

MEDIEVAL ATTEMPTS AT FEMINISM:
THE FEMINIST EFFORTS OF GEOFFREY CHAUCER

by

Olivia Bradbury

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ABSTRACT

Geoffrey Chaucer is one of the best-known writers of the English Middle Ages. As such, his work has been the subject of much study and discussion for centuries, with many schools of criticism analyzing it through their respective lenses. Within the realm of feminist criticism and theory, Chaucer's writing has often been a point of contention as many have debated whether he is a feminist or antifeminist. In this thesis, I propose to analyze and discuss three of Chaucer's major works—*The Book of the Duchess*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and *The Legend of Good Women*—focusing particularly on his depiction of female characters and his portrayals of gender. My goal is to show that the feminist-antifeminist binary is too narrow-minded a system of categorization in the case of Chaucer. Instead, I suggest that the label best suited to Chaucer is that of “proto-feminist,” an individual who, while they might not meet modern standards of feminism, was more progressive than the standards of their own era.

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INTRODUCTION

Geoffrey Chaucer is indisputably one of the most prominent writers of the English Middle Ages. Both the man and his work have been discussed and analyzed from innumerable perspectives and through many different lenses. Despite the many years of Chaucerian scholarship, academic interest in the medieval author has not waned. As time passes and new scholars and critics come along they offer their own views on him and his work. One particular lens through which Chaucer's work has been viewed more and more frequently is the feminist lens. Indeed, the analysis of Chaucer's portrayal and treatment of gender in his work has been the subject of discussion and debate, with many disagreeing on whether the man himself was or was not a feminist. It is a question I myself pondered during my undergraduate years, but I came to learn that such a query is not a simple one to answer. After all, the definition of feminism can change with the passing of time, and the belief of what qualifies as feminist can differ from person to person. Thus, I came to realize that trying to use the binary of feminist and antifeminist to categorize Chaucer is unproductive. Instead, I assert that, if Chaucer is to be given any label, it should be that of proto-feminist.

Carolyn Dinshaw describes feminism as "the ideology of a modern social movement for the advancement of women, taking shape (in its Western European and US forms) in the eighteenth century and based on principles of equality and emancipation in secular societies" ("Medieval Feminist Criticism" 11); taking this definition into account, it should be acknowledged that our current form of feminism did not exist in the distant past, including the Middle Ages. For this reason I believe it is misguided to label Chaucer an antifeminist for failing to meet the expectations of twenty-first century feminism, to adhere to standards that did not yet

exist in his lifetime. With that said, rather than declaring that he was antifeminist or that he, by our current standards, should be considered a feminist, I opt instead to suggest he was a proto-feminist. This is a label frequently given to early feminist thinkers (Ferguson 8). Put simply, a proto-feminist would not meet today's general feminist standards, but would be deemed progressive for their own time. Some scholars have some concerns about the terms "proto-feminism" and "proto-feminist". Margaret Ferguson, for example, worries that the prefix implies that feminism "has a single, linear history" (8). Noah D. Guynn worries the terms could diminish the feminist strides, particularly of women, that have been taken throughout history (Guynn 220). My opinion, however, differs. I do not view the term "proto-feminism" as being separate from general feminism. Instead, I consider it to be a clarifying term that indicates a modern perspective considering historical feminist attitudes and actions. With this belief in mind, I assert that Chaucer himself was a proto-feminist: a man progressive for his era who, in his writing, went beyond the medieval cultural and societal standards he knew.

While many women in the Middle Ages could read and write and both owned and enjoyed books, men still dominated literature in the late medieval English era ("Medieval Feminist Criticism" 12-3). Regarding gendered views and expectations of the time, Delony says the following:

Male voices throughout the Middle Ages (and beyond) judged women inferior, blamed women for sexual desire, both licit and illicit, created an impossible role model, and based gendered expectations on this unreasonable reasoning. Such reasoning, while false, becomes marginally understandable in light of the fact that medieval theologians were members of a church hierarchy which demanded celibacy of its clergymen and women (23-4).

It is no surprise, then, that such misogynistic views were expressed often in the male-dominated realm of medieval literature. While women had little opportunity to write literature in medieval society, they were undeniably affected by it. The Wife of Bath, a character from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, discusses this struggle. She tells the other characters how she was tormented daily by her husband joyfully reading aloud from a collection of stories about bad wives. Eventually, at wit's end, she ripped out the book's pages and hit her husband "on the cheke" (CT III.792). Because of this depiction of texts being used to harm or oppress women, some people consider the Wife of Bath to be a study in feminist literary criticism from Chaucer ("Medieval Feminist Criticism" 12). Chaucer seems to be aware of this issue women face in the "Wife of Bath's Prologue", and shows further awareness of it in other texts. Dinshaw contends that Chaucer seems to see how antifeminism can harm both men and women, and that he imagines not a radical overhaul of the medieval societal structure but rather a reform ("Medieval Feminist Criticism" 16). While such a perspective may not seem impressively progressive to modern readers, it was quite a liberal stance for Chaucer's time. In order to support my view that Chaucer should be classified as a proto-feminist, I will be exploring three of his major works: *The Book of the Duchess*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and *The Legend of Good Women*.

CHAPTER 1 – THE BOOK OF THE DUCHESS

The term “proto-feminism” can be problematized, as both Ferguson and Guynn note. However, in my view Chaucer qualifies for such a designation; indeed, it seems a more appropriate label for him. *The Book of the Duchess* is the earliest of the three primary works I will be analyzing in my efforts to showcase Chaucer’s role as a proto-feminist. Estimated to have been written in the late 1360s, *The Book of the Duchess* is often considered Chaucer’s first poem and is “often recognized as establishing from the outset many (if not all) of the themes, concerns, and authorial strategies which characterize the rest of Chaucer’s oeuvre” (Ross 71). My aim is to highlight how certain elements of *The Book of the Duchess* persist in Chaucer’s later writing, as well as how his literary tendencies changed. With this in mind, *The Book of the Duchess* seems more like a foundation rather than a mold.

The general consensus about *The Book of the Duchess* is that it was written in memory of the late Blanche of Lancaster, the wife of Chaucer’s patron, John of Gaunt (Bahr 43). As James Simpson notes in *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, *The Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer’s earliest datable work, and “The Complaint of Chaucer to his Purse”, one of his latest datable works, are the only pieces of Chaucerian poetry that have explicit patronal references (Simpson 254), suggesting that the inspiration and purpose behind these poems differ from the rest of the works in Chaucer’s repertoire. However, the actual details of the reason behind the poem’s creation are not completely clear. Critics and historians are uncertain as to whether John of Gaunt actually commissioned Chaucer to write the poem in memory of the late Blanche, or whether Chaucer opted to do so of his own accord (Liendo 406). It is clear that the story within is meant to serve as a sort of tribute to both the deceased Blanche and her grieving husband. Their

situation is reflected by the characters of Lady White and the Black Knight, as well as by the motif of grief found in the text, which I will discuss in further detail. While there is some debate over whether Chaucer composed *The Book of the Duchess* as a selfless consolation piece for Gaunt or an opportune work of self-promotion for himself (Foster 189), the poet's true intentions in writing the poem are of little consequence to my discussion: knowing to what and to whom Chaucer wished to bring attention is enough.

The Book of the Duchess is, at its core, a tale of grief. This is the first and perhaps most prevalent aspect of the poem. Seeing how grief is experienced and expressed by the characters, particularly while taking their gender into account, will help reveal the extent of Chaucer's feminism at the time of the poem's composition. By comparing this text to later works, I hope to highlight a sort of evolution. In particular, I will address the grief of Alcyone and the Black Knight, a woman and a man respectively, each a protagonist of two separate narratives within the poem. By comparing how they are depicted, I hope to illustrate some of the differences in how Chaucer presents his male and female characters, particularly when it comes to the depiction of and reaction to their grief. After I've concluded with the portrayal of grief, I will move onto the objectification of female characters in the poem. Objectification in this instance will include an examination of the emphasis on physical beauty, generous character descriptions that seem better suited to a flawless otherworldly entity than a human, and passive roles. For this I will focus mainly on Alcyone and White, two female characters. Finally, although the text may be the earliest of his poems, and potentially one where Chaucer's feminist criticism is least apparent, I also want to address an area in which he goes against the grain and writes against the masculine ideals of his own time via the feminization of his male characters, and of the Black Knight in particular. By exploring each of these aspects of *The Book of the Duchess*, I propose to showcase

the foundation Chaucer established for his writing career, and thereafter I will explain how he and his writing habits changed as he expanded his body of writings.

1.1 *Grief*

David Fine refers to *The Book of the Duchess* as “a vision of loss...[which] attempts to give voice to the ineffable maladies of melancholia. The poem desperately seeks consolation for love’s losses, to ‘knowe and understonde’ earthly woe” (Fine 40). Regardless of how selfless or self-serving Chaucer’s creation of *The Book of the Duchess* may have been, it was indisputably prompted by the passing of Blanche, the Duchess of Lancaster. It is intended to memorialize her while also consoling and/or flattering her mourning husband, John of Gaunt. The poem is told from the point of view of an unnamed narrator who is plagued by sleeplessness:

I ne may, ne nyght ne morwe,
 Slepe; and thus melancolye
 And drede I have for to dye.
 Defaute of slep and hevynesse
 Hath sleyn my spirit of quyknesse
 That I have lost al lustyhede.
 Suche fantasies ben in myn hede
 So I not what is best to doo

(*BD* 22-9).

According to this narrator, insomnia has ailed him for years. Without any obvious solution in sight, he bids a servant to bring him a book. The servant brings him Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, which includes the story of Alcyone and Seys.

The tale of Alcyone and Seys is one of lost love, tragedy, and heartbreak. The narrator, who is himself trying to escape his own melancholy, finds himself reading about other suffering individuals: Seys and Alcyone, two characters from Greek mythology. Chaucer describes the circumstances of Seys's death in a shipwreck, then moves on to discussing his wife, Alcyone:

This lady, that was left at hom;
 Hath wonder that the king ne com
 Hom, for it was a longe terme.
 Anon her herte began to [erme];
 And for that her thoughte evermo
 It was not wele [he dwelte] so,
 She longed so after the king
 That certes it were a pitous thing
 To telle her hertely sorowful lif
 That she had, this noble wif,
 For him, alas, she loved alderbest

(BD 77-87).

Chaucer makes sure to emphasize Alcyone's devotion to and grief for her husband early in this section of the poem. She has sent people to search for Seys, but to no avail. Her worry leaves her sleepless, not unlike the narrator. In her desperation, she prays to the goddess Juno to give her news of her husband's status. Juno decides to heed the request, instructing Morpheus, the god of sleep, to enter and reanimate Seys's body. Morpheus does as told, and goes to see Alcyone. Morpheus—or, perhaps more accurately, Seys—informs her of his passing and instructs her to find and bury his body. Arthur W. Bahr notes that Chaucer's version of Seys is much more

sympathetic to his wife than other depictions. Whereas Ovid's Seys criticizes Alcyone for failing to save him with her prayers, Chaucer's Seys is much gentler while telling his wife the painful truth (Bahr 46). He keeps the explanation straightforward and honest but also softens it with affectionate language for the sake of Alcyone (Horowitz 263). Moreover, Seys tells his wife that he does not want her to mourn, saying "I praye God youre sorwe lysesse" (210). However, Alcyone does not fulfill Seys's request to retrieve and bury his body, nor his request to stop grieving. Instead, after learning of her husband's death, she "swoons" and later dies from her heartbreak.

The narrator is in a position to empathize with Alcyone in the sense that he is also suffering. More than simply being sleepless, the narrator also seems to suffer from a sort of melancholy and fear of death (John M. Hill 43); these ailments may all be connected, as well, with his insomnia resulting from his mental strife or vice versa. Seeing Alcyone's sorrow, he is reminded of his own. However, he is more preoccupied with his own situation than hers, spending little time acknowledging her death and instead opting to plea with Morpheus to put him to sleep. John M. Hill offers an explanation for the narrator's behaviour:

Unable to countenance the death of another, even in story, he perhaps hysterically seeks further diversion (hoping to cure himself); in seeking diversion he seeks some control of his fear and, ultimately, his malady. Concern for his sleepless, dizzy state turned him to books in the first place, and now his incredibly comic response may signal a further attempt to exert some control over his fears and his malady (44).

Chaucer's depiction of Alcyone's grief is something that some critics have deemed subpar or limited; Bahr, for example, notes that Alcyone does not get to fulfill her husband's last wish, and that her lamentation is interrupted by the narrator, who later permits the Black Knight

to express his own (48-9). The best way to explore the assertions that Alcyone's grief is poorly depicted is by considering the portrayal of another mourning character in *The Book of the Duchess*: the Black Knight.

After reading the story of Alcyone and Seys and begging aloud for Morpheus or Juno to bless him with sleep, the narrator finds his wish granted. Falling asleep, he finds himself in a dream. Here he encounters the grieving Black Knight sitting against a tree in the woods. The man is visibly distraught, as the narrator's initial description immediately makes clear :

[H]e saw me nought;
 For-why he heng hys hed adoun,
 And with a dedly sorwful soun
 He made of rym ten vers or twelve
 Of a compleynte to hymselfe —
 The moste pitee, the moste rowthe,
 That ever I herde; for, by my trowthe,
 Hit was gret wonder that Nature
 Myght suffre any creature
 To have such sorwe and be not ded"

(*BD* 460-9).

The Knight is singing a song of sadness. Given the purpose of the text, both tales are relevant as they are both stories of grief, but how does Alcyone's grief compare to that of the Knight? The most obvious difference between Alcyone and the Knight's experiences is that the former dies while the latter lives. However, one must keep in mind that, with Alcyone's tale, Chaucer is retelling a long-established myth. On the other hand, the Knight's story is an original narrative

created by Chaucer, meant to represent John of Gaunt's grieving process after the death of his wife, Blanche; the fact that the Knight's lover is called White, the English equivalent of the French word "blanche", makes the symbolism obvious. It therefore makes sense that Alcyone, a character in an already established narrative, dies as she does in other depictions, whereas the Knight, representative of John of Gaunt who was still alive at the time, does not. However, many critics have noted the shortcomings in Chaucer's depiction of Alcyone's grief, and how it pales in comparison to that of the Knight's.

Jenny Adams draws a parallel between Alcyone and the Knight and their attempts to cope with their grief and beg for their respective lovers back, the former through prayer and the latter through song (259). During his lamentation, the Knight asks Death why they did not take him when they took his lady. He then visibly appears to grow ill and weak, becoming sickly pale within seconds. This prompts the narrator to approach and inquire about what is ailing the man. The Knight does not immediately respond to the narrator, as he is in a swoon similar to that experienced by Alcyone (Bahr 50). However, he eventually responds, thus beginning an exchange during which the narrator is exceedingly oblivious.

Some scholars have noted that the narrator seems to take the Knight's suffering more seriously than that of Alcyone. There are some who believe his request of Morpheus's aid suggests that he was so deeply moved by Alcyone's situation that he was cured of his apathy (Fumo 46-47). This would suggest that he was genuinely emotionally affected by her story. However, there are others who view his request as self-concerned or even comedic and consider it disrespectful to Alcyone and dismissive of her pain (John M. Hill 44). In comparison, when the narrator finds the lamenting Black Knight, he persistently questions him, wishing to know the cause of his grief. He tries to encourage him, to lift his spirits, until the Knight eventually

informs him of White's death, at which point the narrator further offers his condolences with his final words: "Is that youre los? Be God, hyt ys routhe!" (1310). In Alcyone's tale, the narrator is more concerned for himself, but in the second story he is most concerned for the Knight's well-being.

Many critics have discussed the narrator's reaction to the Knight's misery. Despite the many implications that the Knight's lady, White, is no longer in the world, the obtuse narrator fails to realize that she is not just absent, but dead. The Knight continues to allude to the lady's death, using a chess metaphor, referring to her as a queen piece he lost in a match (Edwards 196); the fact that black knights are also part of a typical chess set makes this metaphor even more symbolic of their relationship. One can identify similarities between the Knight and the narrator. Both are more preoccupied with their imaginations than with reality, and possibly even use these imaginations to avoid their real-life situations (Edwards 196). Not only are they both taking refuge within dreams, both are also plagued by thoughts of death (Fester 6). However, the Knight's figurative language and implications go over the narrator's head. Therefore, the Knight is eventually forced to admit in plain terms that White has died. One could suggest that the narrator's ignorance is what forces the Knight to fully accept his reality.

The narrator's reaction to the Knight supports the assertion that the text was written to console John of Gaunt. The narrator, in his obliviousness, is a humbler character than the Knight, who is poetically mourning his lost love. If the Knight is meant to represent John of Gaunt, it is only reasonable that he be given a noble depiction. Making the narrator less sharp and tactful in comparison serves to further emphasize the Knight's nobility. In addition to his obliviousness, the narrator is sympathetic, more so than during Alcyone's part of the text. This, again, could be an example of deference towards nobility. Phillipa Hardman effectively sums up this idea:

The Book of the Duchess is about the importance of compassion as a response to tragic loss, uniting the nobility of the Man in Black's grief for a noble, virtuous lost love with the nobility of pity in the 'gentil herte' of the observing dreamer. The poem creates a noble community of compassion which the reader is invited to enter, by responding to the Man in Black's presentation of himself as an image of sorrow available to all 'whooso [sic] wol assay' themselves (221-2).

By extension, the sympathy the narrator shows the Knight could be considered a representation of the sympathy Chaucer wishes to convey to his patron. This, as well as the contrast set between the tactless narrator and eloquent knight, is an indicator of the knight's nobility as the literary parallel of an existing nobleman, John of Gaunt.

The similarities between the Black Knight and the narrator have been noted, but what has been just as frequently discussed amongst scholars is the comparison of Alcyone to the Black Knight. Alcyone's story is told prior to the Black Knight's, and is relevant to the reader due to the motifs of sleeplessness and thoughts of death. However, her story serves mostly as a setup for the narrator to bargain with one of the mentioned mythological characters and, as Elizabeth Liendo phrases it, "the text uses Alcyone, nude and asleep, to prefigure the bereaved knight who is made vulnerable by his wife's death" (410). In other words, she is a means for the male characters in the story to express their own thoughts and feelings, even while her own are silenced. With this in mind, I would like to move on to the element of objectification.

1.2 Objectification

Objectification is an issue present-day readers continue to encounter in modern literature. For the sake of this thesis, I shall define objectification as a prioritization of beauty, a silencing of voice,

and/or a reduction of one's role. It is possible for any person, real or fictional, to be objectified, but both in fiction and reality it is an issue most often experienced by women. Chaucer's work is no exception. In particular, I will be exploring the objectification of Alcyone, White and—by extension of White—Blanche of Lancaster.

I will begin with Alcyone, who is the only one of the three women mentioned to actually appear in *The Book of the Duchess*. The most obvious example of her objectification is Chaucer's physical description of her:

she heng down the hed
 And fel a-swowne as cold as ston.
 Hyr women kaught hir up anoon
 And broghten hir in bed al naked

(BD 122-5).

In contrast, the Knight is “clothed al in blak” (457), which is the reason he is commonly referred to as the Black Knight. The woman is “naked” and therefore physically as well as emotionally vulnerable, whereas the man is only vulnerable emotionally. Moreover, while nudity is not inherently erotic, the acknowledgement of Alcyone's nudity is arguably an unnecessary detail and could be inferred as sexualizing imagery despite the main purpose of the text being memorialization and condolences, especially given that, as I will address, Chaucer chooses to change Ovid's telling of the story in other ways. However, the objectification of Alcyone goes deeper than appearances; it also involves the silencing of her.

As I have already discussed, Alcyone acts as a sort of prefigure for the Knight. Her story of grief helps solidify the theme of the text and leads the narrator to audibly lament his own troubles. The narrator does not offer her as much sympathy as he does the Knight. As soon as

Alcyone is confronted by the truth of her husband's demise, the poem moves on to her death. Arthur Bahr observes that this is "a remarkably sudden conclusion to a tale that has occupied the Narrator for 150 lines, particularly considering that whereas Chaucer allows Alcyone a single plaintive word, Ovid grants her twenty-three lines" (47). Not only has Chaucer condensed Alcyone's tale, he has also almost entirely silenced her. Seys—or, Morpheus possessing Seys—is allowed to convey his message and comfort Alcyone, but in Chaucer's version she cannot voice her own grievances despite the fact that an older, well-known text permitted her to do so. This is, of course, followed by the peculiar scene in which the narrator tries to plea with Morpheus for his own sake, going further into detail about his own afflictions. It is possible that Chaucer's intent in disallowing Alcyone the chance to lament was to emphasize the lamentation of the Knight. With no other lamentation with which to compare it, the Knight's grief is highlighted, further flattering Chaucer's patron, John of Gaunt, whom the character represents (Bahr 49).

To summarize, in the following ways, Alcyone is objectified: her nudity is noted while her male counterpart is described as clothed; she is used less as a character and more as a narrative device to further the narrative of a male character; she is virtually silenced by the male author; and she is more or less ignored by the male narrator who is more concerned for himself. Taking all of this into consideration, one can see that she is given less consideration and respect than her male counterpart, the Knight, both by the author and the narrator. She exists passively, while the men in the text—Seys/Morpheus, the narrator, the Knight—speak and act with purpose. However, Alcyone is also the woman with the *most* agency in *The Book of the Duchess*, because the two other women who are relevant to the text—White and Blanche—do not even appear within the work.

David J. Fine states that early feminist readings of *The Book of the Duchess* “tend to center on Lady White. Often this criticism discusses White’s absent body, the Ideal Lady through whom the dreamer and the man in black renegotiate their masculinity” (39). I will later address the issue of masculinity in regard to the male characters, but I would first like to, as Fine notes of early feminist readings, focus on White. To pay tribute to Blanche of Lancaster, whom White represents, and to depict the grief of her husband, John of Gaunt, Chaucer has the Knight speak about her in length. However, White does not appear in person. While this is not necessarily surprising given that she is meant to represent a deceased woman, the way in which she is discussed is something to note, in particular the clear emphasis placed on her beauty.

The most obvious element of White's objectification is the emphasizing of her beauty. Such an element is commonplace in medieval literature, especially when spoken by a doting or mourning lover. Many lines are spent describing her physical appearance:

Ryght faire shuldres and body long
 She had, and armes, every lyth
 Fattyssh, flesshy, not gret therwith;
 Ryght white handes, and nayles rede;
 Rounde brestes; and of good brede
 Hyr hippes were; a streight flat bak.
 I knew on hir noon other lak
 That al hir lymmes nere pure sewyng
 In as fer as I had knowyng

(*BD* 952-60).

In this short passage many of White body parts are named and praised, particularly those to do with beauty, sexuality, and fertility. She is said to have fair shoulders and white hands, indicating a light complexion which would have been associated with beauty both in medieval literature and society. The text also describes White as having round breasts and hips of a good breadth; these body parts are often sexualized and are also associated with fertility, with hips connected to giving birth and breasts to feeding children. Furthermore, her body is described as fatty and fleshy rather than thin, another possible indicator of health and fertility. Fertility has historically been associated with feminine value and appeal, so one could make the argument that the focus on beauty, sexual attractiveness and fertility is meant to highlight all the ways in which White is desirable. Yet it is not the acknowledgement of her physical loveliness alone that exhibits the extent of her objectification: the assertions about her perfection do so as well.

The Knight tells the narrator that he did not know White to have any flaws in her physical appearance. This is something he alludes to more than once in the text, such as when he calls her face “alderbest” (907) and Nature’s “chef patron of beaute” (910). The insistence upon a woman’s ethereal beauty—a trope called “superlative beauty” that is often found in medieval literature (Martin 49)—and the value clearly placed on it within the text makes White feel less like a person and more like an ethereal entity of some sort. Some may view this as a negative portrayal and assert that the constant references to perfection depersonalize White, rendering her even more of an object to be mourned and longed for than she already was. Others might see it as a positive portrayal; an ethereal description could imply someone who is even greater than human, which could be a respectful compliment for a deceased individual. In fact, some scholars weigh in on the description of White and claim it is in fact a faithful tribute to Blanche of Lancaster. Marjorie Anderson notes that Chaucer would have been fairly familiar with her as she

was his patron's wife, and that the description "seems like a realistic portrait of a known individual; certainly, the conventional heroine of the romances did not have broad hips and fleshy arms" (158). Considering this, it should be acknowledged that Chaucer appears to be exploring beyond typical medieval literary standards of beauty in the poem, potentially to more accurately pay tribute to Blanche. However, the overvaluing of physical beauty in women that was typical of literature of the Middle Ages remains.

The emphasis placed on White's perfection goes even deeper than her physical appearance. It also extends to her character. Much as he does in regard to her beauty, the Knight does not neglect to speak at length about White's moral goodness. He states the following:

I saugh never yet a lesse
 Harmful than she was in doynge.
 I sey nat that she ne had knowynge
 What harm was, or elles she
 Had koud no good, so thinketh me.

(*BD* 994-8).

He also asserts that his words are not opinion, but are rather fact, and that everyone who knew White thought as fondly and flatteringly of her (Tasioulas 127). Apparently, just as her beauty was beyond compare, White was also unwaveringly kind and virtuous. This concept of complete perfection is even implied by her name as the colour white has long been symbolic of purity and goodness not only in art but in society. The colour has also long been associated with the idea of a person being "fair" in appearance. By calling her White, Chaucer denotes that she is both fair in beauty and good in character (Manning 100). However, this idealistic depiction of White once again depersonalizes her in a sense as she is made to sound almost inhumanly flawless. Through

the Knight's description of her, she becomes less and less of a person and more of an abstract ideal or thought. She is, in this way, othered from the characters of the narrator and Knight. They are people, and she is not. Stephen Manning suggests that "since White is the embodiment of all that is excellent in courtly love, the loss by extension becomes the world's, which now lacks these excellences" (Manning 104); taking this into consideration, it seems reasonable to question whether what is being mourned is White herself or merely the qualities she possessed that brought pleasure to others. The Knight's lamentation could simply be a means of expressing his love for his deceased paramour, but it could also be viewed as a selfish expression of self-pity for what he and those who favoured White have lost.

As White is meant to represent the late Blanche of Lancaster, I would be remiss not to discuss the ways in which Blanche herself was potentially objectified by the text. Unlike the aforementioned figures of Alcyone and White, Blanche existed in real life, and is only symbolized in *The Book of the Duchess* through White; Blanche does not appear in the text as herself. The treatment of Blanche can therefore aid one in seeing that the objectification found in medieval literature is not unlike that which could be found in medieval society. Anderson describes Blanche as follows:

Daughter and wife, respectively, of two of the most powerful nobles of fourteenth-century England, daughter-in-law of one king and mother of another, Blanche of Lancaster is known to the modern world mainly because two poets, Chaucer and Froissart, were inspired to write of her beauty and her virtues (152).

He goes on to explain that more objective historical records do not provide much information about Blanche, and that her role in history has been more or less diminished over time; the best-

known record of her existence is the literary tributes written for her by famous writers of her time.

The information noted above reveals the societal objectification of Blanche. Although she had many ties to nobility and even royalty, her historical existence is largely overshadowed by her male relatives and the poets who wrote about her. It should also be noted that these same poets were apparently inspired to write about her because of her virtues and beauty; this relates to what has been said about White, that her depiction in *The Book of the Duchess* heavily prioritizes beauty and presents her as an almost inhuman model of goodness and perfection. In the fourteenth century, writers also focused on such qualities of Blanche; her charitable and religious activities in particular are well-documented despite the relative inadequacy of the historical record that has survived (Anderson 155). As far as her beauty goes, both Chaucer and Jean Froissart's works about Blanche were partially inspired by Guillaume de Machaut's *Fontaine Amoureuse* (Kittredge 1); in his *Le joli buisson de jonee*, Froissart writes that "Elle morut jone et jolie" (246, qtd. in Anderson 159), meaning she died young and pretty. One of the sections that particularly inspired Chaucer was Machaut's description of the lady. Brewer notes that, although Chaucer certainly used this passage as a reference, he omits many of the physical details Machaut mentions and alters the description to make it more indicative of Blanche's moral attributes, as well as adding some physical descriptors absent in Machaut's work, such as her fair shoulders and broad hips ("The Ideal of Feminine Beauty in Medieval Literature" 263-4). In doing this, Chaucer offers his own subjective imagining of her beauty and reemphasizes her flawless character. Some scholars believe it is likely that Chaucer met Blanche in person (Horowitz). In that case, it is possible his depiction of White comes partly from his own perception and memories of Blanche. However, he was likely also taking creative liberty with

the portrayal, idealizing Blanche through the perfection of White and making her worthy of the immense grief of John as emphasized and expressed by the Man in Black (Manning 89-90). Chaucer also embellishes the description with conventional details often found in courtly romance, such as red nails and a straight, flat back (“The Ideal of Feminine Beauty in Medieval Literature” 264). Therefore, while it is possible Chaucer may have seen Blanche in person, the physical description of White likely comes predominantly from his own imaginings of idealistic beauty and his knowledge of courtly literary conventions.

The character of White is not entirely accurate to that of Blanche. Again, the inhuman level of perfection she is said to occupy would arguably be unattainable for any real person. The text turns Blanche from a person into an abstract, idealistic figure. However, it must be said that such a thing would not be out of place in Chaucer’s environment. The traditions of courtly love, particularly in literature, often involved the flattery of a desired lady’s character (Manning 99). The perfect description of White is meant to be respectful praise for Blanche. Yet, no matter how good the intentions may be, one can take issue with this as the poems are the most prevalent and persistent remainder of society’s memory of Blanche of Lancaster. Historical records leave her in the shadow of the men in her family, and while her actions within the context of charity and religion were documented, there is not enough information recorded about her to get a clear picture of who she was (see Anderson, *passim*). Therefore, the poems of writers such as Chaucer become the best representations of her memory. The problem that arises from this is explained well by Corrine Saunders:

The reconstruction of Blanche paints her as the ideal lady, embodying all courtly virtues, and it also becomes an inset-narrative depicting not just her beauty, but her embodied self...The tale of love and loss is reenacted through the imagines summoned up from the

memory of the Man in Black, in turn stored in the narrator's memory, and eventually written down to enter the memories of the poem's readers (18).

Objectification is an issue that still plagues many, particularly women, today. While it can have many negative ramifications, there is none greater than when the objectification becomes the most prevailing memory of a person. Eventually the individual in question is lost to mortality, and if the memorials that remain after their passing do not portray them as they were, they eventually cease to exist in the world.

1.3 *Feminization of Male Characters*

The last topic I want to address in this analysis of *The Book of the Duchess* is the feminization of the male characters in the text. After exploring the objectification of the women, it seems a worthwhile endeavour to consider how the men might be portrayed in a way that solidifies similarities between them and their female counterparts. Adams notes that the narrator has more in common with Alcyone than he does with her husband; they both pray to Juno, sleep, dream, and find themselves nude at a point (258). Furthermore, the narrator's attitude towards his own plight seems more typical of how women might react in medieval literature. He is desperate, emotional and, as John M. Hill puts it, "perhaps" hysterical in his struggle to overcome his insomnia. Hysteria was an experience often attributed to women, used to diminish or explain away their suffering. The fact that Chaucer's depiction of his narrator's suffering can be described as a form of hysteria is an indication of how he feminizes the male characters in the text. However, the most central figure to consider in relation to feminization is the Black Knight.

The Knight has been the subject of much analysis and criticism over many years. At a glance, he seems like a figure of typical or even hyper-masculinity due to his association with

Octavius's hunt and his status as a great knight (Adams 258). However, there are many who view the particular depiction of his grief as a sort of feminization. Cyndy Hendershot describes a phenomenon in medieval times referred to as *fin amor*, which involves intense focus on and idealization of a woman. Many considered this condition to complicate or even threaten the masculinity of the men who experienced it. Women were considered more emotional than their male counterparts, so the heightened emotions brought on by *fin amor* were considered to be evidence of a feminized man. Some even believed this to be a biological condition which could lead to a transformation on a physical level (Hendershot 2-3). Given that the definition of *fin amor* does seem characterize the Knight's idolization of White, it could be argued that he himself is experiencing this "feminizing" phenomenon.

The Black Knight's mourning is intense, and is arguably the factor that puts him most "at risk" of feminization. We can see this, for example, in the frequent times he compares to Alcyone. There are differences between the two characters, of course. For example, the Knight offers an extensive lamentation, whereas Alcyone swoons and perishes before she can offer any sort of elegy for her husband (Saunders 19). However, there are more similarities than differences between them. Both the Knight and Alcyone suffer physical symptoms of their grief and they both use the spoken word in an attempt to alleviate their pain—Alcyone through prayer, and the Knight through song. Another element of note is the Knight's beard, which has "but litel heer (*BD* 456). While a slight beard may have indicated youthfulness, during Chaucer's time a beard would also have been a typical sign of masculinity (Adams 259). For the Knight to be twenty-four years old and nearly beardless is a peculiar portrayal on Chaucer's part. If the Knight is meant to represent John of Gaunt, one would expect Chaucer to present him as an ideal masculine figure in the hopes of flattering his patron, especially since in the few surviving

contemporary portraits of Gaunt he is shown with a beard. Nevertheless, while the lack of a beard would probably not have been considered attractive for the real-life Gaunt, it may have been appropriate for a literary courtly lover (Lozensky 61). It is therefore likely that Chaucer was not intending to emasculate John of Gaunt, but was rather trying to portray him as a traditional courtly lover. However, in addition to the physical description of the Knight, his excessive lamenting could also potentially be considered a disrespectful portrayal of John of Gaunt as his unstable, raw emotional state would have been viewed as more typically feminine in nature. While Gaunt did publicly mourn Blanche for the remainder of his life, he did so in a way befitting his station in society and even remarried after her death. One could conclude that his mourning, as represented by the Knight in Chaucer's text, is exaggerated or at least dramatized. His life-long love for Blanche is especially symbolized by the fact that after death he was interred next to her in St. Paul's Cathedral (Walker, *ODNB*).

The unique way in which Chaucer chooses to portray John of Gaunt's representative in the poem is fascinating. It is possible he was simply trying to abide by courtly and literary traditions, although it is possible he meant to pay homage to John of Gaunt's immense love and grief for his wife even if he had to risk altering his appearance and character in the representation to do so. The way in which Chaucer depicts and utilizes gender in his works has been extensively explored, and particularly interesting are the many instances within his work where he attempts to defy societal expectations. Perhaps the characterization and description of the Black Knight is one such instance. However, a certain amount of misogyny also pervades the poem. The two grieving characters of Alcyone and the Knight do not receive the same treatment. Alcyone has less agency, and is shown less empathy by the narrator, while the Knight is allowed time to exhibit his sorrow and devotion to his lost love. Moreover, the women in the story, Alcyone and

White, have very little presence in the text: indeed, the latter does not even appear in the text. Both female characters are praised for their beauty, but rendered silent, and are used to further the narrative of the male narrator and the Black Knight. The poem is one of the more persistent texts describing Blanche of Lancaster which has arguably overshadowed her actual historical presence. However, she may not be accurately represented in the book due to Chaucer's need to follow literary tradition.

While Chaucer seems to be trying to defy some societal norms in *The Book of the Duchess* in how he portrays the Black Knight, he otherwise seems to comply with what was expected of such a piece. This is one of his earliest poems, but one can already spot signs of proto-feminism; even though he is still mostly complying with gender standards of the time, he is also pushing the boundary ever so slightly by highlighting how the female characters in the text do not have as much influence or autonomy as the males, thereby showing not a complete abandonment of societal expectations but a willingness to challenge them. In the next chapters I will be examining two of his later texts, neither of which were made specifically to honour a patron. There I propose to compare the two later poems to *The Book of the Duchess* and consider how Chaucer's writing continues to comply with or defy medieval literary and societal standards, further tracking the course and developments of his writing career with the aim of proving him a proto-feminist.

CHAPTER 2 – TROILUS AND CRISEYDE

Chaucer composed *Troilus and Criseyde* around 1386, years after *The Book of the Duchess* which he wrote in 1368 or 1369. It is notable that the main female figure in the narrative, Criseyde, is much more influential and active than the aforementioned Alcyone or White. However, the depiction of Criseyde has also been the subject of much criticism and debate. In my continuing efforts to highlight Chaucer as a proto-feminist, I will be exploring the character of Criseyde. Criseyde is a pivotal part of Chaucer's development as a proto-feminist. With her he pushes boundaries further than in *The Book of the Duchess*, so much so that he later writes another work as supposed penance for depicting her as he does. I will explore Criseyde's position and influence in the text, and the reactions of others (both fictional and non-fictional) to her and her actions. First, I will discuss the extent of objectification found in *Troilus and Criseyde*. I will focus on Criseyde herself, but I will also consider general attitudes towards women during the time Chaucer was writing the piece. Compared to Alcyone and White in *The Book of the Duchess*, Criseyde has much more of a presence in the text. Her influence on the plot's progression is undeniable. However, that does not mean that she does not also fall victim to objectification. Following this, I will juxtapose objectification against agency, analyzing the autonomy and power she has in the text. Afterwards, I will discuss how she is coerced by others, particularly her own uncle, Pandarus. Finally, I will talk about the villainization of Criseyde, a phenomenon which has persisted since before Chaucer's time but which is also the subject of debate amongst subsequent scholars.

2.1 *The Objectification of Criseyde*

Chaucer has a tendency to place his female heroines/love interests on a pedestal for their beauty, or to have other characters in the text place them there. This is not something unique to Chaucer. As mentioned in the previous chapter, “superlative beauty” is a trope in literature that still exists in modern writing. As in the case of White in *The Book of the Duchess*, the initial descriptions of Criseyde are extremely flattering and arguably hyperbolic. D.S. Brewer notes that, as a heroine, her beauty meets both the standards of medieval literature and ancient Greece as she is of average height, has an ideal figure, and possesses great beauty (“*Troilus and Criseyde* II” 187). She is described as superior in beauty to all other women, with the narrator painting her in an otherworldly light:

in al Troies cite
 Nas non so fair, for passynge every wight,
 So aungelik was hir natif beaute
 That lik a thing inmortal semed she,
 As doth an hevenyssh perfit creature
 That down were sent in scornynge of nature.

(*T&C* I.100-15)

There are plenty of otherworldly adjectives found in these lines: angelic, immortal, heavenly. In her introduction Chaucer refrains from emphasizing her non-physical traits such as her wisdom and nobility and asserts that she is “hevenyssh perfit”, a choice which set his version of *Troilus and Criseyde* apart from earlier writings; Boccaccio, for example, acknowledges some of her character traits, and though he does praise her beauty, it does not reach the almost reverential level of Chaucer’s narrator (Martin 49).

Again, as in the case of White, Chaucer's exaggerated and ethereal description of Criseyde distances the reader from the reality that she is human just like the male characters in the text. This is itself a type of objectification as she is treated differently due to her physical appearance, viewed more like a divine entity than a regular person. The physical description of Criseyde is not unlike the Black Knight speaking of his lover's unfathomable beauty. However, Chaucer does acknowledge upon Criseyde's first appearance that she also has a confident poise about her despite the fact that she is the daughter of a traitor. She stands towards the back of the crowd, away from others. She is simultaneously humble and certain. However, this still adheres to the ideal standards of the time, with Marilyn Moore pointing out that these traits "presented a unified, if nearly unattainable, whole to a medieval audience. Humility, self-assurance, and beauty were three of the conventional characteristics of moral perfection" (138). Thus, even with some non-physical elements added to her description, Criseyde is still portrayed as an ideal rather than a reality or a person, just as White is in *The Book of the Duchess*. This might make it more difficult for readers to relate to Criseyde and, by extension, to sympathize with her.

When discussing objectification in a text, it is also important to consider the narrator's behaviour. The narrator is not inherently synonymous with Chaucer. While some scholars consider Chaucer and the narrator to be one and the same, there are others who speak of them as two separate entities. Boboc, for example, refers to the narrator as being only "possibly male" (65), and Nair describes the narrator like a literary device: "[Chaucer] mediates his representation of Criseyde with a narrator who appears intent upon excusing or at least explaining her actions" (38). If it is the case that Chaucer and the narrator are not meant to be the same individual, then the narrator's views cannot be assumed to be the same as Chaucer's.

As the semi-omniscient presence in the book and the figure with the most opportunity to influence the reader, the narrator also objectifies Criseyde. Early in the text he contributes to the conveyance of superlative beauty and “waxes lyrical about her at the first opportunity, praising her as an ethereal being” (Tasioulas 94). However, the narrator is a fickle entity. Throughout the text, the descriptions of Criseyde fluctuate. Andreea Boboc points out that, once Criseyde accepts Troilus’s love and is effectively “attained” by him, her description becomes less ethereal and more akin to that of a typical woman (75). Towards the end of the text and Criseyde’s “betrayal” of Troilus, the narrator for the first time draws attention to the fact that she has a “unibrow”: “save hire browes joynedon yfeete, / Ther has no lakke in aught I kan espie” (*T&C* V.813-4). In the Middle Ages, some would consider the unibrow a mark of beauty while others would consider it undesirable (Dean and Spiegel 233); given the word “lakke”, it is clear that the narrator is part of the latter mindset. The fact that her descriptions become less flattering as the text progresses seems to imply that beauty is associated with goodness and ugliness is associated with badness, a pattern commonly found throughout medieval literature. There are exceptions to this pattern, of course, in which beauty occasionally masks an ugly heart or outer hideousness emphasizes inner beauty, but they are only that: exceptions (Boboc 64). Not only is Criseyde elevated in an isolating and arguably dehumanizing way by the narrator’s initial descriptions, but those praises are stripped away bit by bit, first when Criseyde agrees to enter into a courtship with Troilus and again when she “abandons” him. This exhibits the value placed on beauty in the Middle Ages, as at first it is the greatest thing of note about Criseyde but is later diminished as she herself becomes “less good” and, evidently, less valuable as a woman. Diminishing the descriptions of both her appearance and character could also lead readers to be more critical of her than they otherwise would have been.

Of course, the objectification in *Troilus and Criseyde* is not limited to Criseyde's physical description in the text. The poem begins with Criseyde begging Hector, a Trojan prince and the brother of Troilus, for mercy: "On knees she fil biforn Ector adown / With pitous vois and tenderly wepyng / His mercy bad, hirselves excusyng" (*T&C* I.110-2). She is in a precarious position both as the daughter of a traitor and as a widow. In the Middle Ages there was often business and competition involving the remarrying of widows because the money and property left to them by their late husbands' made them "economically attractive"; Sobecki compares the medieval market of remarrying widows—with the arrangements usually made by male family members or guardians—to trafficking women (426-8). Criseyde has no one who can protect her, and is at risk being taken advantage of or being punished for her father's actions. Hector assures Criseyde that no harm shall come to her, but the fact that she must ask this of him shows the more vulnerable position women—particularly lone women—found themselves in during that time period. They typically had to depend on men for protection. By depicting Criseyde thusly, Chaucer makes her more sympathetic and begins to highlight her precarious position in Trojan society. With her husband dead and her father having abandoned her, Criseyde has no choice but to turn towards the prince for the sake of protection and mercy, which he grants. Unfortunately, the protection he provides has its limits.

Later in the text, the Greeks offer the Trojans a deal: they will return the captured Trojan Antenor in exchange for Criseyde. This proposal is offered after Calkas, Criseyde's father, decides he wants Criseyde to join him on the side of the Greeks. This is such an abrupt change of attitude that one could almost call it a whim, and yet, "however strange such paternal care may now seem from the father who abandoned his daughter to face hostility and possible persecution when he left the city, no one questions his right to claim her" (Aers 130). A meeting is held to

discuss the proposition. Hector does not wish to exchange Criseyde, and allows those present the chance to share their opinions or object to the idea. With no one else voicing their dissent, not even Troilus himself, Hector ultimately agrees to the deal. It is frustrating both for Criseyde and for the reader because of how the situation contrasts Criseyde's character:

She sees herself as a subject with her own desires and tries to use the language and strategies of the men around her to determine her fate. However, when a woman is figured as property in the legal, economic and social spheres, female subjectivity has no public space for expression. There is no place from which Criseyde may speak (Miriam Moore 91-2).

Criseyde has no say in her own fate. Although in private she has great influence over Troilus, in the Trojan public she is reduced to a pawn in the male-dominated world of war (Weisl 99). She is treated as a bargaining chip in the war dealings of men. Regardless of her actions and the bonds she has formed up to this point, she is powerless—she is now of a different use to those around her, ultimately unable to “save herself from this fate even by performing the accepted social roles of the lonely widow or the ‘beautiful, endangered lady,’ for her best service to the masculine master-narrative is now to be a ‘prisoner’—and the Trojans make her one themselves” (Slayton 89). Abandoned first by her father, and then by her own people, she is forced to drift in the direction in which they point her. By showcasing the way in which Criseyde's fate is mainly in the hands of other people, Chaucer allows readers, especially those willing to look past her eventual "abandonment" of Troilus, to view her as a victim of her circumstances.

The objectification of Criseyde is also reflected in the behaviours of the men around her. Troilus falls immediately for Criseyde's beauty. In her article “(Mis)Reading the ‘Text’ of Criseyde”, Victoria Warren discusses not just how one may read the text, but how Troilus reads,

or rather, misreads, Criseyde. Whilst Criseyde eventually submits to a romantic relationship with Troilus and becomes better acquainted with him, Warren notes that it never seems that he truly sees her as a person and that his “self-absorption is also apparent in his tendency to think of Criseyde only in terms of what she can do for him” (3). He takes from Criseyde, but gives little in return. He longs for her to cure his sickness, to lie with him, to give him her love. In his PhD dissertation Majed R. Kraishan explores eroticism and sexuality in both *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. When discussing the latter, he asserts that Troilus’s motivation for having sex with Criseyde is not love or passion or a desire to reproduce, but rather to prove his own manhood through the act of possessing her sexually (303-4). Troilus’s mindset becomes apparent when, as he watches Criseyde, the narrator points out that “the pure wise man myght in hire gesse / Honour, estat, and wommanly noblesse” (*T&C* I.285-7); these lines imply that Troilus is preoccupied with the impression that Criseyde—and, likely, his *being* with Criseyde—will have on other men, as though wooing her represents a public source of pride for him.

Throughout the text Troilus seems largely unconcerned with or aware of the issues or dangers to which he could be exposing Criseyde as a result of their relationship. Sashi Nair notes this and, as a result, deems Troilus “another factor against which [Criseyde] must struggle in order to survive” (Nair 42). However, despite the devotion to her that he exhibits for most of the narrative, when it is proposed that Criseyde be traded for Antenor, Troilus does not speak up for her or protest, claiming afterward that he was worried for her reputation and honour. In her article, “Heroic Criseyde”, Mary Behrman highlights the way in which Criseyde does what she is able despite the fact that her society limits her options. Behrman also asserts that the men in the story are not more proactive than Criseyde as they are also bound by societal expectations. For example, Troilus laments the coming exchange, but because of his concern for his reputation he

refuses to do anything about it. His conceitedness is further displayed when he laments the misery he would experience should Criseyde forsake him, but passes no thought on how she may suffer due to the exchange (Behrman 328). In this way one could suggest that Troilus is morally inferior to Criseyde. In *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, Mark Lambert analyzes the way in which the titular characters interact with each other, as well as how loyal and truthful they are shown to be. He observes that, although it is true that Criseyde values self-preservation, in this situation she is more concerned about Troilus's pain than her own (Lambert 89-90). By depicting them as such Chaucer allows readers to question whether the "hero" is as heroic as expected and, additionally, whether the "traitor" of the story is as callous as expected.

Pandarus, Criseyde's uncle, suggests that Troilus abduct Criseyde without even consulting her about whether she would be willing to go with him. Troilus objects to this, pointing out that a woman's abduction caused the current war and that his father agreed to the exchange of Criseyde, thus to abduct Criseyde would be to betray Troy and his father (Bloomfield 294-5). Troilus is not concerned about whether or not Criseyde would consent to the idea, but is rather concerned about disrespecting his father and behaving shamefully as a prince. He prioritizes a superior man and his own reputation over Criseyde, and does not think to consult her on the topic before he refuses. There is opportunity for him to act, but he does not take it and almost seems to ignore it as he "raises alternatives to inaction only when those alternatives are virtually impossible to choose" (Garrison 334-5). Even after it is already decided that Criseyde will be traded, her uncle and lover continue to discuss what could be done with her as though she is an object for them to use at their leisure. In the end, they allow Criseyde to be exchanged without vouching for her, offering her their assistance, or asking what she herself wants.

Pandarus views the world in terms of value, a quality which is subject to change by circumstance; this outlook is evident in how he objectifies not just women but his own niece, treating her like an item he can give away if he pleases. He relies less on subjective emotions and more on worth, consistently comparing the value and benefit of one thing against the other. It is not surprising, then, that in addition to suggesting that Troilus abduct Criseyde, he also proposes that Troilus simply pursue a new woman once they know that Criseyde is to be traded to the Greeks (Thomas E. Hill 45). While one could read this as a simple “plenty of fish in the sea” sentiment, it creates the impression that they view women as interchangeable objects (Beck 161). This is the culmination of Pandarus’s behaviour towards Criseyde throughout the text. I will speak more in detail about his manipulation and coercion of her later in this chapter, but in simple terms Pandarus makes himself a pimp, promising Criseyde to his male friend. Troilus, later, offers Pandarus one of his female relatives in return. Once again, women are equated to bargaining chips, with men promising them to each other as though the ladies are workers in their brothel, with Criseyde being treated like “a commodity or coin that Pandarus would trade for any number of others of equal or greater value” (Thomas E. Hill 46). The reality that Criseyde is also Pandarus’s niece suggests how difficult it is in Trojan (and Chaucer's medieval English) society for women to find respect and humanization, even from their male relatives and friends.

Eventually, on the Greek side, Criseyde gives in to the romantic advances of Diomedes. While some argue that Diomedes treats Criseyde better than Pandarus or Troilus, there are others who assert that he objectifies her just as much as they do. Catherine Sanok, for example, notes that it is the relationship between Criseyde and Troilus that inspires Diomedes to pursue her, that he views her as just another conquest of war. Sanok goes on to assert that Diomedes is more

interested in triumphing over Troilus than he is in Criseyde herself, and states that Criseyde becomes a “pretext for male aggression” (54). Once again, it seems the men in the text are more concerned about their own reputations and the opinions of other men than they are about women, just as Troilus exhibited when he responded to the suggestion of abduction.

Criseyde is not unaware of her precarious position in society. As I will explore shortly, she conducts herself thoughtfully and cautiously. She seeks male protection because she knows that without it she is dangerously vulnerable (Steinberg 60). Readers capable of considering the context of Trojan society will no doubt analyze Criseyde’s actions in the text in a reasonable, historically aware light. However, there is a hindrance that can come from focusing too much on Criseyde’s hardships. One can risk reducing her to a figure who is entirely passive and powerless. While most are probably well-intentioned when highlighting her limited agency, this can lead one to diminish her significance and influence on the text (Behrman 315). A delicate balance is needed: one must consider Criseyde’s circumstances and how they may affect her actions without forgetting that she is a character capable of having an effect of her own. With that said, the next topic I would like to discuss is Criseyde’s own agency.

2.2 The Agency of Criseyde

Until now I have focused mainly on the elements of the text that lend themselves to the objectification of Criseyde and, by extension, women in general. Criseyde’s physical descriptions and the attitude the male characters and narrator have towards her certainly have objectifying effects. However, the goal of my paper is not to discuss the feminist failings of Chaucer’s texts—it is to consider the bad, the good, and all that falls between. Thus, I think it is important to highlight what an assertive, thoughtful, and influential character Criseyde is.

Chaucer allows Criseyde a significant amount of agency. Sebastian Sobceki analyzes Criseyde in relation to her status as widow in his article “Wards and Widows”, in which he discusses widowhood in the Middle Ages. He notes that unlike Boccaccio’s earlier portrayal of Criseyde in *Il Filostrato*, the text that inspired Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer chooses to make Criseyde a widow rather than a virgin. This significantly changes her status in her society given that she now has an *estat* of her own left to her after her husband’s passing, and thereby she has a means by which to sustain herself despite the fact that she is alone and, for a time, fatherless (Sobceki 427). The assertiveness and strength of Criseyde is clear from the early pages of the text. She is seen begging Hector for safety:

This lady, which that alday herd at ere
 Hire fadres shame, his falsnesse and tresoun,
 Wel neigh out of hir wit for sorwe and fere,
 In widewes habet large of samyt broun,
 On knees she fil biforn Ector adown
 With piteous vois and tenderly wepynge
 His mercy bad, hirselves excusyng.

(*T&C* I.106-12)

Some may consider this demeaning or an act of helplessness. After all, the language used in this passage does suggest weakness and helplessness, such as the phrases “out of hir wit” and “piteous vois”. However, one could also consider it Criseyde being proactive in an attempt to improve her situation; in the society in which Criseyde lives, a woman's voice is not heeded like that of a man, thus an emotional presentation is more likely to get her sympathy and aid than

words alone. The proactivity of the action is addressed by Valerie A. Ross in *The Tradition of Subversion in Medieval Vernacular Literature*:

In a passage that most critics agree upon as establishing Criseyde as irrevocably powerless—on her knees before Hector, pleading for mercy in Book I—I suggest that she can instead be seen as strategically reinscribing her own power relations (with Hector, her father, and the citizens of Troy) with performative and parodic agency (236).

As Mikee Chisholm Delony says, the narrator may well expect someone in Criseyde's situation to be more openly distressed (44). Perhaps this is why he describes her as desperate and pitiable. However, one could also suggest that she is described as such because Criseyde utilizes her helplessness *in order to* help herself, hoping that it will evoke mercy in Hector and secure her safety and security. Regardless of how one might interpret the way in which the encounter is described, the fact that Criseyde makes the trek to Hector and earnestly asks for his aid does not suggest hysteria, but rather courage (Delony 44). This stands in stark contrast to Alcyone, the widow depicted in *The Book of the Duchess*. Alcyone speaks little, is overshadowed by the narrator's own troubles, and is so overwhelmed by her heartbreak that it kills her, thereby preventing her from fulfilling her husband's final request. Criseyde, on the other hand, makes use of what she has and strives to keep herself afloat in a society that puts her at a disadvantage. The encounter is not the only early sign of Criseyde's assertiveness and inclination towards agency. This also becomes evident when she meets Troilus's enamoured gaze with an indignant one of her own, mistaking his entranced expression for one of disapproval. This is especially impressive given the difference in their statuses: Troilus is a prince, while Criseyde is the daughter of a traitor. Despite the disparity in their positions, she stares him down nonetheless, silently asserting that she has as much right to be there as he does (Behrman 317).

Criseyde even manages to find agency in passivity. Consider her dilemma about whether or not to accept Troilus's affections. Chaucer allows Criseyde her assertiveness and intelligence, and she exhibits those qualities throughout the matchmaking scheme. For example, Criseyde, a fan of literary romances herself, is aware that Troilus is acting in the role of the lovesick gentleman, and therefore she identifies her uncle's description of his state as hyperbolic, and counters it with a lamentation of her own that her uncle would try to influence her to be false in order to make her a prince's lover (Behrman 320). Pandarus tries fervently to convince her to accept Troilus as a paramour, beginning with a warning that it is a matter of life or death:

‘the kynges deere sonne,
 The good, wis, worthi, fresshe, and free,
 Which alwey for to don wel in his wonne,
 The noble Troilus, so loveth the,
 That, but ye helpe, it wol his bane be.
 Lo, here is alle—what sholde I moore sey?
 Doth what yow lest to make hym lyve or dey’.

(*T&C* II.316-22).

Despite this, Criseyde takes time to weigh her options rather than allowing herself to be immediately pressured into making a sudden decision. She begins to ruminate as soon as Pandarus leaves:

Criseyde aros, no lenger she ne stente,
 But streght into hire closet wente anon,
 And set hire doun style as any ston,
 And every word gan up and down to wynde

That he had seyde, as it com hire to mynde.

(*T&C* II.598-602).

Even something as simple as taking her time to analyze the situation rather than running into a romantic affair exhibits her agency. Christian Blevins Beck explains that, although the situation frames Troilus as the masculine agent and Criseyde the feminine object of desire, her decision to wait is itself an exercise of agency (177). Criseyde even finds agency in what male characters would consider inherently feminine attributes. Her modesty, for example, is a form of agency for her. While Pandarus seems to equate her fidelity to her clothing, namely her veil, Criseyde considers it part of her principles: “Pandarus views feminine modesty as constructed by sources beyond the self, while Criseyde sees it as animated by practices the self” (Crocker 58). Even in passive actions, such as withdrawing into privacy to write a letter, she exhibits agency—she gives herself a space of her own, a safe, private sanctuary for a personal activity. This contrasts with Troilus, who has Pandarus present when he writes his own letter. Criseyde makes a private place of her own and gives herself a degree of freedom (Stanbury 281).

Criseyde is a thoughtful, cautious person. While she is concerned with her *estat*, it is less for materialistic reasons and more due to her desire for autonomy. The only way for Criseyde to truly find independence is through her widowhood and inheritance of her husband’s assets. Naturally, Criseyde does not wish to lose this. With her husband dead and her father having abandoned her, she decides, understandably, to prioritize herself. She highlights the importance her *estat* means to her, and by “defining the perceived benefits of this *estat*, she exclaims her belief in her independence” (Slayton 84). That desire for independence is a factor in her contemplation of a potential relationship with Troilus. She deliberates over whether or not she should accept his affections, a situation made even more difficult due to the pressure Pandarus

places upon her. However, she does not allow this to hasten her decision. She considers the pros and cons of a romantic affair with Troilus, weighing what she could lose against what she could gain. Even after she eventually responds to his advances, she continues to analyze the situation and its drawbacks and benefits. Moreover, she maintains agency in the scenario as she requests from Troilus that she still be allowed independence and autonomy. While some might see her acceptance of Troilus's feelings as a weakness, one could also view it as an instance of Criseyde simply exercising her agency, accepting because she wants to and can. As Marilyn Moore aptly puts it, "What is the point of independence, then, [Criseyde] wonders, if, when offered an acceptable choice, she does not accept it? So she does accept" (157).

As is evident, the way Chaucer depicts Criseyde in *Troilus and Criseyde* is not simple. It is true that the male characters and narrator tend to objectify Criseyde, but this is not necessarily a reflection of Chaucer's own feelings towards the character. Furthermore, while the setting itself believes in female subserviency, it is also true to history, and it is therefore difficult to argue that Chaucer should be faulted for it. Chaucer provides Criseyde with a great deal of assertiveness, agency, and influence, even in a setting where she is at a disadvantage. This lends credence to my assertion that Chaucer is, in fact, a proto-feminist. He was bound by historical accuracy, literary tropes and medieval societal expectations, and this shows in his work, but he also pushes boundaries, making alterations that differentiate his text from Boccaccio's earlier version to allow Criseyde more freedom and power. All this being said, to do a proper analysis of how Chaucer handles his heroine, it is important to focus not only on her as a character in the poem, but also on the behaviour of the other people—specifically men—around her and how they affect her.

2.3 *The Coercion of Criseyde*

Today, the issues of sexual harassment and assault are discussed much more openly than was possible before. The concept of consent and what does and does not constitute consent is frequently talked about and defined. Powrie describes how actress Molly Ringwald now looks critically at the non-consensual acts depicted in some of the movies in which she starred in her youth, recognizing the way they normalized male aggression by portraying acts against unwitting women in a comedic fashion. Powrie compares *Troilus and Criseyde* to such teen films of the 1980s, noting that the coercion and deception of Criseyde for Troilus's gratification is also often framed comically, especially where Pandarus is involved. The recent #MeToo movement has forced the issue of sexual assault into the spotlight (Powrie 19). This movement first arose from celebrities coming forward about their own experiences with sexual harassment and assault by perpetrators who were usually rich, famous, or otherwise privileged. I believe this is relevant to the story of *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Sexual harassment and assault are not always achieved by the use of physical force. It can also be perpetrated via threats, coercion, power imbalance, and more. In Chaucer's text, both of the main male characters are more privileged than Criseyde. Women were considered subordinate in Trojan society; therefore, Troilus and Pandarus are more privileged than she is as a result of their sex. Moreover, Pandarus and Troilus also come from nearly the same societal class. While Troilus himself is a prince, Pandarus seems to socialize quite regularly with the royal family, suggesting he is an aristocrat himself. Such similarity in status in go-betweens and their friends is found often in medieval romance (Mieszkowski 140). In Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*, the work that inspired Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, Pandarus is depicted as Criseyde's cousin. However, Chaucer cast him as her uncle in his own text. This makes Pandarus

not just Criseyde's relative but her elder. By extension, it increases the amount of influence he has over her and his ability to manipulate her emotions and actions, as older men typically arranged or approved the relationships of their young single female relatives, including widows (Sobecki 430). By making Pandarus Criseyde's uncle, Chaucer gives him more power to abuse and makes him a much greater threat to Criseyde's agency. Because of the risks posed by her uncle, Criseyde can not make choices as freely or act as autonomously as she otherwise could. Pandarus threatens the safety and security she has acquired and fails to provide the conventional protection a Trojan uncle should give his niece (Hume 144). Criseyde, who has already been abandoned and betrayed by male family members, finds herself in yet another disadvantageous situation as her uncle fails to protect her just as her dead husband and traitor father have; rather than strengthening her security in society, Pandarus invades it and puts it in jeopardy (Delony 59). Not only is the flagrant disregarding of her own comfort and happiness once again an example of him objectifying his niece, but also compromising her security is a way in which he makes her more vulnerable and easier to coerce. Troilus, on the other hand, is royalty, a position that gives him power and immunity from the consequences and struggles most people would face. The power imbalance between them and Criseyde seems considerable, something that puts her in a vulnerable position and limits her agency. This is made even worse by the threats, lies and overall manipulation of her uncle.

Criseyde's uncle, Pandarus, acts as a sort of mastermind as he strives to convince Criseyde to accept Troilus's affections. There are several reasons Pandarus might be motivated to do this. Firstly, Troilus is his friend, and Pandarus wishes to help him even at the expense of his own niece. Secondly, Troilus is royalty, and Criseyde marrying him could elevate the status

of their family. Thirdly, Troilus later offers Pandarus whichever of his female relatives he desires as repayment for acting as the go-between himself and Criseyde:

And that thow knowe I thynke nought ne wene
 That this servise a shame be or jape,
 I have my faire suster Polixene,
 Cassandre, Eleyne, or any of the frape—
 Be she nevere so faire or wel yshape,
 Tel which thow wilt of everychone
 To han for thyn, and lat me thanne allone.

(*T&C* III.407-13)

Clearly, Pandarus is not lacking in motive. However, it is evident that all of his potential motivations are selfish in nature.

In her article “Criseyde, Consent, and the #MeToo Reader”, Sarah Powrie notes the self-serving, exploitative motivations of Pandarus as he tries to coerce Criseyde for the gratification of his high-ranking friend, with Powrie comparing him to real life sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein who, under false pretences, lured young women to his estates so he could “loan” them to rich, famous, and/or powerful men. She notes also that he disregards the idea of female autonomy and cares little about women's concerns or desires, an indifference she believes Troilus begins to emulate, most notably when he offers up any of his own female family members as thanks to Pandarus despite what those relatives might want for themselves (Powrie 23-4). Pandarus, who has himself been unlucky in love (*T&C* II.1107), might expect such an offer of repayment, which would be yet another selfish motivation for manipulating his niece. However, even if one assumes he is helping Troilus simply because he wants to, not because of the prospect of

repayment, he is still doing so regardless of what his niece might want. He is trying to satisfy his male friend's desire while disregarding the feelings of a younger female relative who relies on him. As Gretchen Mieszkowski aptly puts it, "Procuring for Troilus, Pandarus is Troilus's agent and Criseyde's adversary" (147).

With Troilus incapacitated by his lovesickness, he leaves the majority of the courting work to Pandarus. Pandarus, an experienced manipulator, takes on this role with gusto. Again, Powrie calls the close relationship between the two men problematic as it "allows Pandarus to socialize Troilus into accepting the same casual disregard for women's sexual autonomy" (24). Their shared scheme to woo Criseyde is evidence of this. Moreover, Pandarus gives Troilus advice on emotional manipulation. For instance, he tells Troilus that when speaking to Criseyde he should not be too charming or confident. Pandarus believes that to successfully woo a woman, a man must not seem too persuasive or it may rouse suspicion (Hagedorn 159). The giving of this advice could be considered a display of sharing misogyny, as Pandarus is quite literally teaching Troilus how to trick and lie to women for his own benefit.

Pandarus, in his efforts to convince Criseyde to accept Troilus's love, even dismisses common societal practice. He tells Criseyde to dispose of her widow's garb and go dancing, despite the fact that Criseyde is still publicly mourning her husband. He does not inquire about what she truly desires. By specifying that she should dispose of her mourning attire and dance publicly he is objectifying her, trying to make her romantically available so that Troilus can pursue her. Criseyde responds in astonishment to his suggestion:

"I! God forbede!" quod she, "be ye madde?"

Is that a widewes lif, so God yow save?

By God, ye maken me right soore adradde!

Yo ben so wylde, it semeth as ye rave.
 It satte me wel bette ay in a cave
 To bidde and rede on hely seyntes lyves,
 Lat maydens gon to daunce, and yonge wyves."

(*T&C* II.113-9)

She is shocked by the impropriety of the idea, and goes on to declare that such frivolous and joyful behaviour is suited to young wives and maidens, not widows such as herself. She feels dread at the fact that her uncle would propose such a thing. Mary Behrman insists that Pandarus' suggestion is an attempt at getting Criseyde to re-enter their patriarchal society and to cease her "sober, cerebral, and potentially subversive activity of interpreting the behavior of men" (320). Criseyde refuses, reminding her uncle what is expected of her as a widow, knowing the possible consequences that could befall her were she to agree to his request (Aers 121). One might read this as her acknowledgment of the limitations her status as a widow places on her. However, Criseyde does not appear to be troubled by the social expectations that come with the role. As noted earlier, Sobecki discusses the freedom women of Chaucer's time could find in widowhood. Chaucer exhibits through her words and actions how it gave them a better chance at security and choice; Criseyde uses her widowhood as a shield to ward off her uncle's suggestion, but also as a sword of sorts to assert herself and make her preferences clear.

Pandarus's selfish manipulation of Criseyde is doubly cruel when one takes into account that Criseyde aims to be a proper and respectable woman. While her independence and security are important to her, she also cares about her reputation, and is "constantly guided by a sense of the standards of correct behaviour, and the standards appear to be those that existed in late medieval society for women, and widows in particular" (Hume 164). However, her uncle does

not care about her values, and seeks to turn her from them. He treats her more as an object he wants to use her for his friend's gratification, but she is initially reluctant to so much as entertain the thought of accepting somebody's affections. However, with both her father and husband gone, she would be expected in Trojan society to obey her uncle, her nearest relative (Aers 122); in other words, her agency is overruled by his will. Criseyde is aware of her uncle's manipulateness, and she knows his attempts to influence her are self-serving rather than caring or honourable, but it would be unbecoming for her to disobey him, something we learn later she is aware of: "withowten await, with hym go,/ She graunted hym, sith he hire besoughte,/ And, as his nece, obeyed as hire oughthe" (*T&C* III.579-81). This is just one of the ways in which Pandarus uses guilt to sway her decision.

Pandarus has a tendency to bend the truth or omit details when trying to convince Criseyde to accept Troilus. For example, he speaks highly of Troilus's bravery to her, knowing she is the type to admire heroic figures. However, when addressing Troilus's lovesickness, he says:

But oones nyltow, for thy coward herte,
 And for thyn ire and folissh wilfulnesse,
 For wantrust, tellen of thy sorwes smerte,
 Ne to thyn owen help don bysynesse
 As mucche as speke a reson moore or lesse?
 But list as he that lest of no thyng recche—
 What womman koude louen swich a wrecche?

(*T&C* I.792-8)

Pandarus, in fact, views Troilus as a coward for being unable to solve his own problem and pursue the object of his desire, but boasts about his bravery to Criseyde in an effort to persuade her to accept him as a lover.

Early in the text, Criseyde is shocked that her uncle would even try to convince her to be courted by a man, regardless of who that man was, as she felt it would be a reprobable act during her period of mourning (Hume 168). However, she does not realize just how far Pandarus is willing to go. The emotional manipulation of Criseyde is a large issue in itself, but I would be remiss to not also examine the sexual manipulation of Criseyde. Once they have convinced her to submit to Troilus's romantic sentiments, Troilus and Pandarus scheme to attain Criseyde carnally, as well.

After Criseyde accepts Troilus under certain conditions, Pandarus tells her that Troilus has been told she has been unfaithful to him in order to convince her to let Troilus come to her bedroom. However, Pandarus's vilest dishonesty comes with his most brutal of threats: that if Criseyde does not help Troilus by accepting his love, Troilus will die, and Pandarus will kill himself. It is not difficult to assume that at least half of this threat is a lie because, Troilus aside, the self-serving Pandarus seems far from the type to kill himself over such a matter. It is an extreme attempt at coercion to force Criseyde's consent. Nonetheless, this threat, which he reiterates again later, is very effective not only because Criseyde cares about her uncle but also because she fears the consequences that could befall her were she responsible for his and the prince's deaths:

‘[I]f this man sle here hymself, allas!

In my presence, it wol be no solas.

What men wolde of hit deeme I kan nat seye:

It nedeth me ful sleighly for to pleie;'

(*T&C* II.459-462)

While such a concern could be seen as somewhat callous, one must remember Criseyde is already in a precarious situation in Troy as the daughter of a traitor. She is fortunate to have been granted mercy by Hector, and naturally fears anything that would cause him to revoke it. Pandarus likely knows this, which is why later in the text he outright threatens Criseyde's reputation to force her consent. When Pandarus comes into her bedroom uninvited intending to bring Troilus, Criseyde initially calls out, but Pandarus warns her that, if she does so, people might assume she has been unvirtuous in some manner: "They myghte demen thyng they nevere er thoughte" (*T&C* III.763). He does this to ensure Criseyde falls quiet, allowing him to proceed with a scheme that will ultimately culminate in Criseyde having intercourse with Troilus. Pandarus knows her reputation and honour mean a lot to her, which is why he plays on her fear of losing it. Powrie notes that little credibility was given to female testimony in that time, suggesting that Criseyde's protests would not be believed were she accused of something unbecoming, and therefore Pandarus's words effectively silence her for fear of being shamed (24). What is more, Pandarus feeds her the aforementioned lie that Troilus has heard she has been unfaithful to him and has become perilously unwell, therefore she must see him as soon as possible (Warren 6). In utilizing this fallacy, Pandarus uses Criseyde's guilt so she will do as he wishes.

Some people view the consummation scene that follows as a consensual interaction given that Criseyde has already accepted Troilus's affections and does not verbally object to the intercourse. However, consent is not as simple as some people believe. It is not as black and white as a yes or no. One must consider what led up to the scene. Criseyde objects to the idea of

Troilus coming to her room as she “resists Pandarus with several more strategies, continually deferring the eventuality of having to sleep with Troilus” (Ross 280). It is only after Pandarus raises the idea—or, one might say, threat—of harm coming to her reputation that she surrenders. As aforementioned, physical force is not the only method through which someone may be sexually assaulted. Coercion, threats, and power imbalances, all things Criseyde faces, are also methods that can be used to force somebody into a non-consensual sexual encounter. Criseyde makes it quite clear that she does not want Troilus’s presence in her room, and only concedes out of fear. This is not real consent. Later, Criseyde allows Troilus to have intercourse with her, but given the fact that this would not have happened had her initial refusals been heeded, it, too, is not a true consensual act. It is an act she is manipulated to engage in out of fear.

Again, it is true that Criseyde does not try to protest verbally when Troilus embraces her. She does not physically struggle against him. She continues to associate with him after the intercourse occurs. However, this does not mean that the encounter was consensual. Coerced, threatened, guilted, and pressured, Criseyde was pushed not into consenting, but surrendering. Some may ask why Criseyde did not refuse or resist more adamantly; however, that mindset itself is something the #MeToo movement is attempting to rectify:

The narrator asks a rhetorical question...why didn’t Criseyde resist Pandarus’s coercion or Troilus’s advances more forcefully? This rhetorical strategy is a classic example of victim-blaming, as the narrator shifts responsibility away from male aggression and toward Criseyde’s response. The narrator suggests that had Criseyde acted more cautiously or if she had resisted sexual pressure more assertively, then she would have avoided harm. #MeToo has prompted us to recognize that a society that frames rape

prevention as a woman's problem is one that will fault the woman for the sexual violation that she sustains (Powrie 22-3).

As I have mentioned, the concept of consent is more widespread and discussed today than in times past. Being in a romantic relationship does not guarantee consent. Silence does not equal consent. Moreover, in reality, many victims continue to associate with their assailants after the non-consensual encounter in an attempt to attain normalcy (Powrie 27). With all this said, Criseyde was not only forced to accept a man's emotional affections but to also satisfy his sexual needs, as well. Her mind is manipulated, her body used, her protests ignored. Her uncle forces her to be a prostitute for his male friend for his own benefit, treats her like an object of desire rather than a person, and yet there are those that perceive consent in her actions; it seems that not only is Criseyde eventually convinced by Pandarus, but that he also manages to convince some of the audience, as well. This is a testament to the openness of Chaucer's writing in the text, and his aim to allow for more than one interpretation. As Mary Behrman says, although Chaucer "fashions Criseyde as a strong-willed woman, his poem does not represent a straightforward rendition of the 'power of women' topos. Instead, Chaucer uses this convention to expose the hypocrisy embedded in courtly love" (316); in other words, while he is presenting the narrative in a particular way that remains at least moderately true to the original tale and which does not explicitly acknowledge the coercion of Criseyde as being immoral or otherwise negative, he does so while also allowing it to be viewed from other perspectives.

Now that I have discussed how Criseyde was a victim of coercion, particularly at the hands of her uncle, I would also like to acknowledge the strength Criseyde exhibited despite her unfortunate situation. Patience is a major element in Criseyde's strategy in evaluating her uncle's behaviour. Patience is not, especially in her case, a passive attribute. It is a virtue which exercises

reason and will, and it allows Criseyde to protect herself against Pandarus's manipulation until she is ready to admit her potential interest. When Pandarus begins trying to stoke Criseyde's interest in Troilus, she is wary of his intentions and decides to respond to his game by waiting, withholding her curiosity, and pretending to be disinterested in what he says. She does this largely to test her uncle's intentions. However, when Pandarus tries to overpower her patience with his own excitement, she confronts him on an intuitive level (Thomas E. Hill 62). She commences the confrontation as follows:

"But for the love of God, I yow biseche,
 As ye ben he that I love moost and triste,
 Lat be to me youre fremde manere speche,
 And sey to me, youre nece, what yow liste."

(*T&C* II.246-9)

Here Criseyde acknowledges their friendship and familial relationship, and requests that he stop acting strangely. Clearly she realizes there is an ulterior factor to her uncle's behaviour. Although Pandarus ultimately sticks to his plan, her words do temporarily shake him. Her intuitive thinking contrasts with the more outward and view-reliant psychologies of Pandarus and Troilus (Thomas E. Hill 62).

Criseyde only agrees to meet Troilus after deliberating about the situation, and weighing the benefits and disadvantages of refusing or accepting his feelings. Knowing that he is—or at least is pretending to be—incapacitated by love, she decides she will not wait around for him to act since he has been “emasculated by his desire” (Behrman 324). After they meet, she makes sure to make the conditions of their relationship clear:

A kynges sone although ye be, ywys,

Ye shal namore han sovereignete
 Of me in love, than right in that cas is.
 N'y nyl forbere. If that ye don amys,
 To wratthe yow.

(*T&C* III.170-4)

Despite the fact that he is royalty, she declares that he will not have any special authority over her, nor will she refrain from chastising him if he does anything wrong. With these words she shows she will approach their relationship as Troilus's equal and nothing less. While it is true she is coerced into the relationship and the encounters that come with it, she stays true to her values and desires from beginning to end. In this way, we can identify another quality with which Chaucer bestowed his Criseyde: conviction.

2.4 *The Villainization of Criseyde*

Having now explored the objectification of Criseyde and how, despite being coerced, she still attempted to find power and control, it is now time to explore what may be the most popular debate when it comes to her character: the question of whether she is a villain or a victim. The issue of her infidelity is a popular topic within academia, with scholarly opinions on Criseyde varying. It was common for authors of the medieval era to portray women as potential black widows who used the power of femininity—or, perhaps more accurately, sexuality—to hinder or even destroy men. Many early readers and critics tended to classify Criseyde as villainous, traitorous, and immoral. However, many modern scholars view her as a victim of circumstance who is used as a scapegoat to excuse the actions of the truly villainous. Behrman views Criseyde outside of the dichotomy of victim and villain, perceiving her to be a woman who is as heroic as her oppressive surroundings allow her to be, but also noting that as much as Chaucer may stray

from medieval literary norms, he is not above writing in such a way that fits the aforementioned binary of female characters (Behrman 14). However, the way in which Chaucer depicts Criseyde and her story suggests he does not want all readers to have the same interpretation of them but to rather form their own opinions and conclusions. His own feelings about Criseyde's moral depiction were complicated, but I believe his true sentiments can be inferred from his writing.

After Criseyde accepts Diomedes's advances and "betrays" Troilus, not only is Troilus wounded, but Pandarus is enraged. To Troilus he says, "What sholde I seyen? I hate, ywis, Criseyde,/ And, God woot, I wol hate hire evermore!" (*T&C* V.1732-3). Additionally, he asserts that he wishes Criseyde was dead, a statement which Troilus arguably concurs with by not voicing his dissent (Behrman 331). It is a stark difference from the attitude Pandarus had towards Criseyde during the earlier part of the narrative. Having pressured and manipulated his niece for the gratification of his friend, he now turns furiously against her as soon as she acts against his wishes (Aers 138). His reaction is hypocritical, considering that following the forced separation of Criseyde and Troilus he advises Troilus to find a replacement lover; in contrast, Pandarus expresses hatred for Criseyde when he learns she has done the same. Gendered double-standards in the medieval era were plentiful, and Carolyn Dinshaw highlights one such double-standard between male and female characters in medieval literature. It concerns the quality of "truth" or "trueness". While both sexes are often judged on their truth or lack thereof, the situation is different for women. While male infidelity is also problematized, the infidelity of women is treated as a much greater offense, as their truth in love correlates with their "function within the structure of patriarchal society" (*Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* 7). On this subject, Elizabeth McCormick notes the following:

A woman's nature is measured - for good or ill — by her constancy. So, the “good” woman's virtue lies in her ability to be constant, faithful and stable. The three types of good women typically depicted are maidens, wives and widows with all three definitions rooted in the woman's relationship to a man and to her marital status. Conversely, the “bad” woman's vice lies in her changeability and instability, typically in terms of her relationship to a man (e.g. Criseyde's “slydyng corage” in the Troilus). So in order to make a bad - or merely questionable - woman “good,” she must be depicted as constant and ‘trewe’ in her relationship to a man (126).

Due to the greater value the patriarchy places on men, a woman's untruth is viewed as an even greater trespass as it negatively affects the men with whom they are involved. Men, on the other hand, while they can be criticized for their untruth, seldom experience the same repercussions as women. This is why, although Criseyde acts in a manner adhering to typical courtly lover advice, advice that Pandarus and Troilus themselves spoke about in the text, the two men are astonished by her actions.

The narrator's attitude arguably exhibits the villainization of Criseyde as much as the other characters' behaviours, if not more. He prepares the readers for her betrayal early in the text:

Now wil I gon streght to my matere
 In which ye may the double sorwes here
 Of Troilus in lovyng of Criseyde,
 And how that she forsook hym er she deyde”

(*T&C* V.53-6).

Admittedly, the narrator—and Chaucer—cannot ignore the eventual developments of the narrative, but the fact that they highlight Troilus’s love and Criseyde’s forsaking him could predispose readers to sympathize with Troilus and disapprove of Criseyde. This behaviour is the result of gendered biases, and it, along with the behaviour of the male characters in the text, works to “shift the moral burden of responsibility toward female behaviour and away from male aggression” (Powrie 22). This is why we find Criseyde blamed for things she is forced to do because of the circumstances she faces as a direct result of male actions.

Of Criseyde’s courting by Diomedes, the narrator says, “Men seyn—I not—that she yaf hym [Diomedes] hire herte” (*T&C* V.1050). He goes on to assert that he is not trying to villainize Criseyde entirely: “Ne me ne list this sely womman chyde/ Forther than the storye wol devyse” (*T&C* V.1093-4). However, he also makes it clear that he considers her actions to be evidence of agency rather than desperation or necessity (Beck 165). This is why, much like Pandarus and Troilus, the narrator is bewildered by the fact that Criseyde takes Diomedes as her lover. He also says it was unnecessary for her to give Troilus’s brooch to Diomedes. Mary Behrman asserts that the narrator is unable to admit that Criseyde’s actions are understandable and that Troilus might not deserve to have her return because it would mean admitting he has been playing the role of a less than heroic man (331). While Chaucer affords Criseyde influence and agency in the text, by neglecting to take her situation and circumstances into account the narrator reveals himself to be short-sighted and offers a shallow perception of her behaviour. While he claims he does not wish to chide her more than necessary, he still views her actions as a betrayal, and Criseyde as a guilty party, as he conveys in lines such as “for hire gilte it oughte ynough suffise” (*T&C* V.1096) and “she so sory was for hire untrouthe” (*T&C* V.1098); her choice of the best option available to her in a precarious position is presented as intentional betrayal.

The narrator does try to defend Criseyde at various points in the text. Notably he comes to her defense after the window scene when she spies Troilus and begins to consider him as a potential romantic partner. The narrator is quick to assert that Criseyde did not immediately fall in love with Troilus: “I sey nought that she so sodeynly/ Yaf hym hire love, but that she gan enclyne/ To like hym first” (*T&C* II. 673-5). This interjection is abrupt and arguably out of place. As J.A. Tasioulas points out, Criseyde ponders Troilus’s positive qualities one at a time. She takes time to identify his traits, consider them, and form an opinion. It does not seem like a sudden or hasty development as the narrator fears it does, but one that grows from internal deliberation (103). The narrator also asserts that the reason she decides to love Troilus is because she recognizes his suffering and pities him (Garrison 330). While Troilus’s “love at first sight” experience is viewed as understandable by the narrator, he feels the need to offer excuses when Criseyde goes through something similar, insisting she is not fickle or superficial (Margherita 260). He expects the audience to be skeptical or cynical but, in offering needless excuses, he himself puts such thoughts into the reader’s mind. This is yet another example of a woman experiencing consequences or scrutiny for something that is generally unquestioned when done by men.

While the fact stands that—regardless of effectiveness or success—the narrator attempts to defend Criseyde on occasion, one can view such defenses as a means of him protecting himself. When he defends Criseyde, he puts emphasis on the fact that he is not trying to discredit her, that he does not want to be misunderstood, et cetera. Ross suggests that the narrator, through these defenses, is aiming to “shield her (and himself) from ‘som envious jangle’” (271). John Fleming states that the narrator’s self-defence against future accusations of misogyny is not an example of feminism (185); this perspective is understandable, as one could perceive the narrator

as being more worried about his own reputation than the actual feelings of women who may be affected by the text. In the final verses he makes his most direct apology and implores female readers to pardon him for the betrayal of Criseyde (McDonald 22). He seems less concerned about their possible unhappiness and more about the prospect of being the subject of their contempt:

Besechyng every lady bright of hewe,
 And every gentil womman, what she be,
 That al be that Criseyde was untrewe,
 That for that gilte ye be nat wrothe with me.
 Ye may hire giltes in other bokes se"

(*T&C* V.1772-6).

This is an example of deflection. In plain terms, the narrator proclaims that his poor presentation of Criseyde is not a choice, but a necessity since her character has been established in earlier texts (McCormick 94). In saying this he is trying to blame earlier writers, citing a (false) lack of creative liberty as the bonds that tie his hands. Arguably, however, this is a flawed argument, as Chaucer has made creative choices to differentiate his text from Boccaccio's. A lack of creative liberty could therefore be viewed less as an explanation and more as an easy excuse. The narrator also uses his appeals to the female readers to further discredit Criseyde as he refers to them as separate from her and tries to make them empathize with and relate to Troilus instead (Doyle 129).

Powrie notes that the way the narrator's feelings towards Criseyde shift—from captivation, to patronization, to angry dismissal—reveals biases he has about women as a whole; they can be objects of desire worthy of veneration, but can quickly become worthy of

condescension or being cast aside (22). We see him go through this emotional process and, by the end, we find that Criseyde is not accounted for in the text's finale. She is mentioned, but it is Troilus's fate to which the reader bears witness, not hers. This absence could be viewed as the narrator's ultimate condemnation and dismissal of her character (Nair 52). Through the narrator, Chaucer may be intentionally calling attention to a typical misogynistic viewpoint held by medieval men.

At the end of the text, the narrator tells the reader that he will write about the faithful Alceste, who died of love for her husband, to make up for relaying the tale of the unfaithful Criseyde. Chaucer does indeed go on to write about Alceste in his later work, *The Legend of Good Women* (Beck 150). In juxtaposing the figures of Criseyde and Alceste, the narrator further emphasizes the unbecoming qualities he perceives in Criseyde. It is also noteworthy that, having criticized Criseyde for making choices for the sake of self-preservation, the narrator then expresses admiration for tossing one's life aside for the sake of love when discussing Alceste. Rebecca Powell Lartigue points out that, in comparing the two women, the narrator showcases "the conventionality of the two literary figures as well-known and opposing representations of women" (141), an idea I will explore more thoroughly below. The comparison also perpetuates a sentiment often found in medieval literature: that a woman's virtue is worth more than her life.

As the narrator promises, Chaucer goes on to write about "good" women in *The Legend of Good Women*. In fact, Criseyde herself is mentioned in the prologue, when one of the characters, the God of Love, shares his dissenting opinion of her and of the fact that Chaucer chose to write about her. Despite Chaucer's status as a writer, the God of Love tries to usurp his authority by asserting his own opinion that "good" works are those which concern themselves with female fidelity. In a sort of retractation, the god condemns *Troilus and Criseyde* as a

creation because he considers Criseyde a bad woman, unworthy of being a literary subject. He goes on to offer suggestions of female figures Chaucer can write about instead. The women he describes are loyal and faithful despite the suffering or punishment they may face, with many dying to preserve their fidelity (Allen 422). The God of Love is projecting the mindset that a woman's virtue is more valuable than her life, and that the latter should be cast aside in order to protect the former. Like *Troilus and Criseyde's* narrator, the God of Love shares sentiments that can influence the reader. Specifically, he says that the sympathy the audience may have felt for Criseyde is incorrect and even immoral (Allen 423). Thus, the attempts to persuade the readers to discredit and disapprove of Criseyde follow them even beyond her own text. However, the God of Love's interpretation of *Troilus and Criseyde* is a shallow and inaccurate one, a fact which has been noted by other scholars. He wants stories only of faithful women, and so he is quick to simply deem Criseyde unfaithful and unvirtuous regardless of the context or details of her story (Lartigue 131). The God of Love's black-and-white perspective is further exemplified by his consort, Alceste, who is also present in *The Legend's* prologue. Alceste, a woman who, in her own narrative, sacrifices her life to die in her husband's place, is an example of what the god believes to be a good woman, the antithesis of someone like Criseyde (Lartigue 142). However, this binary view is an oversimplification of an entire sex and is rooted in a misogyny depicting "good" women as those who can serve the men around them, even at their own expense, and "bad" women as those who prioritize themselves. Moreover, as Lartigue points out, the high standard set by Alceste is one most real women would surely be unable to meet (142); this is a topic that is also relevant to Chaucer and his *Legend of Good Women*, and one that I will revisit.

Although the male figures are the ones who contribute most vocally to the condemnation of Criseyde, she herself predicts that she will become a villain in the eyes of the public. John

Fleming points out that Criseyde is the first to bring up the unbecoming reputation that awaits her, and once her betrayal of Troilus is known it is herself she grieves for, not him (184). In fact, Phillipa Hardman compares the misery Criseyde feels in this scene to the sorrow exhibited by the Man in Black in *The Book of the Duchess*, noting that, “Like him, she offers herself to any observer as a definitive example of sorrow” (226). Criseyde knows what history will do to her name, that the shame will last even after her death. Interestingly, it is not men about whom she is primarily concerned, but women: “wommen moost wol haten me of alle” (*T&C* V.1063). Marilyn Moore believes this is because Criseyde’s story will lend itself to misogynistic rhetoric which will ultimately affect women as a whole (166). In her last lines Criseyde laments, “O, rolled shal I ben on many a tonge!/ Thoroughout the world my belle shal be ronge!” (*T&C* V.1061–62). Sashi Nair states that these lines indicate the fact that Criseyde’s story is more complicated than most would think, but also address Criseyde’s inevitable classification as a faithless woman (35). However, the fact that this is the last we see of Criseyde is odd, almost jarring. Nair herself raises the question of “why Chaucer so carefully constructs a layered female character, imbued with an agency that facilitates the justification of her ‘betrayal’ of Troilus, only to foreground her faithlessness and exclude her from the narrative in its final stages” (35-6). It is possible Chaucer thought it necessary to end her character in such a manner in order to adhere to previous renditions of the text; or perhaps he was prevented by societal misogyny in such a way that he did not know how to resolve her narrative on a sympathetic note. Either way, the reality of the situation is that Troilus is afforded ascension and absolution—Criseyde is not.

The issue of the heroine’s infidelity in *Troilus and Criseyde* is a popular topic within academia, with scholarly opinions on Criseyde varying. It was common for authors of the medieval era to portray women as potential black widows who used the power of femininity—or,

perhaps more accurately, sexuality—to hinder or even destroy men. Behrman views Criseyde outside of this dichotomy, perceiving her to be a woman who is as heroic as her oppressive surroundings allow her to be, but also noting that, as much as Chaucer may stray from medieval literary norms, he is not above writing in such a way that fits the aforementioned binary of female characters (Behrman 14). A modern reader might perceive such villainization of women as a way to absolve men of their own mistakes and shortcomings; rather than blaming the man for becoming obsessed with a woman, one could blame the woman for being the object of that obsession. In any case, there are both scholars who condemn Criseyde and those who defend her. To get an idea of how varied opinions on the subject are, one should explore both sides of the debate. In doing so, a sort of middle ground should become apparent—a ground which, as a proto-feminist, Chaucer occupies.

It is important to review what traits an ideal woman in the eyes of medieval society needed to exhibit—truth, chastity, beauty, and submission are some of the most significant qualities. It is the last one, submission, which tends to cause the most controversy. Often, when female characters in medieval texts are depicted as independent or wanting agency, they are villainized or, at some point, they change and become complacent (such as the old crone in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”). In medieval literature, the perspective on women was largely black-and-white, as Arlyn Diamond indicates about the view of some readers: “[T]he alternative to chastity and secluded widowhood [was] female lust run rampant, demanding and insatiable” (Diamond 70); if a woman is not completely complacent in her role in society, she is expected to be an uncontrollable harlot. Moreover, women were once thought to be more naturally inclined to behave like the latter than the former. Criseyde’s story has been told many times, and in many medieval works, such as Boccaccio’s *Il Filostrato* and Robert Henryson’s *The Testament of*

Cressid, she is often presented as a stereotypical fickle female, with the story often prompting arguments and discussions that culminated in a negative opinion on women in general. As has already been acknowledged, Boccaccio's portrayal of Criseyde is not quite as sympathetic and influential as Chaucer's. Moreover, Henryson's text shows her suffering from leprosy as retribution for her betrayal, a punishment which many modern readers find disproportionate or entirely unrelated to the transgression (Aswell 471). Some authors would explain Criseyde's "betrayal" as part of her nature because they viewed women as innately weak-willed and deceitful (Doyle 5). However, the authors simultaneously try to appeal to female readers, who they fear will be offended by their interpretation of the heroine.

It must be said that the idea of the villainous Criseyde may not be as prevalent as it was centuries ago, but similar views have been expressed as recently as the seventies and eighties. Two critics writing in the late twentieth century, J.D. Burnley and Gail Helen Vieth Reed, are prime examples of this. In his work, J.D. Burnley asserts that Chaucer presents Criseyde as an active participant who denies the fact that she is complicit in the entire affair between Troilus and herself. Burnley concedes that there is coercion involved, but insists that Criseyde is a willing participant who is no more a victim than anyone else, and he even goes so far as to say that, when Criseyde accuses Pandarus of being duplicitous, it is no more than her "usual abnegation of moral responsibility" (Burnley 30). He goes on to state that Chaucer, in developing his version of Criseyde, emphasized the qualities which would have been considered typical of women at the time, particularly her tenderness. Burnley then explains why he himself considers this a negative aspect of her character: "Her tender heart, which in the balanced personality of a mature man can only lead to virtue, is in her a peculiarly feminine failing, leading to ready sympathy, but also to instability of purpose" (36). This statement is a clear example of the double

standard that has persisted for hundreds of years wherein qualities that are thought to make men better are somehow flaws in women; if a man has a tender heart he is virtuous, but if a woman does she is weak. Burnley simultaneously considers Criseyde a weak-willed woman and a manipulative conspirator. It feels contradictory, yet it is not an uncommon view. In a footnote in her dissertation, Valerie A. Ross singles out Burnley as one of the scholars who has, in their analyses, focused on Criseyde's "ambiguity", "slydyng corage", or other perceived flaws. In regard to Criseyde, the phrase "slydyng corage" has been used broadly to refer to qualities such as instability, unpredictability, and changeability. However, Ross notes that "Pandarus, Diomedes, and even Troilus are equally unstable, if not more so, than Criseyde, in terms of their identity and gender construction. But it is Criseyde whom Chaucerians consistently isolate as being primarily responsible for the representational instability permeating 'The Troilus'" (Ross 229); this is yet again another double-standard in that the woman's unpredictability is condemned while that of the men is ignored. Ross refers to the aforementioned behaviour as part of "Chaucerian misogyny", a phenomenon not necessarily produced by Chaucer himself, but by readers of his texts (Ross 229).

Gail Reed also has a critical opinion of the heroine. She views Criseyde as insensitive given that she finds amusement in her uncle's unrequited love (Reed 61). Considering that Pandarus makes a joke about the subject himself, it seems odd to fault Criseyde for laughing when he himself presented the topic in a humorous fashion. Reed goes on to assert that Criseyde knows more than she lets on and suspects what the result of her dinner with Pandarus will be. In other words, she claims Criseyde is feigning ignorance so as to hide the fact that she is willing to comply with her uncle and Troilus's desires. This is not unlike Burnley's view of the character. However, the main quality Reed seems to take issue with regarding the character is selfishness.

This is mainly due to the fact that, as Reed states, “first in [Criseyde’s] heart comes Criseyde, never Troilus, not in their tenderest moments together” (59). While it is true that selfishness generally involves concern for oneself over all others, context is important. Criseyde, as the widowed daughter of a traitor, is in a delicate position within a patriarchal society. Eventually she even finds herself faced with the reality that she will be stripped from her home and handed over to the enemy. Her concern for herself is not trivial or egotistical. She wishes to be safe and secure. While Reed knows this, it does not change her view of Criseyde, who she says “clings so closely to her own concept of her personal security that she almost automatically sacrifices anything which seems to threaten it” (67). While most would consider security a basic human desire and necessity, Criseyde’s desire for it and the fact that she might be willing to make sacrifices for it is viewed as fickle or callous. Reed also states that, in order to be safe and secure, Criseyde must be on the winning side (80); this is a reference to Criseyde eventually joining the Greeks and accepting Diomedes. However, Reed does not seem to take into the account that Criseyde did not *willingly* switch sides, but was rather forced. One could argue that faulting Criseyde for an action she is forced to take is akin to victim-blaming, a term which has gained traction since the #MeToo movement began and refers to blaming the victim of an offense rather than the perpetrator. Moreover, the idea that worrying about oneself, especially in a time of crisis, denotes selfishness is unarguably problematic, especially when mental health is such a prevalent issue in society.

The views of these critics do not stray far from the attitudes of the authors themselves writing hundreds of years ago. However, as mentioned, authors were aware that, while they were condemning a woman—and, by extension, most women—there would also *be* women reading their work. Sometimes the authors would apologize to female readers for having to depict such

an unbecoming member of their sex, as Chaucer opts to do. Some would attempt to guide female readers to agree with the condemnation in the text, a treacherous task given the fact that it arguably insults them as a group (Doyle 5). As Doyle explains, in medieval texts the anticipated resistant female reading is characterized by a desire to conform to societal gender roles while, on the other hand, resistant female readers today often interact and analyze texts the same way in an effort to reject the patriarchal, androcentric values still prevalent in society (Doyle 14-5). It is interesting to ponder if any of the resistant medieval female readers felt a similar defiance in themselves, one which was not spoken or noticed but existed nonetheless.

Despite the fact that characters and scholars alike have frequently viewed Criseyde as a villain, there is much textual evidence and academic work that contributes to her defense. As I have already mentioned, the two most prevalent sides of the debate concern themselves with whether Criseyde is a villain or a victim. Feminist critics in particular have countered the villainous image of Criseyde that has been conjured by some readers and scholars. They have done so by analyzing the text from a perspective in which Criseyde is the victim, contrasting her against the devious antagonist that many masculine readers have identified her as, and reading her instead as an individual whose learned passivity makes her susceptible to the manipulation of self-serving men (Behrman 314-5). David Aers asserts that Chaucer himself is defensive of and empathetic towards Criseyde, despite the attitudes of the characters and narrator. Aers points out that, at the beginning to the text, Chaucer makes sure to emphasize how isolated and dangerous Criseyde's social situation is, and that she would benefit from male protection (Aers 119). Aers also shares his thoughts on Criseyde accepting Troilus's affections, stating that "To survive in this culture the woman needs to make use of her sexuality and whatever courtly sexual conventions, fictions or male fantasies may serve her" (121). While there are those who accuse

Criseyde herself of having the agency of a manipulator, it seems unjust to fault her for using what little advantage she has to survive in a patriarchal, war-threatened climate as a widowed and abandoned woman. Crocker echoes this sentiment, arguing that “Criseyde understands that she is culturally disposable, and accepts the flexible values required for her survival” (Crocker 45). However, despite all of her efforts to be as autonomous as possible, Criseyde becomes a victim of her society. Chaucer subtly depicts a progression in which Criseyde’s assertions of her authority are overpowered by the subordination forced upon women in Trojan society (Aers 132).

Readers and scholars have frequently criticized Criseyde for leaving Troy, but it can equally be argued that, in choosing to leave Troy rather than elope with Troilus, Criseyde exhibits prudence, which would have been considered a valuable virtue in her time (Beck 145). It could also be argued that she makes the decision to leave Troy in order to protect Troilus rather than herself, acting with selflessness and bravery where he exhibits selfishness and cowardice. Specifically, she refuses to elope in order to save his reputation. Troilus’s heroic status comes from the fact that he dies fighting. If he had eloped with Criseyde, it would have been an act of treason, and he would have gone down in history as a traitor instead of a hero (Bloomfield 297). By refusing to elope with him, Criseyde ensures that his name is not sullied, and suffers the brand of “villain” in his place. Many are also defensive of Criseyde’s decision to “abandon” Troilus and accept Diomedes as her paramour. Criseyde’s delicate social and physical security, emphasized by Chaucer more than once throughout the text, is far more precarious in the Greek camp than in Troy. Although her father betrayed his own people to work with the Greeks, she is, by all accounts, a prisoner of the enemy. Initially, Criseyde is hopeful that she will find a way out of the camp. She considers several scenarios such as riding back, tricking her father into

letting her return, or imagining that she will be permitted to go free when the war is over (Tasioulas 110). However, she eventually has to face the fact that there is no method of escape that would not put her at severe risk. Unlike Troilus, who has a friend in Pandarus as well as family and comrades, she is alone and vulnerable (Aers 134).

Criseyde laments the fact that she is trapped in the Greek camp and unable to return to Troy. Unlike many depictions of lamentation in medieval literature, Chaucer allows her to voice all of her fears in a straightforward manner— “her real and justifiable social and sexual fears, fear of the Greek state, fear of rape” (Aers 135). Criseyde herself voices her worries about what may happen if her escape attempt were to go badly:

And if that I me putte in jupertie
 To stele away by nyght, and it bitfalle
 That I be kaught, I shal be holde a spie;
 Or elles—lo, this drede I moost of alle—
 If in the hondes of of som wrecche I falle,
 I nam but lost, al be myn herte trewe”

(*T&C* IV.701-6).

One must keep these fears and very real dangers in mind when considering how Criseyde “abandoned” Troilus for Diomedes. As Delony acknowledges, one can view her decision as choosing the more appealing of two unpleasant options: she can either become the lover of Diomedes, or be available to anyone in the camp who desires her carnally (105). With Troilus incapable of protecting her, Criseyde does what she can to best protect herself which, in her case, is accepting the affections of Diomedes. In doing so, Criseyde is arguably doing no different than

she did when she asked Hector for protection: if she can appeal to one person for security, even if it involves submitting to them, she can avoid being left to the devices of the public (Weisl 37).

While some scholars suggest that Criseyde is secretly pleased to be courted by Diomedes, who may seem to some like a better alternative to Troilus, one must also remember the vast power imbalance between them: Diomedes is a Greek general and she is an enemy prisoner. Criseyde is vulnerable, a fact of which he is aware, and he does not waste the opportunity to try to woo her since she is to him, in Aers's words, "a (doubtlessly goddess-like) fish to be netted" (135). She is in a perilous position and her new paramour uses that to his advantage, yet many people villainize Criseyde for accepting his advances rather than criticizing Diomedes for making them in the first place. Hence, once more we find the heroine blamed for circumstances that befall her due to the actions of the men around her. Chaucer quite clearly conveys the misery Criseyde feels about betraying Troilus and he is sympathetic and understanding when depicting her grief. Rather than painting her as the callous harlot some would have her be, Chaucer instead portrays her as a woman who, although her ideal life is out of reach, chooses security and fidelity over danger and misery (Aers 137). In this instance, Chaucer allows her to exhibit her (albeit limited) agency. Rather than wallowing in her sorrow like the Man in Black and allowing it to incapacitate her, she weighs her options and takes action (Hardman 226). It should also be acknowledged that even if Criseyde *were* to find happiness with Diomedes, it is unjust to chastise her for it. In many ways, Troilus failed her, and therefore she decided to give the gift of her loyalty to another who will potentially treat her more as an equal and follow through his words with actions (Behrman 333). In fact, the text implies that accepting Diomedes alleviates her misery: "He refte hire of the grete of alle hire peyne" (1036). Therefore, whether one wishes to

view Criseyde's decision as a result of desperation or desire, justification exists for either scenario and should therefore call into question the idea that she is a fickle traitor.

Again, there is hypocrisy and double-standards among critics and readers who condemn Criseyde. Despite the fact that Criseyde is the one most often villainized, we should not forget that Troilus fits the definition of "callous", as well. With his desire for Criseyde leaning towards obsession, we find that he is willing to use his own sisters as bargaining chips, to hold Criseyde in higher regard than his father, brothers, and city, all of which he considers betraying to elope with and keep her (Bloomfield 293). However, while his words are traitorous in nature, he exhibits timidity when the time comes to discuss such an action. Criseyde *wants* to go with Troilus. She even gives him the opportunity to ravish her. "O Jove, I deye, and mercy I beseeche!/ Help, Troilus!"—and therewithal hire face/ Upon his brest she leyde, and lost speche" (*T&C* IV.1149-51); here she swoons, expecting him to step into the role of a heroic courtly lover. Yet Troilus does not, instead viewing her as metaphorically deceased, already lost to him, and he surrenders (Behrman 327). In this way he differs greatly from Boccaccio's version of Troilus. In *Il Filostrato*, Troilus is more active than performative. He faints when he learns of the exchange, and attempts suicide when he believes Criseyde has been unfaithful (Lambert 87). Chaucer's Troilus, on the other hand, is a man of inaction. Early in the text he believes he will perish from his love for Criseyde, and later that he will die when he loses her, and yet in both instances he does nothing (Tasioulas 110). It is possible Chaucer made this creative choice to help present Criseyde's situation as more pitiable and understandable. When Troilus does not agree to the idea of taking her away with him, she does not press the issue or try to convince him; instead, she accepts her fate. Thereafter, she forms a plan to escape the Greeks and return to him. It is an optimistic plan borne of someone who, unlike Troilus, has not experienced the reality of war.

Troilus should know dangerous this idea is, yet he does not try to dissuade her from doing it. In fact, he seems “relieved that she seems to exonerate him from taking any rash action, for such a view accords with his own and enables him to rationalize his impotence as simply a chivalric attempt to uphold his lady’s desire” (Behrman 328). Moreover, he later writes to Criseyde to beg her to flee the camp and come back to Troy. This is a thoughtless and ridiculous request, and arguably hypocritical, as well. Troilus remained silent and passive during the debate about whether Criseyde should be traded, and yet he expects her to risk life and limb to run back to him across enemy territory. It could even be suggested that Troilus does not expect Criseyde to reunite with him but to die for him (Behrman 330); it might be that he wants her to sacrifice her life to prove her love and virtue, a concept I have already mentioned and which will appear again in *The Legend of Good Women*. However, despite his shortcomings, only a portion of critics have focused on Troilus’s failures, choosing instead to highlight the perceived flaws of Criseyde (Warren 1).

In *The Legend*, when it comes to the God of Love’s interpretation of *Troilus and Criseyde* and the disdain he feels towards the heroine, it is important also to take into account that a single character does not necessarily convey Chaucer’s own feelings as the author. The narrator of *The Legend of Good Women*, for example, is sympathetic towards Criseyde. He acknowledges the fact that she did something unbecoming, but also “encourages the reader not to blame her but to treat her with that essential virtue, mercy” (Allen 423). It is telling that, even in a text that is meant to be an atonement for the portrayal of Criseyde, the narrator still offers the character sympathy and understanding and implores others to do the same. This is one of the instances in which Chaucer’s personal feelings about the character can possibly be inferred.

As Minnis says, “Chaucer had sought to suck the poison from the misogynistic presentations of Criseyde (by Guido delle Colonne [*Historia destructionis Troiae*, (ca. 1287)] and Boccaccio) two of his sources, but there he was fighting a losing battle because the final infidelity of the heroine could be obscured but not eliminated” (159); however, Chaucer does not dwell on this act as much as earlier authors. He does not want to associate Criseyde’s femininity with the act of betrayal as other authors have (Marilyn Moore 166). Taking this into account, one can infer that he does not want all readers to have the same interpretation of the text. He encourages different readings of *Troilus and Criseyde*, with the narrator inviting readers to form their own opinions (Reis 141); given the long-lasting debate about Criseyde’s identity as a villain or a victim, it is clear that such variation in reading was achieved.

Chaucer's accomplishment of having readers form their own varying opinions on the narrative is due to how he depicts Criseyde and her story. Chaucer affords Criseyde quite a bit of agency, more than the average medieval heroine and indeed more than previous iterations of Criseyde. Scholars have noted that by affording her the agency and influence he does, Chaucer enhances her character:

In the end, Criseyde’s agency provides her with a complex and layered characterization...Her layered personhood, characterized by a pragmatism that justifies her decision not to return to Troy, is compromised by a narrative that ultimately attributes more blame to her than to the men who deemed her an object of exchange (Nair 56).

The enhancement of Criseyde’s character goes beyond her autonomy and assertiveness, however. Chaucer is compelled to portray Criseyde as “slydng of corage” because she does not return to Troilus. While Pandarus and Troilus display such fickleness as well, Criseyde faces much more criticism, a fact which is rooted in the misogynistic double-standards I have

discussed. Yet one can argue that the positive attributes Chaucer grants Criseyde—her generosity, benevolence, wisdom, et cetera—outweigh the negative. Moreover, “slydinge corage” could be viewed as a positive trait if one can set aside the “betrayal” and acknowledge that it allows Criseyde to attain safety and security (Marilyn Moore 154). Criseyde is pragmatic, trying constantly to make the best of the situations to which she is subjected (Nair 53). Chaucer also makes changes to the character that allow him to highlight her positive aspects. For example, the fact that Criseyde does not blame her father for the need to defend herself (unlike Boccaccio’s version of the character) exhibits the grace she possesses (Boboc 69). Crocker believes Criseyde is a character who does not adhere to gendered stereotypes or archetypes. She is virtuous, but Chaucer allows her to use her virtues for the sake of self-preservation. It is possible that, in using culturally approved feminine qualities to their advantage, women could find more security in male-dominated society (Crocker 55). Marilyn Moore also notes that the characteristics of Criseyde that Chaucer emphasizes are positive and not gender-specific, and they allow readers to view her as a complex individual rather than simply an unfaithful traitor (172).

Clearly, Chaucer’s approach to writing Criseyde in *Troilus and Criseyde* differs greatly from his methods in *The Book of the Duchess*. Criseyde is a character of contrast. She is both objectified and assertive. She is influential and subordinate. She is viewed as both villain and victim. There has been debate about her amongst critics and readers, and it is possible even Chaucer himself felt torn between adhering to history and societal standards and letting Criseyde break the mold. Thus, while he was not able to completely shake the shackles of Criseyde’s historical betrayal or the expectations of medieval culture, his attempts at allowing her character to flourish—giving her more agency, more scenes, more influence, and more sympathy than her

previous depictions were given—are no less valuable and should be acknowledged. Perhaps the treatment of Criseyde would today trouble modern readers who would be more willing to identify the faults of the men in the text and could consider Criseyde’s circumstances from a more unbiased perspective. However, the way Chaucer portrayed her, especially when compared to authors like Boccaccio, was far more flexible and respectful than the average presentation of female characters in medieval literature. In this way, Chaucer further reveals himself to be a proto-feminist: not quite adhering to modern expectations of feminism, but daring to venture beyond the gender expectations and norms of his society.

CHAPTER 3 – THE LEGEND OF GOOD WOMEN

Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* is predated by both *The Book of the Duchess* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. In fact, Chaucer's version of *Troilus and Criseyde* was integral to the creation of *The Legend of Good Women*. There are two existing versions of *The Legend of Good Women*'s prologue: Prologue F and Prologue G. These versions differ in structure and line details. The general consensus amongst scholars seems to be that Prologue F is more courtly, whereas Prologue G is more solemn and serious in tone as well as being more tightly organized (Eadie 135-6). Because of its meaningful tone and more organized composition, I will focus on Prologue G for the purpose of this thesis. In the prologue the God of Love criticizes the narrator, understood as an extension of Chaucer, for the portrayal of Criseyde in his earlier work. Alceste, the God of Love's companion and his example of an ideal good woman, defends the narrator, insisting he did not realize or intend to do what he did. The narrator is then tasked with writing a new work as penance for his depiction of Criseyde, which the God of Love views as an insult against all women. This is his catalyst for writing the legends.

Referencing other authors' depictions of women, the God of Love offers his idea of what a good woman is. His ideal involves more than just her virtue. He also highlights a willingness to suffer for their faithfulness:

Telleth Jerome, and that nat a few,
 But, I dar seyn, an hundred on a rew,
 That is it pite for to rede, and routhe,
 The wo that they endure for here trouthe.
 For to hyre love were they so trewe

hat, rather than they wolde take a newe,
 They chose to be ded in sondry wyse,
 And deaden, as the story wol devyse;
 And some were brend, and some were cut the hals,
 And some dreynt for they wolden not be fals;
 For alle keped they were maydenhede,
 Or elles wedlok, or here widewehede.

(L*GW* 286-95).

Chaucer takes this description of suffering into account, as one sees throughout the collection of tales. Violence (especially sexual violence), abandonment, and suicide are prevalent in *The Legend*; in fact, Peter L. Allen, who discusses reading and readers of *The Legend*, notes that more than half the women in the text take their own lives (426). There has long been debate about whether the work is a genuine attempt at penance on Chaucer's part, or whether this collection of stories was a method of criticizing the portrayal of and standards for women in medieval society and literature. I will focus on the different forms of suffering endured by the female characters in *The Legend* in an effort to analyze Chaucer's choices and intentions in creating the text and highlight how, in medieval literature, there is frequent association of female suffering with female goodness.

3.1 *Violence*

To begin, I want to discuss the violence depicted in *The Legend of Good Women*, with particular attention to the legends of Lucrece and Philomela. As discussed earlier in this thesis, the consummation of Troilus and Criseyde's relationship is not sexual assault in the explicit or "conventional" sense, but the circumstances of the encounter cast doubt upon the authenticity of

Criseyde's consent. In contrast, the violent acts perpetrated against Lucrece and Philomela are depicted very clearly as rape. As Carissa Harris observes, the anger of female victims of sexual assault is understudied and is a topical subject given the increasing social awareness about sexual assault in current society, due in part to the #MeToo movement (256). Harris also points out that "anger at rape's wrongs can become a potent weapon aimed at acknowledging, avenging, and preventing sexual violence" (257). However, in *The Legend*, Chaucer's victims do not express anger at their assaults. This is unsurprising given that wrath would not suit the God of Love's idea of a good woman. Hindered by the god's expectations, Chaucer can only depict the traumatic events themselves and the suffering of the victims thereafter. Some might argue that Chaucer becomes complicit in their humiliation by presenting their violation to the audience, objectifying them as the targets of a predator's lust (Dumitrescu 109). On the other hand, he may have portrayed them thusly in order to highlight the issues of medieval ideals for women. Keeping both of these viewpoints in mind, I will first discuss the rape of Lucrece.

Lucrece's rape is the result of male lust and covetousness. In her legend, the assailant is Tarquinius, the son of a king. He comes to Lucrece's town by orders of his father because of an ongoing siege. In *Teaching Rape in the Medieval Literature Classroom*, Tison Pugh discusses the roles of speech and silence in relation to sexual assault, particularly in Chaucer's work. He notes that while many classical authors encouraged masculine speech and feminine silence, it is actually the former that serves as the catalyst for the conflict in "The Legend of Lucrece." Bored with the siege, Tarquinius invites the men around him to boast about their wives so they can decide whose is best: "[L]at us speke of wyves, that is best; / Preyse every man his owene as hym lest, / And with oure speche lat us ese oure herte" (*LGW* 1702–4). This leads Collatinus to brag about Lucrece, piquing Tarquinius's interest. Collatinus later takes Tarquinius home to see

her and, enthralled by her beauty and grace, Tarquinius is overcome by desire for her: “His blynde lust was al his covetyng” (*LGW* 1756). His covetousness is so great that he decides he must have her for himself as soon as possible. In this way he is not entirely unlike Troilus who, perhaps as a punishment by the God of Love for his disdain of lovers (*T&C* I, 204-10), falls for Criseyde when he first sees her and becomes overwhelmed with such a desire for her that it makes him ill. Of course, Troilus is neither as bold nor as violent as Tarquinius, and much of his wooing of Criseyde is conducted through Pandarus. Nonetheless, Criseyde and Lucrece are alike in that they are both innocent women put into stressful and dangerous situations due to the lust and selfishness of men.

As David C. Benson explains in his analysis of Chaucer’s Roman heroines, it is not just Lucrece’s body that Tarquinius violates, but also her marital space. In earlier versions of the tale, such as those written by Ovid and Gower, Tarquinius returns to Collatinus and Lucrece’s house later that night under the guise of paying a friendly visit, and he is received as an honoured guest. Chaucer’s *Legend*, however, expands on the deviousness of Tarquinius’s character. Rather than making a house call under false pretences, in Chaucer’s version Tarquinius instead sneaks into the home without permission. He trespasses on their property, and later trespasses against Lucrece, both times acting without consent. Chaucer goes on to emphasize the brutality of Tarquinius through Lucrece’s dialogue. In Gower and Ovid’s versions of the tale, the man is compared to a wolf, with the latter writing, “[Lucrece] trembles, as sometime the little lambkin, seized upon after it has left the fold, lies under the wolf, its *deadly* foe” (Ovid 81). However, Chaucer takes his description of Tarquinius a step further with Lucrece literally referring to him as a beast in the only instance during the ordeal in which she speaks aloud (Benson 85-6). Robert Worth Frank Jr.’s *Chaucer and The Legend of Good Women*, containing his views on Chaucer’s

development as a writer and a critical analysis of *The Legend*, notes that Chaucer also alters Lucrece's personality, differentiating her from earlier iterations of her story. He reduces the harshness in her speech about the city her husband is defending, and omits her mention of her husband's rashness. Moreover, he depicts her as sitting disheveled by her bedside, unsuspecting, when Tarquinius first sees her: "This noble wif sat by hire beddes side/ Dischevele, for no malyce she ne thought" (*LGW* 1719-20). She is depicted as a defenseless, devoted damsel whose only concern is her husband's well-being (Frank 100-1). Louise Sylvester contends that Chaucer's description of Lucrece in her bedchamber, unaware that she is being observed, places the reader alongside Tarquinius in violating her privacy (130). In making such alterations to his version of the legend, Chaucer shifts Tarquinius and Lucrece further toward the opposite ends of a moral spectrum, portraying Tarquinius as even more villainous and Lucrece as even more innocent and pitiable than is perhaps necessary for a realistic presentation.

In Chaucer's version of Lucrece's legend he has her fall unconscious before the rape, which further differs from other versions of the narrative. Some critics view her fainting as a failure on Chaucer's part as they believe it reduces her to a passive, overwhelmed heroine who does not have control of even her own body (Saunders 28-9). They do not take into account that such a reaction—freezing or fainting—is not unheard of in real-world sexual assault cases. Moreover, there is an element of medieval belief that they also neglect to take into account. In her article "Affective Reading: Chaucer, Women, and Romance", Corrine Saunders discusses the medieval belief that consciousness was tied to one's vital spirit. Chaucer describes Lucrece as losing her breath and wits during the attack. As the spirit was believed in the Middle Ages to be tied to breathing, this implies that she was deprived of her spirit and therefore unable to maintain her wits. In other words, Lucrece was such a true woman that the prospect of having

her reputation and body ruined shook her to the very core of her being (Saunders 28-9). Chaucer most likely made the choice to have Lucrece faint to distance her from the violation and further add to her innocence, something that could be conveyed even more effectively if medieval readers held the aforementioned belief. However, as J.A. Tasioulas points out in *Chaucer: The Basics*, while Lucrece does not remember the actual rape afterwards, she knows that it has taken place and feels great shame (173). This shame is what eventually leads to her suicide.

I will explore suicide as an element of *The Legend* more broadly later, but in Lucrece's case I want to consider it in relation to her assault. Once the rape is over, Lucrece leaves the bedroom and her husband and friends gather around her. Once again she is "discheveled," although this time it is in public for all to see as opposed to the private dishevelment that sparked Tarquinius's illicit intentions ("Pite Renneth Soone in Gentil Herte" 83). For a while, Lucrece is unable to speak. Instead she weeps, unwilling to meet the gazes of those present due to the immense shame she feels (Frank 108). She eventually breaks her silence and tells them what has transpired, but this task is not an easy one: "But atte last of Tarquyny she hem tolde / This rewful cas and al thys thing horryble. / The woo to tellen were an impossible" (L^{GW} 1837-9). In his work on the roles speech and silence play in relation to the sexual assault depicted in Chaucer's writing, Pugh addresses a paradox of speech found in this scene: although Lucrece has the opportunity to tell the others what has happened, words cannot properly convey the trauma she has endured (86). Her friends and family insist that what has happened to her is not her fault, but their assertions do not sway her. She is aware that she has done nothing wrong, and is not seeking absolution (Tasioulas 173). Ultimately, she takes out a hidden knife and ends her own life.

Lucrece's reason for killing herself is clearly stated in the text: "She seyde that, for hir gylt ne for hir blame,/ Hir husbonde shulde nat have the foule name,/ That wolde she nat suffre, by no wey" (*LGW* 1844-1846). In Ovid's version of Lucrece's tale, her main motivation for committing suicide is to escape her own personal shame; however, Chaucer changes this narrative so that the reason is instead the disgrace she believes her husband will suffer due to the assault (Minnis 161). In her dissertation on gender in *The Legend of Good Women*, Faye Walker-Pelkey views the suicide as an act through which Lucrece takes control of the narrative. Tarquinius overpowers her, and her loved ones try to persuade her, but Lucrece, in her own way, enacts agency in the situation. She reveals what has transpired publicly, but secretly conceals and then uses the knife to end her life, ultimately deciding her own fate (Walker-Pelkey 157). Moreover, she also takes care to die with modesty in spite of the recent violation of her body and spirit; she arranges her clothes as she falls so that no part of her body, not even a single foot, is exposed (Tasioulas 173).

After Lucrece's death, Brutus orders the men to carry her body throughout Rome in order to tell her pitiable tale and perhaps to expose the villainy of Tarquinius (Tasioulas 174). While the act may be well-intentioned, the negative aspect of it must also be addressed. Like Alcyone, White, and Criseyde, Lucrece suffers objectification in her text, and not just at the hands of Tarquinius. In her article on Chaucer and Christine de Pizan's virtuous female characters, Judith Laird puts it quite succinctly: "Chaucer's Lucrece is conceived as an object from the outset. Her husband and other men entertain themselves by evaluating their wives. Tarquin becomes obsessed with Lucrece upon sight. Her body is carried about town. She represents not woman, but chastity in woman" (64). Her beauty and value in the eyes of men leads them to treat her in ways of which she is either not aware or to which she does not consent. She is unaware of her

husband's boasting or the fact that he brings Tarquinius into their home to gaze upon her, showing her off like a prized possession, nor is she able to stop Tarquinius from using her to fulfill his selfish carnal desires. After death, she cannot voice her consent to being carried about the city to be gawked at by one and all. From beginning to end, Lucrece never stops being objectified.

At the legend's conclusion, the narrator has some parting words regarding the general characters of men and women:

Crist himselfes telleth
 That in Israel, as wyd as in the lond,
 That so gret feyth in al that he ne fond
 As in a woman; and this is no lye.
 And as of men, loke ye which tirannye
 They doon alday; assay hem whoso lyste,
 The trewest ys ful brotel for to triste;"

(*LGW* 1879-85)

The narrator asserts that most women are naturally good, while most men are naturally untrustworthy. In her analysis of *The Legend of Good Women*, Betsy McCormick considers this perspective to be a counter of sorts to the common antifeminist rhetoric that women are by nature fickle and unstable (156). While Lucrece may fit the God of Love's definition of "good," it should be noted that she and Criseyde (whom he deems immoral), both suffer due to the objectification and selfishness of men. However, unlike Lucrece, Criseyde survives her story and does not suffer such extreme violence. While Lucrece finds a way to take matters into her own hands, it involves ending her own life. Regarding love, specifically the God of Love's idea of

love and the kind of love portrayed in the legend, Peter L. Allen claims that “Love is faithful to the end, and it seems, in fact, that the end must be a violent one in order to prove how good the love was...The sensibilities of any reader are likely to be disturbed by these morbid views of love: in *The Legend*, we seem to move from one tragedy to another” (426).

Here we can raise a question as to whether sharing the story of Lucrece, who would have been considered an ideal good woman by the god’s standards, was an attempt on Chaucer’s part to criticize the traditional and literary standards of feminine virtue. For example, in medieval literature, female modesty and loyalty is valued over female well-being; Alceste is known for having died in place of her husband, and it is she whom the God of Love views as the ideal woman. Many virtuous women in literature also choose to die rather than to suffer assault or, like Lucrece, to die after the fact for the sake of honour. In such texts, women are primarily valued not because they are human beings, but because of what they represent and how they affect the men around them. It is my belief that in choosing to write about the story of Lucrece, Chaucer is not necessarily aiming to uphold such expectations for women, but to call them into question and make his audience think about them critically; the fact that all of the good women he writes about suffer in some way may suggest that his intention was to draw attention to the issues within the societal expectations of and attitudes towards women in his time. With this in mind, I will now move on to “The Legend of Philomela” and the violence she experiences in her narrative.

Philomela’s story resembles Lucrece’s in that she is the victim of a man’s lust and violence. It differs, however, in the origin of the villainy and how the story ends. Rather than suffering at the hands of a stranger as Lucrece does, Philomela’s assault is perpetrated by her brother-in-law, Tereus. In “The Legend of Philomela,” Philomela's sister Procne, homesick and

missing her sister, begs her husband, Tereus, King of Thrace, to bring Philomela to their home. Tereus eventually agrees and goes to Athens to collect her. As in the case when Tarquinius sees Lucrece, when Tereus arrives and sees Philomela he is overcome with lust. Together the two set off, but rather than bringing Philomela to Thrace, Tereus takes her to a remote place and rapes her. However, the violence does not end there.

As Faye Walker-Pelkey notes, Tereus's trespasses are not limited to the rape: he also cuts out Philomela's tongue after the assault in order to keep her silent, and abandons her in an isolated place so he may use her when he wishes (176-7); while Tarquinius violates Lucrece's private space and body, Tereus not only rapes Philomela but also prolongs the trauma by mutilating her and stranding her for the sake of his own protection and future desires. As Carolyn Dinshaw puts it, Tereus's violations are part of a larger program within the text, where "Men [in *The Legend*] literally do divide up women's bodies and separate their bodies from their spirits: Philomela's tongue, for example, is carved out of her mouth" (*Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* 75). Dinshaw goes on to note that, as a result of the mutilation inflicted on her by Tereus, "Philomela is a prime example of a woman denied the 'proper' means of making meaning" (*Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* 81). This is yet another way in which Philomela is similar to Lucrece, whose spirit and wits seem to be separated from her body due to Tarquinius's violence. In different ways they are both robbed of their voice. Moreover, Philomela shares something in common with Criseyde: both are used by a family member for personal gain. Their manipulative relatives, Tereus and Pandarus, are similar to each other, something Robert S. Burges explains in his study of references to Philomela in *Troilus and Criseyde*: "[Tereus and Pandarus] both violate the basic codes of family honor as well as of sexual conduct—Tereus by raping and mutilating his wife's sister, Pandarus by trying to seduce his niece for the benefit of a friend. Some readers

have even suggested that Pandarus incestuously desires Criseyde for himself, which would strengthen the parallel” (Sturges 65). Despite the fact that Criseyde is not a good woman in the eyes of the God of Love, Lucrece and Philomela, both “good women,” are likely to have related to her struggles and circumstances.

Like Lucrece, Philomela finds a way to take the situation into her own hands, only in a much less self-destructive way. Robbed of her voice, she uses her skill in weaving to write a message which she then has delivered to her sister. This is the catalyst for her eventual rescue. She is saved by her sister because of her own cleverness, skill, and action. As Harris observes, “Philomela’s tapestry telling the narrative of her rape is a form of feminist art, as she resourcefully uses the feminized art of weaving—which Chaucer designates as ‘of wemen hath be woned yore’ (line 2353)—to disclose her violation to Procne after Tereus removes her capacity to speak” (263). While Chaucer did not originate this aspect of the narrative, he highlights the traditional association of weaving with womanhood, bringing attention to the fact that Philomela uses a “feminine” skill to save herself. She is able to find strength and change her situation even when she is forced into silence by a man.

Once the sisters reunite, the legend ends and, as in the case of Lucrece, the narrator concludes with a message that women should be cautious of men. While he notes that men may not treat them as terribly as Tereus, he also makes a rather disturbing assertion in these lines:

“For al be it that he wol nat, for shame,
 Don as Tereus, to lese his name,
 Ne serve yow as a morderour or a knave,
 Ful lytel while shal ye trewe hym have—
 That wol I seyn, al were he now my brother

But it so be that he may have non other.

(*LGW* 2387-93)

According to the narrator, the only thing preventing men from behaving as violently as Tereus is shame, and the only way their truth and faithfulness will last is if there are no other women available to tempt them. So, once again, the narrator concludes by warning his female audience of the duplicity of the entire male sex (Percival 281). One might wonder which part of Alceste's task Chaucer prioritized more: praising women or condemning men. Philomela's is the seventh of nine narratives that highlight the goodness of women by describing how they are mistreated by men (Harris 258).

Unlike Lucrece's legend, in which Chaucer focuses on the heroine's virtues, he focuses less on the fidelity of Philomela and more on the injustice she experiences. He depicts her as resilient and clever when he describes how she, having had her voice stolen by Tereus, weaves a message for her sister, thus leading to her rescue. However, Chaucer's rendition of the legend is considered by many to be an abbreviation as he makes noticeable omissions which unmistakably draw the reader's attention to the lady's plight (Collette 23-4). He may have had other intentions, as well. Frank suggests that Chaucer omitted the Bacchic frenzy which, in other versions of the tale, Procne uses in order to reach and free Philomela, to avoid confusing medieval readers (138). Yet those familiar with the original Philomela myth will know that, in order to include the tale in a collection of stories involving the "good women" the God of Love wants, further omissions were necessary.

In the original story of Philomela and Procne, after the two sisters reunite they decide to take revenge on Tereus. They do this by murdering Tereus and Procne's son, Itys, and feeding him to Tereus, who is unaware that the meat he is eating is his own child. After the sisters reveal

the truth Tereus sets out to kill them, but all three are transformed into birds by the gods. Chaucer's version differs in that it ends before the sisters plot their revenge, and therefore he omits the infanticide, cannibalism, and metamorphosis (Allen-Goss 37). Most likely Chaucer does this because, despite the fact that both Philomela and Procne were wronged by Tereus, their vengeance is arguably indefensible. It is not just Tereus they harm in their quest for revenge, but also Itys, an innocent party and Procne's own son. The women become murderers, with Procne committing the very heinous crime of filicide.

Although Chaucer's reason for changing the text is apparent, there is still no shortage of criticism for his alterations and omissions. He removes elements in which women behave unconventionally or violently; Lucy Allen-Goss remarks that, by cutting out the revenge aspect of Philomela's tale, Chaucer reduces her vengeance and, by extension, her agency, to suffering (Allen-Goss 43). Frank, in contrast, argues that the alterations to the text are done for affective purpose:

I suspect that behind Chaucer's cutting and paring was an attempt to make Ovid's story of pain and horror into a story of a different kind, a tale of the pathetic ... Procne and Philomela possess the requisite qualities of helplessness and innocence. The effect of many of Chaucer's cuts has been to rob them of forceful action or even a sense of will. Gower's strong-minded women contrast vividly (as do Ovid's) with these passive, melting heroines who, once disaster smites, hardly act and never speak. They are seen almost always in tears (140).

Despite these criticisms, there are some who do not view the female characters as passive, or at least not entirely so. Pat Trefzger Overbeck asserts that Philomela is not passive, and that she, as well as Procne and Lucrece, are assertive, even rash at times. Lucrece's rashness comes from a

need to protect her husband's name and results in her suicide. Philomela's love for her sister gives her the courage to plead with her reluctant father to allow her to go to Thrace, just as Procne pleads with Tereus to let her sister come to their home (Overbeck 79-80). Moreover, Tison Pugh asserts that, although she is physically silenced, the fact that Philomela is able to change her situation through her weaving shows the resilience of women, especially those perceived as voiceless (87). The answer to the question of whether Philomela is a passive or active figure therefore depends on individual interpretation as well as personal ideas of agency.

When it comes to the original narrative, it is difficult to say whether Philomela and Procne are victims or victimizers. Perhaps they are both at once or, as Tison Pugh suggests, they criticize or defy this binary altogether and exhibit the complexity one can find in a narrative that has been told in different ways by various people (88). This binary is part of the reason the narrator struggles with how to depict his good women. He was condemned for his portrayal of Criseyde, but in his penance—writing about good women—he is forced to illustrate their suffering. Irina Dumitrescu, in her research on the narrator's culpability in *The Legend*, points out that he remarks that he himself in a way is assaulting the readers by telling them of the violence against Philomela (Dumitrescu 121). This implies a self-awareness on Chaucer's part, a sensitivity for the opposite gender that would have been uncommon in his time, and it supports the idea that binaries are not the system by which things should be categorized, because most things, especially people, are much too complex to be labelled in such ways. Victim or victimizer, good or bad, feminist or antifeminist—while such notions seem straightforward, their explanations are not simple at all.

In depicting these tales as he does, Chaucer highlights the ways women can be abused and made to suffer despite the goodness of their character. Yet, he still strives to give the

subjects of his legends agency without going against their original narratives. It is reasons such as these that can classify Chaucer as a proto-feminist. His depictions of Lucrece and Philomela would not be viewed as progressive in modern times, but his efforts to give them choice despite his restrictive instructions convey a desire to give his female characters influence where possible. I believe that depicting the suffering of these women should be read as a subtle method through which Chaucer tries to criticize societal ideals of feminine morality. He makes sure not to recreate the assertive Criseyde in *The Legend*, and is careful to abide by what the God of Love and Alceste want, but throughout *The Legend* the suffering of his heroines is arguably as prevalent, if not more so, than their goodness. Thus Chaucer, in acting out his penance as an author, also tries to convey his difficulties with medieval standards of womanly goodness without condemning them outright.

3.2 *Abandonment*

Sexual violence is not the only method by which men wrong women in *The Legend*. Peter L. Allen points out that “[m]any critics find *The Legend* unsatisfying...as the women trust their faithless lovers, and end up abandoned, despairing, and (often) dead, so Chaucer’s critics trust the narrator to guide their reading, and end up abandoned, despairing, and bored” (419); as Allen acknowledges, some women in the legend are not physically harmed, but are instead emotionally hurt and betrayed. It is abandonment in particular on which I now want to focus. For the purpose of exploring this element of the text, I will discuss the legends of Ariadne, who was abandoned by Theseus, and of Hypsipyle and Medea, who were both abandoned by Jason. I will consider how these men betray their lovers and what befalls these women as a result. This will further highlight how people, in Chaucer’s Middle Ages and eras prior, associated female goodness with female suffering and valued a woman’s well-being less than her virtue.

The mythological daughter of Minos of Crete, Ariadne is known for helping Theseus, the prince of Athens, traverse the labyrinth and slay the Minotaur, her own half-brother. In return, Theseus promises to take her back to Athens and marry her. However, he does not stick to his word. On their way to Athens, Theseus stops their ship at an island, and eventually departs without Ariadne, leaving her for dead. Moreover, he takes her sister, Phaedra, with him instead, deepening the betrayal. Carolyn P. Collette notes that Phaedra seems to go with Theseus without resistance when he chooses her as his paramour, but suggests that the reason for this apparent complacency might be due to the fact that the story is more focused on Theseus and his faithlessness (27). One could say that Theseus is somewhat similar to Tereus: both of them promise to bring a female companion back to their home, but instead abandon them after using them for their own purposes.

The narrator is initially sympathetic towards Ariadne in her legend, but he attempts to steer away from subjectivity. This might be because men in *The Legend* often find themselves infatuated with women when said women are pitiful. Tarquinius, for example, is overcome by desire for Lucrece while spying on her when she is distressed and worrying about her husband; and Philomela's tears as she begs her father to let her go to her sister prompt Tereus's lust (Dumitrescu 116). The narrator and, by extension, Chaucer, are in a precarious position as they are trying to both appease their critics and convey their own feelings about the narratives they are depicting. The narrator seems to be aware of the difficult situation he is in due to the task given to him by Alceste. If he speaks well of love but is not himself a lover, then he proves himself to be similar to the dishonest, disingenuous men in *The Legend*, and if he alters the original tales in order to avoid shaming their heroines, he is still a liar (Dumitrescu 113-4).

Overbeck notes that half the heroines in *The Legend* are never portrayed thinking. Lucrece does so only once, but in that instance she falsely assumes that there is no danger nearby. Ariadne similarly has a thought that seems to foreshadow her eventual suffering as she thinks that Theseus's imprisonment is a pity, and her pity towards him eventually leads her to commit treason against her father and kingdom. However, she is not otherwise shown to openly exercise thought, while her sister, Phaedra, does much of the thinking regarding their plan to help Theseus (Overbeck 81). However, Ariadne, like the other heroines I have discussed thus far, has her moments of boldness. Of course, her decision to go against her father and his kingdom in order to help Theseus is itself a notable display of agency. Her assertiveness is further exhibited when she strikes a bargain with Theseus. Frank describes love in "The Legend of Ariadne" as more of a business transaction than a matter of passion: "Though the situation is potentially dramatic and emotional, emotion evaporates and is replaced by reason. Instead of a pledged word, a promise based on intense feeling, a spontaneous, impulsive generosity, we have a bargain struck" (119). Theseus offers to serve Ariadne in exchange for her aid in defeating the Minotaur, but because of his status she finds this to be a shameful idea. Instead, she requests that they marry, an especially bold proposal given that it is only their first meeting (Hume 187-8). Theseus agrees to her terms, falsely claiming to have already loved her from afar. Although he proves disloyal in the end, her willingness to act so confidently is influential on the plot and shows at least a capacity for assertiveness, similar to what we see in Lucrece and Philomela.

Ariadne finds herself in a position where she will inevitably betray someone she cares about no matter what she chooses to do. If she is loyal to the man she loves she will be betraying her father and her kingdom. As we know, Ariadne ultimately chooses Theseus, and by freeing and aiding him, she betrays her father, King Minos, who has condemned Theseus to death.

Thereafter she must flee her kingdom as a traitor to the king and, by extension, all of Crete (Hume 194). Gail Helen Vieth Reed asserts that Ariadne's betrayal is justifiable and forgivable since Theseus, although eventually revealed to be dishonest and callous, is in actuality a victim of vengeance for a crime he did not commit (42). However, Ariadne later laments her choice following her abandonment by Theseus:

Allas! Where shal I, wreche wight, become?

For thogh so be that ship or boot here come,

Horn to my contre dar I nat for drede.

I can myselven in this cas nat rede"

(*LGW* 2214-7).

While her isolation being stranded on an island could be remedied by a ship arriving, the isolation of being unable to return to her country due to her treason is something that cannot be undone. She abandoned her home and family for the sake of love, and was subsequently abandoned in turn.

In the end, "The Legend of Ariadne" is another example of male treachery. In the context of *The Legend* as a whole, it also shows how disloyalty can span generations, as Theseus will go on to father Demophon who will also prove himself a false man (*Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* 78). Some critics remark that Ariadne was a wise choice of heroine for a collection highlighting good women who suffer at the hands of bad men. Florence Percival, exploring *The Legend's* function as a palinode, states that "in terms of the history of the myth Chaucer was right to present Ariadne as a pathetic heroine, for she was the archetypal *deserta* of classical times; alone on a rocky isle she had no need to threaten suicide, as death was only too inevitable" (197). Unlike Lucrece and Philomela, Ariadne is completely alone in the end, having alienated herself from her

own people and having been abandoned by her chosen companions. Chaucer presents her as even more pitiful as he chooses to omit the element of the classic myth in which she is rescued by Bacchus (Reed 44). In focusing on the cruelty of Theseus and the pain of Ariadne, Chaucer offers a story in which another good woman is hurt by a man—a royal man, no less, like Tarquinius and Tereus—for nothing more than that man’s selfish desires, assigning further merit to the narrator and Chaucer’s message that women should be distrusting of men, who are treacherous by nature.

Allen suggests that, just as Chaucer makes changes to ensure his heroines are in line with the God of Love’s standards of goodness, so he also makes creative choices in order to highlight the villainy of men so as to please Alceste. In the prologue of “The Legend of Hypsipyle and Medea” Jason is referred to as “false” on five different occasions within the span of twenty-seven lines. The narrator implores his readers (particularly the female readers) to distrust all men except himself (Allen 428). However, some critics assert that this particular legend should be considered Jason’s rather than Hypsipyle and Medea’s *because* Chaucer focuses more on Jason than the two heroines. Ninety-four of the three hundred twelve lines of the poem are devoted to exposition about Jason and the quest for the fleece (Frank 82). Moreover, the legend combines the experiences of both women rather than giving each of them an individual legend of their own. While the text thoroughly describes how Jason woos and abandons the women, there is less credence given to their feelings, words and actions (Beck 244-5).

Tasioulas describes Jason as a poison and suggests that Chaucer showcases as much by combining the tales of Hypsipyle and Medea, exhibiting how Jason moves through the world hurting the women with whom he comes into contact. She also states that, although Jason is a hero—the leader of the Argonauts, the acquirer of the Golden Fleece—he is, without a doubt, to

be viewed as a villain in *The Legend* (Tasioulas 168). Frank notes that the most significant factor of Jason as a false lover is that he is successful. Although he is immoral and undeserving, he seems to be the epitome of a lucky man (Frank 82). The heroines of the legend, unfortunately, do not fare as well. Hypsipyle and Medea relate to each other in that they are robbed by Jason both in a literal and figurative sense as he uses them for their bodies, wealth, and wisdom. Hercules assists Jason in wooing and stealing from Hypsipyle. On the other hand, Medea strikes a deal with Jason herself, requesting that he marry her in exchange for her help in his quest. However, like Hypsipyle, she finds herself sexually used by Jason, who steals her wealth, knowledge, and eventually abandons her and their children (Collette 27). The women are at once similar and different, as Reed explains in the following passage:

Hypsipyle and Medea, though very different women, are grouped together by Chaucer for convenience's sake, since they were both betrayed by Jason. Hypsipyle, by far a less complex character than Medea, is perhaps the most ideal of Chaucer's saints of love. Her story is simple and forthright (though Chaucer does add his own complications), her love is true and her marriage honorable, and her cause is patently just (34-5).

As Hypsipyle comes first in the pair of legends, I will begin with her narrative. Jason and his companions are described as "straunge" people in Hypsipyle's section of the legend. Cathy Hume asserts that this description of "straunge" placed upon Jason and his cohorts seems to serve the purpose of emphasizing how willingly familiar Hypsipyle is with men she does not know. Hume also notes that some critics, such as Paull F. Baum, use such behaviour in *The Legend* to propose that the women in the text are at fault for the suffering that befalls them because they "forced" themselves into the attention of the male characters (Hume 184). While this was likely not the message Chaucer intended to convey, it is true that he makes an effort to

emphasize the innocence and naivete of Hypsipyle, particularly through his use of Hercules's character. In Chaucer's version of the legend, Hercules acts as Jason's "wingman", not unlike how Pandarus strives to help Troilus woo Criseyde. Hercules primarily fulfills this role by generously praising Jason to Hypsipyle, painting a picture of a good and true man, discussing how Jason might be king one day and how any wife of his would enjoy a most wonderful life. He claims that Jason is too embarrassed to be seen pursuing or speaking of love. However, unlike Troilus, who in his own text is actually inept, Hercules and Jason actively use this tactic to make Jason appear pitiful and unthreatening and to encourage Hypsipyle to approach him. Jason conducts himself in a manner that would support what Hercules has told her, making sure to look pitiful and giving gifts to Hypsipyle's men in order to appear kind (Hume 195-6). As already noted, men in medieval literature often feel desire in response to female pitifulness. However, Jason himself weaponizes pitifulness with a kind of behaviour Dumitrescu describes as follows: "The causal relationship between pity and lust is visible throughout *The Legend's* stories. Jason is the model false lover, a hunter of women whose 'lures' include 'contrefeted peyne and wo'. He 'bedote[s]' [deludes] Hypsipyle by looking 'pitously'" (116). Here we see a trait for which women often suffer being weaponized against one by a man. Hypsipyle's innocence and willingness to trust is made more poignant because it is contrasted with the dishonesty of not one but two men (Reed 36). While in some versions of the legend Hypsipyle voices her anger, speaking of her contempt for Jason's next lover, Medea, and describing how, if given the chance, she would murder her, Chaucer omits this from his own text (Reed 37). This is the same tactic he uses in Philomela's tale by refraining from acknowledging the violent crime committed by the heroine and her sister. Once again, Chaucer most likely chooses to do this to align Hypsipyle with the God of Love's ideals of female goodness. In the end, Hypsipyle is left alone and

miserable, having been robbed on a physical, mental, and emotional level, as Jason sets off to find someone else to use.

While Medea's story differs somewhat from Hypsipyle's, she is similar to her in that she is unable to escape suffering. Even when they stay safely at home, it would appear women are not safe from the wiles of men. Medea comes into contact with Jason after he is invited into her home and her father makes her "don to Jason companye / At mete, and sitte by hym in the halle" (*LGW* 1601-2); this is something advice literature would warn women against (Hume 184). Here is yet another instance of a male family member pressuring a woman to act a certain way for the sake of another man, although Medea's father is not as conniving as Pandarus—the king's motivation is to please his esteemed guest, whereas Pandarus's goal is more personal as he wants to aid his best friend in acquiring his desired lover. Medea is put into a situation as she must either sit beside a strange man or disobey her father. Like Ariadne, she is in a difficult position where, regardless of what action she takes, she is failing to meet a societal ideal. Despite this, Chaucer strives to make her a respectable example of good womanhood. It is therefore unsurprising that he omits the cruel acts of Medea that are described both in mythology and other retellings of the narrative. He does not acknowledge the revenge she eventually takes against Jason's next paramour, nor the fact that she murders her own children, both well-known events that are depicted in other versions of her tale. He instead chooses to emphasize her kindness, as is necessary for his penance to the God of Love and Alceste (Root 125).

Chaucer chooses not to mention instances in which Medea uses her witchcraft for good, such as when she saves Jason's life or turns his elderly father young again. He likely opted not to because a medieval audience would not have been able to sympathize with an individual who practiced what they would have considered an infernal craft (Reed 38). Reed suggests that "The

Legend of Hypsipyle and Medea” is the shortest of the collection because Chaucer, in order to fulfill the task set for him by the God of Love and Alceste, was required to cut out anything that portrayed Medea as the barbaric sorceress for which she has long been known. After omitting so much of her long-established character, there is little left to discuss (Reed 37). Having aligned his heroine with the standard of a good woman established in the prologue, Chaucer must also establish the antithesis. He ensures that Jason rather than Medea is depicted as cruel (Root 125). The story is meant to be about good women, and therefore it is unacceptable to portray them committing immoral acts. Additionally, the duplicity of man must be emphasized. This is likely why roughly half of the tale of Medea discusses Jason’s deeds, which therefore means Medea is mostly considered not in how she acts, but how she reacts to his actions (Laird 64). While medieval audiences may have noticed such omissions, modern readers would likely be less familiar with the original tale and may not realize such changes to the narrative were made.

In “The Legend of Hypipsyle and Medea” we are presented with two women who, like Ariadne, are betrayed and abandoned by a man they helped; as Laird notes, it is “as if the woman’s goodness could be proved in terms of the man’s wickedness” (64). However, Hypipsyle and Medea may be even more unfortunate than Ariadne in that their tale is thought by many to be usurped by the villain, Jason. The women are relegated to reactors instead of actors, with Hypipsyle made to look innocent through emphasis of her naivete and Medea through censorship of the agency she exhibits in other versions of the legends. This is all for the sake of Chaucer’s promise to praise good women and condemn untrue men. One might suggest that Chaucer’s choice to change them so drastically is a potential method of protest against the moral feminine standards expressed not just by the God of Love and Alceste, but by medieval society and literature, as well. All heroines suffer in *The Legend*. If their most prominent similarities are

goodness and suffering, it is difficult to imagine it would inspire a female reader to strive for goodness herself. Such dissuasion may be what Chaucer intended, or perhaps he wished simply to evoke critical thinking in his readers so that they would question the expectations they themselves held about morals and womanhood.

3.3 *Suicide*

Many of the women in *The Legend*, in response to the abuse, betrayal, and grief they suffer at the hands of men, take their own lives, as Lucrece does, for example. As Lynn Shutter observes in her study analyzing the emotional aspects of wifhood and marital love in *The Legend*, four of the six heroines labelled martyrs kill themselves by the end of their tale (97). Scholars have noted the troubling messages conveyed by the prevalence of suicide in the text. Holly A. Crocker, for example, thinks that “[i]f suicide is a good woman’s only recourse, this is because ... there are no other cultural means of redress open to virtuous women” (265). While in the discussion of “The Legend of Lucrece” I focused primarily on sexual assault and violence, I will now direct my attention primarily to suicide and how Chaucer depicts it in his text. By analyzing the legends of Cleopatra, Dido, and Phyllis, I hope to demonstrate how the narratives lead to the heroines’ self-destruction and how they compare both to the texts already mentioned and to each other. This will further support my observation that in Chaucer's time female goodness was associated with female suffering, so much so that, in *The Legend*, the former is never seen without the latter.

Cleopatra’s is the first story in *The Legend of Good Women*. Benson considers Cleopatra a victim of historical oppression, specifically at the hands of Roman males. Rome sends Mark Antony to coerce her into obedience after she becomes Queen of Egypt, but he falls in love with

her instead. This incurs Rome's wrath, and they condemn Mark Antony as a traitor for loving and serving a foreign queen. Moreover, as a result of the patriarchal structure of Roman society, they further look down on him for being subservient to a woman (Benson 83). Cleopatra's legend showcases Mark Antony's decision to flee the battle and to pursue his love instead, a choice Cleopatra later parallels when she kills herself after he has died (Collette 27). The decision to start with her tale is an interesting one. Chaucer showcases her willingness to die for her love, which aligns her with the God of Love's idea of a good woman—one who is willing to suffer for the sake of a lover and/or preserving her goodness in the public eye. However, Cleopatra was not universally considered a "good" woman. She was historically considered a promiscuous figure. In the *Inferno*, Dante depicts her in the second circle of Hell for her lust (Dante, *Inferno*, 2.63; Tasioulas 166). Still, the God of Love insists the narrator begin with her. It is possible that Chaucer chose to start with her tale in order to make readers question and think critically about the god's standards and judgement regarding women (Lartigue 134). The first renowned woman's tale culminating in her suicide sets a precedent in which female virtue is inherently linked to suffering and death, a precedent that exhibits how the God of Love's ideals for women—and, by extension, the ideals for women found in medieval society and literature—are not in women's best interest.

Much like the legends of Medea and Hypsipyle, in "The Legend of Cleopatra" the narrator focuses more on the male lover than the heroines. He claims he cannot describe Antony and Cleopatra's wedding feast because he is too busy, but Suzanne Hagedorn notes that he contradicts this claim since he is willing to describe the Battle of Actium, from which Cleopatra is absent, for thirty lines (Hagedorn 176). Moreover, while Antony is praised thoroughly in the narrative, Cleopatra is not even given a description, and is instead only stated to be beautiful

(Tasioulas 167). Lynn Arner, who in her work defends the God of Love's criticisms of Chaucer, notes that the narrator concerns himself with the majority of Antony's career before turning his attention to Cleopatra who, in turn, acts by running away, building a shrine, and taking her own life (119). Furthermore, the narrator only gives her his full attention once Antony is out of the picture. Tasioulas suggests that, given her reputation as a promiscuous figure, Chaucer is only willing to focus on Cleopatra once her paramour is dead because his passing removes the likelihood that she will exhibit lust or will otherwise transgress; instead, she becomes model of truth and loyalty through sacrificing her own life out of love for her husband (Tasioulas 167-8).

Scholars offer varying opinions on Cleopatra's role in her narrative, debating whether her depiction in *The Legend* is positive or negative. While the thoughts of some of Chaucer's heroines are not explicitly mentioned in the text, Cleopatra's are. Her feelings, such as "destresse" and "drede", are acknowledged, and her death is decided and planned by her, showing yet another case of tragic agency as we find in Lucrece's tale, as well. It is an active choice the heroine makes in response to her immense sorrow (Saunders 27). Frank notes that her death scene focuses solely on her, but he still questions whether the act is meant to reaffirm or criticize her faithfulness (43). Cleopatra's final order as queen is to have a shrine of precious stones constructed to serve as a resting place for Antony. However, she does not intend to rest beside him. Instead she throws herself into the pit of snakes she has dug herself. She offers herself as a sacrifice to him, to his shrine, and in doing so "purifies" her body which was sometimes historically depicted bare and unchaste, especially by Victorian painters imagining her death. Although she plans the suicide and therefore exhibits an undeniable act of agency, it is difficult to consider it a triumphant moment. While she proves her devotion to Antony, she dies alone with not even his corpse beside her. Ultimately, it is a demise that benefits no one

(Tasioulas 168). Lucrece also kills herself out of devotion to her husband, but does so with the aim of protecting his name and reputation. While Cleopatra and Lucrece's suicides are willing acts of agency, they both make their choices out of spousal fidelity. The question as to whether their decisions are feminist or antifeminist is not simple to answer; while they act of their own accord, they might not have acted thusly if not for societal standards of wifeness (Shutters 98). If anything, Cleopatra's suicide serves primarily to align her with the standards of female goodness held by the God of Love, and once again we are left with two possibilities: that Chaucer is earnestly repenting, or using the text to criticize societal standards of morality and womanhood.

Another prominent instance of female suicide is found in "The Legend of Dido." The circumstances of her death are different than Cleopatra's. Rather than killing herself out of grief for a deceased lover, Dido commits suicide after being abandoned by her paramour, Aeneas. It is another instance in which a woman in *The Legend* is hurt by the deceit of a false man.

Dido's is the longest of the legends, which could be due to her cultural and literary significance:

[Dido] was for the Middle Ages the heroine from the classical past. Virgil had immortalized her passion in the *Aeneid*, and in the *Heroides* Ovid had made her a pathetic and betrayed victim of love. Ovid's influence on the medieval attitude toward Dido was in some ways greater than that of Virgil; Ovid is largely responsible for the unsympathetic treatment of Aeneas and the exaltation of Dido ... The magic of her name is reflected in Chaucer's handling of her martyrdom (Frank 47).

Given that Dido remained a popular mythological and literary figure even in the Middle Ages, it is unsurprising Chaucer chose to include her story in *The Legend*. Moreover, he seems to give her more focus than many of her fellow heroines. Throughout *The Legend*, the presence and actions of the heroines are often overshadowed by those of the male characters. The narrator was instructed in the prologue to write about good women but also of false men, so although he strives to make female characters to the God of Love's liking, he ends up with a collection of largely masculine narratives (Beck 420). However, Dido does, at least, receive more attention than many of the other heroines. In his analysis of "The Legend of Dido," George Sanderlin notes that, in diminishing the involvement of the gods one finds in other versions of the legend, Chaucer instead focuses on Dido's journey throughout the love affair, beginning with her initial happiness at falling in love and consummating what she believes to be a marriage, and ultimately ending with her heartbreak after Aeneas abandons (336).

Throughout the "The Legend of Dido," Chaucer allows his heroine quite a bit of agency, portraying her as an assertive individual. Gift giving occurs between Dido and Aeneas, but there is a difference between the givers. Aeneas's gifts are typically given in response to Dido's, more out of obligation than affection. Dido's gifts, while lavish, are not meant to show off her wealth as a queen, but rather to exhibit her true emotions towards Aeneas, an affection so great she would give endlessly for the sake of his happiness (Frank 68-9). In initiating the gift giving and being the more proactive of the pair in the courtship, Dido usurps a traditionally male role. She also suffers from lovesickness, making her the only one of Chaucer's female characters to endure this affliction (Hume 186). Once again Dido takes on a typically male role as, in medieval literature, lovesickness almost exclusively plagues men, such as Troilus. However, while Dido

may be given more attention than many of *The Legend's* heroines, it does not mean that her depiction is above criticism.

The portrayal of Dido is problematic and unflattering; not only is she depicted as shallow and naïve, but the responsibility and power she would have had as a queen are not acknowledged, diminishing and downplaying her influence and importance. Dido finds Aeneas attractive before knowing anything about his character. He *seems* noble and *looks* knightly and gentlemanly to her, and these surface-level perceptions are enough to capture her interest. In this way she is like Ariadne, who proposes to Theseus upon meeting him despite the fact that all she knows about him is that he is the handsome prince of Athens—some might argue it is karmic that Theseus later abandons her for her sister Phaedra because he finds her fairer than Ariadne (Hume 192). The fact that Aeneas is a stranger makes him more intriguing to Dido, and is an aspect that is exclusive to Chaucer's version of the legend. It is reminiscent of how trusting Hypsipyle is of the strange men around her (Sanderlin 333). Not only is Dido shown to be naïve and superficial, Chaucer also downplays her power. Despite the fact that she is a queen of substantial influence as well as a notable mythological figure of whom many people in the Middle Ages would have been aware, some scholars assert that she is reduced in Chaucer's text to an object of male desire. Judith Laird, for example, describes Dido thusly: "She is indeed possessed of 'beaute and goodnesse, / And womanhod, and trouthe, and semelynesse', but those attributes are virtuous only insofar as a man perceives them" (65). In contrast to Ovid's description of her in *Heroides*, Chaucer's "Legend of Dido" largely ignores the politics with which the queen would have been concerned, focusing instead on Aeneas's circumstances. Even her death is not shown to have substantial effects on her kingdom. As Sanderlin summarizes, "Chaucer's heroine [Dido] is characterized almost from beginning to end not as leader and queen

but as a victim of dishonorable man” (332). One can say the same of both Hypsipyle and Phyllis, (whom I will discuss shortly); despite the fact that they are royal figures, their deaths in *The Legend* are reduced to personal misfortunes rather than realm-shaking events (Arner 119-20). This provides further how the roles of the heroines have been diminished to fit the God of Love’s idea of a “good woman” and to showcase the badness of men as Alceste wishes. For them, power and influence are not needed in the heroines—they must be good and true, nothing more or less.

While his portrayal of Dido has both positive and questionable elements, Chaucer also has to follow Alceste’s instructions and portray Aeneas as a clearly traitorous villain. “The Legend of Dido” shares an element with “The Legend of Medea and Hypsipyle” in that a false man once again weaponizes pity; rather than being a noble trait or a genuine emotion, it is instead a method through which a deceiver manipulates a woman to get what he wants (“Pite Renneth Soone in Gentil Herte” 77). Like Jason, Aeneas woos Dido by portraying himself as an agonized soul, crying for the sake of performance. Dido is already attracted to him, but her pity for him makes her care about and, ultimately, love him (Dumitrescu 116). His deceitfulness is further exhibited when he eventually abandons Dido.

Dido and Aeneas pledge their love to each other in a cave during a storm before consummating their relationship. Hume explains that this act is what ultimately ruins Dido’s reputation. The narrator states he is unsure as to whether the pair was accompanied to the cave. He thereby implies that there is something shameful in them pledging their love without caring whether anyone is there to witness it (Hume 187). Later, after hearing that Aeneas is planning to leave, Dido questions whether or not he truly swore to take her as his wife as she thought he had. The oath, or “troth-plight” (a verbal oath pledging to be one’s spouse), that Aeneas pledged to Dido in the cave scene would be considered valid by most medieval standards. Given that Dido

later states she is pregnant, it is clear the relationship has been consummated; consummation following a “troth-plight” would have been considered a legal and binding marriage in Chaucer’s time (Hagedorn 204-5). However, while medieval law did not require witnesses or a priest for a marriage to be valid, having no one else besides the lovers present could lead to possible issues. While Aeneas *seems* to accept Dido as his wife, he later leaves her, suggesting he does not consider himself truly bound or committed to her. She had only his words to rely on, words which turned out to be less genuine than they seemed, with Aeneas using her for the sake of his sexual gratification, not unlike how Jason lied to his paramours for the sake of his own sexual satisfaction. Such exploitations of this marriage loophole were commonly encountered in medieval marriage law. Moreover, by “marrying” without any witnesses, Dido does not have the security of another person to testify if Aeneas were to deny a marriage took place (Hume 199-200). Chaucer further villainizes Aeneas by having him commit blasphemy by using a potentially fictitious message from Mercury as an excuse to leave Dido and their unborn child (Reed 33-4); he trespasses not only against an innocent woman, but the gods, as well.

Chaucer appears to have had the intention of writing a form of *The Legend* that many today would consider feminist. The task assigned to him in the prologue instructed that he write of good women and false men, which required him to describe how men betray women and how women suffer at their hands. In striving to fulfill this task, he exposes many double standards in the narratives that would also have been found in medieval society. For example, if a man and woman were exposed for having extramarital sex, the woman’s reputation would be tarnished while the man would face far less, if any, consequences. This is clearly reflected in “The Legend of Dido,” where the shame of her affair with Aeneas contributes greatly to Dido’s decision to commit suicide, but Aeneas does not appear to suffer any consequences (Sanderlin 331-2). Dido

states that she fears the surrounding kingdoms will overthrow and destroy her because her relationship with Aeneas has sullied her reputation and she no longer commands the respect due to a queen. Much like he omits Medea's more hostile acts and sentiments from his source, Chaucer omits Dido's cursing of Aeneas before her death, an element that is found in the *Aeneid*. Again, this is an attempt to ensure his heroine is true, devoted, and good rather than vengeful (Reed 37). Her suicide, like Cleopatra's, is planned, an active choice on her part. She absconds with Aeneas's sword, allows herself time to pray and lament, then stabs herself in the heart (Diamond 28).

While Chaucer's sympathy seems to be mainly for Dido, and his condemnation primarily for Aeneas, some infer that the narrator judges Dido despite the woman-praising task he has been given. Reed explains this notion as follows:

It seems unlikely that Chaucer would have approved of a queen giving up her responsibilities to a stranger, and though he can (and does) place most of the blame on Aeneas for deceiving and then deserting her, there remains still the feeling that while an ordinary woman may receive undiluted sympathy if she is thus betrayed, a queen must look beyond her personal feelings to the country she rules (32-3).

While Chaucer gives Dido more agency than most of *The Legend's* heroines, he also highlights her shallowness and naivete. Is this a means to criticize her, or to make her an easier and more pitiful victim of manipulation? I will keep this question in mind as I move on to the last *Legend* heroine I will discuss: Phyllis.

The story of Phyllis and Demophon was popular in the Middle Ages, perhaps because it fit the archetypal narrative of betrayal and false love. Phyllis's legend was sometimes paired with

Dido's as both stories center around a queen who comes to the aid of a stranded warrior returning from Troy, falls for him, and is eventually abandoned by him (Frank 146-7). Chaucer emphasizes the fact that Demophon is the son Theseus, one of the other traitorous men described in *The Legend*. In this way, the text highlights a generational pattern and implies that infidelity may be hereditary. By focusing on the familial connection between the two men, Chaucer is able to further support his assertion that men are naturally deceitful, and that women, in turn, are more vulnerable to betrayal (Frank 148-9).

Much like his father Theseus does in "The Legend of Ariadne," Demophon acts weary and pitiful in order to get what he wants. Theseus feigns needing to rest in order to stop at the island where he eventually abandons Ariadne, while Demophon uses weariness and pitifulness to endear those present, particularly Phyllis, to him in order to get what he wants (*Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* 86). Demophon also uses another tactic exhibited by false men in *The Legend*. The sweet romantic words of men are shown to be the downfall of multiple heroines in the text. Aeneas's pledge of love to Dido in the cave, the verbal charm Jason shows Medea, Theseus's lie about having loved Ariadne long before they met—the deceitful speech of men is often the catalyst for eventual female suffering. In Phyllis's case it is no different—it is Demophon's flattery and fair tongue she blames for her enchantment (Hume 196). Similar to Aeneas in "The Legend of Dido", Demophon swears to marry Phyllis, after which they seemingly consummate the relationship, and he later leaves her, never to return. As Hume points out, a pledge and consummation would have qualified as a valid marriage, but the existence of such a marriage could not be legally proven if there were no witnesses to it, as is the case in both Dido and Phyllis's legends (200-1).

The tonal shifts found in “The Legend of Phyllis” are jarring to some readers. The narrator moves abruptly from the angry letter Phyllis writes lamenting Demophon's cruelty, to the description of her suicide, and finally to his own final message that women should trust no man but him. This makes the narrative discordant and leads some to question Chaucer's authorial competence (Boffey and Edwards 119). Though Phyllis threatens to drown herself in her last lines and readers are reminded that she eventually takes her life by hanging herself, depicting these words and actions is a vain endeavour for Chaucer as her feelings have never been presented in an authentic or serious manner (Frank 154). Furthermore, some critics argue that Chaucer's depiction of Phyllis makes her difficult to pity because she is so naïve. Frank states that “We see her not so much as sufferer, but as dupe” (153). This is a notable contrast to the depiction of other heroines in *The Legend*.

Scholars have acknowledged that, contrary to his treatment of other heroines, Chaucer seems at times to attempt to dissuade readers from sympathizing with Phyllis. Frank notes some elements that suggest this. Firstly, she is introduced in a curt, cliché manner: "Ligurges daughter, fayrer on to sene / Than is the flour ageyn the bryghte sonne" (*LGW* 2425-2426). She also succumbs to Demophon's charms with little resistance, and she is not permitted a proper emotional goodbye, with Demophon offering her the lie that he will return in a month to marry her ("openly he tok his leve tho,/ And hath hire sworn he wolde nat sojorne/ But in a month he wolde ageyn retorne" [*LGW* 2475-7]) before he vanishes from her life forever. While this parting scene is also found in Ovid's *Heroides*, Chaucer presents it flatly and without much emotion (Frank 152). Percival feels that by dismissing the heroine's suffering and instead presenting the narrative with an often comedic tone the narrator and, by extension, Chaucer, align themselves

more with the male villains of the story than with the heroines they have been tasked to honour (283). However, there are elements that should be considered, such as Phyllis' letter.

It seems an odd choice for the narrator to share Phyllis's letter to Demophon after her suicide. However, it also offers the heroine the ability, albeit post-mortem, to share her thoughts and feelings. After the strangely inconsistent tone and the comedic aspect of the legend that makes a mockery of sorts out of Phyllis's struggle, the narrator finally allows her the attention she deserves and lets readers hear the female voice respond to the male betrayal (Walker-Pelkey 139). Interestingly, while Phyllis does blame Demophon's silver tongue for charming her, she also places blame on herself for her situation: "I was of my love to yow to fre" (*LGW* 2521). By the words "to fre" she means too open or willing. In other words, she blames her willingness to give her love to Demophon for the betrayal. It is interesting that, while the man is condemned by the narrator for obviously immoral actions, Phyllis chastises herself for the manner in which she loved. It is unusual for a Chaucerian heroine to admit that she was perhaps too rash in offering her affections. Chaucer wants his heroines to be loyal, but apparently there is an "incorrect" way to be loyal, namely if one does not consider the situation before rushing into a relationship.

Overbeck describes this type of brash affection as follows:

Uncontrolled and uncontrollable, the Good Woman turns into a living libido, in the Augustinian sense, in her lust for love. With the possible exception of Hypermnestra, all Chaucer's heroines act precipitantly, rashly, and thoughtlessly... Hypsipyle foolishly confides in Hercules, a stranger to her, and even more foolishly acts on his misrepresentation of Jason... To summarize in clichés, Cleopatra takes one deluded look at Antony, Medea at Jason, Ariadne at Theseus, Phyllis at Demophon, the fatal "fyr" is lit, and the Good Woman is out to get her man, damning the cost (79).

While such rash passion is present in most of the legends, Phyllis is unique in acknowledging hers. Walker-Pelkey notes that this admission contradicts the narrator's reasoning that Demophon betrayed Phyllis because he inherited his duplicitous nature from his father. Phyllis is the only heroine who believes she has turned her lover off because she made herself too readily available; the other heroines, in contrast, seem to believe they have earned their man's love through their actions (Walker-Pelkey 137). This may be the reason for the narrator's aforementioned curtness and lack of emotion regarding Phyllis compared to the other heroines. He omits certain acts committed by heroines in *The Legend* so as to preserve their goodness, but Phyllis herself claims to have made a poor judgement. While this admission does not mean she is the one at fault, it does tarnish the "good" status she is supposed to have (Reed 46). This may be why the narrator is more terse in the handling of her story; to appease the God of Love, he cannot condone anything less than perfect goodness and thus must convey disapproval through his tone.

This particular legend begins and ends with the narrator discussing his female audience (McDonald 24). At the beginning of "The Legend of Phyllis" the narrator says "God, for his grace, fro swich oon kepe us!'/ Thus may these women preyen that it here" (*LGW* 2401-02), and at the end, he cautions his female audience, 'Be war, ye wemen, of youre subtyl fo,/ Syn yit this day men may ensaumple se;/ And trusteth, as in love, no man but me' (*LGW* 2559-61). Once again he does as Alceste desires, praising good women while condemning false men, and he continues to exclude himself from the untrustworthy male population to which he refers. This legend may be the least flattering to its heroine, and some, like Percival, condemn Chaucer for his treatment of Phyllis. Yet Chaucer also allows Phyllis her final words through her letter. He presents the story almost comedically, yet his intentions for doing so are not clear. Perhaps he simply did not care for Phyllis because of her naïveté—or perhaps he was presenting the story in

a flippant way so as to convey his own distaste for the moral standards placed on women, many of whom are doomed to suffer in spite of the goodness they may possess. It could be suggested that by depicting Phyllis as he does Chaucer attempts once again to go against societal standards and include a good woman in his collection who is not a flawless archetype, thereby conveying the message that people, particularly women, can make mistakes and have flaws yet still be considered good.

It is clear that Chaucer struggles with the depictions of his heroines throughout *The Legend*. He is forced to retell well-known tales while also adhering to the guidelines set for him by Alceste. While he may have been commissioned to write *The Book of the Duchess*, he has even less freedom in *The Legend of Good Women* as it is something he writes not to commemorate a person but to repent for his past actions. He wrote it to make up for the offense he caused with *Troilus and Criseyde* which, out of the texts I have discussed, was the work in which he seemed to have the most authorial freedom. With *Troilus and Criseyde* he maintained the original narrative but depicted the characters as he wished. This led to one of his most assertive and influential heroines, Criseyde. Given that, at his freest, Chaucer wrote a woman who had a great deal of agency and effect in her story, the argument could be made that he would prefer to write women in this way, despite the standards of medieval society and literature. Perhaps this is why, during *The Legend*, there are times in which it seems he may be writing in an effort to criticize moral and feminine ideals. It is possible Chaucer did not want his female characters to be bound by patriarchal expectations, and this view perhaps extended to real women, as well; his work and the way his writing changed over time supports this idea, as well as the assertion that he is, in fact, a proto-feminist.

CONCLUSION

Glenn Burger asserts that reading Chaucer through a feminist lens exposes not the death of the author (to use Barthes term) but rather the birth of him, as well as that of a humanist subject ahead of its time (“Gender and Sexuality” 182). I believe this statement to be true. As I mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, the binary of feminist and antifeminist is an insufficient system of categorization when discussing Chaucer. In fact, I would go as far to suggest this binary is insufficient in general. Measuring all writers against the current standards of feminism fails to take into account significant factors such as time period, culture, et cetera. Moreover, even at present, societal norms vary across the world, and feminism does not look the same everywhere. In some countries, feminism may not yet have reached the stage it has in others. To attempt to fit all people into a black-and-white binary is not just unwise but also unjust to those both past and present.

For many years there has been a debate about on which side of the feminism binary Chaucer belongs. However, the discussion of Chaucer and his feminism becomes much clearer when one begins to consider feminist views not a binary, but more of a spectrum. On this spectrum one finds proto-feminist, a term that has been used in scholarship and criticism to describe those who were more progressive than the standards of their time and reflected the more liberal norms that were to come; this appears to apply to Chaucer. He was a man still influenced and bound by the societal expectations of his time, but who was also willing to go against the status quo, willing to explore progressive topics and call into question the norms set by the society he lived in. His work reflects this mindset. *The Book of the Duchess* he wrote as a tribute to his patron, and yet, intentionally or not, he highlighted both the objectification and the power

of women. The minor role of Alcyone and the total absence of White show that, although the work was inspired by a real woman's passing, more attention was expected to be paid to the suffering of men. However, the effect of White on the Black Knight, even though she does not make an appearance, showcases the influence women can have. Chaucer's interest in seeing women with more agency and influence is also clear in his portrayal of Criseyde in *Troilus and Criseyde*, and he makes evident his wish that the audience would not villainize her for her actions. We see him call into question the expectations of "good women" in his *Legend of Good Women*, where he adheres to the task he is given but arguably uses it to highlight the suffering women are expected endure in order to be "good".

As his writing career progresses, Chaucer seems more willing to share his views and question the standards around him. He accomplishes this in ways that would not completely upset the expectations placed upon him, but all one must do is read closely to see he was not complacent with his society. With his work he questioned the status quo and pushed societal boundaries. While it is true that his writing may not meet the feminist standards of today, to call him an antifeminist is narrow-minded and simply incorrect. Arlyn Diamond notes that, while Chaucer might not be able to fully ignore the influence of the social values and standards of his society, he expresses sympathy for women and their plights and genuinely tries to be a friend to them in his writing. He is not content to simply adhere to the common views of his age. She adds that feminists can honour him for this (Diamond 83). While individual scholars and critics are free to analyze and judge Chaucer's feminist efforts as they see fit, my hope is that, with this thesis, I have opened some minds to viewing Chaucer and his feminist efforts in a broader and more optimistic light.

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