

The “trial” of the Narrator in Chaucer’s The Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*

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ÖZET

Chaucer’ın rüya şiirleri ve *Troilus and Criseyde* adlı eserlerindeki anlatıcısı yoluyla sürekli konu ettiği yazma sanatıyla ilgili görüşleri yazma eyleminin okuma kaynaklı olduğu yolundadır. Bu makale, anlatıcının belirtilen eserlerdeki konumunu da temel alarak, The Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*’ da anlatıcının yargılanmasını incelemekte ve bu yargılamanın Chaucer’ın başka eserlerin yorumlanmasından kaynaklanan yazma teorisini sınıadığı ve yol açtığı tartışmalara rağmen onayladığı tezini savunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Chaucer, Prologue to The Legend of Good Women, reader, dream poems, women.

ABSTRACT

Chaucer’s engagement with the nature and function of writing is epitomised in his acknowledgement of the role of reading in writing. The dream poems present a narrator who promotes a writing theory largely based on reading others’ works. In the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*, the narrator is confronted with the implications of this theory. Discussion of the narrator’s books reveals that the reader’s attitude to the text can subvert the intention of the author. This paper examines the “trial scene” in the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women* and argues that it endorses Chaucer’s theory of writing.

Keywords: Chaucer, Prologue to the Legend of Good Women, reader, dream poems, women.

Often discussed in relation to the legends it introduces, the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women* has been generative of controversial readings which centralise the poem’s “trial” of its narrator’s literary offence as a poet whose listed works we know as written by Chaucer. In view of the overt references to Chaucer the poet’s works, Cherniss considers the Prologue as “the most personal, even autobiographical, of all of Chaucer’s poems” (1986:185), while Jordan dismisses the Prologue as least congenial

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to Chaucer's objectives as a poet for the same autobiographical implications (1987:114). Moreover, based on the citation of Chaucer's works in the poem, critics identify an interest for a poetic assessment in the Prologue. Robert Payne's attitude to the poem's emphasis on the author and his work is celebratory for, Payne suggests, the Prologue represents a poetic review with implications for the direction Chaucer's poetic career takes after *The Legend of Good Women* (1975:205). Delany states, "the Prologue's narrative is about the trial, defense, and expiation of a poet" (1994:58). Similarly, Percival argues that "the fictional debate about women is only an excuse to discuss the poetic craft, a topos which has enabled Chaucer to draw attention to his poetic output" (1998:11). With its main concern as an examination of the validity of the poetic norms Chaucer not only advocates but also exercises in his writing, the Prologue continues Chaucer's concern with the "...nature and function of writing itself" as Lisa Kiser puts it in a different context (1991: 4). This paper argues that in the trial scene in the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer offers for examination his theory –and practice– of writing which is produced by an author frequently positioned as a reader/writer in the texts he produces. This paper agrees with the view that the Prologue offers a poetic review, however, it further argues that the Prologue's concern with the narrator's trespass as a reader/writer is functional to test the viability of Chaucer's self-promoted theory of writing based on reading.

The considerable awareness of the reader and reading in the production of the texts present in Chaucer's writing has been addressed by Peter Travis and Jill Mann¹. Peter Travis argues that Chaucer is interested in the future of his works, and "foregrounds in his own poetry a heightened sense of the subtle chemistry of the reading process, as text and reader interpenetrate in a mutual act of interpretation and transformation." (1987: 203) In *The Troilus and Criseyde*, for instance, the narrator invites the reader to "doth therwithal right as youreselven leste" (III, 1330),² which confirms Chaucer's willingness to encourage "as many different readings as there are listeners in his audience" (Travis, 1987:204). In addition to the addresses to the reader, Jill Mann argues, the importance of the reader's response to the text is promoted also by Chaucer's pose as a reader of others:

[w]hen Chaucer gives us a self-portrait, he represents himself...not as a writer but as a *reader*... The persisting intrusions of a reading presence emphasise Chaucer's interest in his relationship to a literary future -to the readers on whom the continuing life and meaning of his work depends. That is, Chaucer's role as reader

¹ Peter W. Travis in "Affective Criticism, the Pilgrimage of Reading and Medieval English Literature" and Jill Mann in "The Authority of Audience in Chaucer" examine Chaucer's awareness of the reader's role through Reader Response theory. See also Kay Gillian Stevenson, 'Readers, Poets, and Poems Within the Poem', *ChauR* 24:1 (1989), 1-19. Stevenson's specific study of the *Book of the Duchess* detects in the poem an interest in the audience's response and examines this interest through the narrator and the Man in Black.

² *Troilus and Criseyde*. All references to Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry D.Benson. Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

of others' works is a covert surrogate for our own role as readers of his own.
(1991:1)

Indeed, Chaucer's problematisation of reading is carefully coached in the context not only of reading but also of writing. In Chaucer's presentation of the textual production, the writer and the reader are not conceived as two separate agents of meaning; they cooperate in the production of the text. The interdependence of the writer and the reader is a major requirement of literary production in Chaucer. Chaucer's attendance to the complex nature of writing, his almost overstated reminder to "his readers that they should seek the referents of his poems chiefly in other works of literature" (Kiser 1991: 4), state firmly that the writer of the poems under question is a reader and a writer.

Chaucer's insistence on the cooperation of the writer and the reader in the production of the text culminates in the "trial" scene of the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*. The narrator's alleged wrong in translating or rewriting uncanonical love texts in the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women* is, in fact, consequent to the position he assumes in the dream poems. Chaucer's dream poems are marked by a "poetic theorising"³ determined to illustrate the recognition that "poems are based on other people's possible (and other poets' actual) constructions of" life (Kiser, 1991: 4). Accordingly, the narrator's self-presentation in the dream poems emphasises the point that the narrator is not only a reader but also a writer.⁴ The self-presentation of the narrator as a reader/ writer emphasises also the fact that the narrator's primary source for writing is the books he reads.

Chaucer's first three dream poems display a lavish concern with the narrator's laborious reading, foregrounding hence the narrator's literary activity as reading-based writing. In the dream poems, the narrator is potently aware of his re-workings, and he freely theorises about the implications of his re-workings of the "old wyse":

For out of olde felde, as men seyth,
Cometh al this newe corn from yer to yere,
And out of olde bokes, in good feyth,
Cometh al this newe science that men lere. (PF 18-25)

However, although the narrator presents himself as a reader/writer, in the dream poems, there is no confirmation of the narrator's position as a recognised poet whose works should be valued accordingly. On the contrary, in *The House of Fame* and *The*

³ The narrator's lavish use of books has long been recognised. The poetic theory inscribed in the dream poems is examined by Robert E. Edwards in *The Dream of Chaucer: Representation and Reflection in the Early Narratives*. Durham: Duke UP, 1989.

⁴ Delany recognises the dual function of the narrator as reader and writer, however, she contends that the early poems present the narrator as a reader rather than a writer. That is, she argues for a progressive change towards a "writerly narrator". *The Naked Text*, 13.

Parliament of Fowles, the narrator's foregrounded engagement with reading as his sole source of poetry is often subjected to criticism, and even to ridicule. Africanus in *The Parliament of Fowls* offers the narrator a visit to the Garden of Love so that the narrator can have some writing material (162-168). The Eagle is pitilessly critical of the narrator's unproductive reading in *The House of Fame* (614-626). Yet, the narrator seems to make a virtue even of the unfavourable critical comments of his dream guides and strives to establish the viewpoint valid for his books. In fact, Chaucer's first three dream poems present the narrator's reading as almost innocently habitual, with clear indications that the narrator's writing life is dependent on it. Hence, while in *The Parliament of Fowles* the narrator confidently states, "Of usage -what for lust and what for lore-/On bokes rede I ofte, ..." (15-16), reading is nevertheless the unique source of the narrator's poetic creativity and his "underestimated" books:

... it happede me for to beholde
 Upon a bok, was write with lettres olde,
 And therupon, a certeyn thing to lerne,
 The longe day ful faste I redde and yerne. (18-21)

The narrator's comments on the use of the books and the intertextuality of the texts advocate reading as essential for the continuity of the poetic tradition. He states that the old books, in analogy to old fields, can be utilised for their potential for the production of the "new" books. He insists that reading is the instrument for the creation of a new context which generates his new writing. Likewise, in *The Book of the Duchess*, the conventional insomnia leads to reading a book in which

...were written fables
 That clerkes had in olde tyme,
 And other poetes, put in rime
 To rede and for to be in minde, (52-55)

In taking the view that texts produce other texts, the narrator recognises the role of the agent –poets. The transmission of stories from clerks to poets, from one agent to another, ensures the preservation, "to be in minde". Simultaneously, the old literature becomes the source of new literature. In the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*, the narrator reiterates the significance of books as the source for literary continuity: "Than mote we to *bokes* that we fynde./*Thurgh whiche that olde thinges ben in mynde*,"⁵ (F 17-18).

It is evident that the narrator's recurrent confirmation of interest in books serves his position as a writer. However, while positing a model for the reception and interpretation of his work through emphasis on his reading, the narrator's postulations present also the problems of the double task of being a reader and a writer. For the

⁵ My italics

writer is a reader of others, the meaning he tries to present is ultimately that of a reader and thus equally contingent. In *The Troilus and Criseyde*, the narrator's mention of the possible changes he has made to his original text and his invitation to the reader that they should exercise such a choice present the narrator in this significant position. He is the present writer but occupies the same platform as his reader:

But sooth is, though I kan nat tellen al,
As kan myn auctour, of his excellence,
Yet have I seyde, and God toforen, and shal
In every thyng, al holly his sentence;
And if that ich, at Loves reverence,
Have any word in eched for the beste,
Doth therwithal right as youreselven leste. (III, 1324-1330)

The narrator admits to possible modification on his part (eched for the beste) and encourages the reader for a similar attitude if relevant. It is instructive that the narrator insists on a particular practice of writing where the only authority he can claim is the authority of the reader as opposed to that of the writer.

Therefore, it is necessary to view the trial in the Prologue to *the Legend of Good Women* where the narrator is held responsible for producing allegedly offensive works about Love's doctrine in the light of the narrator's claims about the nature of poetic creativity. Important to the narrator's trial is his position in the trial. The fact is that the narrator is charged with treason on account not of his worship of the daisy or for his awkward attitude as a lover but significantly as a writer. For the first time in his writing career, it is by the god of Love in the Prologue that the narrator's claims to being a reader/writer are taken seriously. In other words, the trial scene is significantly testimony to the narrator's coming of age as a writer. Yet, soon after he achieves recognition as an author he becomes as instantly a censured author whose reading/writing poses a serious threat to the ideology of the canonical love texts. The trial of his books compels him to answer for all the implications of using one's reading as material for writing.

Although the "trial" of the poet is necessitated by conflicting readings of the narrator's books, critical readings of the Prologue either do not recognize reading as an important concern of the poem, or, when they do, Cupid's reading of the narrator's books is considered as misreading (Kiser, 1983: 71-94), and thus pedantic (Delany, 1994: 101) since the narrator is subjected to severe criticism and is instructed by Cupid about "correct" reading of the books and "correct" representation of women. Cupid's partiality notwithstanding, it is evident that the "trial scene" in the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women* introduces three fundamentally different readings of the same

texts. The exchange, as McGerr argues, “highlights the difficulty of determining the significance of a text, in spite of its apparent conclusion or closure” (1998:123). The god of Love is confident that the narrator is defiant of his law and is a slanderer of Love’s subjects. In retaliation, he condemns the narrator’s books as propagandist libel and charges him with deliberate defamation of women:

And thow my foo, and al my folk werreyest,
 And of myn olde servautes thow *myseseyest*,

 For in pleyn text, withouten nede of glose,
 Thou hast translated the Romaunce of the Rose,

 And of Creseyde *thou hast seyde as the lyste*
 That maketh men to wommen lasse triste, (F 322-23;328-29;332-33)⁶

Alceste, in turn, does not contradict the god of Love in any significant way, but attempts to shift the emphasis from the objectives of the narrator in writing to the circumstances of the production of his books. Significantly, she stresses the narrator’s position as a reader though she also presents the narrator’s reading skills as misguided, if not underdeveloped:

...for this man ys nyce,
 He myghte doon yt, gessyng no malice,
 But for he useth thynges for to make;
 Hym rekketh noght of what matere he take. (F 362-65)

The narrator’s defence adds to the controversy as the narrator subscribes to a thesis of “correct reading”, and argues that his works are illustrative books that aim to serve the god of Love’s cause through negative modelling:

Ne a trewe lover oght me not to blame
 Thogh that I speke a fals love som shame.
 They oghte rather with me for to holde
 For that I of Creseyde wroot or tolde,
 Or of the Rose; what so myn auctour mente,
 ... yt was myn entente
 To forthren trouthe in love and yt cheryce,
 And to ben war fro falsnesse and fro vice
 By swich ensample; this was my menyng. (F 466-74)

Clearly, the narrator’s alleged “misinterpretation” of the texts he uses presents an interpretative problematic. The concern is no less how the narrator interprets his sources

⁶ My italics

as how his readers, represented by Cupid and Alceste, interpret the narrator's works. The narrator's reading-based writing produces a reading problem that the exchange both reveals and attempts to clarify. The god of Love as a reader approaches the text with certain expectations which he identifies with those of the author: firstly, he believes that his reading of the text is guided and generated by the author. Accordingly, he is confident that the misogyny he detects in the narrator's re-writings can be traced back to authorial intention. His worries about the anti-love content of the narrator's books are clearly grounded on his conviction that his own reading is the only meaning these texts can produce. As stated above, Alceste clearly denies the narrator any potential ability to read the texts he re-writes. Hence, she accords with the view of the narrator's texts as propagandist, but reduces his authorial activity to writing based on "wrong" reading. According to Alceste, the narrator is not qualified to exercise authorial choice, because of this his liability is his naivety. On the other hand, it is Alceste who, more than Cupid, stresses the narrator's literary activity as a reader and concludes that the apparent misinterpretation cannot be ascribed to the narrator for he is at worst a mere incompetent reader. Alceste provides a considerably long list of possible reasons for the narrator's wrong (349-372). She particularly stresses the narrator's possible incompetence in both selecting and rewriting the book of his choice. A significant reminder to the god of Love is that the narrator "useth thynges for to make" without "[h]e rekketh noght of what matere he take". The basis of Alceste's defence is that the narrator is too "short-witted" to understand the seriously damaging content of his reading, but he is not militantly against Love's ideology.

When the narrator is allowed to speak, his view of the problem complicates the matters further for he defends his translations as works serving the god of Love's doctrine. The narrator makes two points, equally controversial and unacceptable to his accusers. Firstly, he claims that his works do in fact transmit the "sentence" of his authors. As a reader, therefore, his contention is that his source books or authors support Love's teaching and aim to further Love's cause by stopping people from committing any possible wrongs against Love. The narrator's second point is consequent to the first: the narrator's defence openly declares that both the god of Love and Alceste are misreading his works:

...yt was myn entente
To forthren trouthe in love and yt cheryce,
And to ben war for falsnesse and fro vice
By swich ensample; this was my menyng. (F 471-74)

Still, as in the previous dream poems, here, too, the narrator is insufficiently knowledgeable about the implications of writing from reading. Consequently, he does

not realise that by arguing that his “intention” was not to defame women or Love’s followers, he, in fact, defends his own reading of the contested texts without acknowledging that his “intente” or “menynge” is as subjective as that of his readers. The struggle for the recognition of a determinate meaning only brings the dismaying recognition that it is not possible to control the reader’s response to the text. In the accusations of the god of Love, in the defences of Alceste and the narrator, the focal point is the meaning or the absence or misinterpretation of the meaning of a text. The main concern is the authorial intention, identified variably by all three, and its effect on the anticipated readers. However, the common denominator in the view of each is the recognition of the process of reading in the production of the narrator’s books. Convinced by Alceste and the arguments of the narrator that the offence is created by the narrator’s choice of books, the god of Love questions the narrator’s motives in choosing the books that he has reproduced:

Why noldest thou as wel [han] seyde goodnesse
Of wemen, as thou hast seyde wikednesse?
Was there no good matere in thy mynde,
Ne in alle thy bokes ne coudest thou nat fynde
Som story of wemen that were goode and
trewe?

(G 268-72).

It seems evident that the Prologue presents a problem generated by reading the texts produced by writers who, like the narrator in the Prologue, base their writing on the reading of others’ texts. Clearly, the problematic text, *Troilus and Criseyde*, is a retelling and hence a product of the narrator’s reading. In re-producing this controversial text in writing, the narrator presents his own reading as a possible paradigm and thus invites the reader to follow suit, (at least this is what the god of Love believes). Thus, while Chaucer acknowledges the important role of the reader —and explicitly encourages the reader to participate in the construction of the meaning—he also addresses the problematic implications of the reader’s involvement. The problematic situation in the Prologue arises from the recognition that the author of the controversial poems is a reader/writer. As a reader/writer, the narrator has exercised not only a right of choice in re-producing a certain text to “promote” loyalty in love but in so doing has also interpreted his chosen work in an unorthodox way. In other words, when the god of Love challenges the narrator in the Prologue, he challenges him as the writer of the books that the narrator has (mis)interpreted as a reader. As we see in the multiple readings of *The Troilus and Criseyde* displayed in the Prologue, while the narrator’s reading activities illustrate Chaucer’s theory and practice of writing in his works,

Chaucer undoubtedly realises that the plurality of reading is fundamentally problematic and is far from satisfactory to the writer. In this context, it is difficult to dismiss the god of Love's reading which declares the narrator's rewritings as blatant misreading and his books as deliberate misrepresentations of women in love.

It is evident that the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women* presents for discussion the reader-based continuity in change and examines the productive yet problematic implications of the reader-text-writer interaction. The trial scene shows that in deciding the nature and intent of a work the reader's subjective authority often contests the author's authority. Perhaps it is for this reason that the god of Love does not allow the narrator to exercise a choice in interpretation. The narrator's "intent", after all, is, and can be, the intent of any reader. Given the free potential of interpretation, it is never guaranteed that reading will not violate the "original" meaning of the text. As the three contestants of the trial scene illustrate, the "original" meaning of the texts is not very easy to determine.

The narrator, clearly, suffers the banishment of the author from his work.⁷ Still, the banishment of the author is something that Chaucer consistently promotes in his writing. The attitude of his readers indicates that if reading is to confer meaning on the text, then reading is considerably monitored by the reader's predisposition to the text. While the narrator's case indicates that the text is capable of generating multiple meanings, it also shows that these meanings can easily be suppressed or imprisoned or limited to singleness through the ostensibly liberating authority of the reader/author. As Eco argues, "every reception of a work of art is both an interpretation and a performance of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself." (1981:49) In the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*, the narrator is confronted with the blunt truth not only that texts are open to (mis)interpretation but also that he, as a reader/writer, has equal responsibility in the generation and dissemination of such interpretations. By subscribing to the role of a reader/writer, one opens a platform of disputables. When the god of Love sends the narrator back to his books and orders him to produce books of his doctrine, he also prescribes a certain type of reading. In having to subscribe to the task of writing women "good", the narrator, ironically, has Chaucer's method of writing endorsed. Rewriting the stories of textualised women to produce stories of good women is again writing from reading. That is, it is constructing for the reader a text out of texts, and the acknowledgment of the process may enable the reader to participate in a similar act.

In conclusion, it can be stated that despite Cupid's impositions, the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women* does not prescribe a certain model of reading; on the contrary,

⁷ The reference is to Roland Barthes, "The Death of The Author"

it problematises the function and the role of the reader/writer. While the writer can freely surrender his/her authority, the reader/writer has to assume the double responsibility of reading and reconstructing the text. Clearly, the interpretation is always generic of further, possibly contradictory, readings.

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