

THE ATTACK OF THE *COMPILATOR*: CHAUCER'S CHALLENGING OF
AUCTORES AND ANTIFEMINISM IN *THE LEGEND OF GOOD WOMEN*

by

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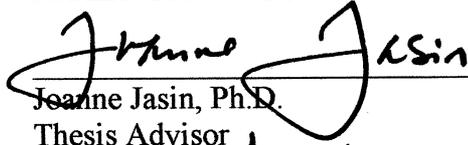
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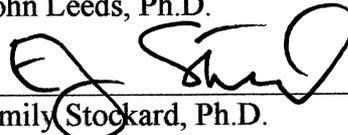
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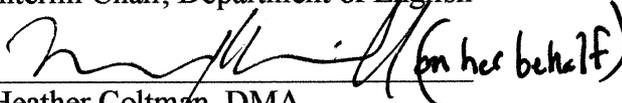
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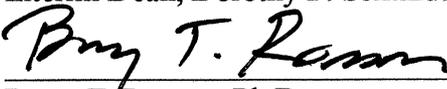

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ABSTRACT

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Geoffrey Chaucer's narrator persona in *The Legend of Good Women (LGW)* goes through a transformation, starting off in the Prologue to the *LGW* as a naïve *compiler* who is subordinate to his literary sources, or *auctores*, and eventually becoming an *auctor* himself by the end of the Legends. To gain an authoritative voice, Chaucer's narrator criticizes *auctoritee* as it pertains to the antifeminist tradition and its misrepresentation of women as inherently wicked, in the process using certain rhetorical devices and other literary strategies to assert control over his sources for the Legends, as well as over the text as a whole. Of particular importance in this process is the narrator's line "[a]nd trusteth, as in love, no man but me" (2561) occurring near the end of "The Legend of Phyllis," the penultimate legend in the *LGW*. At this point in the text, the narrator persona steps completely outside of the role of *compiler* and presents himself as *auctor* who can be trusted by his female readers to tell their stories fairly and sympathetically, in ways that subtly confront antifeminist texts and perceptions.

DEDICATION

for Mikaela Espirito Santo von Kursell

*Laugh until we think we'll die,
Barefoot on a summer night,
Never could be sweeter than with you*

– *Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeros*

*I am at the moment writing a lengthy indictment against our century.
When my brain begins to reel from my literary labors, I make an
occasional cheese dip.*

– *John Kennedy Toole, A Confederacy of Dunces*

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INTRODUCTION

The *Legend of Good Women* (*LGW*) lies bookended between *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales* in Geoffrey Chaucer's *oeuvre*. These three works—which are Chaucer's last—diverge in content, form and style. Whereas the *Troilus* has been called Chaucer's masterpiece and *The Canterbury Tales* his *magnum opus*, the *LGW* may warrant the designation of being the most polarizing of the poet's work. The *LGW* as a whole has spent long periods of time in theoretical darkness and has been criticized for its possible lack of development and unfinished nature, as well as an often satirical or ironic tone, which have proven to be complications for critics. While the *LGW* may never sit alongside the *Troilus* or *The Canterbury Tales* in the canon, it has garnered modest attention from gender and women's studies critics, but even these scholars are divided over Chaucer's treatment of the women in the Legends. For instance, Catherine S. Cox reads the *LGW* as a text creating supportive circumstances for antifeminism: “[T]he *Legend* narrator's retelling . . . reinforces the cultural codes that made possible, indeed inevitable, the original victimization” of the women in the *LGW* (54), and Harold Goddard sees the *LGW* as “a most unmerciful satire upon women” (101). On the other hand, Lisa J. Kiser believes that Chaucer has recognized women's suffering, but it is not he who has victimized them (122); similarly, Daniel M. Murtaugh says that Chaucer views women as men's “moral equals” (492). While opinions on Chaucer's treatment of

women may vary, they all acknowledge his awareness of the negative treatment of women in literature.

Related to this issue of interpretation is Chaucer's role in—and relationship with—authority. The relationship between *auctor* and *compiler* is at the heart of the *LGW*, and examining it more closely can illuminate questions about authority and tone. Alistair Minnis's seminal work *Medieval Theory of Authorship* helps define these terms: an *auctor* writes “*de suo*” (Minnis, *Medieval Theory* 95) and is “someone who was at once a writer and an authority, someone not merely to be read but also to be respected and believed”; furthermore, *auctores* possess a certain degree of “veracity and sagacity” (*Medieval Theory* 10). The *compiler*, on the other hand, “adds together or arranges the statements of other men, adding no opinion of his own (*addendo, sed non de suo*)” (*Medieval Theory*, Minnis 94). A traditional understanding of these roles might lead one to believe that they exist in a rigid and inflexible hierarchy, one which is analogous to the patriarchal structure in the Middle Ages: both the *compiler* and the woman have very stringent guidelines and rules that they must follow, and both reside on the submissive level of a hierarchical relationship. To be either a good *compiler* or a good woman, one must be subservient and faithful to one's *auctor*, or man, as the case may be. However, the way in which Chaucer subtly manipulates these roles in the *LGW* should be taken into consideration when determining what political statement he is making about their corollaries. Nowhere is this manipulation made more evident than in “The Legend of Phyllis,” in which the *compiler* steps outside of his presumed role and boldly impels women to follow his advice and his retelling of women's stories: “And trusteth, as in

love, no man but me” (2561). Understanding the implications of this enigmatic line, and others like it, is essential for a full understanding of the *LGW*.

In the text as a whole, Chaucer challenges the ideals of antifeminism by conflating the roles of *compiler* and *auctor*. On the surface, the narrator—hereafter named Geoffrey—actively assumes the passive roles of translator and *compiler*, which he uses to deflect the God of Love’s anger over his writing *Troilus and Criseyde* and thus to evade the responsibility of authorial intent, instead deferring to that of his *auctores*. While it is standard behavior for medieval *compilatores* to hide behind their “protective ‘schelde’” (Minnis, *Medieval Theory* 193), a closer examination of the *LGW* shows that Geoffrey does not use the shield of the *compiler* as a defense mechanism to hide behind, but instead as a weapon to challenge the relationship between *auctor* and *compiler*, as Geoffrey is able to control and manipulate a text for his (and Chaucer’s) own authorial purposes. Central to this shift in power is the reprioritization of personal experience (*preve*) above textual authority (*auctorite*). In this scenario, the *auctor*’s role is diminished, and the *compiler*’s role is elevated. Geoffrey’s declaration, “And trusteth, as in love, no man but me” (2561), marks the point where the roles of *compiler* and *auctor* are conflated, with the potential for the *compiler* to gain more authority than the *auctor*, and by extension, the potential for the women in historical narratives and mythologies to gain more authority than previous allotted them.

Aside from changing the dynamic between *auctor* and *compiler*, Chaucer actively manipulates character relationships in the text. The gender roles that are characteristic of the antifeminist tradition are at times reversed—or at the very least toyed with—in the *LGW*, as many of the male characters share traits that are often associated

with women in the antifeminist tradition. For instance, many men are false through their duplicity and manipulation, which are typically traits of wicked women in misogynistic texts; an example is Aeneas, who appears vulnerable and weak in order to elicit pity when abandoning Dido. However, the manipulation of these gender roles is subtle; on the surface, the subservient nature of the *compiler* in relation to his *auctor* mirrors the subservient nature of a woman to the man she loves in the antifeminist tradition. Both the woman and the *compiler* are to remain faithful to their more authoritative counterpart, and to a certain extent this faithfulness occurs in the *LGW*. Geoffrey constantly gives his *auctores* credit and refers readers to his source material, while all of the women consistently remain faithful in love, all the way to the extreme qualifications set up by St. Jerome and echoed by the God of Love: the women in the *LGW* would rather remain faithful and die than live after being wronged by a false lover. Similarly, Geoffrey often remains faithful to his *auctores* and plays the part of *compiler* in a traditional style, but he asserts a level of dominance and then gives himself the credibility that is characteristic of that given to an *auctor*.

Literary criticism has often been focused on determining whether or not the *LGW* is an ironic satire of women or an ironic satire of the antifeminist tradition in medieval literature. However ironic or satirizing Chaucer may be in the *LGW*, he is nonetheless offering commentary on important topics. Many elements of the work have not been treated seriously – especially the proclamation at the end of the “Legend of Phyllis,” which has often been dismissed as being facetious (or even a perverted taunt directed at women). While these critical readings may in part reflect the narrator’s tone and attitude, they may miss certain rhetorical maneuvers that he makes. The ways in which Geoffrey

interacts with the authority figures the God of Love and Queen Alceste in the Prologue, how he treats his *auctores* and source materials in the Legends, and the ways in which he handles his characters—both male and female—all figure into Geoffrey's transformation from *compiler* to *auctor*.

In order to see how the tendency for misogyny in medieval literature figures into the *LGW*, this study will examine the history of antifeminist literature as it would have been relevant to Chaucer. A review of the antifeminist tradition will demonstrate Chaucer's knowledge of it and show that the *LGW* is not part of that tradition. Then, I shall examine how Geoffrey represents the topics of experience and textual knowledge in the Prologue and how he links them closely to the issue of authority. Experience, knowledge, and authority impact how Geoffrey deals with his source material as he narrates the Legends. Ultimately, the treatment of women in the *LGW* is closely linked to Geoffrey's transformation from *compiler* to *auctor*.

CHAPTER ONE

ESTABLISHING THE ANTIFEMINIST TRADITION; THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN *AUCTOR* AND *COMPILATOR*

The *Legend of Good Women* is a text that deals specifically with the antifeminist tradition in medieval literature. Chaucer deliberately places the *LGW* in relation to this tradition by virtue of its subject matter and the direct mention of such forefathers of the tradition as St. Jerome. However, the *LGW*'s place within that tradition, and Chaucer's own position regarding the portrayal of women in literature, has been debated within Chaucerian criticism. Also at the forefront of this text are Chaucer's use of the narrator persona and the *compiler* role assigned to that figure, both of which Chaucer deploys rhetorically to criticize the treatment of women in misogynistic writing. These subjects, antifeminist literature, the narrator persona, and the role of the *compiler*, offer an important frame of reference in examining Chaucer's achievement in the *LGW*.

1.1 The Antifeminist Tradition in the Middle Ages

“But please tell me why and for what reason different authors have spoken against women in their books, since I already know from you that this is wrong; tell me if Nature makes man so inclined or whether they do it out of hatred and where does this behavior come from?”¹

– Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*

Christine de Pizan finished writing *The Book of the City of Ladies* early in the fifteenth century, roughly five years after Chaucer's death. Her work in the *City of*

Ladies illustrates an awareness of the antifeminist tradition present in medieval literature and its antecedents. At times, Chaucer's—writing demonstrates a recognition of the misogyny in literature similar to that in Christine's. The first section of this chapter will offer a brief overview of the history and context of antifeminism in medieval literature and of Chaucer's stance within this tradition.

Antifeminism generally asserts the view that women are inferior by virtue of their gender and on this basis justifies their social, political, and economic inequality. In the context of the medieval literary tradition, antifeminism draws upon a biblical frame of reference as its primary basis. In her lengthy survey of antifeminism leading up to Chaucer (including a forty-six page chapter devoted solely to Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum*), Willene Pulliam alludes to the biblical roots of the tradition: "it came to be used in literature as the view that women, beginning with Eve, have brought about the downfall of man. Hence, they are perverse, malicious, and sensual and inimical to man's attainment of holiness and the pursuit of learning" (1). Contained in this statement is the idea that women are not only inferior, but threaten to make men spiritually, intellectually, and philosophically inferior as well. This fear that inferiority can be caused in men by women is central to the medieval antifeminist tradition and sustains the view of women as the unequal other.

Whereas Pulliam takes an in-depth look at the antifeminist tradition in order to make a larger argument about Chaucer, Alcuin Blamires offers a chronological survey of historical misogynistic writings in *Women Defamed and Women Defended* for the chief

purpose of creating an anthology of such texts. Like Pulliam, Blamires begins with the roots of the antifeminist tradition:

By one route it leads back into ancient Judaic law: by another route it leads back to the dawn of Greek culture, where notions were already current in Hesiod's poetry (c. 750 BC) of woman as the deceitful plague of man, responsible for bringing evil into the world. (2)

Blamires continues his discussion on the origins of antifeminism, turning his focus towards the Aristotelian view that woman is a “‘deformed’ or ‘defective’ male, one who could not reach the male standard of perfection because her menstruation signaled that her body was physiologically inferior” (2). This perspective, reflected in ancient Greek views of female physiology, carries over into medieval medical texts, as do the ancient sentiments of the woman as a “deformed” or “deficient” male, which are consistent with assertions made in medieval scientific texts.

Chaucer was more than aware of many medical authorities, from ancient to contemporary, though he first mentions them in detail after writing the *LGW*. In the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, he displays his knowledge of medical authorities through his Physician along for the pilgrimage, naming a range of figures from ancient Greece (e.g., Hippocrates and Galen), the medieval Middle East (e.g., Rhazes, Avicenna), medieval Europe (e.g., Constantine the African, associated with Salerno in Italy) and contemporary England (e.g., John of Gaddesden, Gilbertus Anglicus) (A 429-434). Galen is especially notable, as Blamires points out that in medieval Europe Galen's authority became legendary (41). Galen strongly supported Aristotle's views on the hierarchy of the sexes, and his medical texts are based largely on the belief that women are physiologically an imperfect version of men. The gap in time

between the *LGW* and the *Tales* is short enough that Chaucer may have been well aware of these medical *auctores* while writing it.

While scientific and physiological texts serve as an important basis for misogynist writing, it is only half of the equation when understanding antifeminism in the Middle Ages. The roots of misogynist texts can be traced back to the book of *Genesis*, or rather, the Church fathers' deliberate citation of certain biblical passages. Michael Masi, in his exploration of gender theory in the Middle Ages, says, "[O]ne must look to the scriptures or the speculations of the ancients for logical explanations" of why women occupied a subordinate position in society (2), meaning that scripture exerted an especially great influence on views of women, more so than medicine or science. Masi asserts that two specific passages in *Genesis* are key in shaping medieval views of women, and he confirms that the Latin versions of the Bible available during the Middle Ages would have contained both of them. Both passages are similar in meaning to parallel passages in the modern *Revised Standard Version*. In the first mention of the creation of man and woman, the language alludes to their being created together:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female he created them. (Revised Standard Version, *Genesis* 1.26-7)

In the first sentence of this passage, the pronoun "them" is ascribed to "man," which suggests that the term "man" is used to refer to collective humanity rather than a singular male (i.e., Adam). The final sentence echoes this notion by linking both males and females with the same inclusive pronoun "them," thereby erasing any clear division

between the sexes: the passage implies that both are created simultaneously in the image of God. Chapter Two of *Genesis*, however, provides a more detailed narrative of the creation of the sexes and introduces the notion of chronological order:

So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones / and flesh of my flesh; / she shall be called Woman, / because she was taken out of man'. (*Genesis* 2.21-3)

The allegory of the rib clearly establishes that the first woman was derived from man, thus suggesting that she exists at one remove from the divine and is for that reason inferior to man. Masi points out that, among medieval writers, the latter narrative was preferred and “more often followed in non Biblical medieval texts” (7), as it reinforces the ancient attitude that women are physically deformed men in the sense that they are derived from only a piece of the man’s body. It also enables the medieval attitude that women were created to be subservient to men.

In the second century, Tertullian was responsible for creating the first large body of Latin Christian writing, including *On the Wearing of Veils by Virgins*. Tertullian’s writing focused heavily on living an ascetic lifestyle, with the familiar theme of a woman’s attractiveness leading to the downfall of a man. Tertullian placed special emphasis on the physical aspects of women’s appearance, including wardrobe, hairstyle, and makeup. According to Peter Brown, Tertullian writes the “first consequential statement [...] of the belief that abstinence from sex was the most effective technique with which to achieve clarity for the soul” (78). Statements such as this one were heavily echoed by later Church fathers, such as St. Jerome. Tertullian’s writings were “avidly

absorbed by Jerome two hundred years later,” and it was through Jerome that “Tertullian’s thinking was to enter the mainstream of Christian polemic, and of medieval misogyny too” (Blamires 50). Jerome’s writing often went so far as to condemn marriage in order to increase emphasis on the virtue of virginity and celibacy. Due to the rigidity in his stance against women and marriage, Jerome came to represent the standard for misogynistic writings, especially for Chaucer.

In fact, for the God of Love in the *LGW*, Jerome, particularly his *Against Jovinian*, is the ideal source or *auctoritee* on the subject of women:

“What seith Jerome agayns Jovynyan?
How clene maydenes and how trewe wyves,
How stedefaste widewes durynge alle here lyves,
Telleth Jerome, and that nat of a fewe.” (G 281-90)

By having the God of Love reference one of the most notorious antifeminist writers—Jerome—Chaucer has placed the *LGW* firmly in relation to the antifeminist tradition, or, rather, he has placed the antifeminist tradition within the *LGW*. Chaucer would later go on to mention Jerome and the *Adversus Jovinianum* in the Wife of Bath’s Prologue, reinforcing both his familiarity with and interest in Jerome’s writing. Chaucer’s use of Jerome can also be an indicator of the prevalence of such cultural references in medieval Europe.

The large catalogue of medieval antifeminist literature existed simultaneously with the seemingly oppositional literature of courtly love. The most notable element of courtly love is, according to Robert Miller, “a new reverence for women, indeed an idolization, which has been regarded as an important civilizing influence in the painful emergence of the western world from the darkness of the first ages of Christendom”

(Miller 337). Andreas Capellanus, writing in the twelfth century, brought both of these conventions together in his *De Amore*. *De Amore* is modeled on Ovid's *The Art of Love* and the *Remedies* and is comprised of three books: the first two are Capellanus' expositions on the art of courtly love, while the third is a retraction of the first two and in fact dissuades readers against love. The first two books establish many of the conventions of courtly love, namely worshipping and idolizing the female beloved. In the third section, Capellanus resorts to casting women as evildoers that men should avoid in order to attain intellectual and moral superiority. His sweeping generalizations about "the female sex," condemning "all women" as sinners who are "disposed to every evil" (24, 107) work to undo what Books I and II accomplish in their expression of admiration for women.

In the way that Capellanus represents both of these seemingly opposing traditions in *De Amore*, the God of Love fulfills a similar, dual function in the *LGW*. In a conventional sense, the God of Love represents the law of serving women: "Under the law laid down by a powerful god named Love (Cupid), the courtly lover pledges fealty to her as *domina*, swears to become her 'man', and enters willingly into a condition of 'servitude'" (Miller 336). This newfound reverence for women and the call to worship them is a sharp contrast to misogynistic literature's warning against women as descendants (and thus replicas) of Eve. Chaucer's God of Love conjures up preconceived notions of the woman as a being to be revered, yet through his rhetoric (and evocation of Jerome) he summons the contradictory doctrine of antifeminism: that a woman is not to be revered because she will interfere with men's potential to prosper morally, philosophically, and intellectually.

Chaucer's position within the tradition of medieval antifeminist writings is a complicated one and has sharply divided modern critics. Some view Chaucer as pro-woman and sympathetic to women's suffering (Cox 54). A. J. Minnis, for example, believes that Chaucer is "ostentatiously 'favorable'" to women in the *LGW* (*Fallible Authors* 5). Others view Chaucer as a misogynist medieval author. Yet other critics, such as Blamires, view Chaucer as an intermediary between antifeminism and proto-feminist writers such as Christine de Pizan. Elaine Tuttle Hansen and Carolyn Dinshaw share similar views on Chaucer's treatment of women. Hansen argues that Chaucer did not write the *LGW* to refute the misogynistic tradition, but instead to write about false, unfaithful men by feminizing male characters (3). In her view, the feminine position is divided: on one hand, it is "vulnerable, submissive, subservient and self-sacrificing," while also being "crafty and duplicitous on the other" (3). Since Chaucer applies these traits to most of the unfaithful male figures in the *LGW*, and largely silences the female protagonists, Hansen believes that the *LGW* keeps in line with the medieval antifeminist tradition. Dinshaw agrees with Hansen in the sense that she views the treatment of women in the *LGW* as unflattering, as the female characters become caricatures (71) that are "passive [...], weak martyrs of love" (75). She goes on to say that the narrator has not liberated women, but instead has used his "masculine hands" to create a "record of his continual exercise of control over the feminine" (86).

As the preceding passages have demonstrated, critics have long been divided over Chaucer's treatment of women in the *LGW* (as well as his other works). A unanimous decision about Chaucer's status as either antifeminist or pro-feminist is unlikely, but Chaucer's awareness of the antifeminist tradition and his general knowledge of the

treatment of women in literature are undeniable. This awareness of the antifeminist tradition is coupled with strong, reasonable female characters in Chaucer's later works, among them *Alceste*, the *Wife of Bath*, and *Dame Prudence*, and these elements place Chaucer as an opponent—rather than a proponent—of the antifeminist tradition.

1.2 The *Auctor* and *Compiler* in Medieval Literature

The narrator persona was a common narrative device before and during the Middle Ages. It is a literary construct that resembles the author and, as in Chaucer's writing, often speaks in the first person. Literary personae can be easily mistaken for being the same entity as the author him- or herself, but they are fictional creations used to perform a rhetorical or literary function. This device was in existence for hundreds of years before Chaucer began using it, and it plays an important role in the *auctor* and *compiler* relationship in the *LGW*. In *The Consolation of Philosophy* (circa 524), Boethius uses a narrator persona resembling himself to have a conversation with Lady Philosophy. In the approximately eight hundred years after it was written, the *Consolation of Philosophy* became one of the best known works and Boethius one of the most influential *auctores* of the Middle Ages. Boethius influenced Dante, Jean de Meun, Boccaccio, and Petrarch, all of whom used the narrator persona in their writing. Chaucer was familiar with their work (he may even have met Petrarch and Boccaccio), and wrote within the same narrator-persona tradition.

Chaucer makes extensive use of this device throughout his body of work. Rhetorically, it represents a “convenient literary trope, a ‘false face’ [...] that would allow for the human discussion of certain cultural and religious topics, but that nonetheless was viewed as inherently fictional and unreal” (Gust 5). In this sense, the

compiler is similar to the narrator persona in that they are both poetic personas for Chaucer (and other medieval writers as well) and allow for the treatment of various topics, but with a built-in deflective mechanism: the mask of the persona parallels, in a certain sense, the shield of the *compiler*. Whether it is the dreamer in a dream vision or the pilgrim going along for a pilgrimage, the presence of the narrator persona can complicate the interpretation of a poem because at times it can be difficult to separate narrator from poet. This complication can present obstacles in recognizing Chaucer's accomplishments, which may possibly explain the polarizing viewpoints on Chaucer's position within the antifeminist tradition, as discussed in the previous section. The narrator persona must be recognized as a rhetorical device employed by Chaucer in order to accomplish specific tasks, and not as the embodiment of Chaucer himself in textual form. Chaucer manipulates this persona as he sees fit, and at times that may involve applying antifeminist sentiments to the narrator; however, if the persona's voice is read as being Chaucer's, then whatever Chaucer is trying to accomplish with the fictional persona may be lost. The potential for the narrator and poet to be confused as one and the same is largely due to the plausibility of the narrator's voice. Geoffrey Gust employs the term "autofiction" to clarify the distinction: it "emphasizes that any literary self-presentation is a creative construction, a narrative doubling in which the fictional surrogate need not look, think, or feel like the author him/herself" (41). Narrative doubling allows Chaucer to create a narrator that bears his name and his position as a poet (and translator or *compiler*), but Chaucer is then able to apply any number of attributes to the narrator that he does not personally possess, just as with the creation of any of his other literary figures. Chaucer the poet and his narrator persona are separate

entities and should be treated as such in interpreting the *LGW*. Distinct labels can help maintain that separation: the name “Geoffrey” will hereafter be used to represent the narrator persona in the *LGW*, while the name Chaucer will be reserved for any references to the actual author. There is, however, one brief section in the Prologue where the real Chaucer is mentioned by name: in that section, when the God of Love and Alceste discuss the past literary works of Chaucer, they are in fact discussing actual works previously written by the actual poet. In other instances, however, references involving present or future actions apply solely to the fictional Geoffrey, the narrator persona.

The mimetic properties that Chaucer ascribes to Geoffrey include some details of his own life. For example, in the Prologue, the narrator Geoffrey mentions having written previously about both *Criseyde* and the *Romaunt of the Rose* (F 469-70). Ascribing these two works written by the real Chaucer to his fictional self help authenticate the narrator and blur the line between author and persona. Elsewhere, though, Chaucer positions Geoffrey as a lowly, dim-witted *compiler* with no *auctoritee* of his own. If a major goal in the text is to question the misogynistic treatment of women in medieval literature, then exploiting the “compiler’s stock disavowal of responsibility” (Minnis, *Medieval Theory* 199) makes the questioning of a long-standing literary tradition more palatable.

In assigning Geoffrey the prosaic duties of a *compiler*, Chaucer removes any poetic creativity and originality from him, charging him merely with bringing the wisdom of others, of established *auctores*, into the English language. Minnis believes that Chaucer was not interested in portraying himself (i.e., via his narrator persona) as an *auctor*, which is why Geoffrey actively assumes the role of *compiler*. In his view, “Chaucer was fond of assuming self-deprecating literary roles, and the role of *compiler*

would have been particularly congenial to him” (Minnis, *Medieval Theory* 209).

Chaucer’s consistency in casting his narrator persona as a *compiler* certainly supports Minnis’ claims that the figure of the *compiler* was suited to Chaucer’s writing. Minnis ends his discussion of Chaucer as a *compiler* by saying that Chaucer was indeed content being “an author who hid behind the ‘shield and defense’ of the compiler”; unlike Gower, he never “tried to present himself as an author” (Minnis, *Medieval Theory* 210).

In the *LGW*, Chaucer relegates Geoffrey to the role of defensive *compiler*. Alceste assigns Geoffrey a writing project in the form of a compilation. She instructs him to spend his time ““ [...] making of a glorious Legende,” consisting “of gode wommen, maidenen and wyves”” (F 483-4). The God of Love then instructs Geoffrey to go into his old books and “reherce” (F 574)—meaning “to repeat” (Tolkien, *Middle English Vocabulary*)—the writings of *auctores* on women. The God of Love reinforces Geoffrey’s position as a *compiler* by instructing him to repeat the content of his sources. The God of Love even tells Geoffrey to “[s]ey shortly” his tales and to not take too long (F 577). By giving Geoffrey a particular sort of writing assignment, Chaucer has firmly placed his narrator persona in the role of *compiler*; the God of Love has essentially relieved Geoffrey of any *auctoritee* and creativity as a poet. In this situation, he must simply do as he is told and compile the writing of others. This authorial restriction becomes vital to what happens within the Legends themselves, as Geoffrey consistently references his writing assignment and his role of *compiler*, all the while choosing what information to include or exclude from each Legend (though consistently under the guise of the God of Love’s instructions to be brief), as when Geoffrey in effect says, “It is too lengthy to include here.” Examining the material that Geoffrey does

choose to present in the Legends is essential to understanding what Chaucer is attempting to do in the *LGW*. This material, in conjunction with the line from the “Legend of Phyllis”—“trusteth, as in love, no man but me” (2561)—will show that Chaucer has feminized the role of *compiler*, using femininity as a negative attribute and thus reflecting the antifeminist tradition.

The line above from the “Legend of Phyllis” demonstrates the only instance in the *LGW* in which Geoffrey steps out from behind the position of *compiler* and places himself among the ranks of *auctor* and/or poet. This line is essential to an understanding of the *LGW* as a whole, and can only receive serious consideration if read as a serious declaration, which has not been the case. For instance, in his book *Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women*, Robert Worth Frank declares that scholars had neglected the *LGW* largely due to its inconsistency in tone. While Frank treats most of the *LGW* as a serious work, he flippantly dismisses the line “trusteth, as in love, no man but me” as facetious, spending but a sentence on it (155). Florence Percival also gives it only brief attention, calling it an “artful and slightly ribald invitation” for women “to submit themselves to the poet’s seductions” (288). Whereas for Frank this line is a harmless joke and for Percival a “game of courtly flirtation” with sexual connotations (289), it will be treated here as evidence of Chaucer’s stepping out from behind the defensive position of *compiler*. In it, Chaucer is challenging the *auctores* of the antifeminist tradition, asking readers (and women in particular) to trust only him as a male poet, and not those who have perpetuated misogyny in literature. Chaucer would go on to challenge antifeminism in *The Canterbury Tales* as well, where, as Minnis points out, he was able to use the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath to “reverse the fate commonly endured by women, as the

regular victims of masculinist history” (*Fallible Authors* 5). A similar argument will be presented here regarding the *LGW*.

The *LGW* is an integral piece of literature in Chaucer’s body of work when attempting to position him as either an opponent or a supporter of the antifeminist tradition. In the context of the *LGW* as a whole, the assertion “trusteth, as in love, no man but me” is not merely a line to be skimmed over and dismissed as being ironic, playful, or flirtatious: instead, it is pivotal to understanding Chaucer’s confrontation of antifeminism, and the role that theories of medieval authorship play in that confrontation.

CHAPTER 2

The Prologue

The much admired Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* is all of the *Legend* that the mid-twentieth century is willing to take to its bosom. It is famous for its charm.

– Robert Worth Frank, Jr., *Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women*²

Though the Prologue to the *LGW* functions on its own as a charming ode to the courtly French tradition, it deals with important issues that are essential to the *LGW* as a whole. Many of those issues are developed through the figure of the narrator, Geoffrey, portrayed by Chaucer as an ignorant *compiler* who has collected the writing of others and relied on their wisdom rather than his own. Geoffrey has long been viewed as a “comic figure so stupid he scarcely notices what sinful trash he translates (F 364-65; G 341-43), a burlesque nature lover who in F kneels to a daisy and in G sleeps in a bed of flowers” (Gardner 604).³ John Gardner’s description of Geoffrey echoes the perspective of Robert Frank, quoted at the opening of this chapter, and reflects the view that Geoffrey, like the Legends, is not to be taken seriously by critics. Gardner’s disparaging and dismissive comments about Geoffrey express that critical attitude, resulting in what are rather two-dimensional readings of the text. Yet treating Geoffrey as a serious figure rather than a caricature makes clear that he is a much more complex character than he often receives credit for being.

A common view of Geoffrey has been to look at him as being “so stupid” that he is not aware of what he is writing, as if his inability to adequately read texts were due to some natural intellectual deficiency, especially in regard to his love for the daisy. However, A. C. Spearing, in *Medieval Dream-Poetry*, offers another useful view of Geoffrey and the “marguerite” segment of the Prologue: he suggests that the daisy is “a symbol of love itself” (108), which instead of making Geoffrey appear incapable of reading texts, places him in another light altogether—he seems much less silly as a figure who has fallen in love with love itself, rather than merely a flower. Spearing takes Geoffrey’s praise of the daisy a step further, seeing it as representative of the power of poetic inspiration (i.e., the power that inspired Chaucer to write such poetry about the beauty of a flower). He then applies this point to the Legends as a whole, suggesting that “they bring back to life ladies who died ages ago; insofar as they succeed, it is the power of the poet’s imagination that enables them to transcend death” (109). So while readings of Geoffrey as silly and ignorant are warranted—those are indeed attributes ascribed to his personae—his absolute faithfulness in reading women is what helps him become an *auctor* in the Legends.

The primary issue in the Prologue is an epistemological one, namely, the distinction between knowledge gained from reading texts versus evidence acquired through personal experience. *Auctores* are consistently referred to with reverence throughout the Prologue, but the idea of putting faith in lived experience is also voiced. Geoffrey’s lack of experience with love works hand in hand with his position as a *compilator*: in the absence of personal experience and insight, he must look to *auctores*

so that he may learn about love (as opposed to just writing about it). However, though the Prologue sets Geoffrey up as the dim-witted *compiler* dependent upon texts, it also shows him demonstrating a thinly veiled defiance towards old books that is evident from the first stanza. He begins by lauding “olde wyse” *auctores* and putting faith in them (G 20), but by the end of this stanza he qualifies this sentiment by saying that faith should only be put in texts where “we han noon other preve” (G 28), or evidence. By having Geoffrey undermine his reverence for books, Chaucer is making a statement that might appear provocative in fourteenth-century England, where the *auctoritee* of the Bible (and other texts) was deeply revered. In fact, the Prologue opens with a discussion of texts and experience in relation to religion:

A thousand tymes have I herd men telle
That ther ys joy in hevene and peyne in helle,
And I acorde wel that it ys so;
But, natheles, yet wot I wel also
That ther nis noon dwellyng in the contree
That eyther hath in hevene or helle ybe
Ne may of hit noon other weyes witen
But as he hath herd seyde or founde it writen;
For by assay ther may no man it preve. (F 1-9)

Geoffrey uses the example of heaven and hell to make his point clear: man has no choice but to believe in the knowledge of written texts where it is impossible to gain firsthand experience. Though the assertion that personal experience trumps what one may learn from reading is made plainly enough, it is still somewhat subtle and buried within Geoffrey’s compliments for his old books and their importance.

While Geoffrey may understand the importance of experience, he has little as it pertains to two other important issues at hand in the Prologue: love and writing original

love poetry. His early emphasis on the importance of experience foreshadows the trouble he gets into with the God of Love, which will be discussed later in this chapter. A complex relationship between texts and experience is represented by Geoffrey's love for the daisy, expressed in one section of the Prologue. His lack of experience in love has led him to rely on books, which in turn have led him to fall in love with the daisy. Geoffrey's devotion to the daisy has been shaped by the French *marguerite* poetry of Machaut, Deschamps, and Froissart, all of whom wrote "poems extolling the daisy's special beauty" (Kiser 23). Geoffrey's love for the daisy is an ode to the poetry of Machaut, with the "figure of the daisy" standing in for "the Ideal Woman" (Percival 23). Percival makes the point that Geoffrey's two primary loves both stem from the literary tradition: the symbol of the daisy from "contemporary French poetry," and the figure who ends up being represented by the daisy, Queen Alceste from classical literature (23). The "daisy" segment reveals two things simultaneously: (1) Geoffrey's devotion to and reliance on books—specifically, the use of Machaut and the literary tradition of French *marguerite* poetry—and (2) his lack of experience in love and therefore his use of/expression of his love for the daisy as a kind of substitute that fills that void. By extension, there is no denying that Geoffrey does indeed love the daisy: "That blisful sighte softneth al my sorwe, / So glad am I, whan that I have presence / Of it, to doon it alle reverence" (F 50-2). But it comes to him from French *marguerite* poetry in the absence of any actual experience. Geoffrey's reliance on books as both a lover and a poet converge in the sense that he has learned to love the daisy from reading courtly love poetry and wishes to follow in that tradition and write poetry about his love for the flower, especially since he

had never heard "... in Englyssh, ryme or prose, / Suffisant this flour to preyse aright!" (F 66-7). However, he feels incapable of expressing his love for the daisy poetically: "But wo is me, it lyth nat in my might" (G 60); hence, he looks to his *auctores* for "... any goodly word that they han left" (G 65) for him so that he may write about it. While in this instance Geoffrey is praising his *auctores* for having left poetry for him to read, there also seems to be a bit of lament inherent in the above comment pertaining to his role as a *compiler*, left to dig through the writing of others and repeat what they have said. He goes on to call out for assistance: "But helpeth, ye that han konnyng and myght, / Ye lovers that kan make of sentiment" (F 68-9). Experience ("ye lovers") is again being placed above knowledge gained from reading (which in this case applies to him). By calling out to "[y]e lovers" who are able to express themselves emotionally and poetically, Geoffrey is again signaling the importance of experience: lovers have experience in love, and thus are able to express it in their poetry.

Geoffrey concludes his discussion of experience and *auctoritee* by reiterating his earlier statement on *auctoritee* as secondary to experience:

But wherefore that I spak, to yeve credence
To bokes olde and don hem reverence,
Is for men shulde auctoritees beleve,
There as there lyth non other assay by preve. (G 81-4)

The reiteration of the notion that firsthand experience is greater than knowledge acquired from texts emphasizes the value of experience. Since Geoffrey has already told the reader that *auctores* should be relied on for knowledge only on certain subjects (e.g., heaven and hell) where gaining experience may not be possible, the message becomes clear: the reader of the *LGW* is being asked in the Prologue to question texts where experience is

present. The subject of the *LGW* is, of course, women, and the Legends themselves explore the treatment of women in old antifeminist texts. As discussed in the previous chapter, old antifeminist texts set the standard for the negative treatment of women that became the hallmark of misogyny in medieval literature. While men may not have experience of heaven or hell, one would imagine that they more than likely would have had experience in some capacity with women. Thus, Chaucer is making the case that men should look to their own experience with women rather than rely on vitriolic antifeminist texts that label women as inferior or evil.

Experience is a complicated topic in the *LGW*. Emphasis is placed on experience over *auctoritee* early in the Prologue, but it ends up being inexperience that allows Geoffrey to become a trustworthy, authoritative figure; his inexperience in love means that he has not betrayed any women, implying that he cannot be guilty of having mistreated them. Geoffrey subtly remarks that experience can unmask the falsities that may lie within *auctoritee* (and authoritative figures). For example, the textual *auctoritee* of medieval antifeminist writings asserts and emphasizes the wickedness of women, whereas experience can show that women are not inherently wicked; at the same time, experience can prove the falseness of men in their treatment of women. The God of Love, with his limited view of what constitutes moral goodness in women, serves to reinforce these limitations of *auctoritee*. Thus, the *LGW* demonstrates that experience (as well as its opposite, inexperience) as a way of distinguishing truth can be superior to *auctoritee*, and inexperience in regard to love can be a more acceptable foundation for trust than experience (since men with experience in love may have betrayed their lovers).

Therefore, inexperience—which Geoffrey is said to possess—is a valuable tool for addressing the concerns that the *LGW* raises with regard to *auctoritee* and the treatment of women.

Geoffrey offers a declaration of his purpose and intentions as a writer of women's stories in the *LGW*: he seeks to make “[t]he naked text in English to declare / Of many a story, or ells of many a geste, / As auctors seyn; leveth hem if yow leste” (G 85-88). Geoffrey is deflecting all credit, as well as responsibility, by positioning himself as a *compiler* and purveyor of the wisdom of *auctores*. He is foreshadowing two key points that the dream-vision segment of the Prologue will later assert: that he has rendered the words of his sources plainly, and that he means only what they meant. By telling the readers to “leveth hem if yow leste,” Geoffrey is encouraging readers to make their own decisions regarding a text as opposed to believing everything that *auctores* say, which brings personal experience back to the forefront. Geoffrey is also anticipating the writing assignment that will be given to him by the God of Love and Queen Alceste: to make naked the tales of good women, meaning to tell them in plain, straightforward language. This purpose will be reiterated throughout the Legends, all of which Geoffrey tells with a brevity that at times ventures beyond conciseness. In the tales to follow he picks and chooses exactly what information about his good women to relay to readers, and often refers them to the source material to find out more for themselves, taking more control of the text rather than strictly and mindlessly translating it.

Geoffrey's devotion to books is used later in the Prologue for another purpose, namely, to excuse his crimes against the God of Love's women: specifically, his

“translation” of the character Criseyde in *Troilus and Criseyde*. The God of Love does not appreciate (nor would Jerome) that Criseyde, after being separated from Troilus, falls in love with another man. For the God of Love, the acceptable course of action would have been for Criseyde to spend the remainder of her life without a lover; even death would have been more acceptable than loving another man. Alceste excuses Geoffrey’s writing due to the fact that he has been merely a translator or *compiler* who “... taketh non hed of what matere he take” (G 343). Alceste points out that he has not done anything wrong, only translating what “olde clerkes wryte, / As thogh that he of maleys woulde endyte / Despit of love, and hadde hymself ywrought” (G 350-2). Alceste is making the distinction that the subject matter Geoffrey has compiled and translated is not his own, but belongs instead to his *auctores*. Geoffrey’s devotion to books has become a crutch for him to rely on and avoid blame. He adopts his reliance on books as a defense mechanism, seconding what Alceste has said: anyone who was offended by his treatment of women in the *Romaunt of the Rose* or *Troilus and Criseyde* should not blame him, for he “... of Criseyde wrot or tolde, / Or of the Rose” only what his *auctor* meant (G 459-60). Geoffrey has officially taken on the role of ignorant *compiler*, dependent upon his *auctores* and supplying no original thought of his own. In this case, Geoffrey has adopted the defense mechanism inherent within the position of the *compiler*, taking no blame for the tales he has compiled that have upset the God of Love.

Throughout the Prologue, as discussed above, Chaucer has placed Geoffrey in a position of subordination: as a *compiler* serving his *auctores* and their texts, and as a subordinate lover devoted to the daisy. The God of Love’s negative reaction to

Geoffrey's earlier works introduces conflict into the plot and complicates his role as a servant of the God of Love:

“Thow art my mortal fo and me werreyest,
And of myne olde servauntes thow mysseyest,
And hynderest hem with thy translacyoun,
And lettest folk to han devocoun
To serven me, and holdest it folye
To truste on me. ...” (G 248-53)

The charges levied here are more egregious than simply being ignorant of what one is translating: the God of Love sees Geoffrey as a traitor and enemy, one who has betrayed not only him but his other followers as well. Geoffrey's transgressions exemplify how blind devotion—in this case to books—may lead to mistakes being made. What led Geoffrey to be clearly devoted to the God of Love's authority during the daisy sequence also led him to sin against the God of Love's subjects: namely, faithfully translating, and being devoted to, books. This issue lends itself to the larger argument being made: texts should be looked to and relied upon only when it is not possible to gain direct personal experience. This point is further established by Alceste, who makes it clear that Geoffrey has become a traitor only because of his translation of the *Rose* and the *Troilus*, and that he was not always a traitor:

“The man hath served yow of his konnyng,
And furthered [wel] youre lawe with his mak-
yng.
Whil he was yong, he kepte youre estat;
I not wher he be now a renegat.” (G 398-401)

Geoffrey happened to be faithful to the God of Love in his earlier writings, only to appear unfaithful later. As Spearing points out, “it is true that [Geoffrey] failed to understand

what his sources meant” (105), but his purpose in writing was to promote faithfulness in love and to cherish it:

“. . . what so myn auctour meante,
Algate, God woot, yt was myn entente
To forthren trouthe in love and yt cheryce,
And to ben war fro falsnesse and fro vice
By swich ensample; this was my menyng.” (F 470-4)

In this passage, Geoffrey’s expression of his devotion to love reveals that he has intentions of his own regarding his writing. Alceste rejects Geoffrey’s self-defensive claim, but her treatment of Geoffrey is still much more forgiving than the God of Love’s. Robert Edwards points out that “[r]enegat can signify a religious apostate or a political traitor” (67), implying a serious accusation being levied by the God of Love, but Alceste does not make such an accusation, seeing him as having lost his way as opposed to being a traitor.

Throughout the conversation taking place in the dream-vision portion of the Prologue, it is Alceste who constantly recognizes the potential in Geoffrey’s reliance on texts to lead him to be unaware of what he has written, reaffirming what Geoffrey himself has said, whereas the God of Love never makes this concession and views him as a traitor. Alceste possesses enough authority, reason, and eloquence to dissuade the God of Love from continuing his insults towards Geoffrey, reminding him to be kind to his subjects rather than tyrannical. The God of Love allows Alceste to deal with Geoffrey as she sees fit, which results in her decision to give Geoffrey a writing assignment. Alceste instructs Geoffrey to make a “glorious legende / Of goode women, maydenes and wyves, / That were trewe in lovyng al here lyves” (G 473-475). She also wants

Geoffrey to discuss false male lovers who betrayed good women in order to show “ “[h]ow manye wemen they may don a shame; / For in youre world that is now holden a game” (G 478-9). The Legends themselves demonstrate that Geoffrey spends much of his time on the latter request, rather than focusing chiefly on good women. Alceste then tells Geoffrey something of immense importance that will allow him to move beyond his subordinate position as a *compiler*: “And thogh the lesteth nat a lovere be, / spek wel of love; this penaunce yeve I thee” (G 480-1). Alceste is suggesting that Geoffrey is not—and does not care to be—a lover, which gives him the authority that he needs to elevate his status by contrasting him with his contemporary male counterparts, who partake in shaming women for sport. In this situation, his lack of actual experience is beneficial to his task at hand and may help him return to the good graces of the God of Love. But of even more importance, it allows him to develop an authoritative voice that will enable him to transcend the role of *compiler*.

CHAPTER 3

The Legends

Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* is a meditation on the meaning of integrity – the integrity of female virtue in deed and intention, and the integrity of the written word which preserves the memory of that virtue, at the cost of interpreting and judging its exemplars.

– Simon Meecham-Jones, “Intention, Integrity, and ‘Renoun’: The Public Virtue of Chaucer’s Good Women”

Geoffrey takes his writing assignment from the God of Love and Queen Alceste and, upon awakening from his slumber, begins writing. The Legends open—in what has often been viewed as a perplexing choice—with Cleopatra, and culminate in the premature ending of “The Legend of Hypermnestra.” Throughout all nine of the Legends, the rules that govern the roles of *compiler* and *auctor* are often challenged or broken, and with the use of certain rhetorical devices Chaucer is able to give Geoffrey an authoritative voice, one that is not confined by the rigid nature of the *auctor/compiler* relationship. That said, there are certain moments in the text in which Geoffrey draws directly from his *auctores*, even referring readers to the original source material, which may appear as if he is putting great faith in the original work. However, the Prologue helps readers to better interpret these moments and his reasons for including them in a work that champions experience. The Prologue lays the foundation of Geoffrey’s

ideology; it primes the readers for the Legends, so that it becomes clear that he is manipulating, reinterpreting, and sometimes even undercutting his source material so that he may establish himself as an authority figure, rather than completely defer to the original texts.

For modern readers, Cleopatra seems like an odd choice for the first of Chaucer's good women, as her reputation precedes her. Cleopatra's appearance in the *LGW* appears to be her first serious treatment in English; as Frank remarks, "What we are in fact looking at is her modest debut" in English literature (37). Cleopatra previously made a very brief appearance in *The Parliament of Fowls*,⁴ but nothing is said there of her fate or of her relationship with Antony.⁵ Scholars such as Kiser have noted that in the Middle Ages, Cleopatra was viewed as an example of "satanic lust, unfaithfulness, and other assorted vices" (Kiser 100). Chaucer's decision to enter Cleopatra into "sainthood" by including her in the *LGW* signals the development of Geoffrey's voice into a tool for asserting authority in two ways: first, it shows the illogic of the God of Love's perception, as well as that of figures like St. Jerome, of what constitutes moral goodness in women. Secondly, that decision helps strengthen Geoffrey's voice as a result of his manipulation of an *auctor's* text in such a way that would turn a particular woman's reputation on its head, which is not the typical behavior of an obedient *compiler*.

Sources for Cleopatra did in fact exist in the Middle Ages, as Beverly Taylor demonstrates in her aptly titled article "The Medieval Cleopatra: the Classical and Medieval Tradition of Chaucer's *Legend of Cleopatra*." Taylor surveys the source material about Cleopatra with which Chaucer and his audience would have been familiar

and discusses the perceptions of Cleopatra that were perpetuated by those sources. She notes that the views of Cleopatra popular in Chaucer's day came from such *auctores* as Horace, Ovid, and Virgil and would have been "invariably unflattering" (250). Taylor's view that Chaucer was influenced by multiple sources rather than one specific source is shared by Frank, who says that while Chaucer's source for Cleopatra is generally unclear, he would have been familiar with her through Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio (37). Quinn, for his part, suggests that Chaucer most likely relies on Boccaccio as his *auctor* for Cleopatra's story (64). By not naming any sources or *auctores* in "Cleopatra" whose work he is compiling, Chaucer has taken the first step toward giving Geoffrey a more authoritative voice at the start of the Legends.

One of Geoffrey's primary concerns from the Prologue—authority—becomes relevant in "Cleopatra" through the use of rhetorical devices that will be repeated throughout the Legends. The use of *brevitas* is notable in all of the Legends, but the terseness of "Cleopatra" is particularly apparent.⁶ Kiser notes in *Telling Classic Tales: Chaucer and The Legend of Good Women* that brevity "was a common feature of the saints' lives, especially when more than one was collected into a legendary" (102). This rhetorical approach in "Cleopatra" can be traced back to the God of Love's parting words to Geoffrey at the end of the Prologue: to go back to his old books and retell the stories of faithful lovers with brevity so that as many stories as possible can be told: "For whoso shal so many a storye telle, / Sey shortly, or he shal to longe dwelle" (F 576-7). Also at work are *abbreviatio*, the "shortening or cutting of one's material" (Frank 199); and *occupatio*, used to announce that material is being cut and to draw attention to that

omitted material. In each of the Legends, Geoffrey uses both *abbreviatio* and *occupatio*, the latter evident in the passage from “Cleopatra” below:

The weddyng and the feste to devyse,
To me, that have ytake swich emprise
Of so many a story for to make,
It were to longe, lest that I shulde slake
Of thyng that bereth more effect and charge;
For men may overlade a ship or barge.
And forthy to th'effect thanne wol I skyppe,
And al the remenaunt, I wol lete it slippe. (616-23)

This particular example of *occupatio* is notable for what is absent: the reader is not referred to any particular *auctor* or source.

In another move toward establishing his own authority in “Cleopatra,” Geoffrey interjects his personal reproach of some of his readers, singling out men:

But herkeneth, ye that speken of kyndnesse,
Ye men that falsly sweren many an oth
That ye wol deye if that youre love be wroth,
Here may ye sen of women which a trouthe! (665-8)

Geoffrey’s direct address to the men in his audience draws attention both to the disconnect between words and deeds in their treatment of women and to women’s faithfulness in love. Speaking to his readers in such a way will become a pattern throughout the tales of good women to follow, and it signals Geoffrey’s movement away from the strict limitations of the *compiler* role. Furthermore, it goes against the assignment given to him by the God of Love: namely, to go through his old books and straightforwardly compile stories of good women. By starting with the stories of Cleopatra and Antony and then moving directly to the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe, Geoffrey has also disobeyed an instruction by Queen Alceste, as neither of these stories

contains a false male – or any false lovers at all, for that matter. On this point, Geoffrey ends “Cleopatra” with implied praise of Antony’s fidelity to Cleopatra, as well as her loyalty to him:

And she hire deth receyveth with good cheere
For love of Antony that was hire so dere.
And this is storyal soth, it is no fable.
Now, or I fynde a man this trewe and stable,
And wol for love his deth so frely take,
I preye God let oure hedes nevere ake!
Amen. (700-5)

While the use of Antony as a good man subverts the God of Love’s and Queen Alceste’s commands, it is Cleopatra’s reputation that truly questions the God of Love’s authority. A fundamental flaw in the God of Love’s standards (and, in turn, the standards set forth by the antifeminist tradition) for what constitutes a good woman—unwavering faithfulness no matter the consequences— is being exposed in “Cleopatra,” and Geoffrey will continue to expose such flaws in the remainder of the Legends.

“The Legend of Thisbe” is vastly different from the “Cleopatra” legend that precedes it: it is longer and features more developed characters; it names an *auctor*, Ovid (“Naso seyth thus” [725]); and it follows its source material with relative loyalty. Though Geoffrey now has an identified *auctor*, he is able to assert an important element of his own *auctoritee* in “Thisbe” by violating again the explicit instructions given to him by Alceste in the Prologue, “because Pyramus (not unlike Antony), proves to be every bit as true as Thisbe herself” (Quinn 76). Thus, for a second time, Geoffrey has ignored Alceste’s requirement to show the falseness of men. Pyramus’s goodness is derived from Ovid’s original narrative, which both Quinn and Frank acknowledge Geoffrey has

followed with great fidelity. Quinn in fact points out that “Thisbe,” “more than any of the other eight [Legends], can be properly termed a translation” (74), though Frank remarks not “slavishly” so (49). The events do indeed unfold in very similar fashion in both Ovid’s and Geoffrey’s telling of Thisbe and Pyramus, but Geoffrey’s minor changes work to further establish his intentions. For example, Thisbe’s reaction while hiding in the cave before she discovers that Pyramus has killed himself has been subtly modified to include her fear of being perceived as a false woman:

Now Tisbe, which that wiste nat of this,
But sittynge in hire drede, she thought thus:
“If it so falle that my Piramus
Be comen hider, and may me not yfynde,
He may me holde fals and ek unkynde.” (853-7)

By making Thisbe anxious that Pyramus might interpret her absence as a betrayal, Geoffrey has altered the text in such a way to directly reflect his writing assignment: the God of Love had chastised him for writing about false women with his translation of Criseyde, and his efforts not to repeat that error are reflected in Thisbe’s concern over being labeled a false woman. Those efforts are reinforced in Thisbe’s declaration just before taking her own life: ““But God forbade but a woman can / Ben as trewe in lovyng as a man! / And for my part, I shal anon it kythe”” (910-2). Through the first two Legends, Geoffrey has shown that he can (and will) do with his sources as he pleases, in the process both conforming to and rebelling against the guidelines laid down by the God of Love and Queen Alceste.

Geoffrey ends “Thisbe” with a response to his plea at the end of “Cleopatra” for men who are true in love:

Of trewe men I fynde but fewe mo
In alle my bokes, save this Piramus,
And therefore have I spoken of hym thus,
For it is deynte to us men to fynde
A man that can in love been trewe and kynde. (917-21)

Geoffrey's use of *explanatio* reveals his direct rebellion against Alceste's request that, in telling stories of good women, he also tell of the false men who betray them. In choosing to include the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe in the *LGW*, Geoffrey asserts the existence of men faithful in love, however few they may be. Kiser suggests another motive for the inclusion of Thisbe and Pyramus: in her view, it is a response to the God of Love's reading (or misreading) of the *Troilus*: "Indeed, it is possible to see *The Legend of Thisbe* as a diminutive *Troilus and Criseyde* in theme, a retelling of that poem intended to allow readers like the God of Love further opportunity to understand its issues" (119). The greatest similarity between the *Troilus* and "Thisbe" is that of tragedy occurring despite neither lover being at fault: "[B]ecause the God of Love has erred in his reading of the *Troilus*" by blaming Criseyde, he has missed "the poem's philosophical tragedy" (Kiser 120). "Thisbe" (as well as *Troilus and Criseyde*) demonstrates that tragedy in love can occur even when the lovers are exceedingly good and faithful, and can be caused by "accidents, such as Thisbe's loss of her veil and the complex workings of Fortune and free will in the *Troilus*" (Kiser 120). The God of Love's writing assignment for Geoffrey thus, in light of Kiser's point, reflects the God of Love's own narrow and misguided view of the *Troilus* rather than actual "crimes" committed against him in that text. Geoffrey has instead used the assignment to reiterate the message of the *Troilus* – not exactly an attempt to make amends with the God of Love.

In his writing assignment, Geoffrey was told to write about women who share the noble characteristics of Queen Alceste. Since Alceste does not appear in a legend of her own, the good woman whose circumstances comes closest to Alceste's would be Dido. While Dido and Alceste's actual histories may be quite different from one another's, in "The Legend of Dido," the queen of ancient Carthage is described in a manner similar Geoffrey's and the God of Love's description of Alceste in the Prologue. Dido's beauty and character are portrayed in such a way that ". . . if that God, that hevne and erthe made, / Wolde han a lov, for beaute and goodnesse, / And womanhod, and trouthe, and semelynesse," who else would he choose but Dido (1039-41)? Geoffrey describes Alceste's goodness in the Prologue in a similar fashion: "Now fele I wel the goodnesse of this wif, / That bothe after hire deth an in hire lyf / Hire grete bounte doubleth hire renoun" (G 508-10). "Dido" opens with Geoffrey praising his *auctores* in a manner than does not occur in any of the other Legends:

Glory 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. (924-7)

His declaration of praise here implies that his legend of Dido will reflect his esteemed source faithfully, yet later in the tale, Geoffrey's use of *abbreviatio* suggests otherwise: "I coude folwe, word for word, Virgile, / But it wolde lasten al to longe while" (1002-3). Praising Virgil for his treatment of Dido in *The Aeneid* seems natural, as Virgil's telling of her relationship with Aeneas helped to "immortalize her passion" and, along with Ovid's *Heroides*, cemented her legacy in the Middle Ages as "*the* heroine from the classical past" (Frank 57). But as he indicates in the pair of lines quoted above, Geoffrey

does not commit to Virgil completely, suggesting that the length of his source prevents him from doing so in full. Though working primarily from *The Aeneid*, Geoffrey also mentions his other source: “In thyn Eneyde and Naso wol I take / The tenor, and the grete effects make” (928-9).

Geoffrey’s assertion of control over his source material takes other forms in “Dido.” The first example of *occupatio* in the legend occurs when Geoffrey cuts short Aeneas’ adventures at sea by reminding his readers of his rhetorical purpose: “But of his aventures in the se / Nis nat to purpos for to speke of here, / For it acordeth nat to my matere” (953-5). Geoffrey is clearly less concerned with being a true and faithful translator and more focused on taking his story in the direction he sees fit, which he reasserts in the lines that follow: “But, as I seyde, of hym and of Dido / Shal be my tale, til that I have do” (956-7). Later, Geoffrey seems to question his principal *auctor* when he calls attention to something he finds fantastical and unrealistic, as when Venus makes Aeneas invisible when he enters the great temple at Carthage. Geoffrey prefaces the reference to Aeneas’ invisibility with the comment, “I can nat seyn if that it be possible,” and follows it with: “Thus seyth the bok, withouten any les” (1020, 1022). In his statements here, Geoffrey assumes the shield of the *compiler* not only to avoid taking credit for what Virgil has written, but also to distance himself from material in Virgil that he views as possibly too fantastical to be believed. In the process, he hints at his earlier discussion in the Prologue of the problems in placing too much stock in *auctores*. “Dido” ends abruptly with another example of *occupatio*, which Geoffrey uses to cut short a letter written by Dido to Aeneas before her death: “But who wol al this letter have in

mynde, / Rede Ovyde, and hym he shal it fynde” (1366-7). The motif of including a partial epistle from one of the good women will be repeated; Geoffrey will frequently call attention to the existence of such letters in Ovid’s *Heroides*, which consists of letters written in the women’s own voices. While Geoffrey cannot afford the space to Dido that Ovid provides, he still makes sure to give Dido a voice of her own, even under the rhetorical “pressure” of *brevitas*. While it would have been easy enough for Geoffrey to completely omit Dido’s letter and simply reference its existence, he is acknowledging her pain and suffering by including at least a small portion of her letter. Dido is thus given an opportunity to become more of a fully realized character than she would have been if her letter had been left out.

“The Legend of Hypsipyle and Medea,” the fourth of the Legends, deals with an important element found in “Cleopatra,” that of changing a figure’s story to make her fit the requirements of the assignment, as Medea’s violent reputation and murder of her children cannot be included, for obvious reasons. Hypsipyle and Medea are coupled in a single legend because of their common denominator: both have been betrayed by the falsest of male lovers, Jason, as Geoffrey proclaims in his opening lines: “Thow rote of false lovers, Duc Jasoun, / Thow sly devourere and confusioun / Of gentil wemen, tender creatures” (1368-1370). Yet in selecting Medea, who is presented entirely as a victim, Chaucer chose a woman known by his audience for her diabolical lust; she was “even considered a murderer” (Kiser 100). Through the use of *abbreviatio* Geoffrey is able to make a good woman out of one who is not often associated with virtue. Early on in “Hypsipyle and Medea,” Geoffrey delivers a very personal message to Jason: “Yif that I

live, thy name shal be shove / In English that thy sekte shal be knowe! Have at thee, Jason!” (1381-2). In both language and tone, the vehemence of Geoffrey’s verbal strike at Jason is unmistakable, and it portrays the narrator as a champion of the women whom Jason has betrayed. In his blatant assumption of responsibility and authority, Geoffrey moves well beyond the conventional role of the *compiler*. His choice of the word “sekte” indicates, furthermore, that Geoffrey is challenging not just Jason, but all false men who are out to shame women.

Geoffrey ends “Hypsipyle and Medea” with a mere reference to Ovid’s original text, and he leaves out Medea’s letter altogether: “Wel can Ovyde hire letter in vers endyte, / Which were as now to long for me to wryte” (1678-9). Geoffrey is acknowledging that there is more to the story—as his audience would already know—but he does not have the time nor space to tell it. Divulging more details of Medea would undo what he has done to set her up as the victim who does not retaliate or seek revenge. Again, as with “Cleopatra,” Geoffrey has asserted his control over source material, while also subverting the God of Love’s standards for good women by making women with the poorest of traditions and reputations appear to be good.

While Geoffrey avoids the grisly, violent details of Medea in order to portray her as a good woman, he similarly avoids the violent details of some of his male antagonists. But only the details are omitted: Geoffrey unequivocally informs his readers of the men’s violent treatment of some of the women in his Legends. He may, for example, leave out the violence altogether when it comes to Medea, but he uses *occupatio* to let the reader know that the men are indeed violent, allowing him to cut down on his source

material. Such occurs in the opening to “The Legend of Philomela,” as Geoffrey questions God for creating Tereus, whom he calls the “slaughter of man” (2231). Tereus’s deed was so grisly “[t]hat, when I his foule storye rede, / Myne eyen wexe foule and sore also” (2239-40). Geoffrey effectively uses *occupatio* by calling attention to Ovid’s detailed telling of Tereus’s violent act against Philomela without repeating it himself, thus making it known that Tereus was not a good man without having to explain in detail why. Early on, after providing some background information on Tereus, Geoffrey expresses his eagerness to move on: “But shortly of this story for to passe, / For I am wery of hym for to telle” (2257-8). Later, soon after Tereus rapes Philomela, Geoffrey again sounds eager to get to the end of this Legend as quickly as possible: “Now is it tyme I make an ende sone” (2341). The argument has been made that Chaucer grew tired of writing the *LGW*, explaining why he cut so much material out of his Legends. However, rather than seeming weary of his writing assignment, Geoffrey seems genuinely weary of responding to Alceste’s charge that he write about false, wicked men. Geoffrey’s weariness seems to be the result of repeatedly dealing with violence against women. He makes this clear by choosing not to detail Tereus’s violent actions against Philomela. While many critics have chalked up Geoffrey’s weariness to Chaucer’s boredom with writing the *LGW*, Chaucer ascribes fatigue to Geoffrey as a rhetorical maneuver: it is an excuse for Geoffrey to omit certain violent details from his source material in order to express his distaste for the violence against women, as well as to keep his own writing shorter. Rather than just using standard *occupatio*, pretending to be tired

of these male antagonists allows Geoffrey to shorten his Legends while also following a direct order from Alceste: to tell of false men.

As Geoffrey proceeds to the penultimate legend, “The Legend of Phyllis,” his language and tone intensify, which further implies his growing tired of his source material dealing with false, even violent men, as “Philomela” suggests. The change in Geoffrey’s tone may also indicate his dissatisfaction with the limitations of his role as *compiler*. His use of *brevitas* and the many instances of *occupatio* throughout the Legends have existed primarily to shorten the stories he is telling and to cut out excess material. Whereas Geoffrey’s use of *occupatio* in earlier legends existed simply to cut down his material, his use of *occupatio* is now accompanied by a tone of disgust not previously evident. For example, Geoffrey interjects his own voice and opinion in a very strong way in “Phyllis” in order to avoid telling a story that is similar to one he has already told in a previous legend (i.e., “The Legend of Ariadne”), that of Demophon’s father Theseus. In particular, Geoffrey’s use of the word “agroted” expresses how he feels about telling stories with similar subject matter, as it translates to “surfeited” or “in excess,” even “fed up” (Benson 627):

But, for I am agroted herebyforn
To wryte of hem that ben in love forsworn,
And ek to haste me in my legend
(Which to performe God me grace sende)
Therefore I passe shortly in this wyse. (2454-8)

Geoffrey will not spend a lot of time discussing Demophon, since his story simply repeats his father Theseus’ betrayal of Ariadne (Quinn 13). There is a genetic element of men’s falseness implied by Demophon’s actions, and since Theseus and his misdeeds

against women have already been discussed in “Ariadne,” Geoffrey can avoid detailing those of Demophon. Geoffrey addresses this father-son resemblance more than once in the tale, starting early in the Legend:

By preve as wel as by auctorite,
That wiked fruit cometh of a wiked tre,
That may ye fynde, if that it like yow,
But for this ende I speke this as now,
To tellen yow of false Demophon.
In love a falser herde I nevere non,
But if it were his fader Theseus. (2394-400)

Geoffrey continues comparing Demophon and his father in order to shorten the story he is telling:

Ye han wel herd of Theseus devyse
In the betraysysnge of fayre Adryane
.....
At shorte words, ryght so Demophon
The same wey, the same path hath gon,
That dide his false fader Theseus. (2459-64)

Since Geoffrey has previously discussed Demophon’s father Theseus, he is able to reduce his source material while simultaneously expressing his deepening disdain for false men. The generational or hereditary nature of wickedness raised by the examples of Theseus and Demophon speaks to a certain wickedness in men, in sharp contrast to the antifeminist tradition and its practice of attributing innate wickedness to women.

It is not coincidental that Chaucer chose to open “Phyllis” with the phrase, “[b]y preve as wel as by auctorite” (2394), and to end it with an authoritative request from Geoffrey (i.e., to trust no man but him). Geoffrey’s ultimate authoritative move comes at the end of “Phyllis,” but it can easily be missed or downplayed depending on how one reads it: as either a flippant comment not to be treated seriously, or as an important

coming out of sorts for Geoffrey as *auctor*. His declaration at the end of “Phyllis”—“Be war, ye wemen, of youre subtyl fo, / Syn yit this day men may ensauple se; / And trusteth, as in love, no man but me” (2559-61)—is often dismissed as a “mockery” (Frank 154-5), a humorous, “absurd proposition” that “emphatically and far too explicitly exempts [Geoffrey] himself alone from the falseness of his kind” (Quinn 186). However, when placed in the context of *auctoritee*, which Geoffrey has called attention to in the opening lines of “Phyllis” (just as he did early in the Prologue: “Wel oughte us thanne on olde bokes leve, / There as there is non other assay by preve” [G 27-9]), the line “trusteth, as in love, no man but me” cannot be easily dismissed as one of “Chaucer’s joke[s]” (Quinn 186). Treating this line seriously contributes to an understanding of Chaucer’s treatment of lived experience and learned knowledge in the first half of the Prologue. If these lines are merely reduced to irony or humor, Geoffrey’s growth as an *auctor* cannot be fully appreciated.

Just as the closing lines of “Phyllis” can be seen differently, there are two competing views on “Phyllis” as a whole, and which side one chooses dictates how seriously to take Geoffrey’s declaration. The more dominant side would be represented by Frank, who believes that Chaucer does everything possible to minimize Phyllis’s voice and focus on Demophon. Frank uses the example of Phyllis’s radically shortened epistle, in which “Chaucer has chosen carefully some of the least pathetic sections and presented them with minimally emotional effect. In large part he does this by continuing to concentrate on Demophon – *his* promises, *his* false tears, *his* oaths to the gods. . . . We see her not so much as sufferer, but as dupe” (153). Kiser, who takes Phyllis more

seriously and sees her as a stronger character than either Frank or Quinn, represents the other reading of “Phyllis”: Geoffrey “mentions that he regretfully cannot include this letter in its entirety because of the God of Love’s command for brevity . . . Chaucer has nevertheless managed to let Phyllis’s voice dominate her own legend” (Kiser 121-2). Whereas Geoffrey cuts out most of Demophon’s story and does not give him much of a voice, he allows Phyllis to be directly heard in her letter. Kiser acknowledges that Geoffrey may be “humorously boasting” at the end of “Phyllis,” but he is still “a faithful man (both to Phyllis and to Ovid), clearly more trustworthy than the poetic villains who may have neglected her pain in their works” (122). In fact, the pain of the women throughout the Legends is constantly discussed, so much so that critics have often referred to the *LGW* as a collection of victims rather than of good women.⁷ However, while these women are certainly victimized, Geoffrey treats them fairly and sympathizes with them. This fair treatment favors Geoffrey in his request for women’s trust. While Kiser’s stance may be in the minority when viewing the ending of “Phyllis,” it proves that a serious reading is possible, allowing for new interpretations of the *LGW*: as this reading of Chaucer’s text argues, a serious reading recognizes the development of Geoffrey as an *auctor*.

Minnis’ definition of an *auctor* as “someone who was at once a writer and an authority, someone not merely to be read but also to be respected and believed,” one in possession of a certain degree of “veracity and sagacity” (10), applies to Geoffrey by the end of “Phyllis”: his progression from *compiler* to *auctor* can be traced throughout the *LGW*. The Legends as a whole illustrate his knowledge of false men in the classical

tradition. This knowledge, when combined with his control and manipulation of his sources and his numerous interjections of his own voice and views, prove his ability as a writer, and his advice to women in “Phyllis” comes across as sagacious and authoritative. By selectively resisting the God of Love’s and Queen Alceste’s demands in their writing assignment, Geoffrey is able to fully control the text he is writing and the sources he is using. And, in the process of writing the Legends, Geoffrey develops a certain wisdom regarding false, villainous men, not only the weariness already noted. Geoffrey wishes to be trusted by his female readers, and—in the context of the misogynistic literary tradition in which his source materials exist—he does succeed in becoming trustworthy. Though he may not have hit the same level of understanding regarding the plight of women in literature as Christine de Pizan will later on, Chaucer has effectively managed to critique the treatment of women in literature. In the context of authority, a central issue addressed in the Prologue, the “no man” that Geoffrey is warning his readers about encompasses not only faithless lovers but also other writers, particularly those who do not speak out against false men, namely, the writers of the antifeminist tradition, as well as those who, for example, “may have exalted . . . [Phyllis’s] deceiver Demophon for his other adventures” (Kiser 122). Geoffrey has done no such injustice to betrayed women: he has exposed false men and their deeds *ad nauseam*, to the point of growing weary of them himself.

Three of the legends in the *LGW* have not been discussed in depth for various reasons. “The Legend of Ariadne” shares themes with “Dido” (as noted earlier in this chapter), as Ariadne rescues Theseus when he appears vulnerable and in need of help.

Theseus eventually sets off to sea, leaving Ariadne behind just as Aeneas did with Dido, only Ariadne is left stranded on a deserted island. “Ariadne” is important because, as mentioned previously, it lays the foundation for the wickedness of men to be seen as an innate, inherited trait, as Theseus’s son Demophon is as wicked as his father. “The Legend of Hypermnestra” reinforces the notion of familial wickedness in men with its male characters, the brothers Danao and Egiste. Egiste’s daughter, Hypermnestra, marries Danao’s son, Lyno. On her wedding night, Egiste orders Hypermnestra to murder Lyno, his nephew, ““For in my dremes it is warned me / How that my newew shal my bane be” (2658-9). Whether Egiste’s dreams come true or not, they are representative of the trait of violence that by this point the *LGW* implies is inherent in men. “The Legend of Lucrece,” also mentioned earlier in this chapter, contains its own a straightforward response to Alceste’s request: a wicked man in the form of the knight Tarquin, who rapes Lucretia, a woman so faithful to her husband that she commits suicide so as to not shame him after she has been raped. Geoffrey ends “Lucrece” on an interesting note that subtly foreshadows his impending assertion of authority in “Phyllis”: “And as of men, loke ye which tyrannye / They doon alday; assay hem whoso lyste, / The trewest ys ful brotel for to triste” (1883-5). By warning women against trusting even the truest of men, Geoffrey is creating the conditions necessary for the declaration of his own trustworthiness in “Phyllis.”

CONCLUSION

The scholarly tradition has often separated the *LGW* into three distinct parts: the narrator's courtly love-inspired ode to the daisy, the dream vision, and the nine Legends. While the structure of the poem lends itself to being divided in such a way, this study has shown that all three sections work together in Geoffrey's quest for authority. The first half of the Prologue raises the issue of the validity of experience gained from real life circumstances relative to knowledge gained from books. Geoffrey hints at the limitations of *auctoritee*, suggesting that it should only be accepted in those instances when empirical evidence or direct experience as a basis for knowing are not available. The dream vision portion of the Prologue introduces the relationship between the *auctor* and *compiler* and raises the topic of the treatment of women in literature. Finally, the Legends section synthesizes these elements, and they are utilized to help Geoffrey transform into an authoritative figure. Geoffrey uses various rhetorical devices, such as *occupatio* and *abbreviatio*, throughout the Legends to control the source materials that he presents. In the process, a fundamental reversal of a certain kind occurs in Geoffrey: his apparent silliness in the Prologue ultimately functions as a mask (a "persona," in the etymologically Greek sense of the word), or literary construct, for a narrator figure addressing quite serious matters regarding the perception and treatment of women, at least those women in literature whose stories he tells.

In the *LGW*, it is established that the textual *auctoritee* of medieval antifeminist writings asserts and emphasizes the inherent wickedness of women. One implication of Geoffrey's subtle comments about both the validity of experience and the limitations of *auctoritee* is that direct experience can expose the flaws of *auctoritee* in certain key respects: experience can show, for example, that women are not wicked in general, in spite of what authoritative texts assert, and it can at the same time demonstrate the wickedness of men in their treatment of women (as Queen Alceste suggests is the case in the world Geoffrey lives in, in which she says men make sport out of betraying women). The God of Love, as a literary construct and figure embodying *auctoritee* (though not the textual kind, strictly speaking), serves to reinforce the notion of the limitations of *auctoritee*, specifically, limitations in perception. For example, the God of Love sees Criseyde in the *Troilus* simplistically, as both an example of the faithlessness of women and as evidence of Geoffrey's supposed transgressions against love, and thus "misreads" her and the *Troilus*; he also has a very reductive, narrow notion of what constitutes "goodness" in women. Alceste, as another embodiment of authority (to whom the God of Love eventually defers), provides a counterbalance to the God of Love's assertion of authority and misunderstanding of Geoffrey's literary work and intentions.

Geoffrey, for his part, is a suitable candidate to take up these various issues and in the process to offer a defense of women in the *LGW* precisely because of his inexperience in love (which the Prologue makes clear); it is precisely because of that inexperience that he cannot possibly be guilty of betraying women. At the same time, his devotion to love is genuine (another trait that makes him a suitable candidate), even if expressed only

poetically/textually and not in “real” life. Thus, his inexperience in (as well as his devotion to) love is a key basis for the trust he asks women to place in him alone—he will not betray that trust textually, nor has he done so; given his inexperience, he has not caused pain to any woman, nor has he (in the Legends themselves) neglected the pain of his literary women (those who live in texts, not in real life).

In his body of work, Chaucer has traditionally assumed the role of *compiler*.

Minnis suggests that Chaucer uses the role of *compiler* as a way to manipulate both his texts and readers:

. . . for the most part, Chaucer was content to assume the role of compiler and to exploit the literary form of *compilatio*. Indeed, so deliberate was he in presenting himself as a compiler that one is led to suspect the presence of a very self-conscious author who was concerned to manipulate the conventions of *compilatio* for his own literary ends. . . . [Essentially] Chaucer was an author who hid behind the ‘shield and defense’ of the compiler. (*Medieval Theory* 210)

Minnis rightfully points out that Chaucer uses the role of *compiler* as a rhetorical device. However, Geoffrey’s progression towards authority in the *LGW* shows that Chaucer was not simply content with that role. In the line from “Phyllis,” “Trusteth, as in love, no man but me” (2561), Chaucer goes beyond “exploiting the literary form” of *compilatio*, as he ceases being a *compiler* and becomes an *auctor*.

The irony that Geoffrey is better suited to become an *auctor* due to his inexperience may not be standard Chaucerian irony per se, but irony is at its most basic level a reversal. What occurs in Geoffrey over the course of the *LGW* is a reversal in the sense that a figure of ridicule in the Prologue (a mere *compiler* who apparently does not understand his sources) becomes throughout the Legends a voice taking up serious

matters, and ultimately develops into a figure asserting his own authority. And the issue of experience (and its opposite, inexperience) is part of this reversal: the subtle shift expressed in the view that experience/evidence as a way of knowing or of perceiving truth can be superior, not inferior, to authority. Inexperience in love can be both a more suitable basis for trust than experience (in that men with experience in love are men who may have betrayed women; the faithful ones are the exception, not the rule) and a useful “prerequisite” for addressing the issues that the *LGW* raises. In the end, Geoffrey emerges as a champion of women.

The main issues raised in the *LGW*—reliance on experience versus texts, and the antifeminist tradition, among other things—are further developed in “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue” in *The Canterbury Tales*. Whereas the *LGW* does draw attention to these topics, the text functions primarily as a way for Geoffrey to gain authority. While Chaucer nobly gives some of the women in the *LGW* their own voice, it is his Wife of Bath who becomes a fully realized female character, with her own strong voice and opinions. She is aware of the pitfalls associated with relying on texts and old books rather than experience, and she understands the biases and hypocrisy associated with the antifeminist tradition. Rather than dismissing the *LGW* as an incomplete work too strange in content and tone for a modern audience, readers should be recognize it as an important work capable of standing on its own merit, as well as a major stepping-stone towards *The Canterbury Tales*.

NOTES

¹ 1.8.3, pg. 16

² Frank, *Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women*, 11

³ At certain points throughout this chapter both versions of the Prologue will be referenced, as this particular exploration of the *LGW* will not make any assumptions as to why Chaucer returned to the Prologue and made changes, resulting in two separate versions. No content from the F version is revised in such a significant way that the overall argument being made here is affected. The reason or circumstance for Chaucer's revision of the Prologue has produced various hypotheses: e.g., that the F version was written for Queen Anne and the G for Richard II (J.S.P. Tatlock, *The Mind and Art of Chaucer*); the G version seeks to improve organization and clarity over the F (F.N. Robinson, *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd ed);³ the G Prologue eliminates much of F's Christian language (D.D. Griffith, "An Interpretation of Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*"); Chaucer's poetic sensibilities changed, with his revision reflecting as much (Kemp Malone, *Chapters on Chaucer*).³ Of course other hypotheses exist as to why Chaucer rewrote portions of the Prologue, the ones summarized here being the most notable.

⁴ Cleopatra was mentioned with other figures in *The Parliament of Fowls*.

⁵ Frank's discussion of Cleopatra in Dante's *Inferno*.

⁶ Frank considers “Cleopatra” to be a failure based on its poetic execution due mainly to its extreme brevity, which he refers to “as an exercise [in *brevitas*] somewhat ineptly performed” (46). Frank’s view on “Cleopatra” is similar to many of the criticisms of the Legends, which often note that Chaucer seemed bored or weary while writing them, resulting in the terseness and unresolved nature of the *LGW*.

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