BEYOND MISOGYNY: INDIVIDUALITY IN THREE MEDIEVAL WRITERS' PORTRAYALS OF WOMEN

by

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(Under the Direction of Thomas Cerbu)

ABSTRACT

Colin Morris in his *The Discovery of the Individual 1050-1200* points out that the crucial part of the beginning of individualism in the twelfth century is people's shift of focus from the divine to their relationships with others, with society and with God. The idea of individual flourished in social as well as religious practice and also in literature. The discovery of individual has been oftentimes overlooked in terms of reading medieval literature that centers on the subject of women for the omnipresence of misogynistic traditions. This group of texts, Boccaccio's *Famous Women*, Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women* and Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* together presents these writers' awareness of their identity of being a writer under the influence of the development of individual and offers a new approach of reading these medieval literary texts on women. Boccaccio writes famous women as metaphors on his concepts of history, trying to differentiate his own role of a humanist writer from his predecessor Petrarch. Chaucer writes faithful women as metaphors on the relationship between authorship and readership, trying to define his own position of being both a translator and a writer at his time. Christine writes virtuous women who make great contribution to civilization as various representations to emphasize her role of a female professional writer. Beyond the subject of

women, these different portrayals of women represent various fashions of the discovery as well as presentation of a medieval writer's individuality.

INDEX WORDS: individual, Chaucer, Boccaccio, Christine de Pizan, the subject of women

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Introduction

Medieval literature has long been considered in the context of misogynistic traditions.[1] For critics of medieval literature, it has also seemed inevitable that they would read every medieval text along the lines of such misogynistic traditions. Starting in the 1980s, there has been a fashion of bringing feminist studies into the interpretation of medieval texts.[2] This mode of interpretation now has such a pervasive and long-standing history that there is an impression that every reading of medieval literature concerning the subject of women must be gender-oriented. Following such a trend of interpretation, many critics have chosen a very simple way of approaching a medieval text: is the writer a feminist or a misogynist?[3] This kind of over-simplification of a medieval text on the subject of women not only renders other approaches impossible, but also prevents all interpretations except for the ones about gender issues. To connect writings on the subject of women and whether a medieval writer is a feminist or a

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[1] For the full picture of the history of misogynistic traditions, see *Teaching Other Voices: Women and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) edited by Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil Jr. Also see R. Howard Bloch's *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). Both references describe a full history of how the misogynistic traditions are formed, expanded, and practiced in medieval literature.

[2] For the issue of how feminist studies have affected the reading of medieval literature and how feminist studies should be applied for a more historical conception of medieval literature, see Judith M. Bennett's *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006) and also her earlier essay "Medievalism and Feminism" in *Speculum* (Vol. 68, 1993), p. 309-31.

[3] Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson take the Wife of Bath as an example to specify the problematic tradition of reading literature in a feminist approach: "Yet to commemorate the Wife of Bath as a 'feminist' simplifies both history and textuality... Around her cluster a number of issues central to the rereading in feminist terms of the Middle Ages…. To think about how a voice like the Wife of Bath might constitute a voice of resistance is to move away from naïve readings of her as either a militant feminist or as trapped in the prison-house of masculinist ideology…" See *Feminist Reading and Medieval Literature: the Wife of Bath and All Her Sect* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 1-2.

misogynist implies that these writings on women to some extent represent the real women in the real world at the time the text was written. Such studies often ask: "Are these writings on women meant to elevate the position of women at that time"?

The debate about a medieval writer's intention to elevate the position of women becomes more complicated when it comes to a text that praises women, such as Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women*. The title clearly introduces the content: stories of good women. When confronted with such a text, a series of questions becomes quite common among critics: Is that author writing stories of good women in order to establish models for women in the real world to follow? Is the author writing these stories because he is a true feminist and so simply wants to sing the praises of good women? Is he being ironic because he is in fact a misogynist? These questions become quite difficult to answer when we encounter a medieval writer who holds ambiguous opinions on these questions, as is the case with Chaucer.[4]

One of the reasons for Chaucer's ubiquity in the curriculum of English literature classes and so much attention from readers and critics is his ambiguousness on the "woman question."[5] This

[4] Kathryn Lynch in her introduction to Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women* comments on the controversy and ambiguity of the portrayals of women in this particular text. In Lynch's opinion, Chaucer's alterations may suggest different things: "is the conversion to goodness…to be seen as a poetic challenge, one that Chaucer seriously attempted to meet, or is it a literary inside-joke, based on the premise that a 'good woman' is a kind of oxymoron"? See *Dream Visions and Other poems: Authoritative Texts, Contexts, Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), p. 120-21.

[5] While referring to the misogynistic traditions, Florence Percival uses the term "the woman question" to address the issues encountered by medieval writers concerning such traditions. See *Chaucer's Legendary Good Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). According to Derek Pearsall, the reasons why Chaucer chooses to constantly deal with the "woman question" is because Chaucer is indeed troubled by how women are treated in literature: "A particularly insistent question for him is that of women's freedom and independence and their capacity to judge and act on the basis of a fully developed moral consciousness. All these faculties were systematically denied to women in the Middle Ages, and Chaucer is troubled both by the inhuman stupidity of the denial and by the consequences to men if the rights of women as individuals are allowed." *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Biography* (Oxford, Blackwell: 1992), p. 138.

ambiguity also renders him the most representative model of the predicament facing modern readers of medieval literature, as well as the limited interpretation of medieval texts on a gendered basis. Chaucerian critics find it very hard to pinpoint where this medieval poet stands in regards to the *question*, feminist or a misogynistic?[6] It is undeniable that "the woman question" hovers over the head of medieval writers such as Chaucer whenever they deal with the subject of women. However, if every medieval text is viewed as a representation of real women of that time, meant either to elevate the position of women or to denigrate them, then every reading of medieval texts, in my opinion, will to some extent turn into a historical fact-checking process.

While these critics focus on the writer's intention with respect to the current status of women, they also bring to the front the writer's general intentions. Surely it is understandable that one should pay attention to the issue of women in reading a text about women. However, if the focus on the subject of women becomes the only direction of reading a text, this certainly limits the range of interpretation. Even though taking the discussion of women out of the picture might seem extreme and perhaps pointless, reading a medieval text on women without thinking about "the woman question" is surely possible and perhaps still productive. Although thinking less about "the woman question" while reading a medieval text on the subject of women is a challenge, one of the possible alternatives actually presents itself with the writer's genuineness,

[6] A lot of Chaucerian critics have discussed *The Legend of Good Women* in terms of Chaucer's being a feminist/misogynist. For more discussion on this issue, please see Ruth M. Ames, "The Feminist Connections of Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*" included in *Chaucer in the Eighties* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), Sheila Delany, *The Naked Text: Chaucer's* The Legend of Good Women (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) and Florence Percival, *Chaucer's Legendary Good Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

the writer's intention. More importantly, that genuineness of the writer does not necessarily come from his or her concern about women. One might then ask: if the writer's genuineness is not about the subject of women, what is it about? The development of the individual serves as a fruitful perspective. The idea of the individual started to flourish in the twelfth century.[7] The influence of the idea of the individual on medieval writers who write about women opens a different path for reading these texts. These are not only portrayals of women; they are also portrayals of the writers' concerns with their own sense of authorship and individuality as authors.

This dissertation examines three, closely interconnected, medieval texts: Boccaccio's *Famous Women*, Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women*, and Christine de Pizan's *The City of the Book of Ladies*.[8] The first chapter discusses how these three texts should be considered as a coherent group of texts on the subject of women. The beginning of that chapter focuses on how they provide portrayals of women as models or exemplars. Firstly, these collections of stories of women all play a part in what Alcuin Blamires has defined as "the case for women" against the

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[7] Colin Morris "presents a scholarly reappraisal of the origins of a concept which we have come to take for granted as an essential attribute of Western Christian society, that of the individual. He traces this back to the rich, mobile civilization of medieval Europe in the twelfth century" (From the *Foreword* by V. H. H. Green). See *The Discovery of Individual, 1050-1200* (London: S.P.C.K, 1972).

[8] Boccaccio's *Famous Women* was written between 1361 and 1362 under the Latin title, *De mulieribus claris*. In this collection of stories of women, Boccaccio writes one hundred and six stories of mythological (be they classical or Christian) and historical women, with only a few contemporary women. For quotations of the text, the title is abbreviated to *FW*. Boccaccio's collection of women's biographies is the main source for Christine's *The Book of the City of Ladies*. Christine's collection of stories of women was written in 1405. In this book, Christine creates an allegorical city, the City of Ladies, as a sanctuary for all virtuous women. For the following discussion, the title is sometimes shown as *City of Ladies* or *BCL* to avoid repetition. Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women* is said to have been written between 1374 and 1386. This text includes ten stories of classical women and two versions of the *Prologue*. Chaucerian critics on this text used to focus on the differences between the two manuscripts of the *Prologue* instead of the individual legends (partially because Chaucer never finished the project and it is therefore considered sometimes a less significant work of his). For the following discussion, the title is sometimes abbreviated to the *Legend* or *LGW*. See Bibliography for full references.

defamation of women in misogynistic traditions.[9] Secondly, in terms of establishing role models, it is noted that these writings on good women bear some resemblance to the writing of hagiography. Thirdly, it is also possible that these three writers are only participating in a literary game in which they display their rhetorical skills through their writings on women. The second part of the first chapter elaborates on the trends that these three writers encountered in treating the topic of love, both the broader genre of courtly-love and its representative work of that genre, *The Romance of the Rose*.[10] These writers' reaction to the popularity and influence of courtly love and the *Romance of the Rose* helps to explain why they decided to compose these collections of stories of women. The last part brings the idea of the individual into the picture. It starts with Chaucerian critics who focus on "individuality" in Chaucerian works and extends to the broader development of the idea in literature. These texts as a group show different stages of the development of the individual in terms of how these medieval writers defined their roles as a writer by portraying different kinds of good women.[11]

The subsequent chapters focus on the primary texts. Due to the various numbers of stories of women in these three texts, Chaucer's *Legend*, which only includes ten stories of women,

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[9] See *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

[10] Two authors, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, composed *The Romance of the Rose*. In 1203, Guillaume de Lorris wrote the first part, about 5000 lines of a story that tells how a young lover tries to woo his beloved lady. This part of story is considered as a model of courtly-love storytelling. The second part written by Jean de Meun is almost five times longer than the first one and full of misogynistic statements and stereotypes such as the Old Woman. Both medieval writers and modern critics on this text often focuses on the second part because of its relation to the misogynistic traditions, overturning the idealization of women in a courtly-love story into a text modeled with misogynistic statements. In the following discussion, the text is sometimes cited as the *Rose* to avoid redundancy. See bibliography for full reference.

[11] Chaucer's legends of good women center on the "faithfulness" of these women, Boccaccio elaborates the ways these women obtained their "fame," and Christine emphasizes the "virtues" these women represent in regard to their contribution to civilization. Through their portrayals of these different "good women" these medieval writers represent different kinds of individuality.

becomes the base from where the selections are made for the following discussions. For each text, the stories of Dido, Medea, Cleopatra, Thisbe, Hypermnestra, Hypsipyle, and Lucretia are brought into discussion because they are included in all three texts (or at least all are in both Boccaccio and Chaucer's collections).[12] These stories are not inventions by Boccaccio, Chaucer, or Christine. There are stories of all these characters in classical literature.[13] In this sense each author rewrites the classical tales about these women. These rewritings all share one characteristic: they either treat mythological figures, or contain a combination of mythological and historical features.[14] The selection here focuses on these seven characters because these portrayals of women, rewritings of classical tales, not only represent the writers' self-awareness

[12] Although the scale of these three texts may vary greatly in terms of numbers of stories and their fashions of categorization of their subject (Chaucer's *Legend* only has ten stories while Boccaccio's *Famous Women* and Christine's *City of Ladies* include more than one hundred stories), these seven stories have counterparts in each text.
[13] Dido is one of the main protagonists in Virgil's *Aeneid*. Medea is in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Seneca's tragedy *Medea*, and many others such as Hesiod's *Theogony*. Cleopatra is in both Virgil and Ovid's works. Thisbe is originally from Ovid's works and later is adapted into many literary works. Ovid writes about Hypermnestra and Hypsipyle in his *Heroides*. The Roman historian, Livy (Titus Livius Patavinus) is the first source of the story of Lucretia and later Augustine in his *City of God* adapts the story to talk about the issue of rape. After Augustine, Dante also includes Lucretia in his *Divine Comedy* and presents her as one of the models of virtuous pagans.
[14] All the characters in Chaucer's *Legend* are either mythological or classical figures, but it is a different case in Boccaccio and Christine's collections. There are actually two distinct groups of famous women in Boccaccio's *Famous Women*. One group includes classical women, including the seven characters that are also included in Chaucer's legends. The other group includes women in the real world such as the last story of Queen Joana who certainly has no connection to any mythological tradition. Christine's *City of Ladies* also includes these two distinct groups: a group of classical characters and a group of historical women. These two groups of women in *City of Ladies* are categorized in the first two parts while the third one is dedicated to women saints. One example of a "historical" figure in Boccaccio and Christine's collections is the story of Triaria. To offer a sense of how a historical figure is portrayed in these two collections (which is very different from the way the classical figures are presented), the following is the story of Triaria from Christine's *City of Ladies*: "In the course of the war for control of the empire, which he was waging against Vespasian, the emperor besieged the city of the Volscians and managed to slip into it at night, launching a ruthless attack on the sleeping habitants. The noble lady Triaria, who had been following her husband each step of the way, did not now hold back. Instead, in order to ensure her husband's victory, she armed herself to the teeth and engaged in fierce combat at his side all along the streets, rushing here and there through the darkness. Feeling neither fear nor terror, she fought so hard that she distinguished herself above all others in the battle, accomplishing many extraordinary feats. Boccaccio comments that she thus clearly showed how much she loved her lord, and he expresses his approval of the bond between husband and wife which others have seen fit to criticize so heavily," (*BCL*, p. 112-23). See also Boccaccio's *Famous Women* for his version of the story of Triaria, Wife of Lucius Vietellus (XCVI, p. 201-02). Other historical women in both Boccaccio and Christine's collections include the wives of Seneca, Pompeia Paulina, Antonia (daughter of Mark Antony and wife of Drusus Tiberius), and many others.

in how they decide to alter the old stories, but also signify the writers' attempts to define their own individuality as a writer.

The textual analysis showing how these portrayals of women serve as representations of each writer's individuality starts with Chapter Two, on Boccaccio's *Famous Women*.[15] For Stephen Kolsky, the way Boccaccio defines his role as a writer is to construct a bridge between being a moralist and a historian.[16] For Virginia Brown, Boccaccio's focus is on human nature and that focus shows the writer's effort to follow in Petrarch's footsteps of restoring the values of ancient Rome, part of the humanist movement initiated by Petrarch.[17] Kolsky concludes that the rewritings of classical tales in *Famous Women* represent Boccaccio's re-evaluations of the current status of humanism as well as the author's unstable position in the Florentine power hierarchy among humanist writers. With Boccaccio's participation in the humanist movement started by Petrarch and Kolsky's suggestion about Boccaccio's concern about his position in a power hierarchy, it seems reasonable to connect Boccaccio's uncertainty to his relation with Petrarch. Petrarch, being the head of the humanist movement and a recognized author, is

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[15] Virginia Brown explains the purpose of Boccaccio's writing *FW* in a particular fashion: "The contents of *Famous Women* and his own explicit statements make it plain that Boccaccio's principle of selection favored the pagan women of Greco-Roman antiquity. Nearly all Christian women were deliberately excluded on the grounds that they had been sufficiently celebrated already in hagiographical literature. Boccaccio states further that the life stories of Christian women are from a thematic point of view at odds with those of pagan women: the former sought eternal glory by means of an endurance that was often contrary to human nature; the latter achieved earthly fame with the help of gifts and instincts they had received from Nature, or through a desire for fleeting glory." See Brown's introduction to her translation of *Famous Women* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. xvii.

[16] See *The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio's* De mulieribus claris (New York: P. Lang, 2003).

[17] For more references, please see Brown's introduction. She gives a detailed description of how Boccaccio structures each of his stories in *FW*: "[It] begins with the name of the woman, her parentage, and her rank. Next the reason for her fame is stated in general terms. Then Boccaccio explains in detail how her fame was acquired, usually in the form of a narrative. He authenticates his accounts by frequent allusions to learned authorities, almost always unspecified. At the conclusion of the biography comes a moral lesson or a moral exhortation or a passage of philosophical reflection. Further moralizing precepts are sometimes scattered throughout the narrative." See Brown's introduction to her translation of *Famous Women* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. xx.

probably always present in Boccaccio's mind in writing *Famous Women* because the text is considered to be Boccaccio's gesture of following in the movement of humanism. Based on this connection, the rewritings of classical tales of famous women may represent Boccaccio's concept of history and the writer's undetermined individuality. The concept of history is one major difference between Boccaccio and Petrarch. By bringing his concept of history into the light with his writings of famous women, Boccaccio shows the unstable position that Kolsky suggests and also tries to differentiate his role as a humanist writer from that of Petrarch.

Chapter Three is dedicated to Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women*, in which, like Boccaccio, he conveys his concerns about being a writer through portrayals of women, though they are quite different. The debate between the God of Love and the narrator in the *Prologue* foreshadows the central issue in the text: the relationship between authorship and readership that reflects issues of writing and interpretation. Kathryn Lynch suggests that the *Legend* is a work of transition in Chaucer's career, between writing a true courtly story, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and the writing of his own invention, *The Canterbury Tales*. Thus the *Legend* represents a transition also present in other medieval writers who ponder whether to keep to the tradition of rewriting classical tales or to create their own work and style.[18] Lynch also suggests that what Chaucer tried to do in the *Legend* is more than simply present models of "good" women. Chaucer rewrites many of the classical women, such as Cleopatra and Medea, into good wives instead of creating a prototype of his own invention. Lynch points out that some critics have argued over Chaucer's

[18] Lynch emphasizes that such a transition is a "self-conscious" move by Chaucer and this text "turns out to be both formally and substantively a pivotal…text." See *Dream Visions and Other Poems: Authoritative Texts, Contexts, Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), p. 118.

irony in such an alteration (120-21). These critics are certainly not wrong to see Chaucer's portrayals of good women as ironic gestures resulting from the writer's struggle with the "woman question," but the *Prologue* indeed already presents an alternative theme that shifts the focus from the subject of women to the relationship between readership and authorship, and regarding the task of translation for writers at that time. These deliberately revised portrayals of good women in Chaucer's *Legend* represent the poet's concern with his identity as a translator, which is an integration of two roles: a reader of old books and a rewriter of classical tales.

The concern about being a writer takes another turn in Christine de Pizan. Chapter Four starts with Christine's involvement in the debates on the misogynistic statements in the *Rose*. Rosalind Brown-Grant refers to this series of debates, which would later receive another wave of attention in the Renaissance as "the querelle de la *Rose*" (7-8).[19] According to Brown-Grant, in this series of debates Christine's role as a writer serves as a bridge that connects "the gap between female reader and authoritative male writer" (21-22). Brown-Grant also suggests that Christine continued to contest these misogynistic statements in the *Rose* in her later works, especially in *The Book of City of Ladies* (14). Furthermore, Brown-Grant emphasizes that Christine successfully provides an equilibrium between men and women by suggesting that virtue, a kind of "moral self-edification," is not exclusive to men, but pertains to both men and

[19] Rosalind Brown-Grant explains how Christine attacks the defenders of the *Rose* and later constructs the allegorical fortress for the female gender. She suggests that what Christine tries to advocate along the way is the idea of "virtue." Refusing to fall into the fallacy of dividing the two genders into a simple dichotomy, Christine actually believes that in terms of virtues, the two genders can reach equilibrium. See *Christine de Pizan and The Moral Defense of Women: Reading Beyond Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

women (3).[20] The equilibrium between men and women was probably always on Christine's mind, even before she wrote *The Book of the City of Ladies*. While she defends herself from the accusation of being "an irrational female writer and an unreliable critic" made by her opponents in "the quarrel of the *Rose*," is Christine not already crying out for an equilibrium between men and women in terms of her role as a writer? The portrayals of virtuous women in *City of Ladies* represent a great picture of women who contributed to civilization; yet, before these virtuous women represent the female gender as a group, they certainly speak for the female writer, Christine de Pizan herself. Christine presents these virtuous women in regard to their intelligence, ability, and independence, and suggests that their contribution should not be overlooked. Through acknowledging the contribution of these virtuous women, Christine speaks for her own achievement as a professional and successful female writer in the male-dominated society of her time. In this sense, these portrayals of women also comprise a representation of the female writer. Christine, while providing "virtue" as a universal solution to resolve gender differences, establishes her own reputation as a female writer. The portrayals of women in *The Book of the City of Ladies* embody Christine's sense of individuality as shown in her constant pursuit for establishing her reputation as a female writer.

[20] Brown-Grant explains how Christine de Pizan and her writings fit the purpose of feminist studies: "Since its inception, feminist literary scholarship has had two main goals: First, to challenge what it sees as the marginalization of women's experience typical of the works of the male-authored canon; and secondly, to construct an alternative genealogy of female writers. For many modern critics, whether medieval specialists or not, Christine de Pizan (1364-1430) is eminently suitable for inclusion in this genealogy by virtue of being France's 'first professional woman of letters.'" See *Christine de Pizan and The Moral Defence of Women: Reading Beyond Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.1.

The objective of reading these three medieval texts—Boccaccio's *Famous Women*, Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women*, and Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies*—in the context of "the individual" is to offer a parallel interpretation to that given by gender-based interpretation and ties to feminist studies. For example, Boccaccio presents two versions of Dido in his *Famous Women*, one is a capable leader with great political skills and the other a faithful wife with constancy, in order to suggest that people's biased interpretations can oftentimes do the subject injustice. If people take the second version of Boccaccio's story of Dido as the preferred one, they would only see Dido as a faithful wife. Likewise, if people only take Boccaccio as a faithful follower of Petrarch, they would never consider him as his own accomplished humanist writer. Chaucer's story of Dido reveals the intricate obligations of a translator. A translator's loyalty to old authorities might tragically lead to the death of both the original text as well as the translated work. Christine's version of Dido highlights the protagonist's intelligence and knowledge in terms of founding a great city. Her portrayal of Dido is more positive than any previous versions of Dido, revealing Christine's attempt to call for recognition of a woman's ability to be a professional writer. In conclusion, Boccaccio's portrayals of women are metaphors of his concept of history and reflect his relation to Petrarch. Chaucer's portrayals of women embody the various relationships between authorship and readership, defining his role as a medieval writer/translator. Christine's portrayals of women are direct representations rather than metaphorical ones, presenting Christine's achievement as a

professional female writer. All in all, these portrayals of women reflect the individuality of the writer at different times in the Middle Ages.

The interpretation of these medieval texts in the context of "the individual" does not aim to replace previous critiques of these medieval texts given their focus on the subject of women. The objective here is to break down the confinement in which these texts on women are forever bound by misogynistic traditions and later in feminist studies. There is more to see between the lines of these rewritings of classical tales about good women. The individuality of the writer should not be overlooked. After all, the idea of the individual should be extended to all parties, including both the subject and the writer.

Chapter One

From the Subject of Women to the Subject of the Individual

Three texts considered here form a group in the following ways: First, they all focus on the subject of women. To be more specific, these stories are praises of famous, faithful, and virtuous women. In this sense, these portrayals of women can be read as role models. Secondly, the genre of courtly-love to some extent foreshadows the ways these three writers deal with the subject of women: either to follow the idealization of women in the tradition of courtly-love storytelling or to respond to the most representative text of the genre, *The Romance of the Rose*. Lastly, the idea of the individual, in as much as it shifts people's focus from a concern solely with the divine to their relationships with others, and with society, helps to bring these texts together as a group of evidence that not only shows these medieval writers' concern for "the woman question," but also reveals an awareness of their individuality as writers and of the obligation, responsibility, and expectation that come with that role.

Portrayals of Women as Exemplars and Models

1. The Case for Women

Alcuin Blamires gives a definition of "the case for women": a corpus of ideas about how to fashion a commendation of women explicitly or implicitly that retaliates against misogyny. Blamires then borrows the term "the formal case" from Linda Woodbridge to indicate "a

designation for systematic explorations of defense topoi."[1] According to Blamires, the formal case is designed to free women from slander and has the following features:

> [I]t questions the motives and morality of misogynists, who seem to forget that women brought them to life and that life without women would be difficult; it denounces antagonistic generalization; it asserts that God showed signs of special favor of women at creation and subsequently it revises the culpability of Eve; it witnesses women's powerful interventions through history (from the Virgin Mary and scriptural heroines to Amazons and modern notables); and it argues that women's moral capacities expose the relative tawdriness of men's. (2)

The characteristics of the formal case in Blamires' summation also reveal the central misogynistic ideas: the generalization and the exclusion of women in history along with assumptions about woman's evil nature in terms of religion and morality. Blamires then gives an introduction to a corpus of texts that present "the case for women." In Blamires' opinion, the most efficient are the ones constructed with "examples" (65). He lists a group of medieval texts that together form a whole lineage of "the case for women." He starts his introduction to the

[1] In 1992, Blamires published an anthology of literature, *Women Defamed and Women Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*. The literary texts Blamires includes in this anthology in one way or another counter the misogynistic tradition, whether at the source, such as in Ovid's *The Art of Love* and *Amores*, as in the ambiguous dealing with misogynistic traditions such as Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, or in the definite spokesperson for women defamed such as in Christine de Pizan. Some years later, in 1997, Blamires published *The Case for Women in Medieval Literature*. In this book, Blamires aims to subvert the common habit of seeing the Middle Ages as "an epoch of misogyny" and the biased reading of medieval literature as a corpus of texts that only spread the misogynistic tradition. In supporting his argument, Blamires introduces the idea of "the case for women." Blamires suggests that in medieval literature, there is a group of texts that defend women from the misogynistic tradition. He adopts the idea of "the formal case" from Linda Woodbridge to further identify this group of texts as one that lawfully defends women from slander. Blamires concludes that this corpus of texts is only a case "for" women. It does not turn the Middle Ages or literature from that period into what modern feminists would expect it to be. All discussion here related to Blamires' arguments focuses on his *The Case for Women*. See *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p.1-18. See also Linda Woodbridge's *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womankind, 1540-1620* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), p. 5.

group of texts with Boccaccio's *Famous Women* (70).[2] And in one of his later chapters, he discusses Chaucer and Christine de Pizan, and argues that each of them "produced a version of the formal case" (199).[3]

These three writers along with their respective works present a group of texts constructed with "examples" in Blamires' words. Boccaccio in his *Famous Women* chooses "fame" as his central motif for the various ways of women obtaining their reputation. While the issue of reputation can cut both ways, negatively and positively, Boccaccio further separates the characteristics of women into two categories, virtuous ones and bad ones. Boccaccio tells the story of famous women to specify their different kinds of virtues and to give his educational messages based on the virtues. Chaucer in the *Legend* explicitly deals with women who remain faithful to patriarchal figures such as husbands, fathers or lovers. As counterparts to his portrayal of Criseyde, all the good women in the *Legend* are loyal and constant in love. Christine's criteria for her selection in the *City of Ladies* are also based on "virtue" on the surface. Christine writes about all kinds of virtuous women who are qualified to be the residents of the City of Ladies. Moreover, Christine is trying to make a record of women in history who have made a certain contribution to civilization. Even though they each have a different focus on women's *goodness*,

[2] In his discussion of Boccaccio's *Famous Women*, Blamires addresses the contradictory representations of women in Boccaccio's collection. According to Blamires, on the one hand, some of the famous women in Boccaccio are representations that disclose "womanly weakness;" yet on the other, some of the women in Boccaccio's description show strongly their "possibility of feminine transcendence" of the stereotypical assumptions resulting from the misogynistic tradition. See *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 70.
[3] The chapter is actually dedicated to Abelard, Chaucer, and Christine de Pizan. To avoid confusion, Abelard is left out because he is not part of the discussion here.

these three texts all offer portrayals of women as examples that belong to "the case for women" in Blamires' definition.

2. Writing Good Women as the Writing of Hagiography

These three writers observe certain criteria in selecting their "models." Regardless of these criteria, however, the way they record famous, good, or virtuous women to some extent resembles hagiography. Like hagiography, or the stories of the lives of saints, which aims to provide "sound theological and moral guidance, both the more biographical and historical lives and the more allegorical and fanciful" (Hammer, xxix), so to some extent, do these collections by Boccaccio, Chaucer, and Christine. To say that these collections of stories about women have similarities to hagiography may be an overly simple generalization. However, due to the style, as well the contents, these compilations of stories of women in many ways do resemble the writing of hagiography.[4] In the case of the *Legend*, the title already implies a reference to the writing of hagiography. While the relation between the *Legend* and the writing of hagiography lies merely

[4] In Delehaye's *The Legends of the Saints*, the author explicitly points out the relationship between the term "legend" and the writing of hagiography: "As it is the fictional element that determines the category of legend, it has quite naturally come about that the same name is applied to the fictional element itself, and so we find the term 'legend' extended to every unconscious distortion of historical truth… It can hardly be necessary to emphasize the considerable part played by legend (in all its meanings) in writings about the saints, a form of literature that is eminently of the people both in its origins and its aims. The very word has been borrowed from hagiography." See Hippolyte Delehaye's *The Legends of the Saints* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), p. 8. Christopher Stace's translation of Jacobus de Voragine's *The Golden Legend* (*Legenda Aurea*) includes the introduction from Richard Hammer. In the introduction, Richard Hammer affirms the educational purpose of the collection of saints lives, but shows his hesitation about the connection between saints' lives and current social phenomena, especially the ones concerning the position of women: "It has been surmised that the motif of the refusing bride may have been used to illustrate the oppression felt by women as a result of their lack of power over their own destinies, which was implicit in many of the social and political arrangements of the times, but in the absence of any outright statement of such an intention it is not safe to assume that there was one". See *The Golden Legend* (London: Penguin, 1998), p. xxviii. See also Cynthia Turner Camp, *Anglo-Saxon Saints Lives as History Writing in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015), which considers the writing of hagiography as a certain kind of history writing. Whether Boccaccio, Chaucer and Christine mean to write their collections of stories of women as a means of writing hagiography or historiography indicating social phenomena that troubled them in their times or as a means of creating their own version of history of women in literature is beyond discussion here.

in the title, the relations between the other two texts and the writing of hagiography lie in the fashions of their categorization, narration, and structure of depicting these women's lives. If we are to follow Blamires' fashion of categorizing these three texts, the issue at stake here is that the principle of writing hagiography is the same as the one these three medieval writers followed in making their selections. While there may be a variety of standards of selection, all three writers intend their collections as a guide for readers in terms of morality with models to follow. The examples provided in this group of texts both form "the case for women" that offers a counter to stereotypical representations of women deeply influenced by misogynistic traditions, and provide moral role models for people to read and follow since they resemble hagiography.

3. A Literary Game

If Blamires' opinions about the texts that form "the case for women" show his optimism about these literary works with respect to feminist issues, Betsy McCormick offers a contradictory point of view concerning such texts in which the subject of women is written as *examples* to express the authors' concerns on "the woman question." McCormick formulates her argument in her critique of the *Legend*. She argues that by writing these classical women into good women, Chaucer is participating in a medieval literary game. According to McCormick, this game on the subject of women offers a kind of battlefield where medieval writers compete with their contemporaries in terms of their rhetorical skills. (111).[5] Or is it possible that by

[5] Betsy McCormick, in "Remembering the Game: Debating the *Legend*'s Women," suggests that medieval writers, while dealing with the subject of women, are actually participating in a literary game. She sees Chaucer's *LGW* as one of the models demonstrating that literary texts concerning women are more like the battlefield for medieval writers instead of the place for these authors to speak their true opinions about women. With such a characteristic, it is hard for us to determine whether literary texts such as the *Legend* should be read as "cultural and ethical" texts or

participating in the literary game and interacting with both old authorities as well as contemporary writers, these medieval writers are actually dealing with issues that are more personal, such as that of their authorship? The issue of authorship in these three texts is presented by the writers' encounter with the genre of courtly-love and its most representative work, *The Romance of the Rose*.

The Idea of Courtly Love

1. The Origin of Courtly Love

John Jay Parry notes that the origin of courtly love is deeply indebted to Ovid: "For all practical purposes we may say that the origin of courtly love is to be found in the writings of the poet Ovid who lived…in the time of the Emperor Augustus. Among his poems are *The Art of Love*, *The Cure for Love*, and *Amours*, all dealing, as their names imply, with the subject of love" (4).[6] Parry points out that the treatment of love in Ovid's works is often "sensual" while there is little if any "romantic affection" that modern reader tends to expect in the literary works of courtly love (4). The critic then continues to emphasize the popularity and importance of Ovid's works during the medieval period. According to Parry, many of Ovid's works circulated in Latin or were rewritten in the vernacular while much of their "sensuality" was glossed over in appropriating them into ones that would fit into current society and culture (5). Parry points out

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should be treated as lightly as possible to be just showcases for these medieval writers to show off their rhetorical skills. See The Legend of Good Women: *Context and Reception* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer), p. 105-131.

[6] In his translation of Capellanus' *The Art of Courtly Love*, which was originally published in 1941 and reprinted in 1969, John Jay Parry gives a brief introduction to the origin of the genre "courtly love." According to him, Capellanus better demonstrates the theme of courtly love than do the works of Chrétien de Troyes. See *The Art of Courtly Love* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969).

that “much of the literature of France and England was colored by” this fashion, yet there is a special group that seems to have been more impacted by the influence of Ovid than any other:

> Among the troubadours of southern France, however, this influence took on a special character. The Ovidian material was combined with other elements, and the whole combination was infused with a new spirit. It is to this new combination as it developed in the south and as it spread to other lands that we refer when we speak of “courtly love.” No one of the troubadours produced even an approach to a treatise on the art; we have to get our idea of it from their lyric poems. Yet in spite of individual differences and of the changes that took place with time, we can get a fairly coherent picture of the system. (5)

It may be fair to say that what those troubadours retrieved from Ovid’s works is not a style of writing but the concept of love. Hence, those lyric poems mark the very beginning of “courtly love” literature. They all deal with the one theme that Ovid advocated: love.

Parry then explains the history of the development of courtly love as a collective way of dealing with the subject of love in literary works. He carefully suggests that the development of courtly love had a still controversial connection to the culture of Muslim Spain (7). He is more than reserved about this theory of the influence from Islamic culture since it was still open to dispute at his time. Due to the uncertainty about this source, he believes that the “problem of how and why” courtly love developed is still unsolved (12). Parry thinks that the most plausible theory is that the first troubadour who received the influence of Islamic culture and had a touch of “courtliness” in his poems was Duke William of Aquitaine (12). Even though the works of Duke William include all the elements of courtly love, it was Viscount Ebles II of Ventadorn

who established a "new courtly style of poetry" that "was soon adopted by poets in other parts of the country" (12-13).

The ideas initiated by the poetic school of Ebles were then introduced in the north. The central figure in the development of courtly love is Duke William's granddaughter Eleanor of Aquitaine (13). With her marriages first to Prince Louis of France and then to Prince Henry of England, her influence was quite considerable (13). The two daughters of Eleanor and King Louis also played influential parts in the development of courtly love since they both inherited and carried on their mother's "social and literary interest" (13).

Roger Boase followed in Parry's footsteps and gave further explanation of the origin and meaning of the term "courtly love." In his introduction, he states that the term was created by Gaston Paris in an article on "Lancelot du Lac: Le Conte de la Charrette" in 1883. From then on, the term "courtly love" was widely applied and mentioned in various ways. In nineteenth-century scholarship, the idea of courtly love was even diminished into a "fictional concept" (1).[7]

Due to all the uncertainty about courtly love and the uneasiness scholars have in encountering this genre, Boase holds three opinions:

> First, medieval love poets consciously wrote within a literary tradition, inspired by a particular ideal of 'true love' which motivated their conduct…. Secondly, the study of this social and literary phenomenon was not initiated by Gaston Paris: Courtly Love

[7] Roger Boase, in his book dedicated to court-love, does chronological detailed research concerning the history and transformation of courtly love as a genre. His research on the tradition begins in 1500 and extends to his present time. He gives a collective analysis on the theories of the origins and meaning of courtly love. According to Boase, the reception of courtly genre has never been a fixed one. It has constantly changed over time due to social settings, literary trends, and political persuasions. See *The Origin and Meaning of Courtly Love: a Critical Study of European Scholarship* (Manchester England: Manchester University Press, 1977).

> became a subject for critics when, in the Renaissance, it was superseded by new modes of thought and expression…. Thirdly, most critics since the sixteenth century have shared the conviction that modern European poetry begins in twelfth-century Provence, and the concept of love implicit in troubadour poetry is utterly different from that which was expressed by the poets of ancient Rome. (1)

Such uniqueness, according to Parry and Boase, is not only literary but also political. One thing that Parry and Boase agree on is the undeniable role of troubadours in the development of courtly love. While Parry offers the historical perspective of this issue, Boase offers a broader cultural one. Boase suggests that because the troubadours went beyond the constraints of imitating the classical models, "they were to prove a useful weapon in the campaign against Neoclassicism" (2). Boase points out that there are two theories on the connection between the troubadours and the idea of courtly love: the "traditional" school of thought, on the one hand, and the "individualist" school of thought, on the other (2). Exponents of the former would tend to argue that Courtly Love was rooted in a popular and anonymous oral tradition, whereas exponents of the latter would take the view that it was elaborated by a group of literate and highly individual poets (2). Boase emphasizes that such a division was quite popular among eighteenth-century critics and the major disadvantage of such a classification is that both theories contain "aesthetic prejudices" that remain as impediments in the way of fully understanding courtly love (2).

Leaving such aesthetic prejudices aside, Boase concludes that one thing commonly agreed upon among critics regarding courtly love is that "Courtly Love was the product of a court environment, and that, especially in its initial stages, was far from being a collective or

uniform doctrine" (2). Instead of being formed by discipline and principles, the development of courtly love was a result of spontaneous performance in a court environment. However, with that said, the role of Islam and its influence on the genre of courtly-love is still debated among modern critics. More than three decades after Parry's cautious introduction on the influence of Islamic culture, Boase still talks about such influence (Arabic origin, as he calls it) in a skeptical tone. Among the writers who ever dealt with the genre of courtly love, Parry mentions that Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France were the most important and famous figures (13).

In the works of Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France, damsels in distress and loyal knights are always involved. In its pragmatic form, the female protagonist is pursued persistently and valued dearly by the male protagonist. *Yvain, the Knight of the Lion*, by Chrétien, is one good example of such a form. Yvain has to undergo many trials and adventures to win his lady.[8] The lady whom Yvain tries so hard to win is the representative of noble ladies. The position of women in such texts dealing with the theme of courtly love appears to be superior to that of the knight. However, as Boase points out, the theme of courtly love is an ever-changing idea. It was applied and appreciated in very different ways after Chrétien and Marie de France and their traditional prototypes of courtly love.

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[8] In the narrative, Yvain seeks to avenge his cousin, Calogrenant, who has been defeated by an otherworldly knight, Esclados, beside a magical storm-making stone in the forest of Brocéliande. Yvain defeats Esclados and falls in love with his widow, Laudine. With the aid of Laudine's servant, Lunete, Yvain wins his lady and marries her, but Gawain convinces him to leave Laudine behind to embark on a chivalric adventure. Laudine assents, but demands that he return after one year. Yvain becomes so enthralled with his knightly exploits that he forgets to return to his wife within the allotted time so she rejects him. Yvain goes mad with grief. Later he is cured by a noblewoman, and decides to rediscover himself and find a way to win back Laudine. A lion he rescues from a dragon proves to be a loyal companion and a symbol of knightly virtue. The lion then helps him defeat both a mighty giant and three fierce knights. After Yvain rescues Lunete from being burned at the stake, she helps Yvain win back his wife, who allows him to return, along with his lion. See *Yvain, the Knight of the Lion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

2. The Changing Definition of Courtly Love

In 1969, Francis X. Newman, in his introduction to *The Meaning of Courtly Love*, pointed out the contradictory paradoxes that the idea of courtly love presents:

> What is striking about the courtly love which Paris described is how clearly incompatible it was with conventional medieval views on the psychology and theology of sexuality. It was the habit of the men of the Middle Ages to think man the superior of woman, to see sexual union (actual or desired) as permissible only within marriage, to consider sensuality a hindrance to union with the divine. Courtly love involves the contradiction of such views. It is the special mark of *amour courtois* that it entails the simultaneous acceptance of contradictory notions, contradictory at least by the conventional standards of the Middle Ages. That is to say that courtly love is a doctrine of paradoxes, a love at once illicit and morally elevating, passionate and disciplined, humiliating and exalting, human and transcendent. Perhaps the ultimate paradox of courtly love is that a doctrine in many ways so unmedieval should be considered the unique contribution of the Middle Ages to the lore of love. (vii)[9]

To say that the idea of courtly love is a "doctrine of paradoxes" is to say that it by no means represents any historical phenomenon in the Middle Ages. The first two papers in Newman's volume especially illustrate this twist in the reception of courtly love.

D. W. Robertson Jr. discusses the concept of courtly love in Chaucer's writing and harshly condemns the prominence given to courtly love in the study of medieval literature. According to Robertson, the idea of courtly love in terms of scholarship has become a

[9] *The Meaning of Courtly Love* includes a series of papers that were presented at a conference sponsored by the Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies of the State University of New York at Binghamton in March 1967, and later published in 1969. See *The Meaning of Courtly Love* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1969).

"predicament:" "The study of courtly love, if it belongs anywhere, should be conducted only as the subject is an aspect of nineteenth and twentieth century cultural history. The subject has nothing to do with the Middle Ages, and its use as a governing concept can only be an impediment to our understanding of medieval texts," he writes (17).[10] Robertson uses the most famous "courtly lover" in Chaucer's writing, Troilus, to demonstrate that there is always more beyond the idea of courtly love. Robertson points out that Chaucer writes his version of Troilus' story not only because of his interest in the story (from his reading of Boccaccio's *Filostrato*), but also for his concern with the current status of London. For Englishmen in Chaucer's time, the city of Troy always served as a reflection of London as well as a warning of its potential fall. With that concept of history in mind, Chaucer decided to write *Troilus and Criseyde* (12-13). What Robertson tries to emphasize here is that even under the cover of courtly love in *Troilus and Criseyde*, the purpose of Chaucer's rewriting of the story was to shed light on the current historical status of England. Therefore the concept of courtly love remains impractical and almost useless when it comes to interpreting medieval literature.

Following Robertson's criticism of courtly love based on his reading of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, John F. Benton appears to be even more revolutionary. Benton begins his paper with an act of "renunciation" (19).[11] By giving a detailed introduction of the historical

[10] Robertson's paper "The Concept of Courtly Love as an Impediment to the Understanding of Medieval Texts" is the first one in Newman's collection. In this paper, Robertson harshly attacks the ambiguous history as well as the definition of courtly love and suggests that medieval literature is likely to receive more unbiased interpretation without the idea of courtly love standing in the way. See *The Meaning of Courtly Love* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1969), p. 1-18.

[11] In Benton's paper "Clio and Venus: a Historical View of Medieval Love" he argues that the generally accepted idea of a courtly love is considered immoral and impractical in a real medieval setting, speaking from a historical point of view. Thus Benton comes to the same conclusion as Robertson, the idea of courtly love has no meaning or

background of what "love" stands for in marriage, as well as in the greater society of the Middle Ages, Benton suggests that the idea of courtly love is very *ahistorical*: "Courtesy was created by men for their own satisfaction, and it emphasized a woman's role as an object, sexual or otherwise. Since they did not encourage a genuine respect for women as individuals, the conventions of medieval chivalry, like the conventions of chivalry in the southern United States, did not advance women toward legal or social emancipation" (35). As the idea of courtly love only leads readers and historians in wrong directions, Benton thus concludes that "courtly love has no useful meaning, and it is not worth saving by redefinition" (37).

If the idea of courtly love really appears to be as impractical and useless in terms of reading medieval literature as these critics have suggested, at least the topic of love should not be overlooked in text that centers on the subject of women. Boccaccio, for instance, never strays from such a focus, though his approaches shift as his career develops. In the *Decameron*, the topic of love is a central and constant motif for many of the one hundred stories. The range of how love is presented varies from traditional prototypes of courtly love (such as the fifth tale of the tenth day)[12] to stereotypes of fickle women (such as the sixth story of the seventh day).[13]

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reason to be present when it comes to interpreting both medieval literature and social status. See *The Meaning of Courtly Love* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1969), p. 19-42.

[12] Messer Ansaldo is in love with Madonna Dianora, a married woman, and often sends her messages of his love. She does not return his affections, and in an attempt to put him off says that she will only be his if he can prove his love by providing for her a garden as fair in January as it is in May. Messer Ansaldo hires for a great sum a necromancer, and thereby gives her the garden. Madonna Dianora tells her husband of her promise, and he says that, while he would prefer that she remain faithful to him if possible, she must keep her word to Messer Ansaldo. When Messer Ansaldo learns of this he releases her from her promise and she returns to her husband. From then on Messer Ansaldo felt only honorable affection for Madonna Dianora. The necromancer is impressed by this and refuses to take any payment from Messer Ansaldo. See *Decameron* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013).

[13] Madonna Isabella is with her Leonetto, her accepted lover, when Messer Lambertuccio, who also loves her, surprises her. As her husband is coming home about the same time, she sends Messer Lambertuccio out of the house sword drawn, and afterwards the husband escorts Leonetto home. See *Decameron* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013).

Since the topic of love in the *Decameron* is depicted in such a variety of ways, it is almost impossible to pinpoint Boccaccio's opinion. However, in *Famous Women* Boccaccio is far clearer, as each story is followed by a moral teaching that praises women's faithfulness (as in the story of Dido) while also warning men about vicious women (as in the story of Cleopatra). With the didactic messages at the end of each story, the topic of love is obvious and the writer's position unwavering. In the cases of Chaucer and Christine, the issue at stake has more to do with the notorious medieval text *The Romance of the Rose* than the simple topic of love.

3. *The Romance of the Rose*

While the works of Chrétien and Marie de France epitomize the literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the idea of courtly love undergoes a tremendous change in later periods. *The Romance of the Rose*, composed around the late thirteenth century, bore a significant role in the changing concept of courtly love. It is also the most popular literary work that deals with the theme of courtly love in the times of Chaucer and Christine de Pizan. Larry D. Benson, in his introduction to Chaucer's translation of the *Rose*, describes the importance of this work composed by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun. Benson notes that the *Rose* has long been considered one of the most representative works of courtly love. He also notes that its allegorical frame became a model for many subsequent literary works. According to Benson, the allegory in the *Rose* "provides a fascinating psychological analysis of the experience of love from both the lover's and the lady's point of view" (685).[14]

[14] Larry D. Benson is the chief editor of the *Riverside Chaucer* published in 1987. In his introduction to Chaucer's translation of the *Rose*, he gives the history of the *Rose* and states its importance not only for Chaucer but also for the whole period of the Middle Ages, both social and literary. See *Riverside Chaucer* (Mass.: Houghton Mifflin,

Benson also makes it clear that since Guillaume uses the "love vision" that is "the dominant genre of courtly verse narrative," the *Rose* became a model work of courtly love. "The dream, the idealized spring landscape, and the allegorical personages became the stock devices of love poetry until at least the sixteenth century, and for countless readers Guillaume defined the elegant craft of aristocratic love," he writes (685). However, Guillaume left the work unfinished. Jean de Meun, some forty years after Guillaume's death, picked up the piece and completed the work. Jean de Meun was an "intellectual, scholar and translator of Boethius," and his way of writing the rest of the story took the literary work in another direction. Although the two authors both focused on the theme of love, their approaches and tones differed a lot. Benson's comment is that in the first part of the *Rose*, "love—principally, though not exclusively, is a refined aristocratic pastime." In the second part of the story composed by Jean de Meun, the theme of love is expanded from sex to friendship, to basically everything (685). Benson summarizes the disparities between the writing styles of the two writers of the *Rose*:

> Guillaume's hints of the complexity of love—most notably the well of Narcissus—are developed into a broad consideration of love in relation to nature, reason, and life itself. Guillaume's vision thus became the vehicle for a varied and amusing survey of the intellectual interests of the time that extends the work to almost 22,000 lines, until finally, with a graphic description of the sexual act only thinly disguised as allegory, the lover plucks the rosebud. (685-86)

1987).

Due to the great dissimilarities of the two authors' ways of dealing with the theme of love, the *Rose* has become not only one of the most widely read, but also one of the most controversial literary works of courtly love in the Middle Ages.[15]

Because of its popularity and significance, Chaucer translated the *Rose*. In the Prologue of the *Legend*, he invents a dialogue between the translator of the *Rose* and the God of Love about whether the *Rose* is a bad influence on people in terms of love and whether the translator should take the responsibility of spreading the misogynistic ideas interwoven into the plot in the story. Such an issue does not stop Chaucer from writing on women. After Chaucer's translation of the *Rose*, Christine also acknowledges the popularity as well as the influence of the text, and therefore engages in a series of quarrels with the defenders of the *Rose*.[16] Christine to some extent launches her professional career by engaging the problems deeply tied to misogynistic

[15] To offer a glimpse of the tremendous disparity between the two parts of the *Rose*, the followings are two excerpts from each part. The first part composed by Guillaume appears to follow the courtly love tradition, presenting a graceful picture of a young man's love in an allegorical setting: "In my twentieth year, at the time when Love claims his tribute from young men, I lay down one night, as usual, and fell fast asleep. As I slept, I had a most beautiful and pleasing dream, but there was nothing in the dream that has not come true, exactly as the dream told it. Now I should like to recount that dream in verse, the better to delight your hearts, for Love begs and commands me to do so. And if any man or woman should ask what I wish this romance, which I now begin, to be called, it is the *Romance of the Rose*, in which the whole art of love is contained. The matter is fair and new; God grants that she for whom I have undertaken it may receive it with pleasure. She it is who is so precious and so worthy of being loved that she ought to be called Rose." According to Frances Horgan, the translator of this edition, the second part by Jean de Meun,is almost "anti-Guillaume" as it poses many misogynistic statements and the most representative model is all kinds of speeches made by the character Friend: "And those who marry follow a very dangerous practice, a custom so strange that I marvel greatly at it. I do not know where this folly comes from unless it be the result of madness and lunacy. I see that no one who buys a horse would be so foolish as to pay a penny until he had seen it completely uncovered, however well it had been covered up; he would test it and examine it all over. But one takes a woman without trying her out; win or lose, for better or worse, she will never be uncovered simply in order to avoid putting one off before she is married. And when she sees that the deed is done, then and only then does she reveal her evil nature, only then is it apparent whether or not she has any blemishes, only then, when repentance is useless, does she make the fool aware of her disposition. Now I know for certain that, however well his wife may behave, there is no one who feels himself to be married and does not repent of it, unless he is a fool." See *The Romance of the Rose* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. xvi, p. 3, and p. 133.

[16] Brown-Grant calls this series of debates launched by Christine de Pizan and her friend "the quarrel of the *Rose*." See *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women Reading beyond Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

traditions that the *Rose* brings forth. She forms a series of debates on such problems with those who defend the *Rose* as an artistic work that should be safe from accusations of teaching incorrect perspectives about love and spreading immoral images of women.[17]

From the lady in *Yvain*, who appears to be given an elevated position in a traditional context of courtly love, to the "rose" in the *Rose*—which is considered to be a merely symbolic emblem of the noble lady in the first part written by Guillaume as well as a target of mockery for the theme of courtly love in the second part by Jean de Meun— it is beyond doubt that the idea of courtly love and the reception of such literary texts changed over time. As the idea of courtly love has been ever changing, the reactions of Boccaccio, Chaucer, and Christine de Pizan to its popularity, as well as its controversy, point to these writers' unsettled attitudes toward "the woman question." These writers' indeterminacy in taking a position on the subject of women, especially in the case of Chaucer, has led critics to explore another approach of reading medieval literature concerning "the woman question." Among them, Chaucerian critics in the 1980s suggested a new focus on "individuality" in Chaucerian works.

The idea of the individual

1. Chaucer as a Transition

Blamires regards Chaucer as the transitional model of the "formal case," between Abelard and Christine de Pizan, and explicitly states that Chaucer refused to give women serious

[17] Brown-Grant points out that the central issue in the "quarrel of the *Rose*" is whether Jean de Meun should take the responsibility of providing so many misogynistic ideas in the part of the *Rose* that he composed after Guillaume's first part of the story. For more reference, see *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women Reading beyond Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 28-43.

authority (208).[18] It may be true that Chaucer always maintains a very ambiguous position in terms of women's power and authority in a male-dominated society; and yet Chaucer's ambiguous writing also sheds light on a new way of reading medieval literature. The new approach among Chaucerian critics after 1980 is very inspirational concerning the texts in discussion here. This new approach was initiated by Charles Muscatine and introduced again in Stephanie Trigg's book. Stephanie Trigg applies Charles Muscatine's address to the New Chaucer Society in 1980 about how we should read Chaucer: "While it does look as if it would be highly un-Chaucerian to be too solemn or too pious about Chaucer scholarship, none of us is under the obligation, after all, to be Chaucerian" (1).[19] According to Trigg, Muscatine "reintroduces Chaucer as a moral authority, directing us to discover our own individuality, … encourag[ing] us to be ourselves" (1). Trigg brings a new approach to Chaucer: to read his characters in the context of "individuality."

This sense of individuality in reading Chaucer's works also offers another approach to seeing how our three texts can be related to each other. Whether these three writers are regarded as part of Blamires' "case for women," McCormick's "literary game," or reactions to the genre

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[18] In the chapter dedicated to these three writers, Blamires explains that they, along with their works, represent different versions of "the formal case". In the case of Chaucer, Blamires concludes that Chaucer's *LGW* is an "opaque" version of the case and so it will always remain undetermined if Chaucer writes good women in an ironic way or not. When it comes to Christine, Blamires also expresses his concern about Christine's being a "profeminist" writer even though her *BCL* definitely provides a prototype of the literary fortress for defamed women. See *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 199.

[19] Stephanie Trigg discusses the readership as well as the history of reception of Chaucer's works. In the first chapter on "Speaking for Chaucer: Cannon and Community," she applies Charles Muscatine's address to the New Chaucer Society in 1980. She indicates that before 1980, Chaucerian critics tended to focus on the "ambiguity and irony" in Chaucer's works. In his address, Muscatine suggested that readers as well as scholars and critics should free themselves from such a restricted reception. Muscatine reintroduced Chaucer as a "moral authority" who can lead us to find our "individuality." See *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

of courtly love (most specifically the *Romance of the Rose*), interpretations of this group of texts have always been confined to the subject of women. Bringing the idea of the individual into reading Chaucerian texts helps get away from this omnipresent focus. With the history of the development of the individual, especially the practice in literature, the possibility that these texts illustrate these writers' awareness of their individuality becomes quite evident.

2. The Development of the Individual

The cultural background of the twelfth century, both religious and secular, shows that people's overall focus had turned from the divine to the significance of being an individual person. This shift of focus is not only presented in the details of people's religious lives, but also in different literary genres. Collin Morris gives a full history of how "individuality" emerges in the twelfth century (6).[20]

Morris suggests that the transition between classical and Shakespearean literature reveals a process that leads to the modern idea of the individual. According to Morris, Greek drama, such as *Oedipus the King*, stresses the inescapable fate of the protagonist while Shakespearean plays, such as *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, draw the audience's attention to the hero's tragic flaw. In Morris' words, Greek drama is a drama of circumstance while Shakespearean tragedy is drama of characters (4). Morris points out that in drama, the concern for individuality is already made

[20] Collin Morris published his *The Discovery of the Individual 1050-1200* in 1972. It has been reprinted multiple times, in 1991, 1995, 2000, and 2004. The edition used here is the 1972 one. Morris systematically examines the development of the idea of the individual. He starts with the introduction of the tradition and origin of the idea of the individual in western culture, followed by the historical background. He then covers the development of the individual within various settings, including religious, social, and literary ones. According to Morris, the development of the individual starts with people's introspection and extends to one's relationship with other people, society as a whole, and their relationship with God. See *The Discovery of the Individual 1050-1200* (London: S.P.C.K., 1972).

clear: “Nor has the fascination with human character been confined to the observation of other men. There has also been in Western literature a strong element of self-discovery…[t]his ‘inwardness’ or acute self-awareness has been a distinctive feature of Western man” (4). According to Morris, the high Middle Ages constitute a crucial moment in this process:

> If we concentrate more on the development of self-awareness and self-expression, on the freedom of a man to declare himself without paying excessive attention to the demands of convention or the dictates of authority, then we may well find that the twelfth century was in this respect a peculiarly creative age. (7)

In summation, with the discovery of the self comes the development of the individual. In the high Middle Ages, manner of creativeness starts to flourish from people’s self-awareness.

Morris also touches upon the subject of the individual in regard to religion. For him, individualism also has roots in Christian belief. He points out that the central belief of Christianity can serve as “an affirmation of human dignity” since God became a man. The fact that “[t]he value of the individual and the dignity of man are both written large in the pages of the Scriptures” suggests that the development of individualism already took its roots in this rather confined and pious society (11). Nevertheless, the Church of the twelfth century restricted the development of individuals with its untouchable and multi-layered hierarchy (13). As a result, the idea of individuality, that is a basic element in religious writings, did not prevail in religious society. It did thrive, however, in the realm of secular literature.

The individual starts to appear in medieval literature through a reemergence of the classical past and rewritings of classical literature. Although the question of whether Christians should read the classics of pagan literature has always been an issue, the influence of the classical past is omnipresent. For Morris, there are three figures, Seneca, Augustine, and Boethius, who are seen as major influences on the development of the individual. People in the twelfth century read their works and applied their ideas of individuality to fit their own purposes, religious or secular.

Both scholars and monks in the twelfth century regard Seneca's letters with great praise since they show "the conscious and patient pursuit of virtue, the profession of a desire for leisure and meditation and the choice of a guide and mentor" (16). The second figure, Augustine, stands out for his iconic role in both the literary and religious worlds. Augustine's *Confessions* is widely considered as the world's first autobiography, as well as being seen as a text that conveys a "general tradition of self-exploration in the late Graeco-Roman world" (16). The third one, Boethius who writes in a mixture of Christian and classical traditions, especially in his most famous work, *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Although scholars in the twelfth century commented on Boethius' work from a variety of perspectives, they believed that this work helps to "bring them into touch with the classical approach to self-examination" (18).

The works of Seneca, Augustine, and Boethius to some extent all relate to another aspect of the beginning of the individual in the twelfth century: the widespread practice of individual confession. What is critical in the practice of individual confession is "the good intention of the

sinner" (78). Once the person making a confession has good intention, God is there to show His mercy. This awareness of "inwardness," such as in the intention of the sinner, helps to establish one of the characteristics of the romance genre (75). The practice of individual confession gradually takes people away "from external regulations" and leads them "towards an insight into individual character" (75).

The central idea of individualism is *self*, yet the development is not restricted solely to that domain. It also extends to one's relationships with others. According to Morris, in the twelfth century there are two main categories that define all kinds of relationships between one and others: friendship and love. In terms of friendship, for people in the twelfth century an essential device used to declare friendship is the "letter" (97):

> Just as the cult of friendship was of direct relevance to the political and religious conditions of the day, so it unquestionably meant a great deal personally to the friends. We must remember that a letter was a considerable present, involving trouble and expense in its preparation and its delivery, and to receive an open letter from a great literary or spiritual figure must have been an open honor and pleasure to anyone. (104)

The other category of defining relationships between individuals is love. While letters become documents about the encounters between people or people and God, they avoid covering the realm of sexual love (108). In the twelfth century, what we see is what is commonly referred to as courtly love. One thing that friendship and courtly love share in common is that they are both inclined to "find in these personal relationships the summit of human experience and the source of good," and that can only be done through self-analysis and introspective practice (118).

In the history of the development of the individual, the last stage concerns the relationship between individuals and society. Morris names two literary genres, satire and romance, that indicate different social phenomena and their relations to individuals. The first one is satire, a mode of writing exercising rhetorical skills. In medieval Europe it is often a medium for talking about the corruption of the Church (122-23). Satire is used to represent a kind of managerial revolution in the administration of the Church. This revolution is caused by the administration, being transferred from literary people to lawyers (125). Such a transformation gives an explanation of why most of the writers of satire are "outsiders," implying a background of weakening humanist confidence (126). Satire shows how people react to society, showing their affections and making their opinions.

The second genre is romance. Morris uses Chrétien de Troyes to discuss the ethical focus in the literature of the twelfth century. Morris comments that the works of Chrétien show how "ethical assumptions varied in the society for which he was writing, and that it expected and enjoyed the discussion of conflicting codes of conduct" (135).[21] The works of Chrétien de Troyes draw attention to the inwardness of his characters and also represent the importance of human complexity in terms of ethics and conduct. Furthermore, one thing repeatedly implied in the plots of his works, such as *The Knight of the Lion* and *The Story of the Grail*, is that one should always follow one's heart (137). More often than not, Chrétien de Troyes sends his

[21] The chapter in which Morris discusses the works of Chrétien is called "The Individual and Society." According to Morris, Chrétien's protagonists always encounter the dilemma whether to follow the "conduct of code" which is believed to be the right path to take while following one's heart, and disregarding the traditions set up for a knight or people of other positions. In Morris' point of view, the development of the individual in relation to society consists of both the growing doubt about the current social order and the emerging thought of subverting the traditional values. The dilemmas presented in the works of Chrétien represent such phenomenon.

protagonists out to search for their true self since they are more or less alienated from society (133). For Chrétien de Troyes, such alienation "rouses echoes within the experience of the individual, influencing his most intimate relations with others" (137). As Morris summarizes, both satire and romance are obviously affected by the idea of the individual. The former records the protest against a society that people find unsatisfying and the later emphasizes the importance of the discovery of a true self (138).

While both romance and satire are representations of writers' interactions with society as well as with current social phenomena, three texts by Boccaccio, Chaucer, and Christine de Pizan represent still another kind of literary text that reflects the development of the individual: the medieval writer's self-awareness of being a writer.

The Portrayals of Women as Portrayals of the Writer's Individuality

While the stories of the women in Boccaccio's *Famous Women* center on how they gain their fame, the author includes his own moral judgment, criticizing whether or not it is a correct way for women to gain authority and power. In so doing, Boccaccio is directly communicating with his dominantly male audience since he always has in mind the obligation of a humanistic writer to educate social elites. Boccaccio's moral judgments also mark his attempt to separate himself from Petrarch. Petrarch believed that history is cyclical and therefore that it was possible to restore the traditional values of ancient Rome. Boccaccio, however, believed that history is linear. In Boccaccio's opinion, morality always goes downward in the course of history.[22] In

[22] In her discussion of misogynistic traditions in the Middle Ages, Brown-Grant addresses the difference between Petrarch's concept of history and Boccaccio's. In Petrarch's opinion, since history is cyclical it can serve as an indicator of morality for society. On the contrary, Boccaccio thinks that history is linear and so it is almost

order to elaborate on his own conception of history, which entails his major departure from Petrarch, Boccaccio writes about famous women as metaphors for the inevitable degradation of morality in history. Furthermore, these portrayals of women, representing Boccaccio's major difference from Petrarch, also embody the writer's uncertainty about his position in the Florentine power hierarchy.

Chaucer's sense of individuality is shown in his struggle to perform two roles at the same time, translator and writer. While Boccaccio writes about his subjects in terms of fame, in Chaucer's *Legend*, all the stories center on the faithfulness of the women toward their husbands or other patriarchal figures. The portrayals of women in the *Legend* attest to Chaucer's hesitation about the issue of faithfulness in his translation of the old stories, the old authorities, and to his own creativeness. Both Boccaccio and Chaucer use the subject of women as a metaphor for their unresolved relationship with either another writer or old authorities. The portrayals of women become different kinds of medium for Boccaccio and Chaucer to define their individuality as writers.

For Christine de Pizan, the question of individualism has another dimension since she is a female writer. Christine's stories of famous women emphasize their intellectual, political, and sometimes artistic abilities. Christine presents a greater interest in individuality in addition to her interaction with her contemporary writers (as in the case of Boccaccio) and with older authorities (as in the case of Chaucer). First of all, the opening of *City of Ladies* presents a conversation

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impossible to go back to ancient (best) times. Morality always goes downwards in the course of history. More importantly, Boccaccio thinks that one of the main cause for the downfall of morality is "women." For more discussion of this, please see the following chapter on Boccaccio. See Brown- Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women: Reading beyond Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 160.

between the female writer and an old authority, Aristotle. Furthermore, the structure of her allegory centers on the various kinds of women's virtues, abilities, and contributions. Most importantly, before Christine speaks out for women as a gender, she is speaking out for her own achievement as a female writer. For Christine, the sense of individuality has to include the female gender because these portrayals of women represent the very image of the writer, Christine de Pizan herself.

Chapter Two

On Boccaccio's *Famous Women*

Critics of Boccaccio's *Famous Women* usually focus on its difference from the writer's most popular work, the *Decameron*. Although they tend to agree on the significance of *Famous Women* as Boccaccio's effort in advocating the humanism initiated by Petrarch, there is not much interpretation of the portrayals of women. Stephen Kolsky treats *Famous Women* separately from the *Decameron* and suggests that the text shows Boccaccio's position in a Florentine power hierarchy with his various portrayals of famous women. While Kolsky's criticism of Boccaccio's struggle for power during the development of humanism stops at the discussion of the definitions of moralist and historian in Boccaccio's time, it seems reasonable to extend the interpretation to a more personal level involving Boccaccio's concern about his own position in relation to Petrarch. For Boccaccio, to obtain complete autonomy in the context of humanism was to differentiate himself from its initiator and his predecessor, Petrarch. If these portrayals of women become evidence that marks Boccaccio's failure to integrate the two roles of moralist and historian (in Kolsky's observation), is it possible that such a failure was a deliberate and personal one? While such interpretation brings to the front Boccaccio's awareness of his role as a writer, there is more to read from these portrayals of women. First, they not only stand for Boccaccio's struggle to be a humanist writer (an integration of historian and moralist),

but also signify more specific and personal details about Boccaccio's self-awareness of his own individuality in terms of being a writer. They also serve as metaphors for his position as a humanist writer and his concept of history.

The Dedication and the Scholarship

The first collection of stories mentioned in Blamires' introduction to *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture* is Boccaccio's *Famous Women* (*De mulieribus claris*). These famous women are presented as models to show all kinds of methods by which women obtain their fame in history. Before the first story, Boccaccio writes a dedication in which he states explicitly that the subject of this book is woman. The writer thinks that it is much more suitable if he dedicates this book to a "distinguished lady" rather than a prince (*FW*, 3).[1] The first lady that comes into the writer's mind is: "Joanna, Most Serene Queen of Sicily and Jerusalem" (*FW*, 3). Yet right after the proclamation, Boccaccio immediately shows his hesitation about this choice. Boccaccio's concern is that "her royal luster is so dazzling and the flickering flame of my little book so small and weak" (*FW*, 3). Boccaccio changes his mind for fear that the brightness of the queen would outshine his work and so claims that this book is dedicated to Lady Andrea Acciaiuoli of Florence. Boccaccio then extols the character of Lady Andrea and convinces his readers that she is the right model for his collection:

> For as I reflected on your character, both gentle and renowned; your outstanding probity, women's greatest ornament; and your elegance of speech; and as I noted your

[1] All the quotations of Boccaccio's *Famous Women* are from Virginia Brown's lacing-page translation that was published in 2001. See *Famous Women* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

> generosity of soul and your powers of intellect far surpassing the endowments of womankind; as I saw that what nature has denied the weaker sex God has freely instilled in your breast and complemented with marvelous virtues, to the point where he willed you to be known by the name you bear (*andres* being in Greek the equivalent of the Latin word for 'men')—considering all this, I felt that you deserved comparison with the most excellent women anywhere, even among the ancients.
> (*FW*, 3, 5)

The choice of dedicatee indicates Boccaccio's criteria for what kind of women are *famous* enough to be included in this collection. To be qualified figures for this text, they have to be famous, but also gentle and elegant in speech as well as generous in soul. Most importantly, they have to be intellectually superior to most women. It shows that Boccaccio does not eschew the misogynistic idea of regarding woman as the weaker gender and even suggests that the most valuable characteristic about Andrea is that she is more like a man than a woman. Famous women are either related to remarkable men in history or resemble them in certain ways.[2] Yet, the fact that Boccaccio chooses Andrea over the queen also indicates that such resemblance is always within a certain boundary because Boccaccio explicitly expresses his fear of belittling his own work if the work is dedicated to the queen whose reputation outshines the writer's works and reputation.[3]

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[2] According to Margaret Ann Franklin, Boccaccio's dedication "sets the stage for distinguishing between women whose road to glory is realized through their links to remarkable men, and those who seek fame on their own terms and in service of their own ambition." See *Boccaccio's Heroines: Power and Virtue in Renaissance Society* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), p. 25.

[3] In Franklin's opinion, Andrea would give Boccaccio's work "a favorable entrée into the public realm" because "her more modest stature would not overshadow his efforts as the queen's would have done." See *Boccaccio's Heroines: Power and Virtue in Renaissance Society* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), p. 25.

Most critics on Boccaccio's *Famous Women* have not paid much attention to Boccaccio's choice of dedicatee and his criteria for selection. Instead, they tend to focus on the difference between *Famous Women* and the *Decameron*, trying to highlight the importance of *Famous Women* by addressing its many dissimilarities from the other text. In 1963, Guido A. Guarino published his translation of Boccaccio's *Famous Women*. In his introduction, he holds a more conservative but rather positive viewpoint of this work. Guarino describes this text as Boccaccio's "transitional" work between the Italian writer's career as a "libertine" when he wrote the *Decameron* and as a "moralist" when he composed *Famous Women*.[4] Guarino explains that Boccaccio aims to "entertain" in the *Decameron* and to "teach" in the other (xxiii). Since the *Decameron* was written before *Famous Women*, it seems that Boccaccio was becoming more conservative in his later years. Nevertheless, Guarino sees this transition as a positive one and commends the writer's endeavor to welcome a new age of humanism (xvii).[5] Guarino considers *Famous Women* Boccaccio's attempt to present "an example of vice and virtue" while encountering "a predicament of traditions and prejudices" (xxiv). That Boccaccio presents both good and bad models of women becomes one of the major focuses for critics after Guarino.

More than three decades later, Virginia Brown published the most recent translation of *Famous Women*. One of the things that Brown and Guarino share in common is their recognition

[4] Guido A. Guarino's translation of *Famous Women* was first published in 1963 and later reprinted in 2011. From the very beginning of his own introduction, Guarino points out that even though modern readers and critics consider Boccaccio's *Decameron* his most popular and famous work, in his own time Boccaccio was famous for several works, one of which was *Famous Women*. Both Virginia Brown and Guarino recognize the importance of *Famous Women* in both Boccaccio's career and medieval literature. For more references, see *On Famous Women* (New York: Italica Press, 2011), p. ix-xxxii.

[5] Here Guarino points out that although Boccaccio is willing to welcome the new age, he has concerns due to the "*impedimenta* of traditions and prejudices of a former age." See *On Famous Women* (New York: Italica Press, 2011), p. xvii.

of the importance of this text in juxtaposition to the *Decameron*. Brown regards the choice of Latin in *Famous Women* an attempt to follow in Petrarch's footstep in the context of humanism (xi).[6] Brown points to Petrarch's *Lives of Famous Men* (*De viris illustribus*) as an inspiration for Boccaccio and an influence in his transition from a libertine to a more conservative writer (xii).

Like Guarino and Brown, later critics have focused on the relationship between Petrarch and Boccaccio. Two years after Brown's translation, Stephan Kolsky published a book exclusively dedicated to this text. He emphasizes the significance of *Famous Women* in Boccaccio's attempt to revive the traditional values of classical literature. In Kolsky's view, Boccaccio made a contribution to humanism by rewriting stories of women from classical literature. Such a gesture reveals Boccaccio's departure from his treatment of women in the *Decameron* since in *Famous Women* he shows his willingness to recognize women as "worthy of humanistic concern."[7]

Following Brown's emphasis on *Famous Women* as the first biographical collection in Western literature dedicated exclusively to women, Kolsky further suggests that the text lay the foundation for a group of later texts on women in Italian literature during the sixteenth century.[8]

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[6] Virginia Brown's translation of *Famous Women* was published in 2001, along with the original Latin text. Brown explains that there were eight stages in Boccaccio's writing process. Brown emphasizes the "influence of Petrarchan humanism". She relates such an influence to Boccaccio's avoidance of women saints. Overall, Boccaccio focuses on "historical figures—historical in a sense that Boccaccio finds most of his information in sources usually classified as historical." See *Famous Women* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2011), p. xi-xxiii.

[7] *The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio's* De mulieribus claris (New York: P. Lang, 2003), p. 2, in which Kolsky discusses on the structure, historical background, the different models of women, language, and politics in *Famous Women*.

[8] Kolsky also names several literary works that are adaptations from parts of Boccaccio's *Famous Women*. For example, Chaucer's *The Monk's Tale* is an adaptation from the chapter on Zenobia, and Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* is also inspired by Boccaccio's collection of stories of women. See *The Ghost of Boccaccio: Writings on Famous Women in the Renaissance of Italy* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), p. 1-2.

However, despite its essential role in both the writer's career, as well as in the history of literature, *Famous Women* has not received as much attention as it deserves. Critics have either ignored the text or treated it single-mindedly in relation to Christine de Pizan's *City of Ladies*.[9]

Trying to state the importance of *Famous Women* in Boccaccio's career, Kolsky comments on Boccaccio's Dedication. He points out that Boccaccio's role as a writer is restricted to a "masculinist meta-commentator."[10] Despite the fact that Boccaccio's writings on famous women show his willingness to praise the female gender, the writer is not prepared to overthrow the traditional ideology of regarding man as the superior gender to woman. According to Kolsky, Boccaccio refuses to establish a new "equilibrium" between men and women:

> The 'old fashioned' discourses of the pulpit monopolize the textual present, and confine the new language of humanism that is used to re-narrate the past. This return to an idealized masculinity in the commentaries of the *De mulieribus claris* can be considered a response to the social situation in late Medieval Florence, in which old norms were under threat, and new political structures were emerging that were inimical to those interests and values supported by Boccaccio.[11]

Through the stories of famous women, Boccaccio conveys his struggle and fear about changes in society, while warning his male readers about the underlying threat brought by women, such as the queen, who take power over men and put the superior position of men in jeopardy.[12]

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[9] Ibid., p. 1-2.
[10] Ibid., p. 3.
[11] Ibid., p. 3.
[12] Constance Jordan in her "Boccaccio's In-Famous Women: Gender and Civic Virtue in the *De mulieribus Claris*" suggests that Boccaccio's biography of women aims at restricting women's position from public life since some treatment of their "virtues" is rather "deeply ironic by reference to feminine garrulousness, avarice, and lust." See *Ambiguous Realities: Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1987), p. 25-

According to Kolsky, the fact that *Famous Women* was written in Latin not only indicates Boccaccio's intention of restoring the values of the classical past but also implies that his primary target readers are men rather than women. Boccaccio also meant this book for a particular group of people, the social elite, since Latin prevented ordinary people from getting access to its contents.[13] Considering the fact that most women in Boccaccio's time were uneducated, and therefore unable to read Latin, this text, in Kolsky's words, is "for men." Furthermore, by telling the stories of famous women, Boccaccio was instructing his male readers about what kind of famous women are "acceptable."[14] These instructions are given in a didactic tone, which also ensures that the delivered messages are clear and direct.

The targeted audience being men while the subject was woman could be seen as a contradiction in *Famous Women*. In Kolsky's opinion, this contradiction led to Boccaccio's

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[13] Kolsky emphasizes that: "The authoritative language of Latin emphasizes the controlling function of male discourse in the *De mulieribus claris*, excluding the many men and women who could not read Latin and hence could not participate in the humanist movement. Latin is the language of domination... The text speaks to men in so far as it provides a humanistically acceptable arsenal to contain women, and marks out acceptable and unacceptable female behavior by telling stories about women. Boccaccio has not chosen to enter discursive argument about the social and religious status of women, but rather to illustrate and comment on them, categorizing them for men." See *The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio's* De mulieribus claris (New York: P. Lang, 2003), p. 46. Concerning the issue of Boccaccio's writing *Famous Women* in Latin, Glenda McLeod has different opinions. In McLeod's viewpoint, Boccaccio's choice of Latin shows his willingness to integrate both the subject, women, and the form, a Latin text: "By compiling a scholarly catalog of women, Boccaccio united the subject of his vernacular works with the form and language of his Latin ones, thereby dignifying the one and providing such connection to the other. For the moment I'd like to suggest that the new humanist interests in fame and earthly struggle may have struck Boccaccio as more appropriate to a catalog of women, who were, after all, generally associated with the world of nature and fortune." See *Virtue and Venom: Catalogue of Women from Antiquity to Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), p. 63.

[14] McLeod suggests that Boccaccio's struggle is not only for the equality between two genders, it is also for the position of history in the context of poetry: "History generally fell under the umbrella of rhetoric, and although poetry in the Middle Ages was traditionally associated with grammar, the humanists eventually succeeded in connecting it to rhetoric on the university level. Both pursuits—both literature and history—used many of the same source materials and (at least initially) had many of the same aims, such as conveying ethical truths and promoting eloquent speech. It is important to remember, however, that in the Renaissance these two scholarly endeavors diverged and that the seeds of this divergence are present in Boccaccio's time." See *Virtue and Venom: Catalogue of Women from Antiquity to Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), p. 60.

selection of both good and bad models that are often caught up in a "double bind": women with good characteristics are said to have "trespassed on to male territory and therefore have failed to adhere to 'feminine' values," while women with bad characteristics are condemned "from a moral stance."[15] Kolsky concludes that such a double bind usually leads women in the text to an inevitable ending: their achievement always turns out to be their undoing.[16] This gives rise to a series of questions: Did Boccaccio genuinely mean to provide moral models through his stories of famous women? Did Boccaccio really expect women in real life to imitate the models in *Famous Women*? Or were those models posed as threats and warnings to men? Who was really the targeted reader, men or women? Finally the reader is left to wonder whether Boccaccio was ambiguous and ironical.[17]

Kolsky responds rather harshly to critics who see the whole compilation as one single text and are merely interested in whether or not Boccaccio was a misogynist. In Kolsky's view, such criticism does neither justice to the text nor to the author. This singular perspective is a type of "blanket interpretation" as Kolsky calls it.[18] He calls attention to a couple of critics such as Constance Jordan who criticizes the ambiguity and irony in *Famous Women*, and Marilynn Desmond, who calls the text a "misogynist construct."[19] For Kolsky, these critiques are not only

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[15] *The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio's* De mulieribus claris (New York: P. Lang, 2003), p. 2-3.
[16] Ibid., p. 3.
[17] Ibid., p. 3-4.
[18] Ibid., p. 4.
[19] See *The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio's* De mulieribus claris (New York: P. Lang, 2003), p. 4-6. Kolsky criticizes the fact that Jordan sees Boccaccio's *FW* as "a cunning vilification of women." See *Ambiguous Realities: Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1987), p. 25-47. And Kolsky attacks Desmond's single-minded comment on the text's being misogynistic. Kolsky points out that while such feminist critique seems to "transcend historical epochs," it is simply not right to ignore the predominant context in terms of "medieval systems of thoughts." See *The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio's* De mulieribus claris (New York: P. Lang, 2003), p.6. See also Marilynn Desmond, *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the*

"ahistorical" but also represent "the overt ideological colonization of the text from a contemporary perspective."[20] Kolsky thus concludes that these critiques only lead Boccaccio into a "no-win" situation while they completely ignore the text's "multi-dimensionality."[21]

Kolsky's concern with the text's "blanket interpretation" implies that most critiques fall into the trap of reading the text in only one of the two ways: either as "misogynistic" or "feminist." Kolsky offers another approach to reading *Famous Women* by bringing "history" into consideration. Brown, too, suggests in her introduction that this text offers a "fascinating glimpse at a moment in history" (xv). This moment in history, for Guarino, Brown, and Kolsky, is the time when humanism flourishes. These three critics have their own explanations for Boccaccio's taking the path of humanism in *Famous Women*. First, Guarino points out that humanistic writers such as Boccaccio tend to focus on evidence of "human genius" such as secular wisdom and natural truth (xii). Secondly, Brown holds the view that Boccaccio's sense of humanism mainly reveals his attempt to revive traditional values from ancient Rome. Kolsky takes the issue further and, as we have seen, relates it to Boccaccio's shifting treatment of the subject of women from

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Medieval Aeneid (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p.68.

[20] *The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio's* De mulieribus claris (New York: P. Lang, 2003), p. 6.

[21] Ibid., p. 6. Besides Jordan and Desmond, there are other critics that Kolsky criticizes as those who lead Boccaccio to a "no-win" situation, including Pamela Benson and Glenda McLeod. Benson doubts the fact that Boccaccio's *Famous Women* is the first literary text that defends women in Italy and suspects that instead of writing praises of women the writer composes a group of paradox. McLeod calls *Famous Women* a "scholarly florilegium" and disregards the structure and rhetorical methods of the text. In this fashion, they both criticize Boccaccio's ambiguous position in *FW*, suggesting that he has no intention of elevating the social status of women. Benson argues: "The text's assertion that women should become responsible for their own conduct does not mean, however, that women should have equal authority and responsibility with men." See *The Invention of the Renaissance Women: the Challenge of the Independence in the Literature and Thought in Italy and England* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), p. 20. McLeod emphasizes that the women in Boccaccio's biography cannot represent the female gender as a whole since: "Such women do nothing to refute the long standing debasement of femininity; no matter how great their numbers or how impressive their achievements, they do not speak for their gender." See *Virtue and Venom: Catalogue of Women from Antiquity to Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), p. 66.

the *Decameron* to *Famous Women*. Kolsky concentrates on the fact that Boccaccio mostly avoids the topic of "love" after the *Decameron*: "The virtual exclusion of love from *De mulieribus claris* signals an obvious change of direction, a commitment to serious, humanistic male ideals of friendship and perhaps more importantly, the realization that women can be more than objects of sexual love."[22] That Boccaccio starts to deal with the subject of women as a more meaningful topic than merely as sexual object is Kolsky's major focus.

Kolsky thus relates Boccaccio's choice of women as a subject to humanist values. He points out that the new humanism "sought to position itself as a resource at the disposal of society to push for its renewal and to make itself indispensable to the organization of power."[23] Furthermore, "there would seem no better way towards such a renewal than a re-evaluation of the role as women."[24] Lastly, the ambiguity and irony present in *Famous Women* through writings about all types of women reflects the status of humanism as well as the author's uncertainty about his own position in the Florentine power hierarchy.[25] The portrayals of women represent the rising, but still uncertain, position of humanism initiated by Petrarch.

Brown, on the other hand, believes that by providing good and bad examples of women Boccaccio was trying to convey a "moral and intellectual formation." This derives from a close study of classical literature that always "leads to eloquence, prudence, and ethical models" (xi). More importantly, by doing so, Boccaccio was able to bring "the renewal of Roman virtues" for both men and women (xi). The one thing that these three critics agree upon is that *Famous*

[22] Ibid., p. 14.
[23] Ibid., p. 14.
[24] Ibid., p. 14.
[25] Ibid., p. 14.

Women marks Boccaccio's effort of following in Petrarch's new humanist footsteps. In order to highlight human nature (in Guarino's words), to restore ancient Roman values (in Brown's words), and to make such a movement indispensable in the cultivation of power (in Kolsky's words), Boccaccio decided to write a collection of stories in which the subject was women. Regarding the connection between *Famous Women* and the development of humanism, Kolsky looks at the writer's struggle between these two roles, moralist and historian, which both play significant parts for a humanist writer. Such a direction is also Kolsky's solution to avoid the "double bind" critique. He suggests that Boccaccio tried to construct "a bridge between the roles of a moralist and a historian" through the moral lessons at the end of each story, though he failed.[26] Ironically, in Kolsky's analysis, it is the didactic style employed in each story that shows the writer's failure to weigh equally his roles of moralist and historian. According to Kolsky, Boccaccio's tendency to make moral judgments while writing stories of famous women has everything to do with his own definition of a historian (one very different from Petrarch's).[27] Kolsky points out that Boccaccio always tries to exhaust all the sources he can find for his stories and sometimes refuses a conclusive and integrated result.[28] Such a definition of a historian is, however, very different from Petrarch's. Kolsky summarizes that "Boccaccio did not generally wish to exclude one reading in favor of another" and also quotes from the first preface of *De*

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[26] *The Ghost of Boccaccio: Writings on Famous Women in the Renaissance of Italy* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), p. 3.
[27] McLeod also suggests that both Boccaccio and Petrarch were "acutely aware of their own historical position," yet Boccaccio's biographies of women stand as a combination of a preoccupation with Latin poetry and his new sense of historical perspective. See *Virtue and Venom: Catalogue of Women from Antiquity to Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), p. 60-61. See also Brown-Grant's *Christine de Pizan and the moral Defence of Women Reading Beyond Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 157.
[28] *The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio's* De mulieribus claris (New York: P. Lang, 2003), p. 67.

viris illustribus in which Petrarch argues forcefully against historian who do exactly what Boccaccio does in the *De mulieribus*:

> "In doing this I have thought that I have been able to avoid the imprudence and sterile diligence of those authors who, having collected the words of all the historians—so that they seem to have not neglected anything at all—have really contradicted one authority with another so the entire text of their history is lost in cloudy ambiguities and inexplicable conflicts."[29]

Petrarch believes in "one authority" that can reduce possible ambiguities and conflicts while Boccaccio offers all kinds of alternatives to create "an open-endedness about the historical narratives."[30] Kolsky therefore concludes that Boccaccio's sense of history was not as "straightforward" as Petrarch's. In addition, Boccaccio believes that his approach enriched the pleasure in reading historical narratives even though it might also cause him to appear less objective.[31]

Brown-Grant mentions another major dissimilarity in Boccaccio and Petrarch's respective concepts of history: while Petrarch's view of history was cyclical, Boccaccio's was linear. Petrarch believed in the possibility of restoring the glory of Rome, while Boccaccio held that vice in his time suggests no decline. This decline is "a continuation of immorality" on a downward trajectory since the time of Antiquity. Such a pessimistic view of history extends to Boccaccio's treatment of women and Brown-Grant even suggests that Boccaccio believed some

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[29] Ibid., p. 67. Kolsky uses Kohl's article as his source for this quote. See also Benjamin G. Kohl, "Petrarch's Preface to *De viris illustribus*." *History and Theory* 13 (1974), p. 139.
[30] Ibid., p. 67.
[31] Ibid., p. 67-68.

of the pagan women in *Famous Women* were responsible for the immoral decline of civilization (157).

Is it possible that Boccaccio, while re-evaluating the position of humanism in history and his own position as a writer in the current Florentine power hierarchy (both had much to do with Petrarch), was considering that the only way he was able to be *famous* was to differentiate himself from Petrarch? We may see the portrayals of women in *Famous Women* as Boccaccio's attempt at defining himself as an individual writer rather than just the follower of Petrarch.

Thisbe (and blind loyalty)

The first story in discussion here, the story of Thisbe, is a perfect example of how Boccaccio not only interweaves his moral teachings into the story but also employs his subject matter as both a metaphor for his concept of history and his own position in the Florentine power hierarchy.

In the story of Thisbe, Boccaccio does not spend as much time describing Thisbe's genealogy as he does that of other women, such as Dido. After simply addressing Thisbe as "a Babylonian maiden," Boccaccio claims that Thisbe came to be renowned only because of her tragic love of Pyramus. The plot does not differ much from Ovid's story. The uniqueness of Boccaccio's version lies in the last paragraph (as in almost every story in *Famous Women*) where the writer gives his own judgment on social order, morality, and other issues:

> To love while in the flower of youth is a fault, but it is not a frightful crime for unmarried persons since they can proceed to matrimony. The worst sin was Fortune's, and perhaps their wretched parents were guilty as well… Passionate desire is ungovernable; it is the plague and the disgrace of youth, yet we should tolerate it with patience. Nature intends us, while young and fit, to feel spontaneously the procreative urge; the human race would die out if intercourse were delayed until old age. (*FW,* XIII, 61)

It is doubtless that Boccaccio is delivering an educational message with the story of Thisbe. To guide and to teach parents the right way to raise and educate children, Boccaccio uses his moral teachings to make sure that readers get his message directly without misinterpretation. The topic of love and the subject of woman both become obscure background, highlighting the importance of parental guidance. Kolsky believes that the moral lesson in the story of Thisbe bears more weight than the story itself. In his opinion, Thisbe's story serves nothing but the writer's commentary and such commentary limits "the number of interpretations that could be attributed to the tale by enclosing it in a moralizing reading."[32]

Kolsky also uses the story of Thisbe as an example of Boccaccio's struggle between the two positions, moralist and historian. On the one hand, the commentary signifies Boccaccio's effort in being a moralist; on the other, the alterations Boccaccio makes to Ovid's version of Thisbe symbolize his attempt to be a serious historian:

> The story of Pyramus and Thisbe possesses only the slimmest degree of historical veracity. In spite of the poetical source, Boccaccio attempts to create an illusion of

[32] Ibid., p. 34.

> historicity by abandoning all reference to the metamorphic aspects of the Ovidian version, that is, the mulberry berries changing their colour from white to red as a result of being bathed in Pyramus' blood.[33]

This mention of Boccaccio's deliberate avoidance of those "metamorphic aspects" in the Ovidian version is evidence for Kolsky that in *Famous Women* Boccaccio fails to (or refuses to) construct a bridge between the two positions of moralist and historian. In Kolsky's view, if Boccaccio had succeeded, the story of Thisbe would be more accessible beyond merely providing moral models.[34]

Instead of writing the story of Thisbe and Pyramus with the metamorphic aspect as Ovid had done before him, Boccaccio treats the love story as a historical one (as Kolsky suggests). However, even with these efforts at historical writing and de-mythologizing the story, it is hard to define what kind of virtue Boccaccio is trying to present with the story of Thisbe. Thisbe is renowned more "for the outcome of her tragic love than for any other action" (*FW*, XIII, 55). It almost sounds like the tragedy Thisbe encounters is such a misfortune that Boccaccio is simply offering his condolence.

If Boccaccio's Thisbe has no virtue to be praised, the story stands out for nothing but its lack of metamorphic feature. In other words, the significance of Boccaccio's story of Thisbe is the writer's touch of history. In this sense, Kolsky is absolutely right to underline Boccaccio's failure of integrating his roles of a moralist and a historian. This raises the question: What if the failure of "constructing a bridge" is a deliberate one and Boccaccio's avoidance of *ahistorical*

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[33] Ibid., p. 33.
[34] *The Ghost of Boccaccio: Writings on Famous Women in the Renaissance of Italy* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), p. 3.

elements in Ovid's story is designed on purpose? If Thisbe never was a historical figure before Boccaccio's version, is it possible that Boccaccio deliberately portrays Thisbe in this way to imply his pessimistic view of history? The blind loyalty people hold for history does not necessarily bring a good outcome and Thisbe serves as a prime example. Moreover, the fact that their parents fail to spot the love between the young couple and miss the opportunity to lead them onto the right path serves as subtle metaphors of common people who fail to understand history, as it is always taking a downward road. Thisbe and Pyramus thus become the victims of such ignorance (of their own and of their parents), symbolizing the inevitable degradation of civilization in the course of history. Thisbe is only renowned for her tragic love because that is exactly the issue at stake here. Given people's ignorance of the downward tendency of history in terms of morality, a tragic end is inevitable. Such ignorance is as destructive as history is in regard to its incapacity to stop ever-sliding morality.

Hypermnestra (and incapability)

Hypermnestra was one of the fifty daughters of Danaus, who believed in a prophecy that he would be killed by one of his brother's sons. Trying to escape from his fate, Daunus decided to marry his fifty daughters to his brother's fifty sons and demanded his daughters kill their husbands on their wedding night. Hypermnestra, out of compassion and love for her assigned husband, told the young man to run. In the middle of the story, the narrator accuses Danaus of "shameful murder" and reproves Danaus for making such a dreadful request of his daughters to

"prolong his trembling years with the bloodbath of his nephews" (*FW*, XIV, 65). By doing so, Danaus actually set up "an unfortunate example of audacity, deceit, and detestable excess he would bequeath to evil women in the future" (*FW*, XIV, 65).

It seems Boccaccio would rather spend time condemning the inhuman action done by Danaus than praising the virtuous Hypermnestra. As in the story of Thisbe, the female protagonist almost fades to the background while the patriarchal figure takes the main stage. If Boccaccio's moral lesson does more condemning than recommending, what purpose does the story serve? Together father and daughter represent the predicament of the position of history as well as the writer. While Hypermnestra is unable to deny her father's request, no matter how inhuman it is, she has no choice but to sacrifice herself. The vulnerable position of Hypermnestra can be read to symbolize both Boccaccio's inferior position to Petrarch as well as his historical belief in our inability to prevent the moral decay of society. It is also possible that both Thisbe and Hypermnestra can to some extent represent the uncertainty Boccaccio felt in regard to his place in the Florentine power hierarchy.

Hypsipyle (and the reward)

Thoas, King of Lemnos, was Hypsipyle's father. As he was a tyrant, the women in that kingdom decide to overthrow him and kill all the men. They convince Hypsipyle to join them and plan their attack for the next evening (*FW*, XVI, 71). Hypsipyle thinks it is inhumane to commit such a crime and therefore tells her father what is about to happen. Hypsipyle comes up

with a plan to help her father escape from this cruel act: "Thereupon she built a great pyre and pretended that she was performing the final rites for her father" (*FW*, XVI, 71). Everyone believes that Hypsipyle kills her own father and so places Hypsipyle on the throne. The narrator's comment on Hypsipyle's behavior is as follows:

> Most sacred indeed is the love of children for their parents. What is more seemly, more just, more praiseworthy than to reward generously and honorably those from whose labor we received nourishment when we were helpless, who watched over us with solicitude, brought us to maturity with constant love, taught us manners and gave us knowledge, enriched us with honors and skills, and made us strong in morals and in intellect? Surely nothing! Hypsipyle scrupulously repaid this debt to her father and thus deserved to be placed among distinguished women.
> (*FW*, XVI, 71-72)

The virtue of Hypsipyle shows in her sacrifice in spite of her father's wrongdoing. In Boccaccio's depiction, Hypsipyle represents the obligations of children towards their parents. As such, a moral lesson expects no misinterpretation.

The narrator ends the story with a rather simple conclusion: "Thus Hypsipyle was preserved for a fate and death unknown to me" (*FW*, XVI, 75). Such an ending has significant meaning in Kolsky's critique because it perfectly presents the "open-endedness" he writes about in Boccaccio's definition of a historian. The reader is left to wonder why Hypsipyle receives no reward in Boccaccio's telling. As the ending is open-ended and ambiguous, would it not imply Boccaccio's ambiguous place in the Florentine power hierarchy? And since his view of history is

pessimistic, a historical reading into the ambiguity would either be tragic or probably positive since Hypsipyle did her family duty. This implication not only speaks for the writer's ambivalent state of mind but also for the undermined fate of history. If history (or Boccaccio) has done any good, why has it not earned deserved reward and commendation? As the ending of Hypsipyle's story remains unclear, Boccaccio shows his hesitation about how much good deed he (as well as history) has done and what reward might await him. In this sense, the story of Hypsipyle and its open ending become metaphors for both Boccaccio's and his concept of history, representing both their unspoken eagerness to be rewarded, to be recognized for their good deed, and most importantly, to be famous.

Medea (and the glance)

In the story of Medea, Boccaccio describes Medea's love for Jason as passionate and destined. Due to her love for Jason, Medea betrayed her father and escaped from the country with her father's wealth. The narrator, as usual, cannot spare his own moral judgment. His commentary on Medea's fleeing away with Jason centers on a "glance." "What person of sense could imagine that a simple glance would result in the destruction of a powerful king. Medea committed the crime and so earned the embraces of her young lover," the text reads (*FW*, XVII, 75). In previous versions, Medea was known as a filicide who killed her own children as revenge on Jason who betrayed her and married Creusa instead. However, Boccaccio evades all the atrocities that Medea is said to commit in other sources and simply ends the story by saying: "I

do not remember having read or heard what Medea did later, or where or how she died" (*FW*, XVII, 77). Bypassing the atrocity done by Medea, Boccaccio only focuses on the issue of the "glance" in his version.

As is the common pattern in this text, after the narrator ends the story by claiming that he has already considered all possible sources, there comes the appended comment serving as a moral lesson:

> I should not omit this observation: we must not give too much freedom to our eyes… it is by means of the eyes that avarice is aroused; beauty praised; squalor and poverty unworthily condemned… The eyes are the gateway of the spirit… A person who was wise would either keep his eyes closed or raise them heavenward or fix them upon the ground. Between heaven and earth there is no safe direction for the eyes to turn. (*FW*, XVII, 77-79)

First, the narrator expresses the unreliability of the eyes. Then the narrator suggests that the freedom of the eyes oftentimes results in evil such as avarice, wantonness, and lasciviousness. The narrator even concludes that if Medea had closed her eyes or had cast her sights elsewhere, she would still have everything she once had: father, husband, and most importantly, her honor.

Kolsky explains the way Boccaccio writes his biographies: "Boccaccio did not necessarily tie himself down to a single source for each biography. For example, he might ground a biography in his reading of Livy, but introduce other available sources to provide alternative readings, or to insert details not present in the principle source."[35] Kolsky makes such a

[35] *The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio's* De mulieribus claris (New York: P. Lang, 2003), p. 67.

conclusion only to suggest the impasse Boccaccio is headed to: his failure to construct a bridge between the moralist and historian.[36] Although Kolsky often sees a difference in how Petrarch and Boccaccio approach the writing of history, he deliberately ignores the fact that in this case the protégé actually follows the teacher's lead since Boccaccio refuses to acknowledge other versions of Medea.

With the moral lesson at the end, Boccaccio follows Petrarch's lead in presenting "one authority" in the telling of this story.[37] With the omnipresent moral lessons for each story, Boccaccio makes sure that his version of history is not lost "in cloudy ambiguities and inexplicable conflicts" as Petrarch has inaccurately put it. Media's glance at Jason can be seen as a metaphor for the way people see history; Medea sees only what she wants. The glance is always single-minded and oftentimes to the detriment of the concerned party. The consequence is always the downfall of history. There is also a corollary to Boccaccio's personal anxiety as to how he might be seen in his own time and by future generations. A single-minded glance would not serve well such a complicated writer.

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[36] Ibid., p. 67.

[37] McLeod elaborates on whether Boccaccio writes more "historical" or more "literary" figures in *Famous Women*: "The allegorical treatments of heroines in *De mulieribus claris* often suggests the conception of literature that lies behind Boccaccio's defense. The different chapters sometimes appear as allegories of virtues and vices, as etymological clues to truth, or as garbled accounts of historical incidents (euhemerism)… Both historical and literary figures are also used to convey ethical truths. Circe and Cleopatra speak to the issue of unchastity. Examples that we see as literary—Dido, Medea, Circe, and Minerva—are sometimes treated historically as real figures. And historical figures are sometimes treated literarily when Boccaccio invents incidents (Cleopatra)…or interpolates invented speeches (as in the case of Dido, whom Boccaccio largely treats as a historical figure)… The links to history are thus present, but not dominant, and they always coexist with literary technique." See *Virtue and Venom: Catalogue of Women from Antiquity to Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), p. 76.

Dido (and biased interpretation)

As the *Aeneid* was part of the curriculum in the Middle Ages, Virgil's Dido has become one of the most famous figures in literature. As Marilynn Desmond states:

> The significance of Dido's status in Western literary traditions must be understood in relation to the social implications of reading Virgil. As a school text, the *Aeneid* has generally been read by one segment of the population—the male elite, destined by education and/or birth to occupy powerful positions in a hierarchically arranged social structure, a structure in which Latin literacy played a significant role in the formation of a "persecuting society," in R. I. Moore's term. (3)[38]

The story of Dido is well known among educated people, "the one segment of the population," in Desmond's terms. One can be certain that most interpretations of Dido as a literary character were from a male perspective. In the *Aeneid*, Dido is a distraction for Aeneas away from his obligation of building a new Troy, Rome. In the classical texts, Dido is not praised for her love and loyalty for Aeneas. She is merely an emblem of desire and obstacle that Aeneas has to overcome in order to fulfill the task the divine power has assigned him. Boccaccio's Dido is different from Virgil's in that she seems to be more historical than literary in origin.[39]

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[38] Desmond scrupulously discusses the classical and medieval texts that center on Dido, including the works of Virgil, Chaucer, Augustine, Dante and Christine de Pizan. Desmond here emphasizes the significance of Dante's description of Dido based on the role of the literati in the consolidation of power and the concomitant persecution of subjugated groups. See *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the Medieval Aeneid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994). See also R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe 950-1250* (1987), p. 124-53.

[39] Craig Kallendorf in his "Boccaccio's Two Didos: Virgil. Petraca, and Il Più Grande Discepolo" discusses whether Boccaccio's version of Dido is influenced by Petrarch's refutation of Virgil's invention of Dido for his own humanist purposes. See *In Praise of Aeneas: Virgil and Epideictic Rhetoric in the Early Italian Renaissance* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1989), p. 58-76.

After briefly introducing Dido as "both founder and queen of Carthage," the narrator moves backwards in her story to how she arrived in Carthage and received the name Dido. Born Elissa, the Phoenician princess heard the news that her brother, Pygmalion, who had taken his father's throne, was trying to murder her husband, Acerbas. Boccaccio here emphasizes that there are different versions of this story. After Pygmalion murdered Acerbas, Dido was determined to flee the country (*FW*, XLII, 169). Right after she left Pygmalion, Elissa changed her name: "Womanly weakness was cast aside and her spirit hardened to manly strength; for this she later earned the name of 'Dido,' the Phoenician equivalent of the Latin *virago*" (*FW*, XLII, 169). At this point, Dido is transformed in terms of gender on a symbolic level. Dido then makes intricate plans and employs sailors to aid in her escape. To make sure that these sailors do not abandon her in the middle of the sea, Dido makes a speech before they set off (*FW*, XLII, 169-70). At their departure, Dido acts as a leader, a politician, and a queen. Anyone, upon hearing Dido's speech, would be too afraid to stay behind. The sailors, though "sorry as they were at leaving their home and the country of their birth," were "terrified at the prospect of a cruel death" and so determined to go with Dido (*FW*, XLII, 171).

Dido's speech to the sailors is like a campaign through which she expects people to see her as an ideal leader. To further assure her followers of their safety, Dido demands the sailors change course and sail to Cyprus: "There, to comfort the young men and for purposes of procreation, Dido seized some girls who were on the shore making the customary sacrifice to Venus" (*FW*, XLII, 171). These girls from Cyprus were to meet the sailor's physical needs and

also stabilize their mental condition since now they were far away from home, feeling insecure. Additionally, Dido "also took as companion on her voyage a priest of Jupiter and all his family" (*FW*, XLII, 171). Dido's consideration for her people's stability, both mental and physical, is quite thorough. On this voyage, Dido was able to form a well-functioned community where she acted as the ruler.

So far Dido does not need any help to achieve her goals. With her political consciousness (she manipulates people in a very astute way) and her intelligent strategies (she plans to escape and maintain her advantage), Dido reaches the Massylian shore where she successfully obtains enough land for her people (*FW*, XLII, 171). Dido thus creates the city of Carthage. With the treasures she brings from home, Dido establishes a great kingdom. After finishing the infrastructure, Dido "gave the people the laws and a code of conduct" (*FW*, XLII, 173). She, in this way, gains her great reputation as the queen of a well-established kingdom (*FW*, XLII, 173).

Dido is now a widow who rules a great kingdom and this makes her valuable prey for men. The king of the Massitani sets his eyes on Dido. He threatens the elders of Carthage with war and the destruction of their city to have them promise him Dido (*FW*, XLII, 173). The elders of Carthage are put in a difficult situation fearing that Dido's resolution to being chaste would bring the city's destruction. The elders make a request that Dido cannot turn down. As the elders predict, Dido makes a public claim, assuring her people that she will do anything to protect them (*FW*, XLII, 173). The elders then tell Dido about the king's marriage proposal. However, Dido already has a plan in mind that "seemed compatible with her sense of virtue" (*FW*, XLII, 175).

The later part of the story differs significantly from both Ovid's and Virgil's versions.[40] In Boccaccio's version, Dido meets her end even before she meets Aeneas:

> Thus, even before the arrival of the Trojan Aeneas (whom she never saw), Dido had already decided to die rather than violate her chastity. In the highest part of the city she built a great pyre… When she had completed all the ceremonies, Dido took out the knife that she had brought under her clothing…[and] she said: 'In accordance with your wish, my people, I go to my husband'. Hardly had she finished uttering these few words…she threw herself headlong onto the knife.
> (*FW*, XLII, 175)

This is the end Boccaccio gives to Dido in his collection of exemplary women. He then explains why she deserves such an end, right after her suicide: "What glory there is in inviolate chastity! O Dido, venerable and eternal model of unsullied widowhood! I wish that women who have lost their husbands would turn their eyes upon you and that Christian women in particular would contemplate your strength" (*FW*, XLII, 175).

As for what kind of virtue Boccaccio wants to promote in the story of Dido, the narrative seems very ambiguous. On the one hand, Dido is presented as a woman with great ability to run her campaign (if one may say so) and to establish a great kingdom. On the other, she is a widow who decides that the greatest worth of a woman lies in her faithfulness towards her husband, dead or alive. It is doubtless that Boccaccio is willing to acknowledge Dido's political power, yet the narrator's commentary bypasses any acknowledgment of Dido's ability and intelligence,

[40] Ovid only refers to Dido very briefly as "the Sidonian woman" in his *Metamorphoses*. Later in the *Heroides*, Ovid writes a long letter to Aeneas in which expresses her sorrow and desperation about being left behind by her lover.

concentrating merely on her chastity. The narrator only uses Dido as a model to argue against a woman's excuses for remarrying, showing that it is possible to overcome all kinds of obstacles if one is determined to remain chaste. In this way, Dido becomes an example for one moral lesson: the most praiseworthy virtue of women is their faithfulness towards their spouses. Dido's story serves only as camouflage. For Boccaccio, the intelligence and capability that she demonstrates while encountering various obstacles only serve as re-enforcement for showing Dido's virtue of being chaste to her late husband.

Such a commentary informs Kolsky's critique that Boccaccio is conservative in upholding the old values and the superiority of the male gender.[41] Even if Boccaccio bypasses the encounter between Dido and Aeneas, his version of Dido is more of a mythical figure than a historical one. According to Kolsky, Dido is merely an "allegorical" figure that carries "messages of moral conduct," as "Love must be maintained to the end if they [women] want to fulfill the obligations of widowhood. Nor should they [women] think of contracting another marriage" (*FW*, XLII, 181).[42] Kolsky concludes that such an ending shows that: "Boccaccio's text offers few clues as to how classical values and models might be enacted in the late Middle Ages. Indeed, for the male reader the moral commentary by all means reinforces the patriarchal values which underpin the subordinate position of women in his history."[43]

With such a claim, Kolsky too falls into the "double-bind" trap that he harshly attacked when he reviewed earlier critics of *Famous Women*. It seems biased to focus only on the second

[41] *The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio's* De mulieribus claris (New York: P. Lang, 2003), p. 120.
[42] The subject "they" here indicates "women" in general.
[43] Ibid., p. 120.

part of Dido's story. Boccaccio's two contradictory portrayals of Dido, explain, instead of merely reproducing the tone of patriarchy, as Kolsky suggests, have much bearing related to Boccaccio's own inner struggle for individuality. The narrative provides two contrasting versions of the same woman: the first part of story almost goes in perfect parallel with his depiction of Lady Andrea whom he praises highly in his dedication, while the second part of the story presents Dido as an impeccable role model whose reputation is downsized to fit only with mere chasteness. Such double-sided descriptions actually imply the writer's personal concern about his own position in the Florentine power hierarchy and also his view of history.

The representation of Dido thus becomes the reflection of Boccaccio's own position as a writer: trying to stand out among humanist writers with great ability and intelligence, yet encountering the crisis of being regarded as only a follower of Petrarch.

Lucretia (and fame)

The opening lines: "Lucretia, a leading example of Roman modesty and most divine ornament of ancient frugality," proclaims Lucretia's historical fame (*FW*, XLVIII, 195). The narrator then explains what brings Lucretia her great reputation: "Whether Lucretia appeared lovelier among the Roman matrons because of the beauty of her countenance or because of her upright conduct is open to debate" (*FW*, XLVIII, 195). The story is set at the time "[w]hen Tarquinius Superbus was besieging the city of Ardea" (*FW*, XLVIII, 195). As "[t]he siege lasted a long time," the young men who fought in the war "began to argue about the honor of their

spouse" to while away the time (*FW*, XLVIII, 195-97). They then decided to get on horseback and returned home to see whose wife was the noblest.

Among them, Sextus, the son of Superbus, sets his eyes on Lucretia and returns to Lucretia's house, planning to make the most brutal kind of act: "Making himself known to her, he threatened her with death if she cried out or did not yield to his will" (*FW*, XLVIII, 197). As Sextus encounters Lucretia's resistance, "he said that he would kill her, along with one of her male servants, and tell everybody that he had killed them because they had committed adultery" (*FW*, XLVIII, 197). Lucretia fears that "there would be no one to clear her innocent name" and so "unwillingly gave her body to the adulterer" (*FW*, XLVIII, 197). The next day at daybreak, Lucretia sends for her father, her husband, and other family members, and tells them what Sextus has done to her. While all the relatives are trying to console her, Lucretia takes out a knife and says to them: "Although I absolve myself of the sin, I do not exempt myself from the punishment, and in future no woman will live dishonorably because of Lucretia's example" (*FW*, xlviii, 199). At the end, Lucretia "fell dying before the very eyes of her husband and her father" and "[s]hortly after [she] poured out her soul together with her blood"(*FW*, xlviii, 199). As always, Boccaccio gives a moral lesson after Lucretia's end:

> Here was an unfortunate beauty. Her purity, which can never be sufficiently commended, should be extolled all the more highly as she expiated with such severity the ignominy thrust violently upon her. Her action not only restored the reputation that a dissolute young man had destroyed with his filthy crime, but led ultimately to freedom for Rome.
> (*FW*, XLVIII, 199)

Boccaccio is the only writer who makes a connection between Lucretia's tragic encounter with Sextus and the liberation of Rome.[44]

Kolsky does not talk about this deliberate connection. He simply comments on Boccaccio's version of Lucretia's story and relates it to Boccaccio's role as a writer, which is like that of a director for a stage production:

> The notion of the "indelebile nomen" [indelible fame] is essential to Boccaccio's project in so far as it is a question of naming or, more specifically, of creating or confirming a series of stereotypes for women. In this way, Boccaccio is able to equate a particular female quality (positive or negative) with a story and make it memorable for the readers. It is also a means of reining in the possibilities of a narrative before the reader has the chance to develop his or her response to it. These 'stage-directions' enforce limits on the reader's imagination, to try and ensure that the writer is able to direct and control whatever self-discovery may be afforded by the *exempla*.[45]

The performance is "directed" by Boccaccio to ensure that there is no wrong interpretation from Lucretia's example. In Kolsky's view, Boccaccio does not allow his readers to have any "self-discovery" that does not follow from his instruction.

If the self-discovery of readers is not Boccaccio's concern in the story of Lucretia, then what is? Boccaccio emphasizes that what happens to Lucretia is considered an incident that leads to the liberation from the Roman monarchy since after Lucretia's confession, her husband, along with other young men, become determined to overthrow the tyranny of the royal family (since

[44] Neither Chaucer nor Christine mentions such a connection when they tell the story of Lucretia. In this sense, Boccaccio is "the only writer."
[45] *The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio's* De mulieribus claris (New York: P. Lang, 2003), p. 133.

Sextus is the young heir of the ruler at that time). A revolution then takes place and the kingdom of Rome is transformed into the Roman Republic.

The connection made between the story of Lucretia and history is very straightforward. Of all the women in Boccaccio's collection, Lucretia is probably the most fatalistic one since all she does is maintain silence in her determination to sacrifice for *fame*. It is almost as if Lucretia is the very representation of history. The story of Lucretia may contain Boccaccio's most positive view of history: given the right virtue and Boccaccio's unitary interpretation, history might progress in a better direction. However, even though Boccaccio shows the direct relationship between positive virtue and fame in his representation of Lucretia, many components, such as rape and suicide are quite unnerving. To some extent, these elements reflect the writer's indeterminacy about his own position. Is reputation always a positive concept? Kolsky sheds light on this issue and argues that the fame of these famous women has unbroken ties to their virtues/qualities. This argument may extend to the writer's state of mind. Is there really a right kind of virtue or right type of fame that can consolidate one's identity as a writer and even bring forth his reputation?

Cleopatra (and the demand)

At the very beginning, the narrator clearly states how famous Cleopatra is: "Cleopatra was an Egyptian woman who became the subject of talk the world over" (*FW*, LXXXVIII, 361). Yet soon after this opening line, the narrator concludes that the way Cleopatra gained her fame was

by no means honorable: "Cleopatra had no true marks of glory except for her ancestry and her attractive appearance; on the other hand, she acquired a universal reputation for her greed, cruelty, and lust" (*FW*, LXXXVIII, 361).[46] It is rare in *Famous Women* for the narrator to make his judgment before he even tells the story. This alerts readers that Cleopatra's fame is expected to be negative.

One has the impression that the narrator is trying to be detached from the story because he keeps reminding readers that it is based on many sources, and more importantly, not his own creation. The first version he provides tells the story of how Dionysius or Mineus "left his will instructing his oldest son, who appeared as Lysanias in certain sources, to marry Cleopatra, his eldest daughter". After their father's death, Cleopatra "burning with the desire to rule, reportedly poisoned the innocent fifteen-year-old boy who was both her brother and husband, thus gaining sole control of the kingdom". Then the narrator starts with "our sources tell us that…" and continues to tell how Cleopatra ends up in a war with her other brother, whom Pompey had made king of Egypt (*FW*, LXXXVIII, 363). The narrator repeats the word "source" multiple times so that it sounds as though he is trying to free himself from any suspicion that the story is his own invention. By emphasizing his own detachment, the narrator reveals his reluctance to tell a story where a negative model is presented.

[46] Jordan emphasizes Boccaccio's harsh judgment of Cleopatra: "Boccaccio practically implies that Cleopatra cannot experience an effort of will in other than a sexual way. In contrast to a man, who represents the head of the body politic or the rationality directing civic affairs, this woman represents the body itself, its most basic and elemental desires. Her failure to govern is then a physically determined fact, a logical product of her femininity." See *Ambiguous Realities: Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1987), p. 37.

Nevertheless, he still tries to weave his own judgment into the plot. To settle the fight between Cleopatra and her brother, Caesar requests that two siblings plead their case in his presence. The narrator then abruptly switches his attention to condemn Cleopatra's terrible character:

> Cleopatra, naturally malicious and extremely confident, was happy to comply and arrived in royal splendor. She thought she had a good chance of getting the kingdom for herself if she could entice Caesar, the conqueror of the world, to desire her. As she was beautiful indeed and could captivate almost anyone…Cleopatra had little trouble bringing the lusty prince to her bed.
> (*FW*, LXXXVIII, 363)

The narrator may not take the trouble to send his message of moral conduct, but his judgmental tone is present in the description of every one of Cleopatra's actions and characteristics.

The "malicious" scheme of Cleopatra works perfectly because Caesar gives the kingdom of Egypt to her "[a]s a kind of recompense for the nights they had spent together and for her loyalty." Then the narrator tells the story with a more objurgating tone:

> Cleopatra, who had acquired her kingdom through a double crime, now abandoned herself to sensuous pleasure. She became, so to speak, the whore of the Eastern kings: greedy for gold and jewels, she not only stripped her lovers of these things by means of her artfulness, but she allegedly emptied the temples and the sacred places of Egyptians….
> (*FW*, LXXXVIII, 365)

Once again, every line contains judgmental terms. Regardless of Cleopatra's success and achievement as a queen, the writer denies readers any opportunity to have any positive interpretations of what Cleopatra has achieved.

The story then continues to the part when Cleopatra meets Antony. She asks Antony for the kingdom of Syria as well as Africa and follows him all the way to the Euphrates. The commentator condemns Cleopatra's stupidity for asking even for the Roman Empire and transforming Antony from a liberal man into an unreasonable figure (*FW*, LXXXVIII, 369). Due to Antony's divorce from Octavia for the sake of Cleopatra, Octavian launches a war against the couple. Later Antony is defeated by Octavian and kills himself. (*FW*, LXXXVIII, 371). After his death, the narrator gives two endings to Cleopatra's story. The first ending is: "She gave up any hope of deliverance, put on her royal insignia, and followed her Antony…she opened the veins in her arms and placed asps on the wounds. These snakes, so it is claimed, bring death with slumber" (*FW*, LXXXVIII, 371). Although the plot suggests that Cleopatra's death is painless, the narrator presents it in a negative way: "While drowned in sleep, the wretched woman put an end to her greed, her concupiscence, and her life" (*FW*, LXXXVIII, 373). The narrator wants readers' attention to be on the disappearance of her greed and concupiscence instead of on Cleopatra's painless death.

The second version of Cleopatra's end differs greatly from the first one and portrays Cleopatra as a faithful spouse to Antony:

> Other authorities…say that Antony, in preparing for the battle of Actium, grew fearful that he had lost Cleopatra's favor and consequently adopted the practice of taking neither food nor drink without having it tasted beforehand. When Cleopatra realized this, she devised a plan for removing any doubt about her fidelity. Poison was sprinkled on the flowers with which…she had adorned their crowns… The flowers had been put into the cup, and Antony was about to drain it, when Cleopatra restrained him with her hand… When he understood the deception which she herself disclosed to him, Antony had her taken into custody and forced her to drink the same cup that she had prevented him from imbibing. And this is said to have been the manner of Cleopatra's death. (*FW*, LXXXVIII, 373)

The narrator in the end of the story clarifies that "[t]he first version is the more common. To this I must add that Octavian ordered the completion of the tomb begun by Antony and Cleopatra and had them buried in it together" (*FW*, LXXXVIII, 373). Whereas the narrator tries to make the first version as complete and logical as possible, he never mentions how and where he learns the second ending. By adding the second ending to his version, Boccaccio seems to emphasize that Cleopatra is an untrustworthy woman. All in all, neither of the two endings presents Cleopatra as a good woman.[47]

Regardless of the harshness Boccaccio imbeds within his description of Cleopatra, he saves no effort or time digging into the history of this infamous woman. While the moral lesson

[47] McLeod thinks that Cleopatra may serve as the most practical example to show Boccaccio's audience that women's virtues, virtuous or vicious, could bring destruction to society: As one critic (Peter Godman) has noted, "the inequity of Cleopatra is … an inexhaustible subject" for Boccaccio. More importantly, she is the most vivid exemplum of women's corrupting influence on the state. In fact, the sketch virtually takes the threat of women's sexuality posed for men and translates it into a threat against the state. Cleopatra's aggressive lust for sexual conquest is linked to her lust for territorial conquest. As a queen and as a woman, she exemplifies the destructive notion of femininity operating at full tilt." See *Virtue and Venom: Catalogue of Women from Antiquity to Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), p. 61-63. See also Peter Godman's "Chaucer and Boccaccio's Latin Work" in *Chaucer and the Italian Trecento* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 169-95.

represented by the case of Cleopatra is more than obvious, her function as a metaphor for society's moral degradation over time is also self-evident. Conversely, whereas Cleopatra is presented as such a negative model, this metaphor of history is more positive than the others. For the first time in Boccaccio's writing, the woman asks for what she wants and almost achieves her goal at every turn in life. These representations involving negative qualities in famous women such as Cleopatra reveal the constant downfall of civilization. Furthermore, the story of Cleopatra signifies Boccaccio's inner struggle about his own identity as a writer among his contemporaries because it is not posed as a warning or a bad model; it speaks deeply about the outcome of what one sets one's mind to and what fame out of it one would obtain.

Conclusion

These portrayals In *Famous Women* serve both as metaphors for how Boccaccio viewed history as well as representations of his own concerns about being a humanist writer. Kolsky mentions that one of the obligations of a humanist writer is to provide "examples" for people to follow.[48] Kolsky also points out that while the "*exempla* of humanistic derivation mostly deal with public, male issues of concern," addressing women as the subject of *exempla*, Boccaccio made an important gesture in "the revolution of *exemplum*" because men and women can read the same stories in their own favors:

[48] Warren Ginsberg explores what he calls Chaucer's "Italian tradition," a discourse that emerges by viewing the social institutions and artistic modes that shaped Chaucer's reception of Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch. While offering a fresh look at one of England's great literary figures, this book addresses important questions about the dynamics of cross-cultural translation and the formation of tradition. Ginsberg points out one thing that Boccaccio and Petrarch have in common: they both believe that literature should be exemplary. See *Chaucer's Italian Tradition* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), p. 254.

> It is not simply a question of substituting a female *exemplum* for a male one… In some instances, the woman replaces a man in the performance of a particular function, such as bearing arms. In these situations, the male reader may be challenged in his or her thinking about the role of men and women in contemporary society. In other circumstances, the male reader have their views confirmed or even intensified… The *exemplum* can therefore contain important messages for both male and female selfhood: confirmation of the life led by the female reader, or suggestions that it is too restrictive and could be released but without precise instructions on how to achieve change.[49]

In Kosky's view, the absence of clear instruction on "how to achieve change" reveals Boccaccio's resistance to initiate any revolution in gender. Unfortunately, by saying so, Koslky again falls into the "double bind" trap of critiques that he harshly criticized.

Kolsky falls into this trap by trying to determine Boccaccio's intention for including both virtuous and vicious women, pointing out that he irony in some of his portrayals of women reveals Boccaccio's "virility in subordinating facts about women to a body of knowledge organized by a male mind." Kolsky then argues that "[i]f the new humanism could see value in forming a kind of alliance with women, however, one in which the humanist [Boccaccio] could still maintain a sense of his superiority, it ironically reflected his uncertain place in the hierarchy of power."[50] Blamires also comments on Boccaccio's *Famous Women* which portrays both vicious and virtuous women: "it is sharply equivocal in its representations of women—often

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[49] *The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio's* De mulieribus claris (New York: P. Lang, 2003), p. 70.
[50] See *The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio's* De mulieribus claris (New York: P. Lang, 2003), p. 14. McLeod also orients her discussion on *Famous Women* in terms of ambivalence and irony in Boccaccio's depiction of women's virtues and whether they fit in public life. See *Virtue and Venom: Catalogue of Women from Antiquity to Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), p. 27.

inanely disdainful in these stereotypical assumptions it incidentally discloses about womanly weakness, and yet attentive to evidence in received story of the possibility of feminine transcendence of such stereotype" (70). Either Boccaccio's portrayals of women are "ironic" representations of Boccaccio's conservative leanings or "transcendent portrayals from stereotypical representations of women;" and yet Kolsky and Blamires all sing the praises of *Famous Women*. Blamires calls it a "highly influential text" and Kolsky defines it as "a monument to developing humanist practice" because "[i]t is both a tribute to Petrarch and a sign of the writer's own individuality."[51]

Whether Boccaccio was being ironic in presenting these portrayals of women should by no means cloud the fact that *Famous Women* is the first western collection of stories solely on women. Even though Boccaccio obviously did not venture to start a revolution to overthrow the gender hierarchy, his awareness of the changes in society interwoven in his re-writing of classical women is rare and commendable. Beyond the subject of women, however, through these portrayals of women Boccaccio dealt with more personal issues that link *Famous Women* to his individuality as a writer.

Boccaccio is showing his awareness of the uncertain position of humanism, of his views on the nature of history, and most importantly of his role as a writer.[52] For Boccaccio, the rewriting

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[51] See *The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio's* De mulieribus claris (New York: P. Lang, 2003), p. 179. See also *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 70.

[52] Jordan comes to the same conclusion as McLeod, suggesting that Boccaccio's depiction of women's virtues is most of the time ambivalent, if not ironic; yet she sheds some light on the positive influence of *FW* for the time to come: "It proposes to redefine another relationship of authority and subordination—in this case of the authoritative male or the subordinate female—and to perceive in the subordinate the *virtues* that might justify in certain cases a self-authorized and independent behavior… By virtue of its contradictions Boccaccio's text on women exemplifies certain of the important developments that were to occur in European historical writing, in which for the next two

of classical tales about women can be used as a metaphor for his understanding of history, which at times is shown to depart from that of Petrarch. Furthermore, these portrayals of women also embody the writer's progressing identity as a humanist writer, not one stuck between a moralist and a historian (in Kolsky's words), but one with individuality. The idea of the individual presented by Boccaccio's portrayals of women reveals the writer's responsibility to preserve traditional values as a humanist writer. These portrayals of women reach just beyond the subject of women and relate to the writer's individuality revealing his concerns about his own position in the Florentine power hierarchy during the development of humanism. With the urge to distinguish himself from Petrarch, his predecessor, Boccaccio struggles with his position as a writer in his time. The most characteristic feature of Boccaccio's portrayals of women is the moral lesson that accompanies each story of *Famous Women*. These moral lessons can be considered as one of the ways Boccaccio demonstrates his own inventiveness. Such inventiveness suggests that this humanist writer does not only follow in the footsteps of old authorities such as Ovid, Virgil, and even Petrarch. Boccaccio's interpretation of old stories about classical women, imbedded with his present moral lessons becomes another trademark of his individuality. After all, his writings of these famous women reveal issues that are quite personal, concerning both his role and position as a humanist writer at his time.

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centuries every aspect of the institution of political power came under review. In these texts a wide spectrum of possible forms of government are the subject of repeated discussion, and the problems of assigning and echoing political and religious authority elicit a variety of responses, both liberal and conservative. In its depiction and condemnation of famous women, the *De mulieribus claris* represents an early effort to comprehend and respond to some of the ideas that were to feature in this debate." See *Ambiguous Realities: Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1987), p. 44.

Chapter Three

On Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women*

The Legend of Good Women starts with a *Prologue* where the God of Love and the narrator have a debate over whether the author is doing women serious harm by translating *The Romance of the Rose*. In order to fulfill the request of the God of Love to restore the good reputation of women, the narrator embarks upon telling tales about good women. The debate, however, sets the foundation for the following individual legends. All the legends present classical women as "good women" in terms of their faithfulness in love, and also serve as metaphors for the relationship between writing and interpretation. The intricate relationship between authorship and readership points to Chaucer's major concern about his role as a writer since being a writer often involves the task of translation. Chaucer seeks to support his own commitment to faithfulness in his role as translator through the unwavering faithfulness of women in each legend. The portrayals of good women in *The Legend of Good Women* thus serve as metaphors for the relationship between writing and interpretation that marks Chaucer's sense of individuality regarding his identity as a writer.

The *Prologue*

The Legend of Good Women is one of the least read and criticized books of all Chaucer's works. Most criticism around this text focuses on the *Prologue* with some arguments extending

into the body of the work to question whether Chaucer is being ironic in portraying all the women in the *Legend* as good women. Is the *Legend* one of the works of *exemplam* popular in the Middle Ages? Is Chaucer taking the woman's side while dealing with the subject of women? These questions also take much time and space in critiques of this work. Due to such approaches and preferences, the importance of the individual legends has long been overlooked and so has the poet's concern about his identity as a writer. The possibility that Chaucer uses the subject of women as a metaphor for his own position in literary history has been buried under the major trends of Chaucerian criticism. Critics have acknowledged the importance of the *Legend* in Chaucer's career, and yet limited the interpretation of the text to general gender-oriented criticism.

Robert Worth Frank, Jr. is one of the pioneer critics who acknowledge the significance of the *Legend*. Frank believes that when composing it, Chaucer moved beyond the theme and genre by which he composed *Troilus and Criseyde*: "The complete, the exhaustive treatment of courtly or romantic or polite love—call it what you will—in *Troilus*…left Chaucer limited possibilities for further treatment unless he were content to repeat himself. What indeed remains to be said, within the perspective of the code, after Troilus?" (5)[1] In Frank's view, if Chaucer wanted to refine his rhetoric as well as narrative skills, he had to give up the theme of courtly love. While

[1] Robert Worth Frank, Jr. starts his criticism on the *Legend* with the historical background of England in 1386. This is when presumably Chaucer starts the project of *LGW*. According to Frank, it is a time when both the poet and the country experience certain transitions. Due to such a historical background and significance of the text, Frank also believes that the *Legend* is a representation of the transition in Chaucer's writing career. See *Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 5.

Chaucer still dealt with the subject of women, the poet's concern extended beyond courtly love and therefore none of the characters in the *Legend* are courtly lovers like Troilus.

Concerning how Chaucer decided to deal with the theme of courtly love, Lisa J. Kiser claims that the book, written in the time between *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales*, serves as a bridge. Kiser suggests that in Chaucer's career there is a transition between Chaucer as a poet of courtly love and as the freer writer who writes the *Tales*. Many people see the *Legend* as a "backward looking poem" since it engages the past rather than the future by rewriting the classical tales. Kiser believes that by rewriting these stories of classical women, the poet had a greater purpose in mind rather than the mere intention of giving up the theme of courtly love.[2]

Kiser emphasizes that Chaucer's choice of topic as well as genre demonstrates the poet's great ambition to integrate classical tales from the past into the Christian values of his own age (16). According to Kiser, many medieval writers took such a mission as their career goal: "By the time Chaucer was writing, medieval artists had, of course, fully accepted the idea that classical stories could be useful to Christian readers… medieval artists were faced with the burden of translating ancient issues into terms that could most immediately meet the needs of their own different age" (16).

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[2] Lisa J. Kiser examines various elements in the *Legend*, analyzing the metaphors associated with separate characters in it, including the daisy, the sun, Alceste, and the God of Love. She also focuses on the difference between poetry and *makyng* that signifies the different identities of medieval writers as opposed to modern ones. According to Kiser, the transitional position of the *Legend* not only reveals the poet's intention of writing a different genre from *Troilus and Criseyde* but also implies Chaucer's hesitation of turning away from translating all these classical tales before the poet's more revolutionary work, *The Canterbury Tales*. See *Telling Classical Tales: Chaucer and the* Legend of Good Women (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), p. 20.

As concerns the task of rewriting classical tales, Frank shares Kiser's viewpoint. Retelling classical stories in Chaucer's time served the purposes of preservation and propagation (13). Frank talks about the distinct dissimilarities between Boccaccio and Chaucer in this regard: "It is unlikely that he was emulating the scholarly and educative performance of Boccaccio in *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium* and *De Claris Mulieribus*, his free treatment of sources implies no concern for a comprehensive erudition, no intention to create an encyclopedia work of reference like Boccaccio's" (13-14).[3] While Boccaccio reveals his struggle about his personal status related to Petrarch in the Florentine power hierarchy, Chaucer shows his concern with being a medieval artist: "It is not as a historian or scholar, but as an artist that Chaucer demands to be taken seriously here [in the Prologue]" (14).

Frank notes that where Chaucer tries to define himself as an artist lies in the debate between the narrator and the God of Love in the *Prologue*. Chaucer reveals the problem of being a medieval artist (in Frank's term) through discussing the relationship between "old bookes" and "human experience." The poet elaborates his opinions about how much we can rely on old texts as well as authorities and to what extent one is able to create one's own work. The opening lines of the *Prologue* state the doubtful credibility of the old books:

> A thousand tymes have I herd men telle
> That ther ys joye in hevene, and peyne in helle,
> And I acorde wel that it ys so;

[3] Aage Brusendorf holds another opinion and suggests that the Latin titles of the individual legends were modeled on Boccaccio's chapter headings in *De claris mulieribus*. See *The Chaucer Tradition* (London, Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1925), p. 144-45.

> But natheles, yet wot I wel also
> That ther nis noon dwellyng in this contree
> That eyther hath in hevene or helle ybe,
> Ne may of hit noon other weyes witen,
> But as he hath herd seyd, or founde it written,
> For by assay, ther may no man it preve.
> (*LGW*, 1-10)[4]

The subtlety here is the narrator's internal debate about whether the written texts can be fully trusted. The fact that the creator cannot offer any proof as it comes to the issue of heaven and hell serves as an example.

This debate shows the narrator's recognition of the limitations of human experience. The narrator then continues to argue that for those things that are impossible for us to encounter or experience within the time of mortal life, there is no choice but to consult old books. Here the narrator acknowledges the significance of classical tales and suggests that those old stories provide information that is impossible or unnecessary to be acquired otherwise:

> Than mote we to bokes that we fynde,
> Thurgh whiche that olde thynges ben in mynde.
> And to the doctryne of these old wyse,
> Yeve credence, in every skylful wise,
> That tellen of these olde appreved stories,
> ---
> Of which I may not maken rehersynges.

[4] All the excerpts of *The Legend of Good Women* are from *The Riverside Chaucer* edited by Larry D. Benson. All the excerpts from the *Prologue* are based on *Prologue F*. See *The Riverside Chaucer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

(*LGW*, 17-24)

Whether Chaucer takes on the obligation of retelling classical stories to give them Christian values, as in Kiser's interpretation, or if he identifies himself as a medieval artist by acknowledging the significance of the materials he chooses for his legends, as in Frank's, Chaucer justifies the importance of his sources, these classical tales.

After his endorsement of the old books, the narrator suddenly takes a turn and starts to describe his summer indulgence, exchanging books for one daisy as soon as the birds sing in the morning (*LGW*, 29-39). This sharp turn draws his attention from the books to the marvelous nature in sight, the daisy: "Now have I thanne eek this condicioun / That, of al the floures in the mede, / Thanne love I most thise floures white and rede, / Swiche as men callen dayesyes in oure toun" (*LGW*, 40-44). In the narrator's description, the daisy embodies all the worldly goodness, including beauty and virtues, and therefore it has become the love of his life (*LGW*, 53-59).

The daisy in the *Prologue* is of central concern for Chaucerian critics. Frank's interpretation of the daisy is one of the dominant critiques. Frank suggests that the way the narrator praises the daisy is a rhetorical technique to mock the theme of courtly love: "What is most to the point, the daisy sequence serves to keep the narrator within an area cleanly removed from the experience of courtly love. The sequence uses all the language and postures of courtly love, not for the proper object of love, but for a daisy" (22).[5] Indeed, the narrator seems to worship the daisy in a fashion

[5] Frank here gives further explanation of the importance of the queen. According to Frank, if the passage expresses a devotion to Queen Anne, as has a piece of been suggested, she is also an object removed from the realm of courtly love, and the language is a recognizable rhetoric for praising her, nothing more: "That Chaucer is referring to *his* lady, whoever this might be, seems an unlikely reading of the text. Those few lines that might suggest a real woman (*LGW*, 94) do not necessarily bear this meaning. The whole weight of Chaucer's talk of love is directed toward the

one worships a goddess. First, the narrator describes the daisy as a muse that inspires his creativity. He also compares the daisy to the sun as the daisy leads him forward in his writing career (*LGW*, 60-88). The narrator then continues to further express his desire for the daisy, claiming that he cannot wait to get through the night to see the daisy in the early morning:

> Constreyned me with so gledy desir,
> That in myn herte I feele yet the fir,
> That made me to ryse er yt were day—
> And this was now the firste morwe of May—
> …
> And doun on knes anoon-ryght I me sette,
> And, as I koude, this fresshe flour I grette;
> Knelyng alwey til it unclosed was…
> (*LGW*, 105-17)

Frank's interpretation of this paragraph is that it is very "courtly-love" (24). The narrator's desire, eagerness, and devotion towards the daisy are very much like those of someone deeply in love, reminding readers of Troilus after he is struck by the god of love in *Troilus and Criseyde* (24).

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daisy. No real lady emerges from behind the flower; if she was there, she was sadly ignored. Nor is Alceste, the figure related to the daisy, his lady." On this matter, Frank contradicts Dorothy Bethrum's interpretation as Bethrum believes that the daisy is a real woman since it reveals how far beyond the believable toward parody Chaucer has pushed matters: "The daisy is, of course, some woman; not even Wordsworth could find in that miserable little English daisy 'the clerness and the verray light / That in this derke world me wynt and ledeth.'" See *Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972). See also Bethrum's "Chaucer's Point of View as Narrator in the Love Poems." *PMLA*, 74 (1959), p. 516.

Frank goes further to suggest that the praise of the daisy in the *Prologue* is nothing genuine: "It is possible, it seems to me, to read the praise of the daisy both as a beguiling tribute to a modest, charming flower and as a sly and cheeky mockery of the worshipful lover and the worship of love. The hyperbolic language and postures are typical for devotion to ladies, but comic for devotion to daisies" (24). As the narrator emphasizes more than once that he is not interested in taking sides between the leaf or the flower, it is obvious that the narrator's praise of the daisy bears a greater agenda than merely serving as a symbol of his love for one particular object in nature (*LGW*, 71-72, 188-96).[6] All the effort to praise a flower seems superficial and hyperbolic. In Frank's argument, the daisy serves as foreshadowing for the appearance of the God of Love and Alceste who are also portrayed as objects in nature. According to Frank, Chaucer tries to imply that the theme of courtly love, like the daisy, should fade into the background so that the God of Love and Alceste can have their turn to shine on the stage. That means the poet now is ready to move onto the next stage as an artist: being a creator (of a genre).[7]

The kind of creator that Chaucer tries to be, in Frank's opinion, is to fulfill the mission of preserving as well as promoting classical tales. Regarding this issue, Kiser emphasizes rather

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[6] Kathryn L. Lynch emphasizes that: "Chaucer is alluding here to contemporary courtly debating games that playfully pit defenders of the flower against defenders of the leaf." *Dream Visions and Other Poems: A Norton Critical Edition* (W. W. Norton: New York, 2007), p. 124.

[7] Suzanne Hadegron sides with Frank and agrees that the *Legend* is Chaucer's departure from the theme of courtly-love: "*The Legend*, and especially its *Prologue*, which explicitly glances back at the French sources underlying Chaucer's early poetry, can be read as Chaucer's farewell to his career as courtly "maker" in favor of a new form of poetry that does not exclude the uncourtly, the mundane, or even the obscene. Chaucer's return to the dream-vision in the *Legend* could be viewed as a retrograde movement in his poetry, since he had moved beyond this literary device in the *Troilus*. And so it is, but deliberately so, as Chaucer revisits his earlier poetic debts only in order to demonstrate how much he has grown away from them." See *Abandoned Women: Rewriting the Classics in Dante, Boccaccio and Chaucer* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), p. 166.

Chaucer's intention of rewriting those tales of famous women, suggesting that the poet actually tries to integrate the classical tales with Christian values through the role of the daisy. By praising the daisy, Chaucer not only praises the importance of poetry, but also emphasizes that one of the obligations of an artist (in Frank's terms) is to put knowledge in everyone's use. According to Kiser, classical literature contains knowledge, including that which people are unable to obtain through experiences and therefore it is important and necessary for medieval writers to employ literature as "preserver and conveyor of knowledge" (34). Kiser suggests that Chaucer gives the old authorities full credit for their essential role in human knowledge, and that by taking this stand, Chaucer also addresses the particular responsibility of a medieval writer with his praise of the daisy (49).

The presence of the daisy not only signifies the importance of old books, in Kiser's observation, it is also an earthly imitation of the sun (45). The narrator writes that the daisy only blossoms when the sun comes out and the daisy is able to give the world warmth and brightness, as does the sun (*LGW*, 110-13, 125-29). Such a connection between the daisy and the sun, in Kiser's opinion, is significant when related to literary practice:

> With both physical and linguistic ties to the sun, Chaucer's daisy emerges as a strikingly appropriate model for the poet's craft. Using this flower's close relationship to "truth," Chaucer dramatically illustrates the nature and function of poetic expression…. Thus the mediating function of poetry is made vivid and explicit in the figure of Chaucer's flower, whose powers of representation are truly extraordinary. (46-47)[8]

[8] Kiser cites Derrida for an interesting modern viewpoint on metaphor. Derrida, in "White Mythology," in *New*

Here, Kiser makes it clear that the narrator is not distracted by the old books, as the poem bluntly presents. Although shown as distracted by the daisy, the narrator never strays away from the "truth." For the narrator, appreciating the daisy is not contradictory to acquiring knowledge from old books since the daisy also embodies a kind of "truth," which one can always find in Mother Nature as well as literary works.

It is clear the daisy bears multiple meanings. Whether the daisy is only an inappropriate object of love and so diminishes the importance of "courtly-love," as Frank suggests, or whether the daisy is the very representation of "truth" that the narrator would never leave behind, according to Kiser, the narrator is surely not just following the *marguerite* tradition (23).[9] To say the least, the daisy in the *Prologue* serves as a prelude to the narrator's encounter with the God of Love and Alceste. Right after the narrator states clearly that he has no interest in debating the flower versus leaf, because he wants to go beyond what the old books have said, the narrator falls asleep, dreaming of the arrival of the God of Love and Alceste:

> And from afer com walkyng in the mede
> The god of Love and in his hande a quene,
> And she was clad in real habit grene.
> A fret of gold she hadde next her heer,
> And upon that a whit corowne she beer

Literary History, 6 (1974), discusses the heliotrope as the perfect "metaphor of the metaphor." The essay also discusses the sun as a metaphor for inexpressible truth. See *Telling Classical Tales: Chaucer and the* Legend of Good Women (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 46-60

[9] There are many critics who have made the connection between Chaucer's daisy and the *marguerite* tradition. Frank explains that the daisy of these Frenchmen most often represents real female acquaintances named "Marguerite," a name common in fourteenth-century France. For more references, see *Telling Classical Tales: Chaucer and the* Legend of Good Women (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), p. 23.

> With florouns smale, and I shal nat lye,
> For al the world, ryght as a dayesye
> …
> Yclothed was this myghty god of Love
> …
> His gilte heer was corowned with a sonne,
> In stede of gold, for hevynesse and wyghte.
> (*LGW*, 212-18, 226-31)

Upon seeing the remarkable gesture of the God of Love and the beauty of this noble lady holding the god's hand, the narrator converts his admiration for this lady into a ballad that includes several noble women such as Cleopatra, Thisbe, and Dido, whom he later takes as subjects (*LGW*, 249-69).

The appearance of the God of Love and Alceste somehow complicates the issue of the daisy. If the daisy is the representation of "truth" as Kiser argues, then there is more than one version of "truth" in the *Prologue*, embedded in the presentations of the God of Love and Alceste. The descriptions of both the apparel and the adornment of Alceste's crown show her indisputable resemblance to the daisy. The lines about the God of Love also stress the god's similarity to the sun. All together, the daisy (Alceste) and the sun (the God of Love) represent different versions of truth that the narrator inserts into the *Prologue*. These three versions of truth represented by Alceste, the God of Love, and the narrator become a very powerful prelude to the debate between the narrator and the God of Love, in which the God of Love accuses the narrator of having defiled the name of love by translating the *Romance of the Rose* and rewriting the story

of Troilus and Criseyde. By presenting these different versions of "truth" in this scene, the poet intends to define his own position as a poet in his time. This entails asking several questions such as: what is the true meaning of being a writer; is a writer an artist/creator (as Frank suggests), a preserver of classical literature (as Kiser suggests), or merely a translator (the God of Love's accusation from which the poet tries to defend himself)?

All these questions as to what comprises the identity of a medieval writer arise from the accusations made by the God of Love. After spotting the presence of the narrator, the God of Love immediately experiences a certain kind of rage and directly accuses the poet of violating the law of love:

> Yt is my relyke, digne and delytable,
> And thow my foo, and al my folk werreyest,
> And of myn olde servauntes thow mysseyest
> And hynderest hem with thy translacioun
> And lettest folk from hire devocioun
> To serve me, and holdest it folye
> To serve Love. Thou maist yt nat denye
> For in pleyn text, withouten nede of glose
> Thou hast translated the Romaunce of the Rose,
> That is an heresye ayeins my lawe,
> And makest wise folk fro me withdrawe.
> And of Creseyde thou hast seyd as the lyste,
> That maketh men to wommen lasse triste,
> That ben as trewe as ever was any steel.
> (*LGW*, 321-34)

The God of Love accuses the narrator of having violated and defaming the law of love in his earlier works, and states explicitly that the accusation is "as true as steel," and can neither be denied nor changed. Here is the presentation of the first version of truth.

Upon hearing what the God of Love has accused the narrator of, Alceste kindly reminds the god that a king must be merciful and offers the defendant a chance to explain his own case (*LGW*, 345-472). The lady continues to provide the God of Love with several reasons why the narrator should not take the blame for what he is accused of. Alceste's first defense is that there is no malice in his intention. Secondly, the works are merely one of the means for the poet to pay back his debts to patrons. Thirdly, the poet only translates "that olde clerkes wryten" and therefore should not be held responsible for the consequences (*LGW*, 362-73). She then continues to mitigate the rage of the God of Love and suggests that the other works by the poet, such as *The House of Fame, The Parliament of Fowls,* and *The Book of the Duchess*, should also be taken into consideration to reduce the narrator's penalty (*LGW*, 403-08, 417-30). The lady's defense for the narrator stands as a second version of truth.

Then the poet in defending himself against the accusation presents the last version of truth:

> But trewely I wende, as in this cas,
> Naught have agilt, ne doon to love trespass.
> For-why a trewe man, withouten drede,
> Hath nat to parten with a theves dede,
> ---
> For that I of Creseyde wroot or tolde
> Or of the Rose. What so myn auctour mente,

> Algate, God wot, it was myn entente
> To forthren trouth in love and yt cheryce;
> And to ben war fro falsnesse and fro vice
> By swich ensaumple; this was my menynge.
> (*LGW*, 462-65, 469-74)

Even if the narrator does not state which truth he prefers in the *Prologue*, it is obvious that with proper interpretation, the most important truth lies in his self-defense. However, there are two main issues in his self-defense, one is of interpretation and the other is of the responsibility that comes with translating old books. By saying that he takes no responsibility for the consequences of his works, such as their being misinterpreted or being bad influences on readers, he confirms that there is a certain boundary between writer and reader that neither of them is able to cross. If the boundary really exists and all interpretation is beyond the writer's control, is a translator really free of responsibility when he only repeats other people's words? The issues of the relationship between authorship and readership embodied in the conversation between the three characters becomes the center of the *Legend* and later extends to more deliberate discussion in individual legends.

On the issue of interpretation, Sheila Delany argues that Chaucer's writing renders a "naked text" impossible:

> What is the truth of such a mixed tradition, the weight of any given authority? What is it possible to know, and how may the maker judge? Although we are given no explicit answers, the answers are implied in Chaucer's poetic practice, which opts for

> heterogeneity of sources and multiplicity of meanings, hence suspended judgment: the very reverse, we may note, of a 'naked text.' (123)[10]

To say there is no naked text is to admit that the domain of interpretation is beyond the author's control. Thus, no matter what kind of blame the God of Love is trying to impose on the narrator, it is unreasonable.

Following Delany's critique of Chaucer's works, James Simpson also acknowledges the author's inability to control the vast possibility of interpretation, arguing that misinterpretation is actually part of a "tyrannical community" of patrons such as the God of Love. Simpson claims that Chaucer, by raising the question of interpretation, gives the power back to readers: "Chaucer provokes us to recognize that our interpretive practice has ethical implications, since the issues involved in interpretation are no different from the issues of the 'real world' depicted in the narratives themselves" (74).[11] Hence, in Simpson's words, the *Legend* is "the last will of a dying author" since Chaucer to some extent shows his struggle with "a tyrannical textual community" in this text (74). Lynn Arner, one of the most recent critics of the *Legend* takes the issue of interpretation even further. She indicates that the self-defense of the narrator represents the relationship between individual interpretation and the knowledge of old authorities (123).[12]

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[10] Sheila Delany always focuses her interpretation of medieval texts on gender issues. She discusses the relationship between the so-called "trinity" in her definition: nature, woman, and language. According to Delany, for any metaphor to work in the *Legend*, these three elements of the trinity must be at play. Furthermore, all metaphors represented by such a trinity always concern the relationship between authorship and readership. Due to such complicity brought by metaphors, Delany argues that it is impossible to have only one kind of interpretation that a "naked text" implies. Thus, no texts, especially Chaucer's, could be a naked text. See *The Naked Text: Chaucer's* Legend of Good Women (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994).

[11] James Simpson's in "Ethics and Interpretation: Reading Wills in Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women*" discusses what role the God of Love in *LGW* represents, and its embodiment of readership as great influence on authorship. See *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 20 (1998), p. 73-100.

[12] Lynn Arner compares the different approaches as well as style of John Gower's poetry and Chaucer's, scrutinizing

Given this discussion of responsibility about misinterpretation, another constant focus of Chaucerian critics in regards to the *Legend* is: what kind of writer is Chaucer trying to define himself as? Frank suggests that Chaucer makes no effort to be a historian or a scholar while trying to be an artist/creator, but intentionally avoids the fact that the work of medieval artists often involves the task of translation. Kiser briefly states that medieval writers mostly have the urge to "alter, gloss, allegorize, and edit classical narratives" (146). The issues of interpretation and translation merge into one: is translation also a part of interpretation (which is probably often the case in the Middle Ages)?

The definition of a medieval writer is more complicated than reserving the dichotomy of writer and translator. Kiser tries to define the role of a medieval writer by introducing the concepts of "poesye" and "makyng." According to her, the *Legend* is a "making" rather than "poetry" and Chaucer is more a "maker" than a "poet":

> As modern research is beginning to make clear, this distinction was honored by most late medieval writers, and it served to differentiate "makers," that is, courtly craftsmen who wrote in the vernacular and who sought to meet the social interests of their own age, from "poets," who wrote things of permanent value in Latin… Chaucer never calls himself a "poet"; he clearly saw his poems as examples of "makyng," that is, as vernacular works designed to address local issues, even though they employed classical material in the course of doing so.
> (136-38)

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how poetry in the late 14th and early 15th century represents the transmission of Greco-Roman and European literature into English when literacy was burgeoning among men and women from the non-ruling classes in England. The issue concerning the relationship between interpretation and old authorities will be discussed later. See *Chaucer, Gower, and the Vernacular Rising: Poetry and the Problem of the Populace After 1381* (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

Kiser points out that classical poetry is "a vehicle for the transmission of divine truths to humans" and the poet's goal is always to convey "natural and historical truth." Most importantly, such an effort of unifying nature and history has never been applied to people who try "making." Yet, "making" is exactly what Chaucer is trying to do by rewriting the legends (140).

Kiser says that Chaucer managed to integrate these two concepts of making and poetry in the character Alceste (140-41). By portraying Alceste (the daisy) and the God of Love (the sun) side by side and presenting respective versions of truth with their portrayals in the *Prologue*, Chaucer attempted to synthesize those two concepts and suggested that it was possible for his own making to achieve what classical poetry did. The model of Alceste, who has a natural origin based on her resemblance to the daisy and always reflects the most vivid image of truth, conveys natural as well as historical truth. More importantly, by presenting Alceste as a model, Chaucer connected two concepts, the interpretation of artistic works and the truth that people understand through Mother Nature, and synthesized them in the character.

This connection drawn by Kiser between interpretation and truth in nature inspires Delany's contribution in regard to the relationship between the subject of women and Mother Nature. Delany, who always centers her critique on the gender issue, looks at this problem from another perspective. Delany focuses on the relationship between the making of art (language) and nature (represented by female images). She draws a connection between Alceste and nature, indicating that Alceste is the representation of the women/nature/language trinity: "the language of art, inspired by women (particularly if the art is poetry about love), as a means to moderate the

effects of nature" (157).[13] If women want to be "memorialized," they have to mimic the effects of nature. For nature to be put into language, a female character is a useful medium. For any transmission between any of the two, language is always the "necessary intermediacy" (156-57). For Chaucer the poet, the integration of this trinity in his *Prologue* allows him to give classical stories Christian values and to elevate his making to the level of poetry, conveying natural and historical truth.

The importance of Alceste in the *Prologue* is more than her embodiment of the trinity in Delany's definition. The presence of Alceste explicitly stands for the significance of the subject of women in the *Prologue*. Hence, it is no surprise that the penalty facing the narrator from the God of Love is also strongly related to women. The God requests the poet to write "a glorious legend / Of goode wymmen, maydenes and wyves, / That weren trewe in lovyng al hire lyves, / And telle of false men that hem bytraien, / That al hir lyf ne don nat but assayen / How many women they may doon a shame, / For in youre world that is now holde a game" (*LGW*, 483-89). Even though the instructions from the God of Love appear to be quite simple and clear, the purpose and intention of Chaucer in writing the legends of "good women" still remain controversial in Chaucerian criticism. The major critics of the *Legend* constantly deal with one main issue: Is Chaucer being ironic in writing these "legends of good women" or has he no other intention than to present models with good women?

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[13] Delany in "Rewriting Women Good: Gender and the Anxiety of Influence in Two Late-Medieval Texts" brings Chaucer's *Legend* and Christine's *City of Ladies* together. In this chapter, Delany discusses how both writers, male and female, choose to rewrite the same stories of women in history, such as Dido and Cleopatra and analyzes these two texts from a gender-based perspective. See *Medieval Literary Politics: Shapes of Ideology* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 74-87.

Trying to determine if Chaucer is being ironic is one of the implicit ways to determine whether or not Chaucer is a feminist writer. Such categorization somehow always leads Chaucerian critics into an impasse. Ruth M. Ames indicates that Chaucer refuses to join any membership: "so he maintains his independence of … both the feminists and the misogynists. What Chaucer wrote in the legends was… pro-women enough to serve as a model for other poets and to enhance his reputation as a friend of women, all without his giving up the *Rose*" (72).[14] Ames also calls Chaucer's fashion of writing good women "ambiguous," suggesting that Chaucer chooses a middle ground where he intentionally evades any membership.

Delany finds another way to express her viewpoint about whether or not Chaucer is being ironic in his writing of good women. She emphasizes that Chaucer's writing of good women does not actually help to elevate women's position—neither in a literary context, nor in real life—since it falls into one particular fallacy:

> To let the individual stand for the sex is a standard tactic of misogyny which some twenty years later Christine de Pizan would denounce in her *La Cité des dames*. As a defense of women, essentialism destroys itself. To argue that women are by nature good is to accept the conceptual foundation for the opposite view: that they are by nature bad. Either position is reductive, therefore false. Chaucer's intent, I suggest, is to occupy the orthodox middle ground, neither misogyny nor courtly adulation.[15]

[14] Ruth M. Ames in "The Feminist Connections of Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*" considers Chaucer's *LGW* as a feminist work in which she claims Chaucer tries to overturn people's impression of him from *Troilus and Criseyde* and to be a "woman's friend." See *Chaucer in the Eighties* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986).
[15] Delany, *Medieval Literary Politics: Shapes of Ideology* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 159.

Delany further explains how Chaucer reaches the middle ground between the orthodox methodology and aggressive feminism. By purposefully writing about good women as a "double subversion," Chaucer in his legends only admits one truth he conceives from nature: that all created nature is "inherently contradictory."[16] Delany's emphasis here is that Chaucer is participating in the debate on the "woman question," but does not sign up for any membership.[17]

Florence Percival steers criticism in another direction. She states that by picking up such a topic, Chaucer is participating in a literary tradition "which commonly concerned itself with the relative merits and demerits of women and men" (1). Yet the concern does not concentrate on the merits of debated objects, namely women and men, but rather on the argument and interest of competing disputants (10).[18] Percival concludes that the good women in the legends appear to be only "black swans" that cannot be found in the real world (7). In her opinion, the narrator is only pretending to sympathize with Alceste, a model of all virtues. Such a gesture is a "well-known technique of irony, especially when the topic is the praise or 'dispraise' of women" (4). In a word, Chaucer only wants to draw attention to his own poetic craft, pretending to care for these victimized women at the request of the God of Love. More importantly, according to Percival, the first and original audience of Chaucer's legends was well aware of the true nature of this debate and therefore would enjoy the storytelling without having any concerns about women

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[16] Ibid., p. 82.

[17] Florence Percival divides her discussion on the *Legend* into several groups, including an analysis of the role of the God of Love and of individual characters, including Medea, Cleopatra, and Dido. Percival uses the term "the woman question" to represent all kinds of misogynistic traditions and ideas in medieval literature. See *Chaucer's Legendary Good Women* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 299.

[18] What Percival suggests here is very similar to what Betsy McCormick says about the literary game that medieval writers participate in to compete over their rhetorical skills. See Chapter One for more details. See *Chaucer's Legendary Good Women* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1998). See also The Legend of Good Women*: Context and Reception* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), p. 105-31.

afterwards (10-11). Surely not all Chaucerian critics agree with Percival about Chaucer's being ironic in his writing of good women.[19] Some of those who hold different opinions on this issue have focused on the writer's choice of subject. Frank is one of the pioneers who look at the question from that perspective.

For Frank, the choices made by Chaucer define the kind of artist/creator Chaucer chose to be. To define a medieval writer is to look at what "matter" he finds for his literary works. The "matter," in Frank's explanation, is "written materials—literature, history, moral writings, and so forth—inherited from the past, both distant and recent" (31). Materials from the past constitute a kind of heritage for which the writer is like a transmitter, using heritage as his source or inspiration (31). Frank argues that medieval writers found their sources solely from their accumulated learning from old authorities and never from experience or imagination. Hence, what is at stake is not what a medieval writer "creates" but what he "chooses." "What this becomes, finally, is an act of intense imaginative response," says Frank (31). But this seems to be too simplistic. After all, is not "imaginative response" a kind of creation? If so, then a medieval writer not only "chooses," he also "creates."

In reaction to Frank's resistance to acknowledging Chaucer's intention of "making," later critics have related the purpose of Chaucer's rewriting to his *individual* choice. In one way or another, the *Legend* may signify Chaucer's departure from the genre of courtly love, his

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[19] Those who see the legends as ironic include H. C. Goddard, "Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*," *JEGP* (1908), p. 108-09; Beverly Taylor, "The Medieval Cleopatra: The Classical and Medieval Tradition of Chaucer's Legend of Cleopatra," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies 7* (1977), p. 246-69; Lisa J. Kiser, *Telling Classical Tales*: C*haucer and* the Legend of Good Women (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); John Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); and Delany, *Medieval Literary Politics: Shapes of Ideology* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

achievement of integrating classical stories with Christian values, and his attempt to write a "naked text" as well as his understanding of its impossibility (Delany, 118-23).[20] The work by all means shows Chaucer's version of individualism in his legends. It is Chaucer's "choice" of whether to be an artist (who abandons old literary tradition for a new one), a preserver (of the knowledge from old books), or a translator (trying to write a naked text) that matters in regards to the *Legend*. Ultimately, the subject of women concerns the writer's choice and his individuality at least as much as it does the question of gender.

Arner is a critic who relates Chaucer's legends to individuality and takes the gender issue out of the picture completely. She first applies David R. Carlson's opinion on Chaucer's "response to the crisis of order in late medieval England": "Carlson believes that Chaucer's amatory complaints supported the interests of the dominant class through several maneuvers: by retreating into individualism; by distracting, namely, by pretending that there was no crisis and by shifting attention to other concerns; and by cultivating a capacity for elegantly saying little or nothing, to establish that nothing needs to be said" (11).[21] Following Carlson, Arner claims that Chaucer's devotion to the amorous theme was only a way of escaping from the disorder caused by a series of rebellion and insurgencies in 1381. She proposes that Chaucer's works have no ideological concern of any kind:

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[20] Delany gives a detailed explanation of what the term "naked" possibly means for medieval writers and comes to this conclusion: "Whatever the phrase 'the naked text' may have meant to Chaucer—whether a doggedly literal translation, or a work devoid of rhetoric, or a work so transparent in meaning as to require no interpretation—it must have been so obvious to him even as he wrote it that he neither would nor could produce such a text." See *The Naked Text: Chaucer's* Legend of Good Women (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994).

[21] For the original reference from David Carlson, see *Chaucer's Jobs* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 33-74.

> The *Legend* works to make discourses of inequality ineffectual and incoherent as possibilities for understanding one's place in the world… the *Legend* adopts a strong anti-identity stance… and readers are encouraged to dismiss identity politics more generally, whether rooted in gender or class. Moreover, the *Legend* dramatizes what happens when special interests are given audience: the imperilment of Art, tradition, and even civilization itself. People who argue from identity, the *Legend* maintains, muster no rational intellectual arguments, and the *Legend* instructs readers how to recognize and comprehend identity-based logic, discounting such concerns as unartful, ignorant, and ultimately dismissible. (12)

By diminishing the possibility of Chaucer's legends serving as an effort to elevate women's position, Arner wants to emphasize that the only kind of individuality expressed in the legends is the one of "poetry" or the art of poetry (112).

Arner elaborates on Chaucer's presentation of the individuality of poetry by putting Gower and Chaucer in juxtaposition. She suggests that while Gower's works show concern with contemporary issues, Chaucer's works represent more broadly a milestone in English literature. She praises Chaucer as "one of the first English poets…to declare poetry divorced from the social realm…it is to claim that Chaucer…actively argued against the utility of poetry and did so sustainedly in the *Legend*" (151). In Arner's view, if the *Legend* and its subject do not carry any utilitarian obligation, what does the subject of woman represent if it has nothing to do with gender or social status?

One could argue that excluding all social elements from Chaucerian works is adventurous and probably problematic. However, such an approach rescues the interpretation of the *Legend* from the oversimplified classification of the poet's being either a feminist or a misogynist. As

Chaucer proposes different kinds of truth through the three main characters in the *Prologue*, the narrator actually concentrates on different kinds of "individuality" in the relationship between authorship and readership. Such a focus on authorship and readership has its prelude in the conversation between the God of Love, Alceste, and the narrator. The individual legends, to some extent, can be read as extensive continuations of that conversation.

The Legends

There are plenty of critics who have tried to determine whether the *Legend* should be read as a collection of exempla or as a type of hagiography.[22] Laura J. Getty argues that Chaucer wrote his legends in the fashion of historiography: the poem is "a collection of metaphors on the dangers of writing from source materials…[and] that metaphors on writing (and sometimes on reading) form the underlying structure of the *Legend* (50).[23] This collection of metaphors, in Getty's words includes the God of Love who serves as a metaphor for the misunderstanding as well as the arbitrary readership of literary texts and Alceste who represents the truth a poet is always willing to follow. Other than the metaphors in the *Prologue*, Getty also scrutinizes the

[22] Kiser elaborates on how Chaucer applies the form of the exemplum as used by moralists and teachers tend to do in the thirteenth and fourteenth century. Moreover, Chaucer purposely ignores the disparities between hagiography and classical literature and poses his good women as martyrs in the "religion of love." See *Telling Classical Tales: Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 79-81 and p. 101-03. Percival also discusses whether Chaucer writes these good women as exempla. See also *Chaucer's Legendary Good Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 3.

[23] In this article "'Other Smale Ymaad Before': Chaucer as Historiographer in the *Legend of Good Women*" Laura J. Getty relates all the characters in Chaucer's *LGW* to the writing of historiography and hagiography. According to Getty, all the metaphors found in *LGW* are the poet's deliberate metaphors on writing. Getty in her own footnote gives further explanation of her own standing on this issue: "Indeed, I believe that Chaucer's intentions in the *Legend* are far more complex, including additional borrowings and layers of meaning. For example, it is more than likely that Chaucer borrowed some of his ideas from the works of Machaut." See *Chaucer Review*. 42-1 (2007): 48-75.

individual legends and seeks out all the metaphors on writing and reading. In Getty's analysis, Chaucer responds to the purpose of writing "small history":

> [O]ne reason for his selection [of legends] hinges on their usefulness to convey metaphors about the difficulty of writing from sources. Both the original choice of each tale and Chaucer's subsequent alterations to each of them bespeak a conscious intent to deal with the problem of truth in old books. To demonstrate the problem, Chaucer adapts the metonyms of the historiographers in several ways. (56)

In Getty's view, rewriting classical stories is difficult and it is almost impossible to remain loyal to old authorities.

The metaphors for the relationship between author and reader are mostly imbedded in each legend in a love affair between a man and a woman. Each legend includes a true woman (two in the story of Hypsipyle and Medea) and a false man (although sometimes the man is not actually false, such as Pyramus). The female protagonist resembles the role of the narrator who takes the inferior position before the old books, which is embodied in the male protagonist. In each legend, the love affair between the two protagonists embodies a problem Chaucer encounters while translating classical tales. The ending of the love affair reflects how that certain problem affects the act of re-writing classical stories. The God of Love explicitly instructs the narrator to start his stories of good women with the legend of Cleopatra.

Cleopatra (and failure)

Critics argue about whether the story of Cleopatra fits in the genre of hagiography by asking Cleopatra is a martyr to love.[24] Delany points out that it is a story without a victim since both protagonists share in passion and irresponsibility.[25] Such an approach, in Delany's words, underlines Chaucer's attempt "to collapse gender and political distinctions on the ethical level."[26] This is in keeping Delany's perspective on Chaucer's handling of gender inequality: this medieval poet is willing to address the social problem without any intention of solving it, at least not in his literary works.[27] Such a conclusion limits the subject of women to the realm of gender studies and simply disregards any other possible interpretation.

The shared passion and irresponsibility seems to reflect the relationship between medieval writers and old authorities. As there is no victim in the story, the male protagonist, Antony, is portrayed as a noble man: "Natheles, for sothe, this ilke senatour / Was a ful worthy gentil werreyour… / And hym so narwe bounden in his las / Al for the love of Cleopataras / That al the world he sette at no value" (*LGW*, 596-602). The female protagonist is also a noble lady and her love for Antony is quite genuine in Chaucer's description: "This noble queene ek lovede so this

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[24] Kiser sees the legend of Cleopatra as a betrayal of hagiography because she self-inflicts her own sacrifice, while V. A. Kolve thinks Cleopatra dies for the religion of courtly love and D. D. Griffith takes Cleopatra's death as an action by which to make her fame. Percival, along with Frank, believes that the story is a parody of courtly love. The former regards the story as a mock saint's legend and the latter emphasizes the lack of ethic in the love story. See *Telling Classical Tales: Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983. See also *Signs and Symbols in Chaucer's Poetry* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1981) and *Bibliography of Chaucer, 1908-1953* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1955).

[25] Delany, *The Naked Text: Chaucer's* Legend of Good Women (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994), p. 190.

[26] Ibid., p. 190.

[27] Delany's critique of the legend of Cleopatra sharply contrasts with what Arner says about Chaucer's writing being *apolitical*, reflecting neither cultural nor social status. See *Medieval Literary Politic: Shapes of Ideology* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990) and also *Chaucer, Gower, and the Vernacular Rising: Poetry and the Problem of the Populace after 1381* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013).

knyght,/ Thourgh his desert, and for his chyvalrye" (*LGW*, 607-08). The love affair in Chaucer is nothing like that in any other version, where normally Antony is seduced by the lustful Cleopatra and eventually pays a dear price for their fatal love. With such a design, we might say that Chaucer implies that the translator and the old authority should share any blame for the outcome of the relationship.

After a brief introduction of the two protagonists, the battle scene between the navies of Antony and Caesar follows. Percival discusses the necessity of the scene and suggests that "the violence, emotion and thrusting action of the energetic account suit Antony and Cleopatra's remarkably uncourtly story of passion, rebellion, and treachery" (228). Such terms as violence, emotion, passion, rebellion, and treachery can all be used to describe the complex relationship a medieval writer has to his source material when he tries to perform the task of re-writing. Most importantly, the narrator starts the sea battle with these lines: "The weddynge and the feste to devyse, / To me, that have ytake swich empryse / Of so many a story for to make, / It were to longe lest that I shulde slake / Of thyng that bereth more effect and charge; / For men may overlade a ship or barge" (*LGW*, 616-21). John Flyer points out that using "ships" as metaphors for poetry is a common rhetorical device, yet the metaphor only reflects the unfortunate fate of the two protagonists because the scene "takes up a quarter of Cleopatra's allotted time, and its prominence is not even justified by a spotlight on Antony, who is hardly mentioned" (112-13).[28]

[28] John Flyer suggests that the sea battle does nothing good to the main protagonist, Cleopatra; it only takes up space that is supposed to be given to the good woman Cleopatra. See *Chaucer and Ovid* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 112-13. Regarding the issue, see also Lisa Kiser, *Telling Classical Tales: Chaucer and* the Legend of Good Women (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 128-29 and Edger Finley Shannon's *Chaucer and Roman Poets* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929), p. 203.

The sea battle underlines what constitutes the amorous relationship as well as the process of translating from an old authority: a destined failure. Both protagonists have to suffer and take responsibility for the outcome. After his defeat, Antony has no choice but to run. The timing for Antony to commit suicide is quite tricky in Chaucer:

> Fleth eek the quene, with al hire purpre sayl;
> For strokes, whiche that wente as thikke as hayl;
> No wonder was she myghte it nat endure.
> And whan that Antony saw that aventure,
> "Allas," quod he, "the day that I was born!
> My worshipe in this day thus have I lorn."
> And for dispeyr out of his wit he sterte,
> And rof hymself anon thourghout the herte
> Or that he ferther wente out of the place.
> (*LGW*, 654-62)

What is the "aventure" that Antony sees and that leads him to his doom? Is it his defeated fleet or the departing sail of Cleopatra? If it is the latter, the leaving of Cleopatra marks the ending of their relationship. The metaphor here is that once the translator has decided to leave the original text, the old authority has no choice but to accept his own death. Thus, the relationship is doomed to fail even if it begins under the conditions of shared nobility and genuineness.

The end of Cleopatra is also significant from many perspectives. First Cleopatra is fleeing out of her fear of Julius Caesar. The narrator gives a vivid picture of how Cleopatra prepares for her own death when there is nowhere she can turn to:

> But on the morwe she wold no lengere dwelle,
> But made hire subtyl werkmen make a shryne
> Of alle the rubyes and the stones fyne
> In al Egypte that she coude espie,
> And putte ful the shryne of spicerye,
> And let the cors enbaume, and forth she fette
> This dede cors, and in the shryne it shette.
> And next the shryne a pit thanne doth she grave,
> And all the serpentes that she myghte have,
> She putte hem in that grave….
> (*LGW*, 671-73, 675-80)

The delicate decoration of her own shrine is a metaphor for a translator's glossing and polishing of the original material. Moreover, through his own version of Cleopatra, Chaucer implies that despite the original texts' nobility and a translator's fine embellishment, the relationship between the two may still not avoid the doomed failure.

Chaucer writes the end of the legend as follows: "And she hire deth receyveth with good chere / For love of Antony, that was hir eso dere. / And this is storyal soth, it is no fable" (*LGW*, 700-03). The narrator emphasizes Cleopatra's faithfulness to Antony and also the credibility of the story. Here Chaucer shows his loyalty to old books as embodied in Cleopatra's faithfulness to her lover since Cleopatra has never been described as a truthful woman in any other version of her story. The problem Chaucer poses through the legend of Cleopatra is that the task of translating classical tales may be destined to be a failure even if it has both the translator's loyalty and the credibility of the original. Even if a medieval writer goes through all kinds of

hardships such as violence, emotion, rebellion, and treachery (in Percival's terms) and remains dedicated to the source material, there is still a possibility that the project will turn out to be a failure. The two parties are by no means to be blamed since they share equal passion and truthfulness. Chaucer implies that such failure may result from arbitrary readers' misinterpretation like what the God of Love has done to the narrator's earlier works. Since the God of Love explicitly demands that all legends have to be of "good women" and must be launched with the story of Cleopatra, the narrator has no choice but to present an interpretation in which Cleopatra is portrayed as a good woman. By doing so, the medieval writer underlines the problem of the destined failure of telling a classical story when the text is under the scrutiny of an arbitrary reader like the God of Love.

The Legend of Thisbe (and misunderstanding)

Like the legend of Cleopatra, there is no villain in the legend of Thisbe. This is a story about two young lovers whose love is forbidden by their parents. A tall wall keeps them apart, but that wall is also the only medium through which they are able to express their love for each other (*LGW*, 711-46). As time goes by, they convey their love for each other and decide to elope. On the night of their elopement, Thisbe leaves first and waits for Pyramus alone in the wild. While Thisbe is waiting next to a well, a thirsty lioness comes to drink water. Out of fear, Thisbe runs to hide in a cave, leaving her wimple on the ground. The lioness, after quenching her thirst, finds the wimple and tears it into pieces with its bloody mouth (*LGW*, 793-820). When Pyramus

comes to meet Thisbe, there is no sight of her but only the wimple covered with blood. Pyramus thus believes that Thisbe has been killed and that it is his fault: "Allas, to bidde a woman gon by nyghte / In place there as peril falle myghte, / And I so slow! Allas, I ne hadde be / Here in this place a furlong wey or ye!" he says (*LGW*, 838-41). Out of love for Thisbe and grief for her assumed death, Pyramus stabs himself in the heart (*LGW*, 850). The moment Thisbe finds Pyramus, the young lover manages to give her a last glance and then accepts his death (*LGW*, 884-86). In great distress Thisbe takes her life the same way Pyramus did (*LGW*, 913-15). Thus the legend ends.

Frank talks about the differences between Chaucer and Ovid's versions of the story. He points out that even though both write on the theme of love, they approach the love story from very different perspectives. According to Frank, the reason for Chaucer's departure from Ovid's tale is to enhance the connection between his rhetorical skills and human experience:

> In his poem, the lover's deaths are a triumph of innocence; in Ovid's, they are a triumph of desire. Chaucer has made this shift by creating a slightly stronger sense of the lovers as people and of their feeling for one another through the effective use of the colloquial level of language to humanize the material and to suggest innocence and naïveté and through the intensifying effect of some of his language. (54)

Though Frank's main point here is still Chaucer's significant reluctance to continue the subject of courtly love, such commentary (which brings in the perspective of human innocence) on the legend of Thisbe is quite similar to Kiser's.

Kiser to some extent follows Frank in regards to Chaucer's effort of bringing humanistic concern into his version, and acknowledges that Thisbe is a suitable model for an exemplum as demanded by the God of Love. Chaucer gives the death of Thisbe a moralistic touch, such as with Thisbe's speech before death, as well as the conclusion made to fit the legend's purpose (118). In Kiser's interpretation, there are some similarities between this legend and the Troilus story. The most significant one is that both texts share the narrator's treatment of love and "its attendant misfortunes" (119). In Kiser's analysis, Chaucer uses the legend of Thisbe to make a protest against the "narrowly moral reading" from the God of Love, which is "complicated not only by chance and circumstance, but also, as Chaucer shows, by faulty human perception such as Pyramus's belief that blood on a wimple means his lady's death" (120). Chaucer here has a "double subversion." First, the narrator refutes the naïve demand of "goodness" requested by the God of Love by writing a tragedy resulting from the pure goodness of both protagonists since Chaucer as a writer "undermines the validity of the regulations he [the God of Love] has imposed upon the narrator's enterprise" (121). Secondly, the poet implies that the assumption of innocent love by the God of Love leaves out other aspects of human experience, such as misperception in human nature, and is absolutely flawed (121).

Getty extends the idea of human perception in Thisbe's story and relates the image of Thisbe to the body of a "saint":

> In this case, our "saint" kills herself because her body/story has been misunderstood: her wimple is not her body. Pyramus picks up her wimple from a field and misreads its meaning… If two people living in the same time period can make this kind of mistake,

> what are the odds of Chaucer figuring out the story? The legend rejects the idea that there can be a happy ending when we try to connect with the source (in this case, changed to a person) from which we are separated by time (in this case, a wall). (59)

Chaucer uses the story of Thisbe to show his concern about the relationship between a writer (the narrator) and old authorities (such as Ovid).

Both Kiser and Getty point out that the crucial twist in the story is Pyramus' misunderstanding of Thisbe's wimple, a misunderstanding that leads their love affair to a fatal end. This twist stands for the relationship between the translator and the old authority, implying that their relationship will inevitably meet a tragic end due to some misunderstanding. The promise made and agreed on by both faithful parties turns out to be sabotaged by trivial details. Furthermore, the time and distance disguised as the wall, as Getty suggests, becomes the impassable boundary between the two lovers. With all these interferences, a tragic result is inevitable.

More significantly, the misunderstanding extends to the third party, the reader. As Kiser indicates that the God of Love stands for ignorance and the misperception in human nature, so that his complicated and unpredictable interpretation is always in the picture. It is already impossible for both parties bound by a contract to come to a perfectly mutual understanding. The impassable boundary set up by time and space, and the misconception about human nature render the task of translation, as well as interpretation, unpredictable. Hence, the legend of Thisbe is more than a piece of hagiography or a simple exemplum, it is Chaucer's warning about

"misunderstanding" between the three parties participating in the act of translation: the old authority, the translator, and the reader.

The Legend of Dido (and obligation)

At the very beginning of the legend of Dido, Chaucer reveals his debt to Virgil: "Glorye and honour, Virgil Mantoan, / Be to thy name! and I shal, as I can / Folwe thy lanterne, as thow gost byforn, / How Eneas to Dido was forsworn" (*LGW*, 924-27). Percival refers to Petrarch and Boccaccio's versions of the story as the "true Dido" and points out Chaucer's intent of eschewing the conflict between that Dido and Virgil's version (242).[29] Based on the poet's declaration of his own debt to Virgil, the writer's intention and choice should be quite clear, yet the plain and bold declaration just serves as a camouflage for Chaucer's own alteration.

The narrator states explicitly that this is a story about how Dido was "forsworn" by Aeneas (and thus this legend can fit perfectly with what the God of Love has demanded he to write). Yet Aeneas, in Virgil's version, is a man who focuses on his divine mission of establishing Rome rather than a "false man" who abandons Dido.[30] The crucial disparity between Chaucer's version and Virgil's is his obvious resistance to include the divine power in his story. The narrator tells the story of how Aeneas flees from the fallen Troy and comes to the shore of

[29] The encounter between Dido and Aeneas is entirely imaginative by Virgil. See *The Aeneid* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.)

[30] Kiser comments that Chaucer, in the legend of Dido, remains of the faithful to the good woman by betraying the hero, Aeneas, in order to accommodate the requested literary form exemplum. See *Telling Classical Tales Chaucer and* the Legend of Good Women (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p.124.

Dido's land due to a tempest (*LGW*, 940-62). Chaucer remains quite faithful to Virgil's description in this part of story, but makes changes soon after this.

After Aeneas goes onshore, he meets a huntress who gives him a rough idea about where he is and tells him that Dido is the queen (*LGW*, 968-93). Here the narrator abruptly unveils the truth that this huntress is indeed Venus, Aeneas's mother, and strongly emphasizes that this is Virgil's designation, not his own (*LGW*, 998-1003). This is the first time in this legend that the narrator shows his own reluctance to be responsible for his own writing by implying that he is only following the words of the old authority. Not long after this comes another example. When Dido comes to the temple where the history of Troy is painted on the wall, Venus makes Aeneas's presence there invisible. Again, the narrator tries to eschew the responsibility of bringing a supernatural power into play: "Whan he was in the large temple come, / I can nat seyn if that it be possible, / But Venus hadde hym maked invisible— / Thus seyth the bok, withouten any les" (*LGW*, 1019-22). The narrator's constant mention of his own debt to Virgil reveals Chaucer's distancing himself from the old book regarding certain details, a device Chaucer also used in *Troilus and Criseyde*.

When Dido and Aeneas finally make their acquaintance, Dido admires Aeneas for being a true hero and sends him food and supplies, willing to offer her help. To return Dido's hospitality, Aeneas sends his son Ascanius, who is actually Cupid in disguise, to give Dido gifts. Such a gesture delights Dido, but the narrator reminds us that this is only the plot told by the old authority instead of his own narrative:

> But natheles, our autour telleth us,
> That Cupido, that is the god of love,
> At preyere of his moder hye above,
> Hadde the liknesse of the child ytake,
> This noble queen enamored to make
> On Eneas; but, as of that scripture,
> Be as be may, I take of it no cure.
> (*LGW*, 1139-45)

It seems that every occasion where Dido falls for Aeneas involves the intervention of gods. Such a designation is one of the means Virgil uses to justify Aeneas's leaving Dido. Such interference exonerates Aeneas from the responsibility of betraying Dido's love.

At this point, Dido has already fallen for Aeneas. Dido goes to her sister, Anna, and makes a confession of her love for the Trojan hero. She tells Anna that she wants to marry Aeneas and Anna expresses her dissent (*LGW*, 1178-83). The next morning both the hero and the heroine go hunting and there comes a storm that drives them into a cave. The narrator emphasizes that there is no mention in the old book whether anyone else was in the cave, so that no one witnesses the affection between the two (*LGW*, 1227-30). Only through the narration can the readers learn that Aeneas and Dido are now husband and wife. It reads "And as a fals lovere so wel can pleyne, / That sely Dido rewede on his peyne, / And tok hym for husbonde and becom his wyf / For everemo, whil that hem laste lyf" (*LGW*, 1236-39). Many critics of the legend of Dido have offered all kinds of opinions about whether such a bond of marriage was solid in the

Middle Ages.[31] Regardless of its legal status, the love between Aeneas and Dido is now official and public.

Not long after the cave scene comes the night when Dido decides to confront Aeneas, asking him if he is about to leave. Aeneas gives reasons for leaving that involve the visit from his dead father and the undeniable request from the gods (*LGW*, 1294-1302). Upon hearing this, Dido is so desperate that she even claims that she is pregnant with Aeneas' child in hopes that it would keep Aeneas from leaving (*LGW*, 1323-24). Unfortunately, Aeneas is unaffected by Dido's desperation and leaves in the middle of the night (*LGW*, 1324-29). Abandoned by Aeneas, Dido commits suicide out of despair, as is told in Virgil's story.

The fact that only the male protagonist is altered in Chaucer's legend of Dido indicates Chaucer's attempt to overturn the constructed representation of Dido as a mere diversion. Since Chaucer's narrator gives no credence to the role of divine power, his version of Aeneas does not have sound excuses for leaving Dido. All the maneuvers, tricks, and decisions during the love affair are Aeneas' doing and his alone. By rewriting Aeneas into a false man, Chaucer becomes what Gavin Douglas calls him: "all womanis frend."[32] Furthermore, by taking out the

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[31] Suzanne Z. Hagedorn claims that the marriage between Aeneas and Dido is a legal bond in the context of medieval times while Frank holds the opposite opinion. See *Abandoned Women: Rewriting the Classics in Dante, Boccaccio, & Chaucer* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), p. 182. See also Percival's C*haucer's Legendary Good Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 75.

[32] Percival mentions that Chaucer's reputation as "all woman's friend" starts with Gavin Douglas's comment on Chaucer's alterations to the story of Dido: "The Scottish poet, Gavin Douglas, in the Prologue to his own translation of the *Aeneid*, [presents] Aeneas as a traitor to Dido. [H]is 'maister Chaucer' was deliberately taking the woman's part when he blames Aeneas and Vergil, 'For he was evir (God wait) all womanis frend.'" See *Selections from Gavin Douglas* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964), p. 445-49. See also *Chaucer's Legendary Good Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 251.

supernatural elements Chaucer re-evaluates the obligation both protagonists have to fulfill their relationship.

The obligation faced by the translator of the old authority is the problem Chaucer tries to pose here with the story of Dido. Since establishing Rome is Aeneas' priority, love affair awaits its tragic destiny (at least for Dido). How much must the translation faithfully follow the old authority? Despite the interference from the gods, Aeneas and Dido are both very human, and therefore have to be responsible for their love affair. Neither of the protagonists has the gods to blame in regards to their failed relationship. It is Aeneas's decision to appear as admirable as possible to win Dido's heart. Likewise, it is Dido's own responsibility for yielding to Aeneas. Hence, neither the old authority nor the translator has anyone else to blame when the relationship fails.

According to Percival, the legend reflects the question about the narrator's choice of materials as well as his intent as raised by the God of Love:

> we begin to suspect that the straightforward discussion of the translator/poet's "matere" and "entente" in the *Prologue* to the *Legend of Good Women* is being humorously enacted in the *Legends*…in the hero's necessary betrayal of Dido in the service of his imperial destiny Chaucer finds a potent exemplar of the imperative laid upon the vernacular translator not to adhere too faithfully to his source material, according to medieval poetic theory. (258-59)

Percival puts Aeneas and Chaucer in juxtaposition and therefore suggests that the hero's "unfaithfulness" to some extent corresponds to the translator's released obligation.

In response to Percival's focus on the issues of obligation and interpretation, Getty suggests that Dido's claim to have Aeneas's child is another metaphor for writing: "Virgil and Ovid in one story, combined by Chaucer—it is a suggestive image when combined with the body of the pregnant Dido. One really must insist on a metonym in this case, considering the possible implications of the story/body being 'impregnated' in some sense by Chaucer" (61). The addition of Dido's pregnancy in Chaucer's version not only suggests that Chaucer has both Virgil and Ovid in the *Heroides* in mind, but it also complicates the death of the heroine. By relating the love affair between Aeneas and Dido to the relationship between the translator and the old authority, Chaucer thinks that the obligation of being a translator involves the murder of the old books, especially when they do not fulfill the obligation of telling the truth. Is it possible that after all, Chaucer's obligation lies in his passionate participation in "the contest he promotes between Virgil and Ovid" as well as the literary game involving the woman question in the Middle Ages (Percival, 259)? All in all, the subject of women in the story of Dido is mainly about Chaucer's identity in terms of his relationship with the old authorities since the central issue he poses with the story of Dido is about his obligation as a translator toward his source materials, both old books and old authorities.

The Legend of Hypsipyle and Medea (and deceit)

Although Chaucer writes about two women in this legend, it is actually a legend about Jason, as Frank points out (80). The condemnation of Jason's evilness sets the basic tone for this legend:

> Thow rote of false lovers, Duc Jasoun,
> Thow sly devourere and confusioun
> Of gentil wemen, tendre creatures,
> Thow madest thy recleymyng and thy lures
> To ladyes of thy statly apparaunce,
> And of thy wordes farced with plesaunce,
> And of thy feyned trouthe and thy manere,
> With thyn obesaunce and humble cheere,
> And with thy contrefeted peyne and wo.
> (*LGW*, 1368-76)

Getty agrees with Frank that this legend's main subject is Jason but rejects Frank's reasoning that Jason offers a counterpart to the hero of courtly love romances.[33] Getty suggests that it is the body of Jason that is misread because all of Jason's good qualities presented in the beginning eventually lead both Hypsipyle and Medea into believing Jason's lies (61).

In the story of Hypsipyle, Jason is sent to pursue the Golden Fleece of Pelias' demand, stemming from Pelias' fear and jealousy of Jason. Jason falls for the scheme and decides to take the trip (*LGW*, 1406-13, 1439-51). Getty relates the role of Pelias to the narrator (a fictional version of the author): "On the one hand, the God of Love sends Chaucer on an unbelievable

[33] See *Chaucer and* The Legend of Good Women (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972) p. 200.

mission that threatens to destroy him… On the other, Chaucer acknowledges that his task forces him to tell stories in deceptive ways: he is Pelias, leading astray any listener gullible enough to take his stories at face value" (62). In Getty's words, Jason is a symbol of gullible readers who are lured into the writer's trap. However, this gullible character later becomes the deceiver.

According to Getty's explanation, Hypsipyle falls for Jason's charm due to his "face value" and such an action serves as a "nice reminder of the difficulty of reading sources" (61). Getty also notices that Jason does not lure Hypsipyle alone; he has help from Hercules. The scheme planned by the two men is nothing but a "wicked lie" and its victim is "innocent" Hypsipyle (*LGW*, 1543-46). After this brief description, the story of Hypsipyle comes to an abrupt end. The narrator gives a very short description of Hypsipyle's fate with Jason: "The somme is this: that Jason wedded was / Unto this queen and tok of hir substaunce / What so hym leste unto his purveyaunce; / And upon hire begat he children two, / And drogh his sayl and saw hir nevere mo" (*LGW*, 1559-63). The narrator even states firmly that he refuses to write Hypsipyle's letter to Jason because it is too long (*LGW*, 1565).[34] The end for Hypsipyle is that she "deyede for his love, of sorwes smerte" and then begins the story of Medea (*LGW*, 1579).

In the beginning of Medea's story, the narrator once again emphasizes that Jason takes pleasure in deceiving women and that Hypsipyle is not his only victim: "Ryght so can false Jason have no pes. / For to desyren thourgh his apetit / To don with gentil women his delyt, / This is his lust and his felicite" (*LGW*, 1585-88). Arriving at the town of Colcos, Jason reveals his desire to

[34] In Ovid's version of the story of Hypsipyle in the *Heroides*, Hypsipyle writes a long letter after she is abandoned by Jason, telling the whole story as well as her own regret and sorrow. See *Heroides* (London: Penguin Books, 2004).

win the Golden Fleece. The king gives his consent and invites Jason to the dinner party where Jason sets his eyes upon the beautiful and elegant Medea who sits next to him (*LGW*, 1589-1602). Just like Hypsipyle who fell for Jason's good qualities, Medea too experiences Jason's "craft in love", and has her bad luck with Jason as Fortune designs (*LGW*, 1607-09).

In the case of Hypsipyle, it seems that she more than Jason is like a gullible reader. Since Hypsipyle takes Jason at his "face value" (in Getty's words) and fails to look into his true intentions, her fate is destined to be tragic. In the case of Medea, it is quite different. Upon hearing of Jason's goal of obtaining the Golden Fleece, Medea offers her help in exchange for Jason's hand in marriage (*LGW*, 1614-16, 1633-36). Although Medea is also charmed by Jason's gracious words and reputation, she knows that Jason's true intention is to succeed in his adventure. With this knowledge in mind, Medea tries to prove her own worth to Jason, expecting to win his heart. Hence, Medea is not as innocent as Hypsipyle. While Hypsipyle was deceived by Jason's superficial virtues, Medea is deceived by Jason's oath of marriage.

Kiser defines this legend as a story of man's endless pursuit of form: "Both Hypsipyle and Medea become the unfortunate victims of Jason's endless quest for 'form'… Jason is a master of sophistry" (113). He is an example of a lying poet, "whose fictions ensnare those who attend to them" (113-14).[35] Kiser compares Chaucer to Jason, calling him a "misrepresenter," because both of them twist the idea of "goodness" and "faithfulness" (114). In Jason's case, such

[35] See *Telling Classical Tales: Chaucer and the* Legend of Good Women (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 113-14. Delany reverses the Jason character into a representation of "matter" that usually symbolizes the female gender in medieval philosophy. See also *The Naked Text: Chaucer's Legend of Good Women* (Berkeley: University of California, 1994), p. 201.

an accusation easily finds its ground. In Chaucer's, it is what the poet chooses not to write that renders him a "misrepresenter."

In Ovid's version, Hypsipyle has a chance to write a long letter, which Chaucer refuses to repeat. Hence in Chaucer's version, Hypsipyle never has the chance to speak for herself. As for Medea, what she is known for is her filicide as revenge for Jason's betrayal. Delany sees Chaucer's deletion of such a plot as a "deliberate cliff-hanger" and suggests that no one could ignore what he left unsaid. For Delany, Chaucer is attempting to achieve gender equality by implying that violence and brutality are not men's privilege nor is victimization women's.[36] Percival sees Chaucer's alteration as a gesture to demonstrate "how well adapted were the stories of the classical heroines to draw attention to the writer's power to make his matter what he willed" (219).[37]

Certainly, the deliberate deletions of Hypsipyle's letter and Medea's brutal revenge may be read in two different ways: either to show the writer's power or to show that even a "fake" (in Frank's term), referring to Jason and the narrator, can succeed. If Chaucer deliberately omits the most significant details when approaching his subject from earlier sources, what is his intention? While Jason appears to be the main character in this legend, his deceit of both Hypsipyle and Medea is the center of the story. Here, the love affair maps the relationship between writer and reader, rather than the translator and the old authority as in the other legends. In Kiser's view,

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[36] Delany, *The Naked Text: Chaucer's* Legend of Good Women (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994), p. 200.

[37] Frank takes a rather aggressive approach on this matter, saying that what is at stake in Chaucer's version of Jason "is not that he is false, but that he is successful." *Chaucer and* The Legend of Good Women (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 85.

Jason is the embodiment of the narrator. If Jason means to deceive, are both Hypsipyle and Medea willing preys of his deception or just innocent victims? Since in Chaucer's telling Hypsipyle never has a chance to explain her thoughts after being abandoned, it is hard to tell if Chaucer means to let his readers hold a grudge over being deceived by the texts or whether he is indirectly mocking his readers' gullibility. Medea presents a different case. Without her help, Jason could never fulfill his task, as it is told in Medea's speech. What Frank says about this legend is undeniable. The false Jason receives his undeserved success, yet the point here is that the false man/writer can never achieve his goal without help from those who are deceived by their oath/words. In conclusion, the act of deceit goes both ways. A successful text requires both the writer's sophistry in deceit and the readers' willingness to be deceived, conscious or not.

The Legend of Lucrece (and rape)

The story of Lucrece is simple before Chaucer adds some of his own touches. The legend starts with a set of commendations of Lucretia:

> But for that cause telle I nat this storye,
> But for to preyse and drawe to memorye
> That verray wif, the verray trewe Lucresse,
> That for hyre wifhood and hire stedefastnesse
> Nat only that these payens hire comende,
> But he that cleped is in oure legende
> The grete Austyn hath gret compassioun…
> (*LGW*, 1684-90)

Although the narrator stresses firmly here that Lucretia has received commendation from both pagans and Christians, Chaucer's handling of the *rape* in the story has made it difficult to be certain whether Lucretia should be praised at all.[38]

The story is set in a time of siege. One night, Colatyne, Lucretia's husband, and other men who are bored with the war decide to entertain themselves by choosing among themselves the one who has the best wife. Tarquinius, the king's son, and the others, ride back to Rome, to see whether Colatyne's wife is indeed the best as her husband claims (*LGW*, 1711-14). Arriving at Colatyne's household and seeing Lucretia as a chaste and docile wife, Tarquinius burns with the desire to take Lucretia for his own (*LGW*, 1745-53). Unable to forget her, Tarquinius secretly goes back to Rome and sneaks into Lucretia's room. Tarquinius threatens her with a false accusation of adultery with a knave if she does not comply with what he wants (*LGW*, 1769-1811).

The scene following Tarquinius' threat involves Chaucer's alteration:

> These Romeyns wyves lovede so here name
> At thilke tyme, and dredde so the shame,
> That, what for fer of sclaunder and drede of deth,
> 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.
> (*LGW*, 1812-18)

[38] Lucrece: for consistency, Lucretia is used in all following mentions.

Getty mentions that Lucretia's swoon before the rape is Chaucer's kind addition to free Lucretia from any guilt (63).[39] The next morning, Lucretia calls for a meeting, gathering her husband and all her family. In front of everyone Lucretia makes a confession of what has happened to her and commits suicide.

Before she meets her end, Lucretia makes it clear in her speech that it is her husband's reputation she is trying to protect because it would be wrong to put any blame or guilt onto her innocent husband (*LGW*, 1844-45). Even though she receives everyone's forgiveness, Lucretia still takes her own life (*LGW*, 1854-55). The description of Lucretia's death is quite dramatic: "And as she fel adoun, she caste hir lok, / And of hir clothes yet she hede tok. / For in hir fallynge yet she had a care, / Lest that hir fet or suche thyng lay bare, / So wel she loved clennesse and eke trouthe" (*LGW*, 1856-60). Even though the narrator states that both pagans and Christians praise Lucretia, the legitimacy of her suicide (or the question of whether she should take part of any responsibility for the rape) has been a center of criticism on this legend. Percival points out that after Augustine, there were two perspectives on Lucretia: "Lucretia the 'protomartyr,' who was easily assimilated to that part of the Christian value system, which esteems chastity above every other virtue. Another perspective regards Lucretia as someone who might loosely be called 'Augustinian' Lucretia, whose virtues were carefully scrutinized and often condemned" (264).

[39] On the same matter, see also Kiser's *Telling Classical Tales: Chaucer and the* Legend of Good Women (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 105-106.

One irrefutable thing about this legend is that Lucretia is indeed the most truthful and chaste example in all the legends and probably the one closest to the idea of "martyr" (though the biblical quotation near the end appears to be wrong and inappropriate).[40] What is more noteworthy here is the fashion in which Chaucer deals with the act of *rape* since that is the crucial point to determine whether Lucretia is an appropriate subject for hagiography or a moral exemplum. Getty compares the body of Lucretia to both the action of writing and the artifact itself (63). She explains the suicide as a necessary action because Lucretia has to "deny even the slightest possibility of misreading, making it clear that she would rather be dead than misunderstood" (63).[41] In Getty's reading, Lucretia represents the ancient source and her attacker is the God of Love whose fastidiousness about women's fidelity has violated the originality of the source: "Even in death, Lucrece insists that no part of her be exposed to public view—or to public misreading—because she loves 'trouthe.' The job of the poet, therefore, cannot be tied too directly to the truth in sources, since the truth is covered by time" (Getty, 64).

It is true that Chaucer creates a metaphor of writing out of Lucretia's reaction to the rape, yet the rape as metaphor has more layers other than the one in Getty's analysis. This legend is the only one that does not involve a love affair, although there is a tangent about Lucretia and her husband. The relationship at stake in this legend is the one between the victim and the

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[40] The biblical reference here is not correct. Kathryn Lynch makes it clear that this is a misquotation: "Probably a blending of biblical passages derived respectively from the miracles of the Syro-Phoenician woman and the centurion (Matthew 15:28, Matthew 8:10, and Luke 7:9). In fact, the Bible does not specifically make the claim about the faith of women as Chaucer presents it here." See *Dream Visions and Other Poems: Authoritative Texts, Contexts, Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), p. 168-69.

[41] Getty also adds that some critics have seen the final act with humorous elements (such as Frank) and she does not disagree. See "'Other Smale Ymaad' Before: Chaucer as Historiographer in the *Legend of Good Women*." *Chaucer Review*. 42-1 (2007): 48-75.

perpetrator. What Chaucer wants to portray here is the problem of rape/violation in the process of translation. If the translator remains absolutely faithful to the source material, his own creativity is inevitably violated. The character of Lucretia, serving as a metaphor for the translator, implies that in the action of truthful translation, the translator has no choice but to play dead in front of their perpetrator, the old authority. The translator is not allowed to "feel," just as Lucretia chooses not to react during the attack. Getty sees Lucretia's suicide as a refusal to meet any possible misreading. However, to some extent, the gesture also signifies the suicide of the translator, who willingly gives up his own identity in order to maintain loyal translation.

More significantly, the urge Lucretia feels to cover even her feet (*LGW*, 1859) underlines the urge a medieval translator feels to conceal his true intentions while translating from the old authorities. Furthermore, the question of *rape* can also be extended to explain the problem of readership. The perpetrator, if he is not the authority of the old books, can be the reader. Through a misunderstanding of the poet's intention and the misinterpretation of literary texts (shown in the character of the God of Love in the *Prologue*), literary texts can experience violation and injustice. Eventually, the relationship (between translator and original text, or authorship and readership) has unpredictable results. All a translator can do is to minimize the damage (to his reputation) as Lucretia does in order to protect the good name of her husband as well as her family.

The Legend of Hypermnestra (and the ultimate power)

In the beginning of this legend, Chaucer tries to defy the old authority, Ovid, by refusing to put an exact number in his narrative. In Ovid's description, both brothers in this story have fifty children: Egistus has fifty sons and Danaus has as many fifty daughters, while Chaucer only uses the word "many" to tell his version.[42] Such avoidance of specifics, Frank notes, is a rhetorical trick Chaucer uses to "resort to amplification and create…a horoscope, a 'nativity'" (161). Chaucer in this legend has shown his refined skill by handling the ends of *amplificatio* in brevity, which he uses to great advantage in *The Canterbury Tales*. According to Frank, in this legend Chaucer experiments with his narrative, refining his rhetorical skills as preparation for his major work, *The Canterbury Tales* (161).

Aside from the omission of the number, Chaucer's own addition to the legend is the divine power that interferes with the fate of Hypermnestra at her birth:

> The whiche child of hire natyvyte
> To alle thewes goode yborn was she,
> As likede to the goddes er she was born,
> That of the shef she sholde be the corn.
> The Wirdes, that we clepen Destine,
> Hath shapen hire that she mot nedes be
> Pyëtous, sad, wis, and trewe as stel.
> …
> That, what with Venus and other oppressioun

[42] Chaucer takes the story of Danaus and his brother Aegyptus (called by Chaucer Egiste or Egistus) from Ovid's *Heroides*. In the Ovidian story, all fifty sons and daughters marry with Hypermnestra resisting the command to kill her husband Lino (in Ovid, Lynceus). See *Heroides* (London: Penguin Books, 2004).

> Of houses, Mars his venim is adoun,
> That Ypermystra dar nat handle a knyf
> In malyce, thogh she shulde lese hire lyf.
> (*LGW*, 2576-82, 2592-95)

Kiser argues that Chaucer's addition of the astrological lore deprives Hypermnestra of her free will since both her actions and punishment are already written in the stars as fate (110). Delany sees such "stellar fatalism" as Chaucer's attempt to introduce "Oriental" attitudes about the exercise of free will into the Christian Providence.[43]

Getty shares the same view as Kiser and Delany regarding the stellar influence on Hypermnestra but concentrates on the portrayal of Hypermnestra as "corn" rather than "sheaf" (64).[44] Getty points out that in the G prologue, the God of Love asks the narrator "what eyleth the to wryte / The draf of storyes, and forgete the corn?" in order to accuse the poet of choosing his source materials at his own discretion (*LGW*, 311-12)? According to Getty, Hypermnestra is a metaphor for what the poet should write, the corn rather than the sheaf, which the God of Love has warned him to abandon (67). Getty sees Hypermnestra as playing a "dual role" that represents both the positive and negative sides of literary texts in the interpretation by the God of Love. Such a dual role is just like Venus, Jupiter, or Mars, which are said to have both good and bad influences on human experience (68).

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[43] Delany argues: "There is no explicit counterpoint, so that interpretation of this theme is left to the reader—a valorization of interpretive activity quite consistent with what has come before in the *Legend*." See *The Naked Text: Chaucer's* Legend of Good Women (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 226.

[44] Kiser mentions that some critics see Hypermnestra as a naïve heroine while she herself thinks that Hypermnestra lacks free will. See *Telling Classical Tales: Chaucer and the* Legend of Good Women (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).

Both the good and bad parts of Hypermnestra are presented in the way she carries out what her father asks her to do on the wedding night. As a matter of fact, her father makes a threat rather than a request: "Tak hed what I, thy fader seye the here, / And werk after thy wiser evere mo. /… / That, but thow do as I shal the devyse, / Thou shalt be ded, by hym that al hath wrought!" (*LGW*, 2633-34, 2641-42) Hypermnestra then realizes that she is asked to kill her husband (*LGW*, 2656-57). Unable to defy her father (since the stars hold control over her temperament), Hypermnestra agrees to carry out her father's request (*LGW*, 2663-65). By the time Hypermnestra has the chance to do what her father demands of her do, Hypermnestra chooses to spare her husband: "…syn I am his wif, / And hath my feyth, yit is it bet for me / For to be ded in wifly honeste / Than ben a traytour lyvynge in my shame" (*LGW*, 2699-2702).

Hypermnestra's refusal to betray her husband makes her a traitor to her father, and so she is put in prison. The story ends with "Til she was caught and fetered in prysoun. / This tale is seyd for this conclusioun" (*LGW*, 2722-23). Getty relates the dilemma Hypermnestra encounters in her story to the predicament Chaucer faces as a medieval writer:

> [H]ow to carry on with an imposed project that will either cause the death of someone else… or result in one's own death… Chaucer's stories have "wielded the knife" against numerous characters at this point, and Hypermnestra's refusal to do so appears to have a strong effect on the narrator, who stops writing and gives up; in essence, he sits down and waits for the end, as she does. (68)

Getty thinks Chaucer, like Hypermnestra, lacks free will and therefore gives up the whole project after this particular legend. To offer another perspective: perhaps it is not the question of "free

will" that drives Chaucer to give up the task, but rather the imposition from a higher power and Chaucer's realization of his inability to beat it.

The problem of the task of translation Chaucer tries to address in the legend of Hypermnestra is the question of "omnipresent authority." There are multiple layers of imposition and a hierarchy of superior powers in this legend. First of all, after being subdued by her father, Hypermnestra decides to be a martyr, sacrificing herself for a higher authority, her husband. The fact that her father provides no solid reason why he wants Hypermnestra to kill her husband underlines the narrator's ridicule of the unreason and cruelty of the higher authority.[45] Eventually, Danaus has to lose his war to another supreme power, the gods. Since Hypermnestra is under control of the stars in terms of her temperament and nature, Danaus has no chance to beat the divine power. Hence, it is not Hypermnestra's lack of free will that is at stake here, it is the implication of every character's inability to overcome a superior power.

As in the legend of Lucrece, there is no love affair in this legend. The metaphor is based on the dynamics of the main characters: the gods, the father, the husband, and the daughter/wife. Chaucer has downsized his role as a translator to the most incapable one, Hypermnestra, and implies that the most plausible representation for such a role is to sit in prison (built out of the old books) and wait infinitely for something to happen. In this final figure of the *Legend*, Chaucer realizes the impossibility of subverting old authorities and reluctantly presents his own inability to accomplish the task of rewriting classical tales. Maybe after all it is not out of

[45] In Ovid's *Heroides*, a prophet told Danaus that he would be killed by one of his nephews. See *Heroides* (London: Penguin Books, 2004).

boredom that the narrator leaves the project unfinished, but from his acknowledgment of the limitation of how far he is able to go in the relationship between authorship and readership.

Conclusion

In each individual legend, Chaucer raises a variety of issues regarding the relationship between the old authority (classical tales), the medieval writer (the translator), and the reader. By scrutinizing those issues in his legends of good women, Chaucer tries to identify the difficulties and responsibilities of being a writer in a medieval context. The sense of his position in a specific historical moment makes Chaucer aware of his identity as a writer. Chaucer, by rewriting classical tales, addresses the individuality of three participants: the writer, the reader, and the "subject." The subject of women serves not only as metaphors for the poet to address crucial issues between authorship and readership, but also signifies the writer's awareness of his individuality as a writer in the Middle Ages.

Chapter Four

On Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies*

Christine de Pizan is a significant literary presence and deserves to be part of any discussion of the "woman question" in the Middle Ages. Her rewriting of stories about classical women in *The Book of the City of Ladies* marked a milestone in her professional career. But she first established her reputation by launching a series of debates about the misogynistic statements in *The Romance of the Rose*. The gender equality she fought for against defenders of the *Rose* continued in her best known work, *The Book of the City of Ladies*. There, Christine created an allegorical city where only virtuous women could be selected as qualified residents, based on their contribution to civilization. These portrayals of women define Christine's sense of individuality as a writer, solidifying her position as a professional writer among her contemporaries and helping to establish the equilibrium between men and women she fought for as a writer.

Often regarded as Europe's first professional female writer, Christine's personal life is so unique and essential to understanding her place in literary history.[1] Kate Langdon Forhan suggests that the two most important factors in Christine's successful literary career were the

[1] See Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 1, which refers to Christine as "France's 'first professional woman of letters.'" See also Altman's "Christine de Pizan: First Professional Women of letters (1364-1430?)" in *Female Scholars: a Tradition of Learned Women before 1800* (Montreal: Eden Women's Publications, 1980), p. 7-23; and Bell's "Christine de Pizan (1364-1430): Humanism and the Problem of a Studious Women" in *Feminist Studies* 3 (1976): 173-84.

fortunate circumstances of her birth and her tragic early widowhood: "Christine was born in 1364 in Venice, but from the age of four she spent her entire life in France, primarily in Paris. An extraordinary witness and commentator on French political and social life, through her insights she provides us with a window on the world of the late fourteen and early fifteenth centuries in France" (1).[2]

Due to her Italian origin, the education she received from her father, Tommaso da Pizzano, who once served as the physician and astrologer at the court of King Charles V, and her knowledge of French society at a critical historical moment, Christine had more resources and opportunities as a writer than ordinary women in her time. However, it was the death of her husband in 1389, Etienne de Castel (Charles' royal secretary, whom Christine had married at age fifteen), which led Christine to earn her living as a writer. After losing both her father and husband, she first worked as a copyist. Then in 1399, she started to write her own literary works, trying to appeal to potential patrons in order to provide for her family.[3]

Nadia Margolis' study is particularly useful in the broader historical background of the Great Schism, notably the division of the Church and the failure of feudalism (4).[4] The conflict

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[2] Kate Langdon Forhan aims at discussing Christine's texts with a focus long forgotten among critics. By giving a detailed introduction to the historical background as well as political maneuvers during Christine's time, Forhan emphasizes the significance of Christine's role as a woman writer "in a man's world" as well as "in a world structured by social ideas." See *The Political Theory of Christine de Pizan* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2002), p. vi.

[3] There is discrepancy between Christine's earlier works and later ones. The discussion of this issue continues below in p. 131-32. For more references, see also Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defense of Women: Reading Beyond Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1999), p. 128.

[4] Nadia Margolis intends to provide new perspectives on medieval literature, authors, and traditions. She divides her book into several parts, including an introduction to Christine's life and the historical background of her time, her early works (lyric poetry and debates) as well as later ones (historical, political, and religious writings), and Christine's sources and influence. Margolis explains how Christine reacted to various medieval traditions, including the misogynistic ones and set up a new model with her own writing. See *Introduction to Christine de Pizan* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2011).

between clerical and chivalric ideals contributed to the misogynistic traditions, which Christine de Pizan addressed in her writing:

> Along with kingship, chivalry (*chevalerie*) seemed another endangered aspect of French collective self-esteem. Originally signifying the class of knights, *la chevalerie* made up the second of the Three Orders, conceived during the eleventh century, comprising medieval Christendom's social hierarchy: those who pray, those who fight and those who work; women were sometimes categorized as the Fourth Order. *Chevalerie* as chivalry also came to mean a set of civilizing values connected with that order in its relations with the rest of society in time of both war and peace: on the battlefield and at court. (10)

By the early fifteenth century (two centuries after the idea of chivalry was invented and celebrated), there was a great loss of those chivalric values. The idea had diminished into meaningless jousting with ladies as bystanders (11).

In order to restore new values to replace those of lost chivalry, Charles V established a new force constituted of highly educated clerks, lawyers, and diplomats. Their purpose was "to help counter the disasters of the declining military knighthood":

> These clerks too exemplified a set of learned, literate values, termed "clerkliness" or, in Old French, *clergie*, often opposing the values of the chivalry, even though both served France. While chivalric authors tended to praise the existing order, the inevitably more probing, intellectual clerkly spirit tended to criticize and satirize. Another difference, of special concern to Christine, lay in the fact that, while chivalry contained the honoring of women as an essential value, by contrast, French clerks and clerics alike, despite their vast learning and astuteness, tended to be misogynistic.

(Margolis, 12)[5]

Margolis points out that for a literate woman like Christine de Pizan, the emerging force of clergymen prevalent in law, administration, and, most importantly, historiography, posed a tremendous threat since she was self-educated and making a living with her own writings (12).

The 'querelle de la *Rose*'

Early in the *City of Ladies*, the *Romance of the Rose* is directly addressed as one of the literary works that speaks so much illness about women. Christine includes herself as a character in the work and is visited by three women who embody Reason, Justice, and Rectitude. Lady Reason tells character Christine that she should not be bothered by anything in the *Rose*: "As for what these authors – not just Matheolus but also the more authoritative writer of the *Romance of the Rose* – say about the God-given, holy state of matrimony, experience should tell you that they are completely wrong when they say that marriage is insufferable to women" (*BCL*, 9). The *Rose* can be seen as the essential starting point for it led Christine the author to establish her own reputation as an independent individual as well as a professional writer.

In 1401 and 1402, Christine launched a series of criticisms of the *Rose*, attacking both the author's intention of defaming the female gender as well as its defenders' malicious campaign of misogynism prevalent at the time. Christine believed that such a text not only defames the female gender, but also undermines society as a whole since it serves as a terrible influence on people who read it as a moral guide. This debate later became known as "la querelle des femmes" in the

[5] For more references regarding clerical misogyny, see Rosalind Brown-Grant. Rosalind Brown-Grant's translation of *The Book of the City of Ladies*, which gives a brief summary of the origin of clerical misogyny from Greek philosophy to the literary genre *fabliaux*. See *The Book of the City of Ladies*. (London: Penguin, 1999), p. xx-xxii.

Renaissance (3).[6] Brown-Grant suggests that the most significant feature of Christine's attacks on the *Rose* is not necessarily gender-oriented, countering Sheila Delany's comments on the matter (10).[7] According to Brown-Grant, Christine transforms this debate into a "rhetorical battle" between the two genders. In the process of the debates, Christine confers with the most famous defenders of the *Rose*, the brothers, Gontier and Pierre Col, on the misogynistic ideas in the work (11). Christine's main argument is that Jean de Meun, who wrote most of the misogynistic statements, should take moral responsibility for educating his readers. Such an approach appears to be similar to the one Boccaccio takes when he identifies himself as a moral teacher to his readers, yet the strategies Christine applies in her debate on the *Rose* are a lot more complicated than Boccaccio's (3).

Brown-Grant emphasizes that one of such strategy is to minimize herself into an "insignificant self" in her verbal fight with those "eloquent scholars," who are most of time male (17-18). By doing so, Christine forms a connection with the insignificant group of readers, being a representative of "everyone" in real life, who might suffer from the misogynistic statements in

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[6] Rosalind Brown-Grant is probably the most important critic among all that have dealt with Christine and her works. This book starts with the history of Christine's quarrel with defenders of the *Romance of the Rose* and continues to discuss Christine's individual books in terms of gender, morality, and other issues that Christine deals within her writing career. As the title suggests, Brown-Grant comes to the conclusion that Christine's works should not be solely considered as texts on gender issues: the true purpose of Christine's writings lies in the issue of morality. By putting moral issues at the center of her arguments, Christine succeeded in creating an equilibrium between men and women. See *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defense of Women: Reading Beyond Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1999), p. 7-51.

[7] Brown-Grant formulates her argument based on Delany's discussion of the 'querelle.' The four main issues are: language, authorial responsibility, love, and anti-feminism. Brown-Grant's argument is that these four elements are actually unified by Christine's ethical perspective, which forms her defense of womankind: "In tackling the questions of anti-feminism and love in the *Rose*, Christine asserts that Jean de Meun's negative representation of women leads to disharmony between the sexes and thus to immoral and un-Christian behavior. On the matters of authorial responsibility and language, Christine's views are, in general, typical of her age in their emphasis on the writer's role as a moral reformer, whose function is to impart ethical instruction to the reader." See *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defense of Women: Reading Beyond Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1999).

the *Rose*. When the Col brothers criticize her as an "unschooled female" and thus deny Christine's ability to "bridge the gap between female reader and authoritative male writer," she gives logical and reasonable explanations to prove that such defenders of the *Rose* are actually the living proof of having been wrongly "educated" by all the misogynistic doctrines in the book (19-24).

One of the main issues regarding the responsibility of a writer to educate readers is the aesthetics of literature. The two groups participating in the debate disagree about the rhetorical level of works of art. According to the Col brothers, any vulgar or coarse language in the *Rose* should not affect readers since everything in a literary work should remain on a figurative level; after all, the *Rose* is an example of "art for art's sake" (26-29). To refute such an argument, Christine insists that the author's intention with respect to morality should definitely be taken into consideration: whether to offer instruction or pleasure to its readers. Christine does not develop this idea alone. Brown-Grant points out that there was a common expectation of utilitarianism in literary works, especially poetry, in the medieval period:

> Jean's credentials as an *auctor* were dependent on a variety of factors, the first of which was the supposed usefulness or *utilitas* of the *Rose* as a work of poetry. Both sides in the 'querelle' adhered to the widely held medieval view that the *pars philosophiae* to which poetry properly belongs is ethics, a branch of moral philosophy, because it is concerned with human behavior. (30)

Due to such an expected "philosophical and moral utility" in poetry, Christine insists that Jean de Meun has to take responsibility since its "lack of moral values" cannot by any means be compensated by the author's erudition (33).

John V. Flemming, D. W. Robertson, and Sheila Delany have all criticized Christine for being prudish and conservative. They accuse Christine for her refusal to admit that allegory has its "pious" limitations and also for her conservatism in putting so much emphasis on the author's moral responsibility (Brown-Grant, 9). Brown-Grant disagrees and argues that Christine presents herself as an independent and authoritative rival of her opponents in this rhetorical battle rather than just being a victim of misogynistic traditions (9). Furthermore, in Brown-Grant's discussion of Christine's role in the quarrel of the *Rose*, what Christine insists on and emphasizes is not only the author's moral responsibility, but also the reader's freedom and vulnerability.

Christine and her partner in this debate, Jean Gerson, both expressed their anxiety about readers' moral vulnerability when exposed to texts such as the *Rose*:

> Christine and Gerson's belief in the moral vulnerability of readers…is grounded in the Church's teaching on Original Sin. Using an image which suggests the weak state of the reader, Christine declares that it is pointless to stress to a sick person that they must not eat the kind of unripe fruit which will harm them…. The fevered mind of the reader/sick person will only remember the pleasing description of the fruit and will forget the advice not to touch it. (43)

In Christine's opinion, the *Rose* is exactly the "unripe" fruit to a sick person since it is full of misused allegorical characters that carry indeterminate euphemisms, while such euphemisms in

conventional allegory are supposed to convey a "higher truth" (35-46).[8] For Christine, such a higher truth concerns three parties that constitute the complete circle for literature to stay alive: the author, the text, and the reader. Christine takes the individuality of each element in literature into consideration when she diligently attacks the role of the *Rose*.

This issue of whether a literary text, especially an allegorical work, should carry a "higher truth" marks the significant difference between Christine de Pizan and her two predecessors, Boccaccio and Chaucer. According to Brown-Grant, Chaucer takes the same side as Jean de Meun on this issue, giving the reader absolute freedom in terms of interpretation since they both believe that they only serve as compilers, not authors (47).[9] In the words of Brown-Grant, authors such as Jean de Meun and Chaucer use the genre of allegory in a careless way because they think: "It is thus the reader who becomes responsible for reading the text morally rather than the author for ensuring that nothing immoral is included in the text" (48). Christine does not accept such an assumption about readers because of her firm belief in their vulnerability. In Christine's point of view, the reader's competence is determined by the moral guidance of an authoritative voice (49). Boccaccio does share Christine's belief in the author's responsibility of

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[8] "For the detractors of the *Rose*, the danger of its use of language lies in its tendency to lead the reader's mind back towards earthly matter, by advocating explicit literal terms for tainted objects and by its profanation of the sacred through inappropriate figurative euphemisms. In Christine and Gerson's view, these problems are symptomatic of the general effect produced by the *Rose* on its readers in encouraging them to seek vice and to flee from virtue." See Brown-Grant *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defense of Women: Reading Beyond Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1999), p. 46.

[9] For more discussion on the issues of "author" and "compiler" in the Middle Ages, see Maureen Quilligan's *The Allegory of Female Authority: Christine de Pizan's* Cité des Dames (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 31-35. Quilligan focuses on this particular text of Christine's and discusses the relationship between Christine, the author, as well as compiler, to her multiple sources, including Boethius and Boccaccio, the mythological characters in the story such as Lady Reason and Lady Justice, and the famous women included in this text, such as Dido and Lucretia.

educating the reader through moral lessons. Yet Christine does not exclude female readers as Boccaccio implicitly does with his writing of *Famous Women* in Latin. Furthermore, Christine considers her role as a writer who provides models for both men and women (51).

In order to provide models for both men and women and fulfill a writer's obligation of teaching moral lessons, Christine de Pizan decided to write *City of Ladies*. This particular work not only represented a transition within Christine's professional career, but also has led critics to call her "a pro-feminist writer":

> In this text, Christine tackles the problem of misogyny head-on, offering an alternative view of history in which women's contribution as historical figures is fully recognized. It also marks an important genre shift from Christine's previous works such as the *Othéa* and the *Avision*: from the instructive mirror for male readers she switches to a commemorative catalogue of women's laudable deeds addressed to a female readership. Moreover, whereas in the *Othéa* and the *Avision* Christine was concerned to encourage her reader to look beyond gender for the essential humanity embodied in her female exemplars, in the *Cité* she attempts to valorize what women have achieved as a sex in their own right. (Brown-Grant, 128)

For the first time in her writing career, Christine strayed from her focus on advising patriarchal figures, many of them royalty, and started a project of compilation with very unique purposes, agendas, and narratives in order to bring people's attention, as well as recognition, to contributions made by women over the course of history.

The Book of the City of Ladies

Christine began writing *The Book of the City of Ladies* in 1405 and her main source was Boccaccio's *Famous Women*. As there is no evidence that Christine had access to Boccaccio's original in Latin, it is widely believed that she read its French translation, *Des cleres et nobles femmes*. Boccaccio's influence extends only through Parts I and II, however, while the major source for part III, in which Christine writes about female saints, is *Miroir historical*, Jean de Vignay's French translation of Vincent of Beauvais's vast encyclopedia, *Speculum Maius*.

As earlier criticism on both Christine and her works has always centered on her personal experience and the historical background of that time, recent critiques of *City of Ladies* have tended to focus on issues of gender or genre, starting with the differences between Boccaccio's *Famous Women* and Christine's collection. Eleni Stecopoulos comments on Christine's rewriting of history by creating a new sort of myth with her stories of women:

> On one level—and fundamentally—Christine wishes to destroy the pernicious, and in several important respects recent, idée reçue according to which women cannot be considered as the indispensable historical, and equal, partners of men. Myth is refuted on another level too. In order to achieve her objective, she places all her characters within a continuum that, quite purposefully, does not distinguish between ancient and contemporary, "real" and fictitious. This decontextualization allows Christine to turn many so-called "mythic" women…to her advantage; she utilizes them as her coworkers in an ongoing feminine endeavor—the construction of what she calls "The City of Ladies." (48)[10]

[10] Eleni Stecopoulos in "Christine de Pizan's *Livre de la Cité des Dames*: The Reconstruction of Myth" argues that in order to form a strong case for women, Christine deliberately writes some of the mythological women into historical figures. By doing so, Stecopoulos argues that Christine is able to acknowledge their contributions in the

Stecopoulos turns the previous critiques of Christine's misuse of allegory into praise for her "decontextualization" of myth. After arguing against the misogynistic statements in the *Rose*, Christine moved forward to offer a place for women in history "as the indispensable historical, and equal, partners of men."

Following Stecopoulos's view of the broader implications of Christine's works, Brown-Grant offers another refreshing view of Christine's choices from the perspective of genealogy. Taking genealogy in a biographical catalogue as a genre, Brown-Grant relates Christine's *City of Ladies* back to Petrarch's *De Viris Illustribus* and Boccaccio's *De Casibus* (*On Illustrious Men*) and *Famous Women*, emphasizing that the differences in Christine are based on the writer's "anxiety for authorship" (140). Petrarch uses illustrious examples to ask his compatriots to follow the deeds of the exemplars, and participates in the laudatory narrative tradition. Boccaccio means to bestow those masculine characteristics onto women and by doing so educates men to be careful of those famous women who can behave like men. Broan-Grant points out that Petrarch and Boccaccio share something in common: in their compilations both "reprove the lax morals of the present day and lament the loss of the greater virtue of the past" (135-39). Christine, however, has a different starting-point and unique goal. Brown-Grant mentions that the lack of a dedication or preface in *City of Ladies* reveals Christine's yearning to establish her own authorship: "Instead, it has a much more extensive prologue in which she reveals her 'anxiety of authorship' in taking up a pen in the first place, given that she has no previous examples of

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course of history, helping these women get rid of the stereotypical assumption of their mythological impracticability. *Reinterpreting Christine de Pizan* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), p. 48-62.

women writers on whose literary authority she can draw" (140).[11] Since there is no female writer or model for her to follow, Christine has to start from scratch, establishing her own female authorship through her own works.

According to Brown-Grant, concerning the role of women in history, Christine holds very different view from her two predecessors, Petrarch and Boccaccio:

> [T]he most striking divergence between Christine and her predecessors is that whereas Petrarch and Boccaccio share a pessimistic view of history, which they regard either as a process of decline or as a continuum of vice down the ages [due to evilness of women], she argues that history has been marked by progress and that women have played a key role in the development of civilization. (155)[12]

For Brown-Grant, to remain positive and to defend women, Christine has to "analyze history from the long term in order to valorize the contribution made by the female sex to human progress" (159). Such a view of history opposes Boccaccio's and is based on Christine's rejection of the myth of the Golden Age (160).[13]

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[11] Brown Grant uses the term "anxiety of authorship" to describe women's difficulty in inserting themselves into a literary genealogy. See *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defense of Women: Reading Beyond Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1999).

[12] Brown-Grant points out that this view of decline is a medieval commonplace and lists a group of medieval scholars who have agreed on this issue, including J. B. Bury and Theodor E. Mommsen. For more references, please see *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defense of Women: Reading Beyond Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1999), p. 155. The discussion of the difference between Petrarch's view of history and Boccaccio's are also above p. 7 and p. 48, where the base of the comparison is different. Concerning solely the view of history, Boccaccio is more pessimistic than Petrarch; whereas with the role of women in history, they are both pessimistic.

[13] Brown-Grant explains that the authorities, including Boccaccio, "favor the primitivist myth of the Golden Age, that is, that humans were once wild and yet content, innocent of the unhappiness that progress would bring into the world. Christine would therefore seem to be one of the first late medieval writers to support an anti-primitivist thesis and to argue for the positive effects of civilization and of human inventions." See *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defense of Women: Reading Beyond Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1999), p.160.

Margolis points out that Christine composed *City of Ladies* at a historical moment when France and Italy were undergoing a cultural competition reflected in their different perspectives of humanism:

> While the Italians excelled at what we could call first-rhetorical humanism, based on writing in classical Latin—that is, in the style of Virgil and Cicero, a higher quality than clumsy scholastic Latin—the French were cultivating another, second-rhetorical humanism, whose exponents wrote in French for both personal and political purposes, enriching the vernacular in the process. (129)

Margolis stresses the effort Charles V put into patronage of translation and book production, leading France to favor the vernacular language (129).

One feature of the French translation of classical texts in Christine's time, as Margolis explains, is the use of erudite references that often carry certain agendas. Interweaving a learned reference into a translated text is often presented as a patriotic act since it is done to "enrich the cultural prestige and reinforce the political agenda of each French king's reign" (130). Margolis suggests that Christine's *City of Ladies* relied on this technique.

Furthermore, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, the most widely read work of Christine's, reflects her own version of individuality. In establishing a city of ladies where only virtuous women are allowed to be residents, Christine uses the portrayals of famous women in history to show her own competence as a writer. The allegorical story in *City of Ladies* starts with the narrator encountering passages from old books that make misogynistic statements. This

encounter takes the narrator on the journey of writing stories of famous women in history, trying to fight misogynism by creating a new type of history from a female perspective.

At the beginning of *City of Ladies* the narrator is drawn to one of the books by Matheolus.[14] Before she gets the chance to read it, she is called away by her mother because it is time for supper (*BCL*, 1). Unable to resist the urge to read Matheolus, the narrator goes back to her study to read and is then annoyed by all the bad things she finds in it:

> But, seeing the kind of immoral language and ideas it contained, the content seemed to me likely to appeal only to those who enjoy reading works of slander and to be no use whatsoever to anyone who wished to pursue virtue or to improve their moral standards. I therefore leafed through it, read the ending, and decided to switch to some more worthy and profitable work. Yet, having looked at this book, which I considered to be of no authority, an extraordinary thought became planted in my mind which made me wonder why on earth it was that so many men, both clerks and others, have said and continue to say and write such awful, damning things about women and their ways. I was at a loss as to how to explain it. It is not just a handful of writers who do this, nor only this Matheolus whose book is neither regarded as authoritative nor intended to be taken seriously. It is all manner of philosophers, poets and orators too numerous to mention, who all seem to speak with one voice and are unanimous in their view that female nature is wholly given up to vice.
> (*BCL*, 5-6)

Obviously this book of Matheolus is in line with the clerical tradition that spreads misogynistic ideas. The reading leads the narrator to question both the illogical philosophy and the popularity

[14] Maureen Quilligan relates the opening scene of Christine's *BCL* to the symbolic image of "a room of one's own" in Woolf's writing. See *The Allegory of Female Authority: Christine de Pizan's* Cité des Dames (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), p.xx.

of such works. In deep confusion, she was "sunk into a deep trance," calls out to God for answers and suddenly has a vision (*BCL*, 6).

"A beam of light" reveals three ladies, who claim to help her "reject what you know and believe in fact to be the truth just because so many other people have come out with the opposite opinion" (*BCL*, 7-8). As one of the three ladies tells the narrator that Matheolus, along with many others, including the authors of the *Rose*, are wrong, she is "too dumbfounded to utter a single word" (*BCL*, 9). Thus, the lady comforts the narrator as she promises to dissolve all the troubles she has been experiencing regarding the issue (*BCL*, 11).

Without any delay, the lady tells the narrator that they are there for a more important reason. The lady says:

> 'Our wish is to prevent others from falling into the same error as you and to ensure that, in future, all worthy ladies and valiant women are protected from those who have attacked them. The female sex has been left defenseless for a long time now…. For this reason, we three ladies whom you see before you have been moved by pity to tell you that you are to construct a building in the shape of a walled city, sturdy and impregnable. This has been decreed by God, who has chosen you to do this with our help and guidance. Only ladies who are of good reputation and worthy of praise will be admitted into this city. To those lacking in virtue, its gates will remain forever closed'. (*BCL*, 11)

The mission bestowed upon the narrator is to describe all the features of this allegorical city she will build. First of all, its purpose is to offer shelter and defense for virtuous women from slander and defamation in the past and in the future. Secondly, the residents in the city must be virtuous.

Lastly, the lady specifies the mission to be "decreed by God," bestowing a sense of sacredness on it.

Many critics have commented on the concept of a "city," in particular Brown-Grant who connects Christine's city and Augustine's. Notably however, Christine's version includes both Christians as well as pagans (134-35). Forhan elaborates on this issue, and focuses on the political agenda in Christine's writing: "Some Romans, facing the disintegration of the empire, blamed political and social upheaval on the wrath of gods offended by their abandonment in the name of the new state religion. In 420 Augustine refuted their arguments, drawing on a new analogy of Christian community as a kind of baptized eternal city, like Athens, or even Rome" (47). According to Forhan, while Augustine tried to offer a counterpart of the secular city with his spiritual one, Christine's creation of a celestial city is more "eloquent and multilayered" (37).

Forhan then emphasizes that Christine proposes a radical subversion of Augustine's ideology and metaphor of the *city*:

> First, the very structure of the work, with its powerful opening images, implies an emphasis on experience and observation over the authoritative statements of the *auctores* of the past…. Secondly, [there is] the ironic aspect of Christine as author… This 'ignorant and irrational' woman of misogynist stereotype is so well-read that she can toy with the structures, allusions and ideas of the *auctores* on which she models her work, particularly the mighty St Augustine and the *City of God*…. Thirdly, to subvert a genre in this fashion points to considerable command and proficiency in the forms of discourse, coupled to the creative imagination that is one of Christine's most significant intellectual characteristics. (56)

By posing herself as a counterpart to authorities such as Augustine, Christine "toys with" great traditions, including misogynistic ones. She turns an existing structure and ideology into one that fits her own purposes, in favor of the female gender.[15]

Margolis develops the connection made by between Augustine and Christine, explaining more specifically the way Christine challenges the notion of "city". The old French meaning of "*cite"* was actually that of "a fortress or a fortified city" and served as a common motif (as a place that "enclosed women") in medieval and Renaissance literature, including the *Romance of the Rose*. However, the notion of city in Christine's work appears to be very different:

> Yet Christine would erect a different kind of fortress to protect the image of woman as self-defining through virtuous action, defined apart from her existence as a male possession. Also, as a secular political space encouraging individual self-determinism, this City of Ladies resembles a city in the modern sense, rather than a convent—the more typical enclosed space for women in medieval times, governed by religious rules and conformity. (71)

Christine is challenging the notion of city as *confinement* for women while also giving a very modern twist to that concept.

The lady tells the narrator to build the city as "impregnable" so that as this city carries the meaning of *confinement* to some degree. But Margolis explains, it is designed to keep women from men's possession because only by doing so, can the female gender obtain "individual self-

[15] Forhan notes nevertheless that "her celestial and idealized City of Ladies finds no counterpart in actual practice. The Italian city-states, the closest analogues to the cities of Augustine's world, do not appeal to her either as models of an ideal polity or as expressions of good government." See *The Political Theory of Christine de Pizan* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), p. 56.

determinism." Moreover, such confinement becomes a means of defense. In this way, Christine reverses the notion of "city" that is used to enclose women such as in the *Rose*, and turns it into one that offers defense of the female gender. This enclosure no longer embodies men's control over women and even signifies the freedom of women in a safe and friendly environment. In terms of authorship, Christine's notion of city also subverts the authority of male writers over female ones because the female narrator is able to speak her mind there. Such an environment makes the individuality of women possible based on the quality of residents since only virtuous women are allowed to live in it.

The details of the City of Ladies are gradually revealed as the three ladies who visit the narrator introduce themselves and describe their roles in building the city, its structure, materials, and even its residents. The first lady declares her identity as Lady Reason and gives the narrator the details about the city they are going to build together:

> 'In order to lay the foundations, you shall draw fresh water from us three as from a clear spring. We will bring you building materials which will be stronger and more durable than solid, un-cemented marble. Your city will be unparalleled in splendor and will last for all eternity…. As has been decided amongst the three of us, it is my task to help you begin by giving you tough, indestructible cement which you will need to set the mighty foundations and to support the great walls that you must raise all around. These walls should have huge towers, solid bastions surrounded by moats, and outer forts with both natural and manmade defenses. This is what a powerful city must have in order to resist attack.' (*BCL*, 12-13)

What Lady Reason tells the narrator about the infrastructure, construction, and defenses of the City of Ladies is surprisingly concrete instead of merely figurative. It all seems very real even in a fictional setting. The need for cement implies the intensity and destructive power that a possible attack might carry. In order to defend against defamation at such a level, the city has to be as strong as Lady Reason instructs it to be.

Following Lady Reason, the second lady describes her role in this task of building the City of Ladies:

> 'My name is Rectitude …. This splendid rule that you see me holding in my right hand like a scepter is the yardstick of truth which separates right from wrong and distinguishes between good and evil…. With this rule, those powers are infinite, all things are measured out. As far as you are concerned, this rule will help you to plan the city which you have been commissioned to build. You'll have good need of it in order to lay out the interior of the city and to build its high temples, palaces and houses, its roads, squares and marketplaces; in fact, everything that is needed to accommodate its inhabitants.'
> (*BCL*, 13-14)

Rectitude is responsible for every construction inside the city, especially places where its residents are going to live. In order to make every place solid and secure, the city needs perfect *measurement* that guarantees the safety of the buildings. What is noteworthy is that the ruler Rectitude is holding is not only for regular measures. It is for telling good from evil and right from wrong. Interestingly, the narrator does not take the symbol of rule in a figurative way. She uses it in a very literal fashion. The implication here may be that in the narrator's view, the issue

of good and evil can actually be measured. Only with the possibility of measuring one's ethics, does the standard of determining who should be the inhabitants of the City of Ladies prove workable.

Once the cement for the infrastructure from the first lady and the rule for interior places from the second one are settled, the third lady speaks up:

> 'My dear friend Christine, I am Justice…. My task is purely and simply to judge and repay everyone according to their just deserts. It is I who keep things in order, since without me nothing remains stable…. This vessel of pure gold that you see me holding in my right hand is like a measuring cup…. I could tell you even more about my powers and my functions but for now let me just say that, of all Virtues, I am the most important since they all culminate in me.'
> (*BCL*, 15)

Justice declares that the city can only be full of "worthy ladies" and that she is the one who judges everyone based on their deeds. The golden vessel carries the deeds of virtues from virtuous women, which will become the splendid garnishment of gold on all the buildings.

The three ladies then help by answering questions the narrator has about the misogynistic traditions she has found in her readings of old books. The following individual stories of famous women are divided into three groups based on what kinds of virtues the story presents. Brown-Grant points out that Christine's city has a structural "hierarchy of virtue": the community, the family, or the individual, corresponding to Part I, II, and III of the book (163).[16] The following is

[16] According to Brown-Grant, this hierarchy is a moral one based on Aristotle's philosophy: "These distinctions correspond roughly to Aristotle's definitions of practical philosophy: politics (the individual in relation to the state); economics (the individual in relation to the family); and ethics (the individual as individual), although Christine

a commentary on Christine's manner of characterization in the stories of Dido, Medea, Lucretia, and Thisbe.

Christine writes two versions of the stories of Dido and Medea, with versions in both Part I and II. There is only one version of the stories of Lucretia and Thisbe, and they are both in Part II. Given the design of the city, it may be concluded that Dido and Medea have made contributions to both the community and the family, whereas Lucretia and Thisbe only fit in the second category, as good wives. The third category includes a group of female saints. They are virtuous because of their pious belief. Regardless of which group these famous women belong to, the narrator focuses on their virtues. More importantly, these different kinds of virtue can be read as various representations of the author herself.

Dido (and knowledge)

Dido's first appearance in *City of Ladies* is in the category of noble women who are involved in public affairs, which also includes Amazon women and women who excel at learning. In the first part, the story of Dido faithfully follows Boccaccio's version from *Famous Women*. The story refers to Elissa, Dido's original Phoenician name, and describes her escape from her brutal brother after her husband's death and her eventual founding of Carthage in Africa (*BCL*, 82-85). While Boccaccio attributes Dido's reputation and virtues to her constancy

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transposes ethics into theology, which concerns the spiritual good of individuals rather than just their moral good. However, unlike Aristotle, and indeed most medieval political theorists, Christine places the sphere of economics above that of politics in her hierarchy, ranking the deeds of wives and mothers above those of warriors and teachers." See *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defense of Women: Reading Beyond Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1999), p. 163-64.

in remaining a widow all her life, Christine praises Dido's "good sense and cleverness" in founding a great country:

> 'Thanks to her bold and courageous actions and her judicious rule, she became so renowned for her heroic qualities that her name was changed to Dido, which means "*virago*" in Latin: in other words, a woman who has the virtue and valour of a man. She lived a glorious life for many years, one which would have lasted even longer had Fortune not turned against her. As this goddess is wont to be envious of those she sees prosper, she concocted a bitter brew for Dido to drink, which I'll tell you about all in good time.'
> (*BCL*, 85)

Christine's first version of Dido appears to be realistic. She does not shun the fact that Dido has earned her reputation by acting like a man. Christine obviously tries to make this version of Dido more independent and human by leaving out most of the mythic parts (except for Love). We see this in her choice of Boccaccio's version of Dido over Virgil's.

In Part II, the story of Dido figures under the title, "On the subject of women's constancy in love," in keeping with Christine's emphasis on women's virtue. Compared to Chaucer's version of Dido, Christine manages to keep the story short. After a brief paragraph describing how Dido meets Aeneas and falls in love, she describes how Aeneas abandons Dido and how Dido dies. In Christine's description, Dido and Aeneas only fall in love because of Love's manipulation: "He and Dido spent so much time together that eventually Love, who is all too skilled in the art of ensnaring hearts, made them fall in love with each other" (*BCL*, 173). By

bestowing the responsibility onto Love, Christine can be evasive about Aeneas' reasons for leaving Dido, implying that Aeneas had no good excuse to abandon Dido (*BCL*, 173).

Blaming Aeneas for the failure of the love affair corresponds with Chaucer's version of Dido. However, Dido's reaction to Aeneas's abandonment is much less dramatic in Christine's depiction than in Chaucer's. Christine concludes Dido's story:

> The wretched Dido was so devastated by his departure that she lost all interest in life and joy, consumed as she was by her passion for Aeneas. In the end, having uttered many regrets, she threw herself on a great pyre that she had prepared beforehand. Others say that she killed herself with Aeneas's own sword. Thus it was that the noble Queen Dido met her end, she who had been so exalted above all other women in her time. (*BCL*, 174)

In this ending of Dido's story, Christine seems almost reluctant to endorse the fact that Dido killed herself with Aeneas's sword and therefore she simply writes "others say" so.

Maureen Quilligan discusses the differing ways Dido is treated by Augustine and Dante. By bringing two male authors who have once dealt with the relationship between Dido and Aeneas into the picture, Quilligan addresses the significance of Christine's version of Dido:

> Augustine confessed that in his youth, a rebel to God's love, he had read Virgil and wept for the death of Dido…. Dante differs from the youthful Augustine by being able to distinguish between Dido and Aeneas, condemning Dido's passion but condoning Aeneas's transcendence of it…[17]

[17] Before this, Quilligan writes: "In the second circle of hell, Dante and Virgil confront, in the figures of Semiramis and Dido, representatives of two versions of the city which are opposed to the imperial legitimacy Rome;" and such a representation is a reversal and counterpart of Augustine's *The City of God* as an heavenly opposition of secular Rome. See *The Allegory of Female Authority: Christine de Pizan's* Cité des Dames (Ithaca: Cornell University Press,

(71-72)

Virgil had described Dido as a mere distraction that kept Aeneas from his sacred task of founding the Roman Empire. Dante also viewed Dido's passion for the Trojan hero negatively and praised Aeneas's detachment from the affair. Quilligan thus concludes that instead of following in the footsteps of either Virgil or Dante, Christine shows her own compassion, similar to that of Augustine, in describing Dido as a constant woman who deserves people's compassion (72).

The fact that Christine here echoes Augustine shows Christine's maneuver of challenging the traditions. By doing so, Christine reverses the tradition of condemning Dido as a distraction for Aeneas in both Virgil and Dante's stories. Christine also portrays her as a lawful queen and Carthage as a well-established city. Quilligan points out that Dante regards Carthage as an "illicit" city because of its female founder, but Christine sees the city built by Dido as an original site serving as "an alternate tradition of civilization" (73). In this way, Christine subverts the tradition set by Virgil and Dante since they both speak little of female builders of cities. For Christine, the founder's gender is irrelevant when their contribution, devotion, and capabilities make a city well functioning. Dido's ability to overcome hardships and establish a great city is at the center of Christine's version. Dido's knowledge, which is also in Boccaccio's version, serves as the highlight of Christine's story. Dido's story indicates that Christine too has that kind of knowledge, to create a great city, the City of Ladies.

1991). p. 71.

Medea (and education)

The two versions of Dido in *City of Ladies* do not seem to contradict each other while the opposite seems to be the case in the two parts of the story of Medea. Medea occupies one short paragraph in Part I:

> Medea, who is mentioned in many history books, was no less skilled or knowledgeable than this Manto. An extremely beautiful lady with a tall, slim body and a very lovely face, Medea was the daughter of Aeëtes, King of Colchis, and his wife Perse. In learning she surpassed all other women, for she knew the properties of every plant and what spells they could be used for. Indeed, no art had been invented that she hadn't mastered. Intoning a song that she alone knew, Medea could make the sky go cloudy and black, draw the wind out of the dark caverns in the depths of the earth…It was she whose powers of sorcery helped Jason to win the Golden Fleece.
> (*BCL*, 63)

The writer deliberately postpones the affair between Medea and Jason until Part II.

Despite all the positive descriptions of Medea as a well-educated and skilled scholar, Medea still has to face her unfortunate fate. All her wonderful skills merely favor Jason. After a brief introduction concerning the Golden Fleece, the narrator tells the story of how Medea fell in love with Jason and decided to help him:

> 'The king's daughter, Medea, was so struck by Jason's good looks, royal lineage and impressive reputation that she thought he would make a good match for her. In her desire to show her love for him, she resolved to save him from death, for she felt such compassion that she couldn't bear to see a knight like him come to any harm. She thus freely engaged him in lengthy conversations and, in short, taught him various charms

> and spells which she knew would help him succeed in his quest for the Golden Fleece. In return, Jason promised to take no other woman but her for his wife, swearing that he would love her for evermore. However, Jason broke his word. After everything had gone just as he had planned, he left Medea for another woman. She, who would have let herself be torn limb from limb rather than play such a false trick on him, fell into utter despair. Never in her life did she experience happiness or joy again'.
> (*BCL*, 174-75)

Christine, along with Boccaccio and Chaucer, decides to leave out Medea's atrocity. Critics of Christine offer different views of why she chooses to write the story of Medea in this fashion.

Quilligan comments that Christine "suppressed the grisly ending of Medea's revenge on Jason's faithlessness" in order to render her second part of Medea's story a mere extension of Dido's, putting the women's gracious generosity and the men's mendacious ingratitude above other elements of Medea's story (174). Stecopoulos gives a rather positive critique: "Christine describes Medea's spells as the articulation of a great knowledge, not as the instruments of a nefarious personality" (53-54). Stecopoulos further suggests that the second part of Medea's story is a very "feminine one." Medea's "clerkliness" can only be well acknowledged given Jason's being in need of Medea's help, making Medea's scholarly achievement quite feminine (54). In this sense, the virtue that Christine tries to propose and advocate here is "the unswerving absoluteness of her loving devotion [and] her particularly feminine fidelity" (54). In Stecopoulos's view, such virtue favors a traditional sense of marriage: "Christine's Medea consequently is to be read as a Christian exemplar: she has done everything in her power to

guarantee the sanctity and inviolability of marriage—of the supposedly not-to-be-broken couple which she and Jason had formed and which Jason betrayed" (54).[18]

While the first part of Medea's story appears to be quite positive and promising, the second part seems conservative (according to Stecopoulos). If the story of Medea, as Quilligan suggests, is an extension of Christine's version of Dido, one of the common themes between these two protagonists is the opposition between a woman's constancy and a man's betrayal. One of the issues in both stories is that despite Dido's cleverness and Medea's accomplished arts, those achievements still turn out to favor men. Dido is less clever in the presence of Aeneas. She turns from a good queen into a woman in love. The same goes for Medea. At first, Medea is a scholar as well as an artist who possesses many skills, yet those very skills become her downfall when she uses them to help a man.

In this light, maybe Delany is correct when she calls Christine a "reactionary as well as a prude." She points out that Christine "should have chosen Vergilian Dido," and implies that Christine is indeterminate when it comes to the issues between the two genders (193).[19] By saying so, Delany refutes the popular argument that Christine is a "pro-feminist," especially based on *City of Ladies*:

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[18] Although Christine describes Medea as a faithful woman who sacrifices for the man she loves, Medea is often harshly commented on due to her infanticide after Jason leaves her behind. Stecopoulos justifies Christine's choice of Medea's story by suggesting that the excision of Medea's infanticide has plausible cause due to the possibly tampered history that led to prior revisions. See "Christine de Pizan's *Livre de la cité des dames*: Reconstruction of Myth" in *Reinterpreting Christine de Pizan* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), p. 48-62.

[19] Sheila Delany in "History, Politics, and Christine Studies: A Polemical Reply" disagrees with the popular saying about Christine being a "pro-feminist" writer and argues that Christine shows different opinions on different issues. Thus the modern criticism that pins down Christine's role to a "feminist writer" is ahistorical as well as inappropriate. In this chapter, all criticism from Delany is from this specific essay, unless cited otherwise. See *Politics, Gender, and Genre: The Political Thought of Christine de Pizan* (Boulder: Westview, 1992), p. 193-206.

> Christine de Pizan did a significant thing in writing and an interesting thing in "rewriting woman good" to the limited extent she did (though she was far from the only or first to do so). She was also a reactionary and a prude. To use a different vocabulary: Christine's voice is sometimes pro-woman but far more often it is the voice of patriarchy, chosen in spite of ample alternatives. This is why my several pieces on Christine display different facets of the writer's multifaceted oeuvre…. But much literature occupies a kind of "gray area" of positive mixed with negative values and of conservatism mixed with subversion. I have tried to attend to both with respect to Christine. (197)

Indeed, the stories of Dido and Medea do to some extent reflect Christine's inclination toward telling stories in a "patriarchal" tone as Delany suggests. Doubtless Christine's revolutionary attempt also had its limitations.

Nevertheless, one should not diminish Christine's effort to portray Dido and Medea as capable and virtuous women. The virtues that Christine wants to advocate in Dido and Medea's cases are mainly in regards to a woman's learning, education, and judgment regardless of who the beneficiary might be. More importantly, such virtues also represent Christine's capabilities as a writer. She presents the stories of Dido and Medea to reflect her own professional status.

Lucretia (and the female perspective)

Christine starts the story of Lucretia with the following statement: "In order to contradict those who claim that women want to be raped, here begins a series of examples, the first is Lucretia" (*BCL*, 147). Before telling the story, Christine makes the purpose of her Lucretia story

quite clear by addressing Rectitude's comments on the question about whether women want to be raped as many male authors state: "It therefore angers and upsets me when men claim that women want to be raped and that, even though a woman may verbally rebuff a man, she won't in fact mind if he does force himself upon her. I can scarcely believe that it could give women any pleasure to be treated in such a vile way" (*BCL*, 147). Rectitude assures Christine that no chaste and moral woman would ever find pleasure in rape.

The story of Lucretia follows:

> Lucretia, a high-born lady of Rome, and, indeed, the most virtuous of all Roman women, was married to a nobleman called Tarquinius Collatinus. Unfortunately, Tarquin the Proud, the son of King Tarquin, was deeply smitten with the great Lucretia. Having seen with his own eyes how supremely chaste she was, he didn't approach her directly. Despairing of being able to persuade her with bribes and entreaties, he plotted how to win her by trickery.
> (*BCL*, 147)

In Christine's depiction, Tarquin did not have to make the trip to Lucretia's household to be astonished by her timidity and chasteness as happens in both Boccaccio and Chaucer's versions. In Christine's plot, there is often no reasonable explanation for men's violence perpetrated on women. Moreover, it is always the woman, the victim, who has to justify the case to prove her innocence in cruel actions such as rape.

According to the story, Tarquin sneaks into Lucretia's house and threatens her with slander to compromise her. Here Christine does not stray far from her main source, Boccaccio's

version. As in both Boccaccio and Chaucer's versions, the next morning Lucretia calls for a meeting where she gathers her husband and other relatives. Lucretia, being inconsolable, makes her last speech with all her family present: "Though I can absolve myself of sin and prove myself innocent this way, I can't get rid of my suffering and pain: henceforth no woman need live in shame and dishonor because of what has been done to me" (*BCL*, 148). The central issue for Lucretia here differs a lot from Boccaccio and Chaucer's versions. In Christine's description, Lucretia does not commit suicide for her husband's reputation, nor does she feel obligated to do so. The beneficiary in her mind is the female gender as a whole. It is the reputation of women she is trying to protect.

This alteration by Christine has led critics onto a very "gendered" path. Quilligan thinks that Christine's story of Lucretia is "specifically gendered" compared to Boccaccio's (160). She argues that first of all, Christine shortens the story on purpose so that the issue of rape and suicide can become the center of the tale (157). Secondly, the excision of the boasting scene from Boccaccio's opening (*FW*, XLVIII, 195) suggests that Christine is actually trying to remove men's mastery over women from the equation, turning the tale into a "drama of female history" (159). Last but not least, while the context in Boccaccio's text is all about "the controlling position of the male viewer," Christine tells her story from a "resolutely female-gendered" perspective (160).[20]

[20] Here Quilligan talks about the psychoanalytic film critic Laura Mulvey and what she calls "the controlling male 'gaze'": "The male looks at a woman who is 'displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men'.… But this controlling gaze…according to Mulvey, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified… a voyeuristic pleasure in assigning guilt and in asserting control through punishment and forgiveness…. The woman then is no longer a 'bearer of guilt, but a perfect product, whose body, stylized and fragmented' is the 'direct recipient of the viewer's

The way Christine ends the story strengthens the notion of a gendered position taken by both the protagonist and the narrator, according to critics such as Qulligan: "Some say that because of the outrage done to Lucretia, a law was passed which sentenced to death any man who raped a woman, a law which is moral, fitting and just" (*BCL*, 148). Neither Boccaccio nor Chaucer mentions such a law. Christine's purpose in creating such an addition may be due to her enthusiasm for presenting Lucretia as a role model that can be justified in the realm of law as well as of morality. After all, it is not the suicide (and definitely not the rape) that Christine wants her readers to focus on here. The virtue celebrated in this story is Lucretia's courage to speak about her pain and suffering. When Christine portrays Lucretia as a brave woman who speaks her mind, Christine is also conveying the necessity of assigning a female perspective in a story where "woman" is the subject, regardless of the issues at stake here. For the first time, the story of Lucretia is about "the woman" and not the man. A woman's perspective should always be appreciated and provided to make the story a complete one. With her version of Lucretia, Christine reveals her anxiety to establish her authorship while her contemporaries may not feel the urge to. Christine also tries to establish her indispensable position as a female writer, emphasizing the importance of a female perspective in all narratives. Such emphasis becomes even stronger in the story of Thisbe.

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gaze.'" Quilligan discusses the possibility that both the stories of Dido and Lucretia in Boccaccio's *Famous Women* were voyeuristically received during the time Christine encountered Boccaccio's version. See *The Allegory of Female Authority: Christine de Pizan's* Cité des Dames (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

Thisbe (and the power of speech)

At the beginning of Thisbe's story, Christine clearly states that her main source is Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (*BCL*, 175). Though both Boccaccio and Christine claim their loyalty to Ovid's story of Thisbe, Christine makes some alterations of her own. For example, in Boccaccio's portrayal, Thisbe and Pyramus can only talk to each other through the crack in the wall; yet in Christine's story, Thisbe and Pyramus spend a lot of time together before they are forced to separate on their parents' orders:

> Not a day went by when Pyramus and Thisbe weren't to be seen busy together at their games. This went on as they grew older and, with each passing year, the flame of their passion burned ever more fiercely. Unfortunately, they spent so much time with one another that they drew attention to themselves and aroused people's suspicions. When Thisbe's mother heard what people were saying, she had her daughter locked in her rooms…. Yet, though they had to endure this separation for a long time, their feelings for one another were not in the least weakened or diminished by it. Indeed, despite being kept apart, their love grew all stronger over the years until they reached the age of fifteen. (*BCL*, 175)

Christine revises the relationship between Thisbe and Pyramus into one of a loving couple separated by their parents, the patriarchal power. Despite the fact that it is Thisbe's mother, and not her father, the patriarch, who forces two children to separate, the love between Thisbe and Pyramus seems to be more genuine and real since they have actually spent time together, nurturing their affection for each other.

The crack in the wall between the two households is an essential element in both Boccaccio and Chaucer's versions. However, in Christine's version the crack is a result of their love. In Christine's description, because of Thisbe's outcry something miraculous happens:

> "O cruel stone wall, you cause me and my loved one such suffering that, if you had any compassion at all, you would crack a little so that I could at least catch a glimpse of my beloved." No sooner had she spoken than she happened to glance down at a corner of the wall and noticed that there was indeed a crack, through which she could see the light coming from the room on the other side. She therefore picked away at this crack with the buckle of her belt, for she had no other tool to hand, working away at the wall until the buckle passed right through to where Pyramus would see it, which is exactly what happened.
> (*BCL*, 176)

Christine has actually bestowed on Thisbe the power to crack the wall and thus sets the female protagonist free from patriarchal confinement.

While the rest of Christine's story bears no difference to the other two, Thisbe's speech that cracks the wall becomes the spotlight of Christine's story. Although Thisbe's speech leads the young couple to their tragic end, it still proves Thisbe's power and control over her own fate. Quilligan points out that in both Boccaccio and Chaucer's versions, the moral lesson that teaches young people to follow parents' guidance is the center of the two male authors' storyline. Quilligan comments that, on the contrary, in *City of Ladies*: "there is no undercutting moral: Thisbe's death directly proves her heroic constancy" (176). There are major differences between Boccaccio's Thisbe and Christine's: the avoidance of a moral lesson, the crack brought by

Thisbe's speech, and a less biased tone in the end of the story. With these dissimilarities from her main source, Christine's version of Thisbe can be regarded as an example of the author's original narration. In her hands the story of Thisbe, concerns the representation of the individuality, as well as the originality of an author. Most importantly, where Thisbe's speech can crack a wall, the voice of a female writer can also break the confinement built with a male-authored canon. While Lucretia represents the perspectives of women in telling a story, Thisbe signifies the voice of women that needs to be presented, heard, and respected. Furthermore, there is great power in the voice of a woman to crack the boundary and free both men and women from their restrictions and confinement constituted by traditions and biases concerning the gender differences.

Martyrdom and the Mother

There are three famous ancient women that both Boccaccio and Chaucer choose to include in their collections of stories of women, but that Christine decides to leave out of her *City of Ladies*: Cleopatra, Hypermnestra, and Hypsipyle. To provide a conjectural but reasonable answer, these three women do not possess virtues that are good enough for Christine to include them in her selection of virtuous women. Cleopatra, portrayed as a martyr to love in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, cannot be considered the legitimate and constant wife that Christine would have hoped for her City of Ladies. Perhaps neither Hypermnestra nor Hypsipyle has the very basic quality of individuality nor makes great contribution to civilization that Christine requires, so she has no choice but to leave them out of her collection.

The absence of these women is to some extent filled by other female figures in *City of Ladies*. The most important group of other female figures in text is the one of women saints. Christine devotes the third part to saints, praising martyrdom in a special fashion. Quilligan connects Christine's inclusion of women saints with her choice to write in vernacular French, a move that opposes her to her male predecessors, Petrarch and Boccaccio, who write their collections in Latin. Also, while Boccaccio mostly writes about pagan women in *Famous Women*, Christine's devotion to religious women is noteworthy. According to Quilligan, though the lives of saints were often written in the vernacular, they had to go through a parallel authority since the texts of saints' lives were "institutionalized" by the Latin Church (205). Quilligan thus suggests that Martyrology was exactly the right genre for Christine, because it "is a well-defined, august, fully authorized genre that legitimates narratives of specific female experience" (205). More importantly, the concept of martyrdom symbolizes the exercise of free will. Quilligan explains that in Christine's examples of martyrdom, "the body becomes a site of dramatic contestation between institutions of power and the self…for control over the body" (209).[21] The third part dedicated to women saints thus raises Christine's ideas of women's individuality to another level. In this third category, the virtuous women are not only considered "individual," but also presented as those who make contribution to other *individuals*.

[21] Quilligan here applies what Caroline Walker Bynum proposes about mythic figures in the Middle Ages. As Bynum argues, such increased hostility—and vulnerability—may have been a response to the new possibilities available for women to shape "their own religious experience in lay communities" by taking on "a clear alternative—the prophetic alternative—to the male role based on the power of office." Such speculation on this "prophetic alternative" lends a contemporaneous sociological weight to Christine's emphasis on various traditions of prophecy, particularly in a text titled for its community of women, the "City of Ladies." See *The Allegory of Female Authority: Christine de Pizan's* Cité des Dames (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991). See also Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 22.

One figure not falling into any of the groups described by Quilligan is the narrator's mother. At the very beginning of the text, upon hearing her mother calling her for supper, the narrator immediately drops the book she has just found. Quilligan suggests that by introducing such an interaction between mother and daughter, Christine tries to pose a contradictory representation of woman's role in medieval society:

> It is Christine's mother who calls her, and the interruption is for a meal; thus we have a double and profoundly resonant cultural signal of femaleness. Both the mothering and the feeding are not only culturally significant, they literalize the meaning of "authority" inherent in its etymological origins in the Latin word *augere*—to cause to grow, to increase…. In the *Cité* the mother becomes a key element of the allegory's opening "threshold text." The threshold text of this allegory posits the central problem of Christine's book as the problematic relationship between the scene of reading and the woman's traditional role as mothering and physical nurturance. (49-50)[22]

The representation and function of the narrator's own mother serve as a counterpart to the narrator: one is a housewife and the other a professional writer. While the narrator's mother becomes the symbol for "nurturing," the traditional role of female figures, the narrator upholds the role of a female writer who praises women's intelligence, constancy, and perspective. With these two different images of women, the mother and the writer, Christine embeds certain secular expectations for women in her spiritual City of Ladies and poses the distinctive differences between the expected and the achieved roles she plays in a male-dominated medieval society.[23]

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[22] Quilligan explains that a threshold text is an initiating scene whose elements become features that the rest of the text comments on it in the mode of a narrative exegesis. See *Language and Allegory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 49.

[23] Another female figure that critics comment on is the Virgin Mary, whom Christine also refers to: "man has gained

Conclusion

Critics have been tried to pinpoint the position of Christine de Pizan, regarding whether she is a "pro-feminist" writer. Christine Reno attacks Christine's intentional exclusion of women that belong to the working class, while Delany strongly refutes Reno's argument and states, "some feminists are so eager to empower women that they are willing to revise history to do so" (197).[24] Yet she too opposes seeing Christine as a "pro-feminist" writer, and also attacks Christine as being prudent and conservative. Forhan, on the other hand, holds a different view: "In part, this role for high-born women is a natural consequence of Christine's gender theory complementarity. Women are predisposed to be peacemakers because of their natural qualities of prudence and circumspection" (62). Forhan explains that such endorsement of prudence is actually opposite to the essentialism that readers always associate with the liberal feminism of the 1970s, yet it is "more consistent with European and social democratic views that indeed developed out of the corporate inheritance of Europe" (62).

It seems that none of the critics of Christine de Pizan achieves a decisive conclusion on this score. In some of her writings, she is doubtlessly a great spokesperson for women; yet some of her political writings lean in the other direction. Maybe for her the issue was not gender, but

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far more through Mary than he ever lost through Eve" (*BCL*, 23). Brown-Grant lists several parallels between Christine and the Virgin Mary as a central figure in a spiritual city: "First, both Mary in St Luke's account of the Annunciation and Christine in the *Cité* are presented as intimidated by the sudden appearance of the bearers of the prophecies, which will concern them…. Secondly, both are then reassured by being told that they are privileged to be entrusted with the task that awaits them…. Thirdly, both Mary and Christine are informed that the product of their missions will be immortal." See *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defense of Women: Reading Beyond Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1999), p. 146.

[24] Brown-Grant introduces Christine M. Reno as one who rediscovered "a hitherto unknown authorial preface, which provides an allegorical gloss on the first part of *L'Avisio Christine* which will form the basis of a new critical edition." See Reno's "Christine de Pizan: 'At Best a Contradictory Figure'?" in *Politics, Gender, and Genre: The Political Thought of Christine de Pizan* (Boulder: Westview, 1992), p. 96.

more of a personal matter? In the case of *City of Ladies*, the virtues that Christine tries to advocate concern women's education, constancy, and the power of speech. Dido, Medea, Lucretia, and Thisbe represent those virtues. Together with the counterpart offered by her mother Christine established all kinds of moral models with which she hoped to lead readers. Having attacked the *Rose* for its bad influence on people, Christine perhaps felt obligated to stress the utility of literature through this project. Helen Solterer relates the importance of "the quarrel of the *Rose*" launched by Christine to the role of poetry in European vernacular culture:

> We come here to the core of the *Querelle*: the confrontation of set positions that pits the humanists' sacrosanct poetic form against Christine's notion of a socially profitable language…. In a fashion virtually unprecedented in European vernacular culture, it explores the idea that an authoritative poetic discourse can be rendered answerable to its publics; specifically, that the authoritative discourse on women can be taken to task. Critical attention long has been riveted on the *Querelle* as either an expression of medieval culture's characteristic misogyny or an emancipatory credo for poetry. What has gone largely unremarked is the confrontation between the humanistic notion of a "supreme fiction" and Christine's Roman notion of its public accountability. (161-62)[25]

Solterer makes a refutable point here. Perhaps it is not the matter of misogyny that should get all the attention here. What is at stake rather is Christine's hope for her works to be put into practical use based on her belief in moral responsibility of poetic practice for the public good.

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[25] Helen Solterer writes a chapter dedicated to Christine's role when she was launching the debate about the *Rose*: "Christine's way: The Querelle du *Roman de la Rose* and the Ethics of a Political Response." By scrutinizing carefully all the details in the quarrel of the *Rose*, from both sides, Christine and the defenders of the *Rose*, Solterer argues that it is not the gender issue that Christine is trying to highlight in her argument. It is her own authorship and role as a female writer that is so rare in her time. See *The Master and Minerva: Disputing Women in French Medieval Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

In conclusion, the focus here has been more on Christine de Pizan as a writer than on whom she writes for or what she writes about. While the virtuous women in discussion here mostly belong in the "gray area" in Delany's terms, Christine's role as a writer who tries to make literature practical in utilitarian sense is certainly not clouded by her indetermination in regards to gender issues (especially since such a perspective is an *ahistorical* one). Reading Christine's stories of famous women as various representations of her identity as a writer is an approach that is neither gender-bound nor anachronistic. To set the question of gender aside, Christine's self-awareness as a writer and her urge to establish her own authorship is manifest in her *City of Ladies*. Margaret Brabant and Michael Brint together come to a rather unbiased conclusion of the way Christine identifies herself in the course of writing:

> As woman, as other, Christine understands the suffocating effects produced by a discourse of domination…. In framing her discourse, Christine does not defile men in order to deconstruct their myth of female barbarity. Although she rejects the discursive practice that denies women the opportunity to speak and define themselves, she refuses to accept the one-dimensional portrait of humankind…. Her women enjoy the attributes typically granted to men only: They are intelligent and innovative as well as compassionate and faithful. In this way, Christine is determined to display the complexity of human experience without reducing it to a set of simplistic polarities. (218)[26]

By rewriting the stories of classical women in the context of virtue and morality, Christine reaches a different level of individuality from that of the other two male authors have considered.

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[26] Margaret Brabant and Michael Brint, "Identity and Differnce in Christine's de Pizan's *Cité des Dames*." See *Politics, Gender, and Genre: The Political Thought of Christine de Pizan* (Boulder: Westview, 1992), p. 207-22.

Christine's writing in these stories of women is about universal virtue, not about the discrepancy between men and women. Such unity between the two genders was a central theme in Christine's career since "the quarrel of the *Rose*."

In Christine, the representation of women ceases to be mere metaphors. The images, models, and characters, regardless of their definitions, together become the unified representation of the writer. As a female writer, Christine presents the possibility that mankind as a whole can actually obtain individuality regardless of gender.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

My interpretation of the portrayals of women as metaphors of Boccaccio's concept of history in *Famous Women* came into the picture rather late because I was not very familiar with his works and I simply had nothing smart to say. When I learned about the fact that Boccaccio actually wrote *Famous Women* almost a decade after he finished the *Decameron*, I was so surprised that I started to consider why he would make such a move. That led to my interpretation of *Famous Women*: all these portrayals of women are metaphors of history as it takes a downward trajectory when it comes to people, to morality, and to women. The interpretation is significant not in terms of reading these stories of women as metaphors, but in terms of reading stories of women beyond the subject of women. These portrayals of women, these metaphors of Boccaccio's concept of history, help define Boccaccio as a writer. He is more than a supporter and a follower of Petrarch's humanism. He is a writer with his own individuality.

Among these three writers, I spent more time on Chaucer than on the other two. I wrote my master's thesis on *Troilus and Criseyde*, in which I argued that Criseyde is an independent woman, an individual with free will and good judgment. All the choices Criseyde ever makes, including leaving Troilus, are based on her free will and good sense of judgment. Looking back at the thesis now, it seemed a bit naïve and too optimistic. Compared to *Troilus and Criseyde*,

The Legend of Good Women is not as long or tedious, yet the former shares the similar fate with the latter: they are oftentimes found not as interesting or inspiring as *The Canterbury Tales*. I had dealt with the misogynistic tradition and the effect of feministic studies on medieval literature in working on *Troilus and Criseyde*, so I tried very hard not to go down that road again when I wrote on *The Legend of Good Women*. Unfortunately, everywhere I turned the issue of "the woman question" was always there, waiting to be addressed. I certainly wish that I have opened a new path with my reading of these good women in *The Legend* as metaphors of the relationship between authorship and readership. The shift of focus from the subject of women to the identity of the writer in Chaucer's time hopefully takes the reader and the critic off the subject of feminism, however briefly.

It is likely to sound presumptuous if I say I sometimes think critics have overstated the importance of Christine de Pizan. Perhaps that is because I am, more than often, under the impression that Christine receives attention because of her being a woman, instead of being a writer. Of course it would be pointless to deny the fact that Christine is a woman. However, I had the urge to try and see if we take the fact that "Christine is a woman" out of the equation when approaching her works. *The Book of the City of Ladies* is interesting but also contradictory in this sense. Christine established her reputation as a writer with this collection of stories of women. Surely, Christine wanted to emphasize her identity as a writer and establish her name as a professional. Given the success of *City of Ladies*, it seems that Christine could only succeed in establishing her authorship through having written about women. The realization of Christine's

position as a professional writer and her anxiety in claiming her own reputation led me in the direction of reading these portrayals of women in *City of Ladies* as various representations of her as a writer. The subject of women, in the case of Christine, no longer serves as a metaphor, but as a *representation*. Although even at this point, I still feel resistant to say that Christine is a pro-feminist writer, I will not deny the importance of Christine and her works in terms of "the woman question."

The key to my interpretations of these three medieval texts is my attempt to understand these writers' intentions in writing their texts on women at particular points in their respective literary careers. Why did Boccaccio write *Famous Women* after the *Decameron*? Why did Chaucer decide to write a not very interesting text, *The Legend of Good Women*, after an already not interesting work, *Troilus and Criseyde*, especially with the success and popularity of his *The Canterbury Tales*? Christine's decision to write *The Book of the City of Ladies* is easy to explain and understand because the book was written and published not long after her debates regarding *The Romance of the Rose*. The interest in these writers' intentions of writing stories of good women turned my focus onto these medieval writers' sense of identity and individuality.

With the development of the concept of the individual, people's focus changed from being primarily about God to their personal relationships in society as a whole and with other people individually. The sense of individuality brings self-awareness to people. That sense of self-awareness steers my focus on these three medieval writers into another direction: no matter how famous, prestigious, or well-established these writers are, they are still trying to define who they

are with their writing. “Who am I?” seems to be a question that everyone always has in mind, regardless of time, place, or gender. Almost a decade ago, I asked the question on Criseyde’s behalf, trying to make the point by asserting that “I am an independent individual” for her. This idea of the individual has stayed with me ever since. Everyone is an individual first before he or she is a man or a woman. These writers, in my opinion, before speaking for any kind of social group, write and speak on their own behalf. After all, *self* is the center of the development of the individual. Everything has to start from the *self* before it goes to anywhere else.

Unfortunately, when the majority of critics on medieval literature focus on “the subject of women,” the individuality of these writers no longer bears any significance, except perhaps with Christine. I might be sad if I were Boccaccio or Chaucer, because no one sees “who I am” in my stories because all they can see is the subject of women. This is the major reason why my discussion on these three medieval texts says little on the subject of women. The subject of women, in my opinion, is simply the means by which these writers show their individuality as writers in the Middle Ages. The subject should by no means precede in priority these writers’ attempt to search for their identity and individuality.

That is probably how I ended up with this kind of interpretation, trying to see beyond the subject of women. I have always been convinced that there must be more to see beyond the subject of women and that is an interpretation that is not primarily bound to “the woman question” in medieval literature. The infinite possibilities of interpretation are what I like about medieval literature. A reader can always make a connection concerning current issues or through

approaches that are quite modern with a story from medieval times. In the case of reading these three texts, that connection is the idea of the individual and the definition of one's identity. That focus on the individual has not changed since I wrote my MA thesis on Criseyde. This reading, in light of the idea of the individual has held my interest in medieval literature all along. However, during the course of time I have spent time with medieval literature, I have sensed that people's reception of, as well as enthusiasm for, medieval literature has greatly diminished if not totally vanished.

From my point of view, medieval literature is facing a dilemma: on the one hand, students and critics seem to be losing their interest in reading and analyzing these stories; yet on the other, they quite enjoy reading "modern medieval literature" (as I deliberately call it) that tells stories in an imaginary medieval world. "Modern medieval literature" such as *Game of Thrones* and *The Lord of the Rings* have constituted a new genre, leaving the original medieval literature unwanted and unread. The massive attention that "modern medieval literature" receives from readers and viewers drew my attention to the phenomenon: From *The Lord of the Rings* to the *Game of Thrones*, stories in a medieval context never stop fascinating readers and the viewers of both TV shows and movies.

Now that HBO has announced that the final season of *Game of Thrones* would be aired in 2019, America is undergoing a lot of turmoil. Once a safe haven for immigrants and refugees it has now become a battlefield of identities, politics, and ethnicities. Without a long history on which to look back, Americans tend to take the medieval past as their own, expressing their

nostalgic feelings. Furthermore, the clear division between the South and the North, the political scheming between fiefdoms, and the constant threat from the White Walkers represent the current conflicts in modern American society. White supremacists see the Middle Ages as theirs, justifying the right to bear firearms and to exclude so-called aliens. Politicians are busy making changes that only bring new crises. The rest are facing a divided country, trying to decide if any of the houses, or fiefdoms, represent the true identity of their beloved nation. With the anticipation for the show's finale starting to brew, the anxiety and uncertainty for America's status is also unfolding. These are all the reasons why a TV show like *Game of Thrones*, set in an imaginary medieval world, has been such a hit for the past seven years.

I think the phenomenal success of *Game of Thrones* reveals that Americans are searching for the definition of their identity, asking what does it mean to be an American? On this basis, is it not true that Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women* and *Game of Thrones* actually share a lot in common? Whether it is Chaucer, a medieval poet from the fourteenth century, or *everyone* who loves watching *Game of Thrones* from twenty-first century America, the search for one's identity and individuality is always present. This fact and the connection between medieval texts and modern ones hopefully can draw people's attention back to the texts, the writers, and most importantly, the idea of *self*.

The belief in the universal value of medieval literature energizes my persistence in writing a text-based dissertation. My approach here might be old-fashioned and outdated, but my intention is certainly not. By writing such a dissertation, I hope to keep these medieval texts from being

forgotten. The fact that both *Game of Thrones* and these medieval texts on women have something in common, the idea of the individual, should render medieval literature worthy of people's attention and even of their enthusiasm. The universal theme of the idea of the individual, in both actual medieval literature and modern medieval literature, should also enhance my interpretation of these medieval texts. In conclusion, the idea of the individual not only comes to the rescue of these three medieval texts and these three medieval writers in regards to misogynistic traditions as well as feminist studies, but also comes to rescue medieval literature as a whole from people's boredom and avoidance. Beyond the subject of women, there is the idea of the individual waiting to be considered and embraced.

Bibliography

Abbreviations of the Primary Texts

Famous Women – FW

The Legend of Good Women --- the Legend or *LGW*

The Book of the City of Ladies --- City of Ladies or *BCL*

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