necessary. In this manner, she becomes as sinful and as tainted as the rest of humanity. It is about making her pay for being desirable, and yet daring to be unattainable. The violence makes her “real,” but ironically, once she is “real” she is no longer desirable. She no longer has power over her subjects. She is no longer worthy of sacrifice. And every time contemporary criticism denies that the relationship between thwarted desire and history has any relevance to the modern moment, it is also trying to deny the “Lady” her sovereignty in both a literary and a human context. Even though this sort of violence is intellectual rather than physical, it remains as damaging as even the most violent rape because what such a denial does is lobotomize the psyche so that history becomes merely an afterthought—the proverbial footnote in this supposedly modern world. I am not trying to say that everyone who reads Chaucer or any literature from the Middle Ages must immediately

comprehend its value or even like it; nonetheless, anyone who tries to deny that medieval literature can sustain a modern reading in any critical field has more in common with the polemics, clerics, and other questionable authorities that the Middle Ages had to offer than he or she might choose to admit. Gayle Rubin perhaps says it best when she so famously writes: “I personally feel that the feminist movement must dream of even more than the elimination of the oppression of women. It must dream of the elimination of obligatory sexualities and sex roles. The dream I find most compelling is one of an androgynous and genderless (though not sexless) society, in which one’s anatomy is irrelevant to who one is, what one does, and with whom one makes love” (140). This statement is obviously the ideal that we have yet to attain; however, it demonstrates the fact that, with regard to desire, love, sex and gender, we are perhaps as clueless and troubled as our ancestors. It is an inevitable fact of the human condition that we all want to belong, but we do not want to be like anyone else. Furthermore, we all want to consider ourselves and our thinking unique, and what authors like Chaucer do, is to show us in no uncertain terms that, no matter how far we may think we have come, we have, in reality, progressed by inches rather than by Ages. And, if we continue as a society, in general, and as women, in particular, to deny that history has any bearing on the modern world, then we, once again, run the risk of being relegated to an abstract notion, to an interpretation that lacks substantial proof, and worst of all, to the expectation of pious silence.

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