

**DIFFERENCE  
AND THE DIFFERENCE IT MAKES:  
SEX AND GENDER IN CHAUCER'S POETRY**

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“My indecision is final,” the movie magnate Sam Goldwyn is reported to have said, and I find the malapropism suitably expressive of Chaucer’s attitude toward sexual difference. My concern is not simply to decide whether Chaucer was or was not “woman’s friend” (as the Scots poet Gavin Douglas put it in the early sixteenth century), but to look at the systems within which a late-mediaeval courtly writer was permitted to be woman’s friend, and the systems within which he was not so permitted. My argument will be that Chaucer both “is and is not” the friend of woman. Some of you will recognize the phrase I borrow from Salman Rushdie, who in turn borrows it from ancient Arabic storytelling. I use it in order to articulate the deep-rooted ambivalence about women that is a structural feature of late-mediaeval culture, providing a *terminus ad quem* beyond which even the most well-intentioned writer cannot pass.

That the culture itself was divided on “the woman question” is evident from social fact and ideological theory. Socially, women were integrated into the work-force in rural and urban communities, contributing their labour to the burgeoning European economy of the high Middle Ages and benefitting from the wealth they helped to create. At the same time they were excluded

from important arenas of social activity and influence: from universities, priesthood, and (with a few exceptions) government.

Ideologically, Christian myth performed a similar double-take on women. On the one hand, Christian ethics maintained the equality of men and women with respect to grace, free will, and salvation. That is why, as Paul admonished the Galatians, "There is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female; for you are all one person in Christ Jesus" (3:28). On the other hand, the story of Eden specified several sorts of difference as permanent consequences of the fall. One is the difference between human beings and animals; as Jahweh says to the serpent, "I will put enmity between . . . your brood and hers. They shall strike at your head, and you shall strike at their heel" (Genesis 3:15). Another is labour and with it (according to Catholic theologians) class difference, for Jahweh destines Adam to "gain your bread by the sweat of your brow." And there is also sex difference and gender difference; that is, difference both biological and social, for to Eve Jahweh says, "I will increase your labour and your groaning, and in labour you shall bear children. You shall be eager for your husband, and he shall be your master." These differences are not correctible historically, according to Catholic doctrine; that is why utopianism, which would erase the consequences of the fall, is potentially heretical.

In order to show this ambivalence at work in Chaucer's poetry, I will offer a reading of the balade from the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*. I will then briefly indicate how the tension between same and different operates in two of Chaucer's better-known works, and lastly indicate why ambivalence is important for critics to acknowledge.

#### I. THE BALADE

The balade is a poetic high-point in the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*. The lyric praises a lady, and its catalogue of ladies who are excelled by the object of praise includes eight of the ten figures treated at greater length in the poem proper.

It is curious, therefore, that at the head of this catalogue of women there stand two men. They are Absolon and Jonathan, in the first and third lines of the poem. Two more men, Demophon and Jason, are introduced toward the end, in stanza 3, balancing the two men of stanza 1 with approximate formal symmetry. What are these male figures doing here, and how do they affect our response to the lyric? They do so, I suggest, in two different and competing ways, depending on our method of interpretation. One effect of their presence is to minimize gender difference; this occurs in a semantic

register. The other is to reaffirm gender difference and female subordination; it occurs on the level of syntax. I will begin with the former as the more typical way of reading a lyric.

Absolon, the son of King David, is adduced as exemplar of beauty for his “gilte tresses clere” (F 249; cf. 2 Samuel 14:25–26), and Jason was also distinguished for his golden hair, as Medea will later note (1672). In stressing the physical beauty of men — and particularly their golden hair, a primary *desideratum* for the aristocratic woman — the balade reverses conventional expectations. It makes a gender-blind point, reminding us that since physical beauty is not limited to women, neither are the attendant difficulties. Men have to take responsibility for their sexual attractiveness, to ensure its proper use, and to resist exploiting the power it confers: these are not merely the problems of femininity. As for Jonathan, David’s intimate friend, he embodies “frendly manere” (F 251; cf. 2 Samuel 18:1), again a quality which, while not exclusively feminine, tended in courtly tradition to be associated with women largely through the example of Bel Accueil, one of the Lady’s most important qualities in the *Roman de la Rose*. The friendship of Jonathan to King David was both personal and political. It transcended family, for Jonathan has constantly to resist his father Saul’s instigation to treason. The example of Jonathan shows that loyalty, like beauty, is not the property of either sex, and therefore neither is disloyalty. (The legends themselves will amply demonstrate these principles.<sup>1</sup>)

On the semantic level, then — considering only the associative or historical meaning of the men’s names — the presence of these names in the balade minimizes gender difference in the interest of moral egalitarianism. Far from “feminizing” the male figures by including them in this catalogue, the effect is, rather, to deconstruct gender by suggesting its irrelevance as an ethical category: a perfectly orthodox procedure.

But how gender-blind really is the balade? The moral life may well be gender-blind but social life is not, and the balade manages to convey both aspects of that dialectic simultaneously. Looking now at the structure, or syntax, of naming in the balade, we find that it reasserts hierarchies which limit the moral egalitarianism of its references. This is because the names constitute a referential network, analogous to the acrostic sometimes concealed in the initial letters of the lines of a mediaeval poem and revealing the author’s or translator’s or recipient’s name.<sup>2</sup> In this case the point is a syntax not of letters but of names, whose relations within standard mediaeval theories of classification, both social and historical, carry the structure of repressive ideology in this short and apparently innocent lyric.

One notes, first, that there are seven names in stanza 1. I will attach a significance to this number only because it seems contextually justifiable to do so. Seven is the number of historical periods in one of Augustine's historical schemes, the one he borrowed from hexameral millennialism and which represented history as a week of ages paralleling the week of creation. This theory appears throughout *The City of God*, most prominently in its closing paragraph. It became a common topos in mediaeval historiography, and there can be little doubt Chaucer was aware of it.<sup>3</sup> This would be a weak argument were it not for other evidence that Augustinian historicism is very much on Chaucer's mind here, as evidenced in the positioning of the seven names.

In accordance with its title, a second historical scheme structures Augustine's great book. This is the parallel alignment, imitated from Eusebius, of the cities of God and of man. The development of the city of God can be traced in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, while the city of man is manifested mainly in pagan/classical, history, each phase of which is contemporaneous with and antithetical to a phase in the city of God. We have, therefore, three major cultural traditions to reckon with in the Augustinian periodical schema: Hebrew, pagan/classical, and Christian. This periodization is incorporated in the structure of the "nine worthies" topos, which always includes three Jewish, three classical, and three Christian heroes; it can be seen, I believe, in Chaucer's *Monk's Tale* as well.<sup>4</sup>

This is the progression followed in the first stanza of Chaucer's balade. We begin with three Old Testament figures; there follow two classical ones; last come two Christian romance heroines, Isolde and Helen. There is no reason to assume, as scholars have always automatically assumed, that this "Eleyne" is Helen of Troy. I propose that we think of her instead as "la belle H  l  ne" of Constantinople, eponymous heroine of an extremely popular French romance of the fourteenth century. H  l  ne's story closely resembles that of Chaucer's Constance. Moreover, like Constance and like Isolde, with whom she is paired here, H  l  ne marries an English king. Her doctrinal credentials are fully validated when her twin sons become saints. The progression of names in this first stanza thus asserts both *ecclesia* and *patria*: orthodox Augustinian historical periodicity culminating in a subtle compliment to the English monarchy. It is a stance, as Chaucer well knew, not always so easy to maintain as in the structure of a short lyric.

Of course, there is no explicit textual assertion about how to interpret this Helen, H  l  ne, or even Elaine: all depends on our interpretative grid or method. If the Augustinian historical schema is granted, then H  l  ne

fits. Indeterminacy of this sort serves to highlight the role of interpretation, the necessary subjective activity of the reader. This becomes a prominent theme in the legends to follow, so that the balade is again paradigmatic of what it precedes: not only in content but in method.

Besides chronological structuring, a hierarchy of social values may be discerned in the placement of names in the balade. This social syntax reaffirms gender relations as a kind of sub-set to the doctrinal hierarchies already posited in the historical periodicity of the names. I used the metaphor “headed” earlier on, and I want now to literalize that metaphor, suggesting that the positioning of male and female figures at the start of the poem represents a “correct” organic structure resembling that of the traditional descriptive blazon of the human (not only the female) body. The blazon always begins with the head and works systematically downward. This is because what is highest is most important and therefore comes first. In the human organism, the position of physical and conceptual primacy is filled by the head, seat of reason which is the highest intellectual capacity. As in the body biological, so in the body politic: what is highest, rules. As the head rules (or should rule) the body, so reason rules the passions, king rules state, and man rules woman.

Hence the balade opens with a man, expands to a man followed by a woman, and then gives a pair of men enclosing — constraining, if you will — a woman. The cluster of three names thus offers a tiny linguistic image of proper leadership and proper control. The poem opens also with the image of a head — Absolon’s head of gilt tresses — as does the traditional blazon. It opens with three Old Testament figures representing temporal priority; they are, moreover, inseparably linked to monarchy, or headship of state. This power-packed opening movement is immediately followed by two examples of marital fidelity (Penelope and Marcia Cato) that extend the political principle into the domestic sphere.

The image of Esther is especially rich in this context, touching as it does all three areas of concern: state, marriage, and individual self-control. (Here I revert to a semantic mode of analysis.) The Book of Esther opens with an act of disobedience: Queen Vashti refuses to come forth at the command of her husband, King Ahasuerus. This misconduct carries potentially disastrous results:

Every woman will come to know what the queen has done, and this will make them treat their husbands with contempt. . . . The great ladies of Persia and Medea, who have heard of the queen’s conduct, will tell all the King’s officers about this day, and there will be endless disrespect and insolence! (Esther 1: 17–18)

The insubordination feared here is at once domestic and political: not only will other women follow Vashti's example against their husbands, but princes may do so against their superior the king. Royal advisors therefore urge that a "better" queen be found so that "all women will give honour to their husbands, high and low alike." The successful candidate is the Jewish maiden Esther, a paragon of obedience, tact, and modesty. Esther does assert herself eventually on behalf of her people, but always using feminine wiles: food, wine, appearance, tears. She achieves a writ of indulgence, the promotion of her deserving relative, and the death of her people's enemies. On every level, then — political, marital, ethical — Esther is represented as a model of proper female conduct. Her story reasserts the importance of gender-role difference (i.e., of specifically feminine behaviour); it reaffirms authority both sexual and social. Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* and *Man of Law's Tale* adopt a similar strategy of sexual politics.

If the first stanza of Chaucer's balade gives us images of headship, rule, and rational behaviour, the second stanza shows what is to be ruled. It opens with the image of a body: "Thy faire body, lat yt nat appere, / Lavyne" (F 256–57). At its heart — that is, in its central line — passion appears: just where it ought to, for the heart is, in mediaeval medical lore, the seat of passion and particularly, though not only, of sexual passion. (We recall the opening of *The Canterbury Tales* with its birds pricked by nature in their "corages.") The "passyoun" here is that of Cleopatra, surely one of the most negatively charged figures in all mediaeval history and legend.<sup>5</sup> Death dominates this stanza as it does the natural body, for of the five ladies named, three were suicides and one was killed as a sacrifice. Moreover, all five are closely associated with warfare or family feud. (One Ottawa commentator observed that if the stories of the ladies in stanza 2 are followed out, several are implicated in the end of a dynasty, people, or era. Though I haven't pursued this interesting angle, it would be consistent with the historical thematic noted above, and it would provide another contrast with ladies from stanza 1 who are responsible for the continuity of a dynasty or people: Esther, Penelope, Hélène. One might add further that all these ladies are pagans, but I would not want to lean too heavily on the "spiritual death" notion.) The figures in stanza 2 therefore lead us to consider the ways of irrational or excessive behaviour both personal and social. In so doing they contrast with the heavily-charged onomastics of control in stanza 1.

Stanza 3 adds nothing to the dialectic of control and subversion already established, but illustrates it in a fairly pedestrian way: the feet, I suppose,

of this small literary body whose structure does, after all, mime that of the conventional courtly blazon. (Nor is it necessary to apologize for etymological wordplay, a standard rhetorical device in classical and mediaeval literatures.)

In such subtle ways does the balade introduce the legends to come, not simply by naming several of the heroines to be represented there, but by showing, in its miniature poetic practice, the stress-ridden and paradoxical relations of men and women, reason and nature, eschatology and social life, form and content, syntax and semantics. In terms of gender, it at once undercuts and reasserts difference. These are the themes that resurface in the individual legends, so that the balade is paradigmatic of the poem as a whole in its interplay of gender-blind and gender-aware strategies. Though I would like to illustrate this pattern from the legends, it is more obvious in two of Chaucer's better-known works. I turn therefore to them in order to indicate how his poetry carries the dialectic of same and different.

## II. DORIGEN AND ALISON

*The Franklin's Tale* opens with a curious readjustment of the requirements of gender and class. A knight loves a lady whose rank is so much higher than his own that he is intimidated; she was

comen of so heigh kynrede  
That wel unnethes dorste this knyght, for drede,  
Telle hire his wo. . . . (V. 735–37)

The knight's fear and "meke obeysaunce" are at odds with the expected social role of a husband — "swich lordshipe as men han over hir wyves" (743). The contradiction is resolved by a vow reversing the conventional order of marriage:

Of his free wyl he swoor hire as a knyght  
That nevere in al his lyf he, day ne nyght,  
Ne sholde upon hym take no maistrie  
Agayn hir wyl, ne kithe hire jalousie,  
But hire obeye, and folwe hir wyl in al. . . . (745–49)

"Day nor night": he will make neither social nor sexual demands against her will (though he had the legal right to do both), nor demonstrate any jealousy. The only reservation is that this agreement will be secret, for the couple are not so foolhardy as to believe that they can safely flaunt their

subversive, inverted relationship. The agreement thus apparently rectifies the sexual double standard by eliminating oppressive husbandly authority.

By the end of the tale, however, this egalitarianism has failed. Dorigen has proved unable to navigate the black rocks of social life — for the ardent squire Aurelius not only does illusory magic with those rocks, he *is* those rocks in another register. Dorigen's prayer (865–93) reveals her inability to comprehend the natural order of things, the necessary evils that exist in the world. She would re-create the world without rocks just as she would re-create marriage without husbandly authority. There is nothing opportunistic in her utopian impulses, for deep down Dorigen is a good and conventional wife, only a little self-indulgent and over-subjective, as we see in her demand for theodicy, in her verbal play with Aurelius, and in her lengthy melodramatic consideration of suicide (1354–456). Finally it is Arveragus who must resolve the dilemma for her. When Arveragus reasserts the traditional husbandly role he does so in uncompromisingly authoritative terms:

“I yow forbede, up peyne of deeth,  
That nevere, whil thee lasteth lyf ne breeth,  
To no wight telle thou of this aventure. . . .” (1481–83)

We learn that the couple live happily ever after, but not whether their original marriage contract remains in force. In any case, we have been invited first to sympathize with the impulse to an ideal sexual egalitarianism, then reminded in the narrative that social life is not after all ideal.

A similar pattern can be observed in the Wife of Bath's Prologue, indeed in a single line from the Prologue. Telling of her fifth husband Jankyn, who would preach at her nightly from misogynist texts, Alison says:

For trusteth wel, it is an impossible  
That any clerk wol speke good of wyves,  
But if it be of hooly seintes lyves,  
Ne of noon oother womman never the mo.  
Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?  
By God, if wommen hadde writen stories,  
As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,  
They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse  
Than al the mark of Adam may redresse. (III. 688–96)

This is a serious and radical critique of the exclusion of women from cultural production. Yet in the process of its own rhetoric it negates itself,



demonstrating the recuperation of female desire (the desire to write, in this case) for the male-dominated cultural economy.

Who painted the lion? The question poses the problem of subject and object in cultural or ideological production, referring to an incident where a man and a lion are walking, see a painting in which a man is shown killing a lion, and briefly discuss the production of this picture. The incident is treated in a fable by Marie de France, a twelfth-century woman writer who did seize the means of cultural production (and whose work Chaucer is known to have used elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>)

What did Marie produce when she “painted the lion?”<sup>7</sup> The answer to the lion’s question — “Who painted this picture?” — is that a man painted the picture, with his ingenuity (*engin*); the lion agrees wholeheartedly. How could it do otherwise? For lions can’t paint and never will. It is not their nature to do so. Further episodes in the fable make the point that the brute force of lions must be properly channeled or it will be merely anarchic and destructive. Lion and man may have a mutually beneficial relationship, but the proper hierarchal order must be maintained, with intellect in control. It is a perfectly conventional mediaeval moral, and if allegorized as a fable about men and women and cultural production (as the Wife of Bath quite legitimately allegorizes it) it yields a perfectly conventional message. Woman as lion is precisely woman as not-fully-human, woman as requiring control by a superior intellect, woman as deficient in the means of serious cultural production. That is what Marie produced and I would argue that it is what the Wife of Bath produces when she in her turn temporarily seizes the means of cultural production in her recital: quotations that turn against themselves, and the tale of a rapist who beats the rap. I do not doubt it tickled Chaucer’s fancy to have his rebellious woman speaker adduce a woman writer whose painting of the lion was the same as it ever had been.

### III. THE DIFFERENCE IT MAKES

In the Chaucerian text, then, affirmation and denial of sexual difference come as closely bound as true and false tidings from the House of Rumour, which, “compounded / Togeder fle for oo tydynge” (*HF* 2108–09). I want to conclude by saying briefly why I think it matters that ambivalence be acknowledged.

It is sometimes tempting to see Chaucer as outright misogynist, especially when we recall his implication in the *raptus* of Cecily Chaumpaigne and notice the prominent role assigned to rape in his work. Nonetheless,

this position (which I have held in the past) minimizes two things. One is the immense creative power the poet has invested in many of his women characters; the other is the real social productivity of women in English and continental economic life. It is therefore important both aesthetically and historically to understand how far Chaucer was from a simple-minded essentialist clerical misogyny that would portray women — “Woman” — as inherently passive or inherently wicked.

On the other hand, to see Chaucer as truly the “friend of woman,” truly an effacer of gender difference, is to discount the influence on the poet of conservatizing tendencies in his environment. I mean particularly the exclusion of women from university, priesthood, and government, and the ways in which Christian ideology justified these social exclusions. Given the cultural facts, it would be difficult for anyone to be “woman’s friend” in any sense acceptable to moderns, or in any but a severely qualified way.

The poet both “is and is not” woman’s friend; that is because his culture both “is and is not” favourable to women. It is uncomfortable to inhabit a paradox, but we still do, and I suspect that acknowledging it is necessary to getting out of it.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I offer a detailed reading of the legends in *The Naked Text: Chaucer’s Legend of Good Women and the Making of a Medieval English Fiction*. Forthcoming. Quotations from Chaucer’s poetry are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. Larry D. Benson, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), and those from scripture are taken from the New English Bible.

<sup>2</sup> Also relevant to my syntactic reading here is Roger Dragonetti’s demonstration, in *La Vie de la Lettre au Moyen Age* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), of the importance of appearance and lay-out on the manuscript page.

<sup>3</sup> During the fourteenth century, for instance, Nicholas Trivet and Thomas Waleys commented on *The City of God*, and Ranulf Higden used the hexameral theory as structural principle in his immensely popular encyclopedic world-history, the *Polychronicon*. *The City of God* is alluded to in the *Legend* (1689–91) because “the grete Austyn” there discusses the case of Lucretia (in lines 18–19).

<sup>4</sup> Lucifer provides an archetypal prologue to the series; Hercules (grouped with Adam and Samson) was often seen, in the exegetical tradition, as a type of Samson; the middle or pagan section mixes “Assyrian” and Latin figures; and the modern instances should come at the end, as Donald K. Fry has argued in “The Ending of the *Monk’s Tale*,” *JEGP* 71 (1972): 355–68.

<sup>5</sup> See Beverly Taylor, “The Medieval Cleopatra: the classical and medieval tradition of Chaucer’s *Legend of Cleopatra*,” *JMRS* 7 (1977): 249–69.

<sup>6</sup> In the *Nun's Priest's Tale*; cf. Robert Pratt, "Three Old French Sources of the Nonnes Preestes Tale," *Speculum* 47 (1972): 422–44, 646–68.

<sup>7</sup> A more detailed consideration of Marie's fable appears in my article "Strategies of Silence in the Wife of Bath's Recital," in S. Delany, *Medieval Literary Politics: Shapes of Ideology* (Manchester, 1990) and reprinted in *Exemplaria* 2 (1990): 49–69.