

## On the Individuality of Women in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women: the Case of Dido*

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1. Chaucer deals with nine women in his *Legend of Good Women* (=LGW) — Cleopatra, Thisbe, Dido, Medea,<sup>1</sup> Lucretia, Ariadne, Philomela, Phyllis, and Hypermnestra —, all of whom are legendary figures, except the first one. He wrote in the prologue to the LGW<sup>2</sup> that his motive for composing the story lies in the admonishment by the God of Love, Cupid, who denounced the poet thus:

Hast thou nat mad in Englysh ek the bok  
How that Crisseyde Troylus forsok,  
In shewynge how that wemen han don mis?      LGW(G) ll.264-5

Chaucer was in a predicament as to how to answer the God of Love. In order to alleviate the anguish Chaucer incurred, Queen Alceste who served him offered the following terms of compensation to him. She suggested he would write a poem in defense of women.

I, youre Alceste, whilom quene of Trace,  
I axe yow (=Cupid) this man, ryght of youre grace,  
That ye hym nevere hurte in al his lyve;  
And he shal swere to yow, and that as blyve,

... he shal maken, as ye wol devyse,  
Of women trewe in lovyng al here lyve,  
... of mayden or of wyve LGW(G) ll.421-9

As the motive of the story is thus clear, we expect the poem to be a definitive rendition of each of the women. The way Chaucer describes each woman is, however, not particularly colourful or rich in personality. As Alcuin Blamires, a critic of medieval English literature, writes that the *LGW* is the single Chaucer text which looks most like a formal case for woman,<sup>3</sup> it is written with an attitude which is too rigidly defensive of women and nothing more. F.N. Robinson, a compiler of Chaucer's works, states further that "the piece of work is less famous than the *Canterbury Tales* or *Troilus and Criseyde*. ... Moreover it is sometimes regarded as a failure."<sup>4</sup> He attributes its unpopularity to its incompleteness, because it is abridged at the end of the ninth story, "the Tale of Hypermnestra."

Robinson goes on to say: Then comes the next reason for the unpopularity of the *LGW*, that it was written as a recantation to the *Troilus and Criseyde*.<sup>5</sup> Recantation is a common measure employed by a poet to secure permission from God when the writer is too lewd or secular in his writings or poems. Therefore, that part of the poem is usually rather stereotypical and bland.

The women in *LGW* are all described to have been faithful in love, while each of the men who had been involved with these women all forsook them through deception or desertion.<sup>6</sup> The place and time in which they lived varied, but the motif varied little. It may be partly due to the fact that the tales of Dido, Hypsipyle and Medea, Ariadne, Phyllis and Hypermnestra derive their sources from Ovid's *Heroid*,<sup>7</sup> but there

may be other explanations for it if we look more closely at the story. Chaucer transliterated the original in his own way, as it was the usual practice of a medieval poet, and that may have been his cause for being so rigid.

2. Dido, the reputed founder and queen of Carthage, is a representative of the forsaken woman. She is a legendary figure in Greek mythology, who fled to Carthage. She obtained a piece of land from a local chieftain Iarbas using her wit, of which Chaucer wrote little. She succored Aeneas, according to Virgil, whose version Chaucer followed in his *LGW*, and married him. Later, he left for Rome abandoning her with her sister Anna. The reason for his change of heart is told by Chaucer as follows.

This Eneas, that hath so depe yswore,  
Is wery of his craft withinne a throwe;  
The hote earnest is al overblowe. *LGW* ll.1285-7

He further describes the scene in which Aeneas explains his need to leave for Italy.

“Certes,” quod he, “this nyght my faderes gost  
Hath in my slep so sore me tormented,  
And ek Mercurye his message hath presented,  
That nedes to the conquest of Ytalye  
My destine is sone for to sayle;...” *LGW* ll. 1294-1299

Aeneas is one of the heroes in the tale of Troy and is destined to

become the founder of Rome, so his pretext for his departure, mentioning only of his dream, sounds too conventional.

Hearing his apology for leaving, Dido visited shrines and offered sacrifice, praying and pining. She conjured him and asked him to let her go with him even as a mere servant, disheveling her hair, crying bitterly.

Chaucer ends this tragedy with the epistle which Dido is said to have written. Before going into her letter, it might be prudent to view Dido in another poem of Chaucer's, the *House of Fame*.

3. *The House of Fame* was written much earlier than *LGW* and it is the only poem in which Chaucer writes extensively about Dido. In the *Book of Duchess*, which was his first rhymed narrative in the style of courtly love, he stated briefly about her thus:

... Another rage  
Had Dydo, the quene eke of Cartage,  
That slough hirself, for Eneas  
Was fals;

*BD* ll. 731-4

Here he refers to the case in order to admonish the knight for his attempt to commit suicide after the death of his beloved wife. It was the knight, supposedly John of Gaunt, who lamented the loss, not the lady, because Chaucer did not necessarily write this passage in defense of women in this case. It was in the *House of Fame* that he wrote about the sad experience of Dido, which was taken up again in *LGW*. He spends 143 lines (ll. 239-382) on the matter of Aeneas and Dido and most of them were about Dido's lament.

The scene of his departure and her desperate devastation was described much more vividly and minutely here than in *LGW*. For instance, Dido's denouncement on Aeneas is succinct, as she says:

“Allas!” quod she, “what me ys woo!  
Allas! is every man thus trewe,  
That every yer wolde have a newe,  
Yf hit so longe tyme dure,  
Or elles three, peraventure?  
As thus; of oon he wolde have fame  
In magnyfyinge of hys name;  
Another for frendshippe, seyth he;  
And yet ther shal the thridde be  
That shal be take for delyt,  
Loo, or for synguler profit.”

*HF* ll. 300-10

Her complaints include her assertion that women are: “For certeyn, for the more part, / Thus we be served everychone.” (*LGW* ll. 336-7) Therefore, she warns to women that: “How sore that ye men konne groone, / Anoon as we have yow received, / Certaynly we ben deceyvvd! / For, though your love laste a seson, / Wayte upon the conclusyon, / And eke how that ye determynen, / And for the more part diffyren. (*LGW* ll. 338-44).

This discussion is more logical, better constructed and more convincing than the one uttered by her in *LGW* as we saw on page 54 of this paper. The letter she wrote cited at the end of “the Tale of Dido” in *LGW* is only a maudline imploration, including her worry about losing her good reputation. It reads as follows:

“Ryght so,” quod she, “as that the white swan  
 Ayens his deth begynnyth for to synge,  
 Right so to yow make I my compleynynge.  
 Not that I trowe to geten yow ageyn,  
 For wel I wot that it is al in veyn,  
 Syn that the goddes been contraire to me.  
 But syn my name is lost thourgh yow, ...  
 I may wel lese on yow a word or letter,  
 Al be it that I shal ben nevere the better;  
 For thilke wynd that blew youre ship away,  
 The same wynd hath blowe away youre fey.” *LGW* ll.1355-65

5. As we saw in Dido's letter above, the women in *LGW* often write letters of reproach after they are abandoned. This is a rather ineffective form of protestation, so to speak, especially when passion on the part of the man is gone or the woman's justification is too conspicuous.

Hypsipyle whom Jason loved and left with two children in Lemnos on the way to Colchis, wrote a letter of reproach for his infidelity in “the Tale of Hypsipyle and Medea” in *LGW*. She prayed for his return, as it would be expected, and poignantly said that “they (her two children) ben lyk of alle thyng, ywis, / To Jason, save they coude nat begile.” (*LGW* ll. 1569-79)

After succeeding in obtaining the golden fleece in Colchis wiith the help of Medea, he betrayed her for his third wife, the daughter of king Creon.

Medea wrote to him interrogatorily thus:

“Whi lykede me thy yelwe her to se  
 More than the boundes of my honeste?

Why lykede me thy youthe and thy fayrnesse,  
And of thy tonge, the infynyt graciousnesse?  
O, haddest thou in thy conquest ded ybe,  
Ful mikel untrouthe hadde ther deyde with the!" *LGW* ll. 1672-7

Chaucer abridges the letter because he says that it was too long. In addition to being tardy, the letter shows that her primary complaint concerns her pride and honour. She only regretted her lack of good judgment in assessing his personality.

Another lady in *LGW* who wrote a letter of deploration is Cleopatra. Her case, however, is not exactly a letter of complaint but a will. She is said to have written to Anthony, who had killed himself just before she did, that she would kill herself as proof of wifely faithfulness, as she wrote:

And in myself this covenannt made I tho,  
That ryght swich as ye felten, wel or wo,  
As fer forth as it in my power lay,  
Unreprovable unto my wyfhod ay,  
The same wolde I fele, lyf or deth, —  
And thilke covenant, whil me hasteth breth, *LGW* ll.698-94

Her pride was in showing men there "Was nevere unto hire love a trewer quene" (*LGW* l. 694).

Although Chaucer attributes the monotonousness of the letter to Ovid's *Heroid* and his epistles, he could have added a tint of individuality as we saw in Dido's complaint in *the House of Fame*. Therefore, we can at the very least say that he deliberately or unconsciously avoided his

own interpretation of each woman's feeling in *LGW*, and this omission leads us to regard the piece as less than successful. Its unpopularity is not that it was written as a recantation for the poem he had written earlier, for instance, *Troilus and Criseyde*, or that the last story ("the Tale of Hypermnestra") was left unfinished. It would seem some lack of enthusiasm on the part of the poet to individualize each heroine that makes the poem rather insipid.

#### Notes:

- 1 There are two heroines in "the Tale of Hypsipyle and Medea," as the title shows, who helped Jason win the golden fleece of a ram.
- 2 The text is: F.N. Robinson, *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, Oxford University Press, 1986. As for the Prologue, the G version of *LGW* is cited in this paper.
- 3 Blamires, Alcuin, *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997, p.212.
- 4 Robinson, p.62.
- 5 Robinson, p.62.
- 6 In case of Thisbe, however, Pyramus did not betray her but killed himself as a result of misunderstanding about the situation.
- 7 Blamires, p. 215, note 54.