

*Rethinking Chaucer's Legend of Good Women*, by Carolyn P. Collette. Woodbridge, Suffolk: York Medieval Press, 2014. Pp. xvi + 168. ISBN: 9781903153499.

Carolyn P. Collette positions Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* in a number of specific contexts in an attempt to better understand both the evolution of the text as it is received today and its potential. A number of the established arguments surrounding Chaucer's poem, including the likelihood that more complete arrangements of the poem were known to his contemporaries and immediate successors, are raised here as a way of situating Chaucer's approach to the material in the broader contexts of early English humanism. The general framework of Collette's text is closely aligned with the work of Beryl Smalley and Anne Middleton in terms of its emphasis on the evolution of English humanism and the influence of the broader humanistic impulses of the period on the examination of the individual and gender.

This alignment is particularly evident in the first chapter, "Love of Books," in which Collette uses Chaucer's own "deeply personal love of *olde bokes*" as a lens for situating his work within a teleology of early humanism, particularly as it was expressed in England by men such as Richard de Bury and his circle at the court of Edward III. Collette suggests that Chaucer's reception of the ideas promulgated by de Bury and other writers of the previous generation is expressed in his own work through the use of books as generative sources of wisdom. This is evident throughout Chaucer's corpus as his references to "olde bokes" or appeals to the wisdom of the books themselves, such as the frequent variations of statements like "as the bok seith" or "as olde bokes tellen us," grant the books a specific autonomy and independent value beyond the poem at hand. While this is visible early in Chaucer's career, including references to the power of books in the *Book of the Duchess*, Collette suggests it is telling of the larger impulses in a number of Chaucer's sources for his material as well.

"Exemplary Women," the second chapter, bridges the gap between Chaucer and his sources, particularly Boccaccio and Machaut, as a means of exploring the differences between Chaucer's approach to women in the tradition, the attitudes and expression of his sources, and the treatment of women in similar works by his contemporaries and later medieval writers. While describing Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* as both derivative and original, Collette suggests that, while Chaucer's debt to Boccaccio is well known, his debt to Machaut as both source and moral compass is perhaps more important in some ways. In terms of his presentation of the women's lives in *LGW*, the way in which Chaucer

presents the courts of love establishes his own parameters for the discussion and reflects the influence of the various strains of humanist thought at play in medieval England, even as it dictates tone and structure of each woman's legend he recounts. This moralistic and intellectual play directly establishes a genealogy of the concept as expressed in Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and parallels similar discussions in Christine de Pizan's *City of Ladies*, which only just postdates Chaucer's death.

These connections are reinforced in the third chapter, "As Etik seith: Aristotelian Ideas in the *Legend*," which suggests the Aristotelian mean is one of the underpinnings of the cautionary narratives presented in the *Legend* and explains the ways in which the *Legend* celebrates "women's patience, generosity and fidelity though a contrast with male impatience, rapacity and betrayal" (94). The extremities presented on both sides of the equation allow Chaucer to both praise the feminine, without criticizing excess in either direction, and affirm the "desirability of moderation, the virtue of the mean, and the idea that balance and equalization are ideals worth struggling to achieve" (95). This balancing act, to Collette, becomes the source of many of the problems critics have had in locating the poem in specific contexts, as "its uncertain tone, its oddly elliptical relation to its classical sources and its fragmentary nature" stem from the excesses Chaucer presents and the recursive praise of women's fidelity, integrity, and the dichotomous nature of their portrayal in Chaucer's sources that must be reconciled with his project.

It is the endemic nature of these complications that necessitates Collette's repositioning of the *Legend* within Chaucer's corpus in the fourth chapter. Drawing on Robert Frank, Jr.'s *Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women* as an exemplar for how the poem should be interpreted, Collette suggests that the themes presented in the *Legend* demonstrate a continuity of sympathy with women, at least nominally so, throughout Chaucer's later work which spans the gap thematically between *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Canterbury Tales*. Rather than being read as a "simple recantation" of his *Troilus*, Collette suggests that the shift to women's fidelity and honor in the *Legend* works within the same narrative of "desire, exchange and loss" as the earlier poem (119). This system of exchange and the recursive discussion of position and loss also serves to prefigure the discussion of similar, if not identical, themes in the *Canterbury Tales*. The final chapter, "A New Paradigm: Comedy and the Individual," explores the ways in which the portrayal of women in the *Canterbury Tales* builds on the narrative paradigm of the *Legend* and *Troilus*. While the women in the *Canterbury Tales* "do not suffer, are not betrayed and usually prevail, even if at great cost," the

narrative of exchange and sacrifice is still present (139). This assertion seems odd, given the trials of Griselda in “The Clerk’s Tale” and the anxieties of Dorigen in “The Franklin’s Tale.” Collette claims that the restoration of order, the return to the balance of the Aristotelian mean at the end of these tales, makes more positive readings of these instances possible and provides a twist on the plots of the *Legend*. This claim feels problematic in context, as other instances in which the treatments of women in the *Canterbury Tales* do align with the darker themes of the *Legend* are not addressed.

Overall, the final chapter is the major structural weakness of the text. While it is not an aside in context, it does feel more like the beginning of a corollary project as it stands. Collette presents a logical and articulate argument for re-considering the conventional wisdom surrounding the *Legend*. While the text itself is not overtly feminist in its approach to the material, the repositioning of the *Legend* in the broader contexts of both early humanism and Chaucer’s approach to presenting women and feminine concerns in his corpus is a valuable contribution to a feminist discussion of the text.

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