

DISTORTIONS OF THE CHAUCERIAN TRADITION IN  
*THE ASSEMBLY OF LADIES*

The evolution of the role of the poet in late medieval literature has recently been depicted as one which moves towards a gradually new pervasive figure: that of the learned and genteel courtly poet.<sup>1</sup> From the fourteenth century onwards, the perception of the poetic task became associated with that of royal courtiers who, as efficient composers, turn to the poetic practice as a clear sign of personal proficiency and fitness for courtly governmental duties. It seems logical that most courtly poets at this time showed great willingness to depict themselves as devoted writers at work. On most occasions literary pieces would be shared by members of an audience who could equally boast some command of the poetic skills; therefore, the reaction to the constant challenge posed by audiences made up of courtly educated companions required these poets to exercise the art of composure and control over any anxieties that this might cause. Thus, authors resorted to all kinds of masks and rhetorical devices to show their ability to cope with the delicate personal situation writing might put them in. Composition turned into a demanding form of introspection but at the same time required these poets to sustain some theoretical coolness that could only be securely brought to the literary surface with the help of some distancing techniques.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gervase Mathew has characterised the “international court culture” of the late middle ages as connected with the corresponding decline in popularity of old-fashioned minstrelsy, and with the rise of a new concept of the social role of monarchy.

<sup>2</sup> J. A. Burrow (1971: 39) refers to this particular attitude as representative of Ricardian literature: “It means that the poet is not, in the last resort, directly committed to his work, as we feel Dante to be. He reserves for himself, as it were, the right to say ‘But that is Will (or Geoffrey) speaking, not me’. More positively, it leaves the poet free to exploit possibilities in the contemporary vernacular which he might otherwise have found it difficult, as an educated man acquainted with polite languages, to come to terms with.” The same author (1982: 40) later emphasised how these attitudes derived from medieval ones rather than from modern Italian stances: “The origins of autobiographic and personal writing in this period lie nearer home, in the literary traditions of the Middle Ages. Surprisingly

Writing became a kind of self-revelation not only of poetic skills but of the writers' personal capacities for the courtly behaviour expected of those daring to share their views with that exquisite community. As Firth Green (1980: 112) says: "[...] irony, allegory, the conventions of the dream vision, and the use of *personae* all contribute to a sense of obliqueness in much of the love poetry of the late middle ages [...]. It is almost as if literary etiquette demanded that the poet should conceal his own personality behind a series of socially acceptable masks."

The sense of close surveillance and of constant judgement could not be ignored or eluded by writers, whose elegant response to the personal challenge was that of humble superiority, often achieved by anticipating their attitude before the final verdict uttered by some audience.

One of the genres that best reflects and even symbolises this challenge is debate poetry. Debate became not only a major tendency for courtly edification but also a means by which poets could in fact deviate the focus of attention from their own inner strife to that of the subject matter under discussion and, simultaneously, shrewdly hint at the implicit courtly pressure they are under, ameliorating it through just such suggestion.<sup>3</sup> The very nature of debate poetry requires equanimous presentation of the parts and therefore, by presenting any subject in the controversial manner, these poets precluded their own commitment to any of the causes brought to the dispute. No wonder irresolution has become almost a defining trait of this genre, reflecting not only the didactic origins of this literary trend but also its

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enough, in fact, the authors of this period continue to present themselves in the old petitionary attitudes. The image of the writer becomes fuller and more intimate, but its outlines are most often unchanged."

<sup>3</sup> John W. Conlee (1991: xiv-xv) describes the evolution of narrative frames for Latin debates: "Among the important earlier innovations was the introduction of a first-person narrator, who served as the auditor and reporter of the debate that he had overheard. This innovation, which was probably introduced during the eleventh century, was accompanied by a tendency to elaborate the framing materials used to surround the debate component of the poem. The result of these two developments was greater structural complexity and a more extensive narrative element. Yet another significant development among the later Latin poems was the introduction of the dream-vision. Used first in poems of serious didactic import such as the *Visio Fulberti*, an important Latin prototype for the vernacular Body and Soul debates, the dream-vision soon became the vehicle for goliardic whimsy in poems such as the *Goliae Dialogus in Aquam et Vinum* [...]"

undeniable parliamentary uses, where delay and indefiniteness become essential attributes of real causes brought to court.<sup>4</sup> Thus, debate poetry encapsulates two salient and celebrated features of courtly poets: appreciation for their ability to artfully move the strings so as to avoid personal concessions and at the same time confirmation of their total command over the unpredictable coiling of the issue under debate, thus prefiguring their role as wise counsellors for princes in the future.

A particularly relevant concern in medieval debates had been precisely the case of women. Blamires (1992) tracks the long tradition of defence of women up to Christine de Pizan's final vindication.<sup>5</sup> Some of Chaucer's works could be regarded from the perspective of this late-medieval zeal for debate as a training technique for mastering the art of discretion and equanimity. By entangling his poetic persona as witness in a debate the way he does, for instance, in *The Parliament of Fowls*, or by recording someone else's remarks about an ongoing debate, as in Alice of Bath's response to misogynous tenets, he makes explicit and underscores the debatable nature of the attitudes towards love and women. He epitomises the sort of author who is implicitly involved in debates dealing with women but who still refuses to give his "final word". The weight placed on the reception of his poems reflects the anxiety of the poet who is required to play the role of the calm, confident courtier, able to laugh at himself through his self-imposed worldly detachment and, thus having to deny himself any definite position in this debate.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Thomas Reed, Jr. (1990), and the parallelisms between law and literature as described by Howard Bloch (1977), where, again irresolution becomes characteristic of these activities. The training process at school did involve such dichotomous and parallel distribution of contents and the university and courtly disputations depended largely on techniques to delay the ultimate decision.

<sup>5</sup> Among the historians, Eileen Power (1979: 19) refers to the duality in the ecclesiastical depiction of women by talking of them as some sort of two-faced Janus. Blamires (1997: 4) remarks that "it is inevitable that, within such a patriarchal culture, many medieval profeminine texts do indeed rehearse a male point of view" due, among other reasons, to the exclusive male readers these early profeminine authors would be most probably addressing. Therefore, in these early authors the very tone may decry the disavowal of the object of defence, in this case, women.

Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*<sup>6</sup>, for instance, is supposedly written as a penitential response for his having disparaged them in *Troilus and Criseyde*, and is handled by the poet within a recreational atmosphere which allows this penance to coexist with his predominantly ironic pose.<sup>7</sup> Still, the poem has been traditionally regarded as profeminine. If many current feminist critics are ready to give "Chaucer his due", it seems that fourteenth and fifteenth century readers were also willing to accept his ambiguity as part of the conventional detached pose of the author, ultimately hearing his protestations of being a defender of women as sincere. Even his place within the canonical configuration of English literature, acclaimed as founding father, met the resistance of some of his earliest followers, who questioned such exclusive paternity in this sense. Jennifer Summit points out that Gavin Douglas perceived how Chaucer took the female side and criticised him "for he was evir, wemenis frend".<sup>8</sup>

But Gavin Douglas was not alone in noticing Chaucer's profeminine attitude: there is another phenomenon which suggests a view of Chaucer, originally, almost as "a brother" for some sort of (ghost) female literary tradition apparently championed in *The Legend of Good Women*. That phenomenon is the transmission of the great bulk of the so-called "Chaucerian verse" of the fifteenth century. Under this label, a heterogeneous group of occasional texts, many of them anonymous and devoted mainly to love and debates in the form of allegorical dream visions and lyrics, was assembled and attributed Chaucerian authorship.<sup>9</sup> Among

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<sup>6</sup> It was Lydgate who in his *The Fall of Princes* states that Chaucer "wrot, at request off the queen, /A legende of parfit holynesse off Goode Women" (l. 1330-32). According to Florence Percival (1998: 1) he follows the model of the palinode: the ancient literary tradition concerned with the relative merits and demerits of women and men, first appeared in Greek literature as defence of women and love in response as reply to the slandering of women as represented firstly by Helen of Troy. Two poems likely to have influenced Chaucer's *Legend* are also considered palinodes: Book III of the *Ars amatoria* by Ovid and *Le jugement dou Roy de Navarre* by Guillaume de Machaut. Thus all of these poems would participate somehow in the debate over the "war of the sexes".

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, R. W. Frank, Jr., Janet M. Cowen, Elizabeth D. Harvey, R. M. Lumiansky, Elaine Tuttle Hansen, and Nicole McDonald.

<sup>8</sup> First preface of the translation of *Aeneid* of 1513 pointed out by Jennifer Summitt (23).

<sup>9</sup> By the early sixteenth-century, in Richard Pynson's 1526 edition of the three volume Chaucerian production, we can find Christine de Pizan's *Morale Proverbs*

them we find the late fifteenth-century *The Floure and the Leaf* and also *The Assembly of Ladies*, allegorical pieces that present a female character as narrator.<sup>10</sup> Both were celebrated as Chaucerian poems and their female narrator was thence taken for one of those distancing masks Chaucer would wear in order to enhance the depth of the debate and ensure his authorial dispensations.<sup>11</sup> Only by the late eighteenth century were these two pieces finally excluded from the Chaucerian canon.<sup>12</sup> Since then, scholars have determined that their divergent style points to different authorship for the poems and the main remaining question now is whether they echo a male or a female voice. Since debate about this issue has resulted in a sort of endless medieval disputation,<sup>13</sup> I would like at least to stress *The Assembly of Ladies*'s Chaucerian vocation as well as the intention of the author to highlight some poetic concerns as specifically female. The question of its possible female authorship has become a key issue concerning the rise of a

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or Richard Ross's translation of Alain Chartier's *La Belle dame sans mercy* under the heading "The booke of fame, made by Geffray Chaucer: with Dyvers other of his Workes". About these Chaucerian attributions see J. Summitt, H. S. Bennett, Derek Pearsall, Paul Strohm, Julia Boffey and Julia Boffey & John J. Thompson.

<sup>10</sup> It seems therefore that to the fifteenth-century editorial and reading mind it was definitely the partaking of a certain literary trend rather than the alleged identification between author and narrator in a poem that decided the lot of these anonymous pieces.

<sup>11</sup> In fact, we might draw a line linking Chaucerian female complaint poetry to the apocryphal *The Assembly of Ladies*, as the miscellaneous collections may attest. Of the three late fifteenth-century manuscripts containing *The Assembly of Ladies*, the earliest of them, and model for Pearsall's first edition (1962), is British Library MS Addit. 34360, which happens to be preceded by Chaucer's *Pity* as well as other short complaint poems and by the *Craft of Lovers*. MS Longleat 258 includes Lydgate's *Temple of Glass* and Chaucer's *Anelida and Arcite* and *The Parlement of Foules*, as well as *La Belle Dame sans Merci*. As for the third manuscript, Trinity College Cambridge MS R.3.19, it includes *The Legend of Good Women* and *The Parlement of Foules*, as well as several lyrics by other authors. In 1532 William Thynne produced an early print of *The Assembly of Ladies*, still as part of Chaucer's collected works. The original title, *Le samble des dames*, is first rendered in English by him as part of this phenomenon of Chaucerian appropriation of other works.

<sup>12</sup> Thus, Thomas Tyrwhitt, in his "Account of the Works of Chaucer" (1775-78), opened the way to Skeat's interpretation of both poems as written by one and the same author, a woman.

<sup>13</sup> This issue has been debated for some years now. See W. W. Skeat, A. Barratt, J. Stephens and mainly R. Evans and L. Johnson's illuminating contribution. I have used Derek Pearsall's 1990 edition of "The Assembly of Ladies", which follows British Library MS Addit. 34360, often referred to as "A".

proto-feminist consciousness in English courtly culture.<sup>14</sup> The significance of embroidery in the poem as well as the distortion of some Chaucerian stances will be read as specific signs of female awareness and as a response to the courtly debate about women, to which Chaucer had contributed.

The poem, a dream vision, suggests the debate in its variant of the legendary courts of love, where, typically, bills, petitions and individual complaints of love were presented and debated in a courtly session by a judicial assembly that arbitrated the cases rigorously, on a specific day, according to the rules of love.<sup>15</sup> While in a garden, a lady tells the knight,

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<sup>14</sup> Georges Duby (1998:19-57) already referred to the role of keeping alive the memory of the dead traditionally granted to women. This means that they were acknowledged as natural narrators, although they would hardly be endowed with the *auctoritas* men had always been credited with. Alexandra Barratt (1992: 7-16) mentions the three main different strategies medieval women would resort to in order to overcome these limitations; among them, anonymity would sometimes be used to guarantee the circulation of her works. Feminist criticism has focussed on these anonymous writings and tried to detect some sort of essential female style in them, only to find out no plausible proof of female authorship. However, the effort has been worthwhile, since it has fostered a different approach to these texts, thus enriching them. Regarding our text, Laurie Finke remarks (1999: 95): “Since it seems unlikely that there will ever be sufficient evidence to determine whether the authors of these two female-voiced poems were male or female, perhaps it would be more useful to stop looking *through* the sexual ambiguity in these works—trying to resolve it—and instead look *at* it. Unlike the female-voiced lyrics examined above, we might speak of the authors of *Floure and Leafe* and *Assembly of Ladies* as ‘epicene writers’, establishing a third term which is not a category or sex in itself, but a space of possibility that puts sexual identity into play. In these poems, the epicene is not simply the result of our own lack of information about the author’s identity; rather it constitutes the characteristic poetics of these two texts. These poems present us with a conundrum of textual sexuality.”

<sup>15</sup> French literary topics such as this one of the *cour amoureuse*, largely celebrated by fourteenth-century French and English poetry, have been defended as historical instances of the rising power of the female presence in these refined and educated courts. However, although their existence has not been totally dismissed by historians, the most specific recorded data cannot possibly refer to real ceremonies of this kind. Régine Pernoud (1995: 153) refers to them: “No se trata sino de juegos de ingenio, deleite de una sociedad letrada a la que nada apasionaba tanto como el análisis de los matices del amor, y por modo de juego se celebraban sobre casos propuestos juicios semejantes en su forma a los que se celebraban con ocasión de los juicios orales feudales de las cortes señoriales ante las cuales se fallaban los pleitos”. The 1400 charter of the *cour amoureuse* attributed to Charles VI, with its exact imitation of the literary ones, and which includes the participation of important known members of French courtly life, has been revealed as chronologically incorrect. According to J. Wimsatt (1993: 279): “The conception of the court evidently was in part the fantasy of Isabelle of Bavaria and her entourage; notwithstanding, the documents witness the strong influence of the civic

who has asked the cause of her present paleness, about a dream she had. In it, she and her eight female friends are summoned by Lady Loyalty to meet at her palace and asked to take their bills and complaints to court.<sup>16</sup> The narrator is the first one to be visited by Perseverance, who brings Lady Loyalty's command, and she starts her journey right away, accompanied by Diligence. She is the first to reach Lady Loyalty's palace, called Pleasant Regard, and is escorted to her chamber by the porter, Countenance, who answers her questions about the way this court works. Countenance tells her about their sisterhood and the legal representatives at the place, the steward being Largesse, the marshal of the hall Bealchiere, Discrecioun being the chief purveyor, Aqueyntance the lodgings-officer, Remembrance the chamberlain, Avisenesse the secretary, Perseverance the usher, and Temperance the chancellor. Meanwhile, the narrator's eight friends arrive, and after getting properly dressed, they all witness the appearance in procession of a multitude of women heading for the main hall in order to present their bills to Lady Loyalty. With the help of Perseverance, these nine friends cross the crowded space and are able to present their petitions, only to be told later that the resolution of all the bills presented that day would be dictated some other time.<sup>17</sup> Thus, having departed from Pleasant Regard

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pays on the literary ideas of the nobility. The numerous membership list of the *cour amoureuse* was not confined to the nobility; names from the bourgeoisie, especially from the north of France, appear on the rolls". See also D. Burnley (1998) and S. Jaeger (1999).

<sup>16</sup> Spearing (1976: 5) described the centrality of the dreamer in dream-vision: "[...] the dream-framework inevitably brings the poet into his poem, not merely as the reteller of a story which has its origin elsewhere, but as the person who experiences the whole substance of the poem". This is precisely what happens to this dreamer: she is the first to be summoned, the first to arrive in Pleasant Regard and the only one who, among the friends, resists or ignores allegorical authority. Her questions and thoughts lead us through this dream.

<sup>17</sup> Reed (1990: 93) recalls the frustration of supplicants in most of the causes taken to political parliamentary debate at that time: "[...] although both Lords and Commons were required to give their 'answers' to the king's points before the parliamentary session ended, virtually none of the petitions they presented would have been ruled on by the time they themselves were dismissed. Instead, committees of the king's council sifted through the various petitions (500 of them in 1305) over a period of weeks or months, answering some of the most important or difficult yet merely initiation action on the vast majority." The poem would reflect perfectly that lack of hope in a solution for love complaints, leaving thus these ladies by themselves, dispersed as they are found at the beginning of the poem, roaming about some maze justice cannot unravel and compensate for. Delay,

without any redress, the dreamer wakes up and the narration ends when the knight, who has listened with keen interest, utters his positive verdict on the dream and she gives a title to it, presenting the story now as a book. Their conversation and the poem itself end when friends call her back.

The poem presents some anomalies that account for its having been regarded, in Pearsall's words, as "lifelessly handled", betraying "a touch of the busy bureaucrat" (1966: 229). It certainly does lack the main ingredient expected in one of those amorous courts: the debate itself. The most active characters, with the exception of the narrator, happen to be eleven allegorical ladies who might stand for the different attitudes and temperaments of women aggrieved because of love, and thus, they have been judged as conventionally dull and uninteresting. As for the real characters in the story, they are individualized although they are never given proper names or any distinctive agency. However, a clear difference among them may be sensed from the very beginning. The narrator introduces them as they walk through the cross alleys of the garden labyrinth, surrounded by knights and squires, stressing that while four of them were gentle women, the other five were ladies.<sup>18</sup> Later on, before she starts telling the curious knight her dream, the narrator refers to her friends as they rambled through the garden labyrinth

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both in justice and in this labyrinth, becomes thence the normal condition these dissatisfied ladies have grown used to.

<sup>18</sup> About the relevance of the maze as symbol for the possible feminist interpretation of the text see Evans and Johnson's article, which blends outstandingly Penelope Reed Doob's and Carolyn Dinshaw's interpretations of the role of the labyrinth in medieval culture. As for the difference between ladies and genteel women, such distinction was perceived mainly by the sumptuary laws, of which this poem seems to be a perfect document. According to P. Coss (p. 53) when referring to the great sumptuary act of 1363, the 'Statute Concerning Diet and Apparel': "Knights and ladies were placed in a separate social category from 'squires and all manner of gentle men (*gentils gens*) below the estate of knight'. Within these categories, however, there was to be further differentiation according to income. Knights and ladies with an income from rent and land of between 400 marks and £ 1,000 per annum could wear more or less what they wished except ermine and 'letuse' and apparel embroidered with precious stones, apart from their headdresses. Knights with less than £200 per year were forbidden to use cloths valued at more than 6 marks and to use cloth of gold, gowns furred with ermine or miniver and apparel embroidered with precious stones. This was to apply to their wives and daughters, except again that they might use precious stones in their headdresses, and to their male children."



one afternoon, reacting differently to the bends and errors the maze presented them:

There were ladyes walkyng, as was the wone,  
Foure in nombre, as to my mynde doth falle,  
And I the fift, symplest of alle.  
Of gentil wymmen foure ther were also,  
Disportyng hem everiche after theyr guyse,  
In crosse aleys walkyng be two and two,  
And som alone after theyr fantasyes.  
Thus occupied we were in dyvers wise,  
And yit in trowth we were nat alone:  
Theyr were knyghtis and squyers many one. (A 5-14)

To passeoure tyme in to this mase we went  
And tokeoure weyes yche aftyr other entent:  
some went inward and wen they had gon oute,  
some stode amyddis and loked al about;  
and soth to sey some were ful fer behynde  
and right anon as ferforth as the best;  
others there were, so mased in theyr mynde,  
al weys were goode for hem, both est and west.  
thus went they furth and had but litel rest,  
and som theyr corage dide theym so assaile  
for verray wrath they stept over the rayle. (A 32-42)

This scene conveys wonderfully the variety of womanly responses and capacities with no sign of disdain for what might have been otherwise presented as a multiple portrait of characteristically female fickleness. Female diversity and individuality will be later confirmed in the dream when each of these women presents her particular written petition in court.

The narrator's own impressions reveal very soon that her priority is not the new landscape but mainly the ladies' garments and ornaments.<sup>19</sup> It is

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<sup>19</sup> It is worth recalling C. S. Lewis's (1936: 249-50) final dismissal of the poem on these grounds: "What the writer really wants to describe is no inner drama with loyalty as its heroine, but the stir and bustle of an actual court, the whispered consultations, the putting on of clothes, and the important comings and going. She is moved, by a purely naturalistic impulse, to present the detail of everyday life; and if her poem were not hampered by being still attached—as with an umbilical

through her eyes that we first notice that the allegorical sisters are clad in luxurious attire embroidered with distinctive French mottoes. Perseverance's dress characterizes her by the motto: "Bien loialment" (very loyally), Countenance by "A moi que je voi" (To me what I see), Remembrance by "Plus ne purroy" (I couldn't do more) and Diligence by "Taunt que je puis" (As much as I can). When Perseverance pays her visit to the narrator she states clearly Lady Loyalty's command that they all wear blue dresses and that their petitions be embroidered on their sleeves: "Al youre felawes and ye must com in blewe,/ Everiche yowre matier for to sewe,/ With more, whiche I pray yow thynk upon,/ Yowre wordes on yowre slevis everichon." (A 116-19)

Of course, not only these personified characters but even the impressive cloth of state covering Lady Loyalty's throne is described as follows: "Above ther was a riche cloth of state/ Wrought with the nedil ful straungely,/ Hir worde theron, and thus it sayde triewly:/ A *Endurer*, to telle in wordis fewe,/ With grete lettres, the better for to shewe." (A 486-89). It is this particular fragment that highlights the role of embroidery: "To last". The visual quality of these threads strangely intertwined by the needle to form the capital letters gives lasting power to the piece of cloth, itself emblematic of Loyalty's nature.

The poem has been criticized for its incoherence and ambiguity, since neither from the allegorical side nor from the complaining women does the principle of psychomachia really develop. When the friends come to present their case, all of them look equally enigmatic: their mottoes are "Sanz que jamais" (Without ever giving cause), "Une sans chaungier" (One without changing), "Oncques puis lever" (I can never rise), "Entierment vostre" (Entirely yours), "C'est sans dire" (It needs no words), "En dieu" (In God is my trust), "Sejour ensure" (Rest assured) and "Bien monest" (Well advised). It is the narrator's role to explain the reasons for these mottoes, but she is so discrete in recounting these women's love mishaps that the mottoes retain their suggestive power and fascination. Reading these messages created by

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cord— to the allegorical form, it would be an admirable picture of manners. [...] To read it is to learn why some critics hate allegory; for here the *significacio* is —what some suppose it to be in all allegories— a chilling and irrelevant addition to the story."

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the embroidered stitches on the sleeves causes one and the same effect: namely, wonder at the enigmatic emblems and interest in their superficial and static qualities, in the face of such incomprehension. Thus the narrator seems to ignore any need for textual insight and instead goes on stressing her attraction to the magnificence of garments, themselves made, like Loyalty's, to hold their own unchangeable significance. If there is any appeal to understanding, it is through the spontaneous remembrance caused by the visual effect of those threads. Through those colours and the presence of a few French words, reminiscent of love and of grandeur, the poet appeals to any high audience the poem might address. Thus, it is the visual dimension, the outer message conveyed by the blue color as well as the individual characterization of each of the embroidered mottoes that contain and encircle the ultimate purpose of the text.

The significance of veiling is enhanced through the poem's overt tribute to Chaucer. When depicting the walls of the great hall at Pleasant Regard, the narrator recalls how the stories of Chaucer's good women and some other sad cases were carved on the shining stone. She mentions Phillis, Thesbe, Cleopatra, Melusine and Anelida, emulating Chaucer's wanderings in his dream visions as she reads the messages on the walls. However, here these carved legends happen to be covered with a veil to avoid the blinding brilliance of the material they are engraved on. The narrator says: "And bicause the wallis shone so bright/ With fyne umple they were al over-sprede/ To that entent folk shuld nat hurt theyr sight,/ And thurgh that the storyes myght be redde" (A 470-73). This comment about the fragility of women's eyes seems ironic here. The tradition of female susceptibility in front of unseemly stories, a common concern in courtly literature, suggests in this context the possibility of self imposed blinkers, since the veiled stories are about women themselves. Although, from the poet's point of view, not even these emblematic tragic legends of female suffering should ever be read as a naked text: reading cannot dispense with the ultimate outer veil, and this need for some covering is bound to the symbolic use of embroidery in the poem.

The epistemological place assigned to needlework is usually connected to the ornamental quality of this activity, to its merely decorative goal. Its value derives from the technical expertise required and the manual labor

invested in it, mainly associated with female hands.<sup>20</sup> For the medieval tradition, one that cherished the duality between the hidden spiritual content and surface matter, and that assumed the need to transcend or remove the latter in order to reach any ultimate message, embroidery occupied precisely that category of the external and material. Indeed, it not only concealed meaning, as letters could do, but furthermore, it amplified and embellished any surface. Embroidery magnified and exaggerated the superficial excellence of the material and the visual; it was the surface of surfaces, the top of the costume, the ultimate outer layer displaying its own formal beauty and accuracy as a unique and essential value, belittling any other virtue.<sup>21</sup>

Needlework and tapestries have traditionally been related to the quality work of quality women.<sup>22</sup> However, this activity still betrayed the stigma of its nonintellectual nature, whereas writing could boast just the opposite. Notwithstanding this basic dichotomy, Chaucer had dared to acknowledge the potential of the needle to tell stories and make the truth prevail over treason and lies, thus binding it to the aspirations of writing. It is precisely in *The Legend of Good Women* where, narrating Philomela's tragedy, he explains:

She coude eek rede and wel ynow endyte,  
But with a penne coude she nat wryte.

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<sup>20</sup> About the development of this art in England and the social and general implications of embroidery, see R. Parker, A. G. I. Christie or S. M. Newton, among others.

<sup>21</sup> Despite this, however, rich embroidery may also herald the beauty of the object wrapped in it; a box, a book, any sort of case may be covered by an embroidered piece to proclaim the richness of the gems or the message inside. Thus, its aim is to declare from the outside the inner quality of the object it covers. But this is a secondary analogical use; originally the embroidery would surpass the beauty of the dresses or cloths it decorated, being the *surplus* piece projected out of any other surface.

<sup>22</sup> As some pieces gallantly embroidered by nuns and queens from Anglo-Saxon times and the spread of the *opus anglicanum* technique may attest. However, by the Late Middle Ages, the guild system allowed the massive entrance of men in the ranks of embroiderers. Notwithstanding this, noble women still held embroidery as a primary occupation associated with their elevated status and the psychological disposition this craft demanded: that of patience and dedication. Again, the attitude required had to do with perseverance and constant waiting as self-imposed defining traits.

But letters can she weve to and fro.,  
So that, by that the yer was al ago,  
She hadde ywoven in a stamyn large  
How she was brought from Athenes in a barge,  
And in a cave how that she was brought;  
And al the thyng that Tereus hath wrought,  
She waf it wel, and wrot the storye above. (F 2356-2364)

In this passage, Chaucer accounts for female ignorance of writing techniques, here portrayed as some male skill; he nevertheless allows embroidery to denounce the male capacity to silence women.<sup>23</sup> In her analysis of female hagiography, Wogan-Browne (2001: 34) accounts for the practice of embroidery by linking it to the theme of enclosure: “In showing the heroine as a reader and embroidery as both her text and her occupation, treatises and saint’ lives reveal their agenda of image-making. Women’s time in enclosure is constructed as repetitive stasis, in which women are at once producers of images and icons themselves.” Also among these good women, embroidery becomes the ancient thread through which they perceive themselves as separated, isolated from the active world and able to generate, therefore, interpersonal female bonds. Philomela’s message is meant for the one who not only can read but who has also learnt the art of embroidery, her

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<sup>23</sup> Although Philomela had not been trained to use the stylus, her legendary betrayed sisters did in fact write not with the needle but with a pen. In *The Assembly of Ladies* the offended friends bring their petitions to court and complain of having to present them in a written form, not only in the embroidered thread. They resent using the pen; not so the narrator, who is proud of it and emphasises her friends’ uneasiness to use it. It is also interesting to relate the opposite relationship between writing and sewing in both poems: in Philomela’s case, embroidery acts as the final ornament of what has already been advanced and explained by the narrator, although it is precisely this embroidered account of past events that reveals itself as decisive for the denouement of the story; in *The Assembly of Ladies*, instead, the narrator explains the meanings of the embroidered mottoes only after we have had the chance to read and perceive them as enigmatic. She enlarges and enhances their meaning by giving her own point of view about the friends’ pain, leading us into a labyrinth where we are abandoned. Thus, our experience of female solidarity and pain derives from intellectual ground more than from sentimentality. Whereas Chaucer achieved sympathy for the prisoner whose story he had previously recounted, the narrator of *The Assembly of Ladies* prefers keeping readers at some distance from her friends. Female space is never completely occupied or disturbed by male explanation.

sister,<sup>24</sup> whereas in *The Assembly of Ladies* all of these noble women perceive this activity as defining their particular feelings as well as bringing them together as friends. Their condition of embroiderers suggests not only their female condition but also companionship and group feeling, according to which they act as a unit. Consequently, the poet underlines the duality of writing with the needle or with the pen in order to reinforce the notion of writing in ink as a technique that guarantees the connection with the male world, whereas embroidery remains somehow the symbol of captivity and eternal delay for women, to which they seem to acquiesce. In the dream, most of these female friends show their uneasiness with writing, as we can see in these two examples:

Moche more ther was wherof she shuld compleyne  
But she thought it to grete encombraunce  
So moche to write, and therfor, in certayne,  
In God and hir she put hir affiaunce. (A 652-55)

For as me thought she felt grete displesaunce—  
One might wele perceyve bi hir chiere,  
And no wonder, it sat hir passyn neere;  
Yit loth she was to put it in writyng,  
But neede wil have his cours in every thyng.  
*Sejour ensure* this was hir worde certeyne,  
And thus she wrote but in litel space. (A 661-67)

Needlework remains the communal activity that keeps women together and their identity secure from curious eyes. However, the most advanced woman among the ladies, the one who happens to have first found her way through the intricate paths of the labyrinth, and therefore deserving the dream vision, illustrates her command over the writing technique when asserting in the following lines:

Hir gowne was blew, this wote I verily,

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<sup>24</sup> Although Philomela's use of the needle is undeniably the result of her confinement it does paradoxically bring about her liberation and homecoming to Procne.

Of goode facion and furred wele with gray;  
Upon hir sleve hir worde, this is no nay,  
The whiche saide thus, as my penne can endite,  
*A moy que je voy*, writen with lettres white. (A 304-8)

With that anon I went and made this booke,  
Thus symply rehersyng the substaunce  
Because it shuld nat out of remembraunce (A 740-42)

By turning her dream experience into a book, *La samble des dames*, this narrator becomes an author in the Chaucerian vein. Although the book, the story she dedicates to none other than a curious knight, is merely a vehicle, a means with which to participate in the male writing tradition, her control over the technique actually spells breaking with what was considered conventional. The narrative frame she employs inverts the traditional motives found in Chaucerian dream visions. For instance, the dreamer here displays her own peculiar, highly assertive personality.<sup>25</sup> She does not comply with the image of the rather dull dreamer that happily accepts his incapacity to cope with the new scenery or to understand its inhabitants. On the contrary, she effectively manages the impressive landscape and defiantly refuses to show her motto in front of the allegorical female court. When talking to Perseveraunce in the hall, we notice her reluctance to identify herself through words: “Whan they begynne to opyn their matier/ There shal ye knowe her wordis, by and by./ But as for me I have none verily/ And so I told to Countenaunce here afore;/ Al myn array is bliw, what nedith more?” (409-13). When telling the knight about the moment in which Lady Loyalty finally demands some explanation from her, he suddenly interrupts her account<sup>26</sup> in order to urge her on, and only then does she finally disclose the content of the bill she read in front of the assembly of ladies:

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<sup>25</sup> In the dream she shows herself confident enough to even complain when talking to Perseveraunce about the endless tarrying at the hall: “The rather spede the sonner may we go./ Grete cost alwey tere is in taryeng,/ And long to sue it is a wery thyng.” (418-20).

<sup>26</sup> Some readers have attributed these first words to Lady Loyalty, but the tone may correspond to that in the conversation between the narrator and the curious knight from the very beginning of the story. As for the reference to a female character in line 699, scholars give her different names —Lady Fortune, the Virgin, Lady Loyalty or the female friend the narrator might be in love with, as Alexandra

“Now, goode, telle on, I hate yow, be saynt Jame.”  
“Abide a while, it is nat yit my wil;  
Yet must ye wite, bi reason and bi skil,  
Sith ye knowe al that hath be done afore.”  
And thus it sayde, without any more:  
“Nothyng so lief as death to come to me  
for fynal end of my sorwes and peyne;  
what shuld I more desire, as seme ye—  
and ye knewe al aforne it for certeyne  
I wote ye wold; and for to telle yow pleyne,  
Without hir help that hath al thyng in cure  
I can nat thynk that it may long endure;  
And for my trowth, preved it hath bien wele—  
To sey the soth, it can be no more—  
Of ful long tyme, and suffred every dele  
In pacience and kept it al in store;  
Of hir goodenesse besechyng hir therfor  
That I myght have my thank in suche wise  
As my desert deservith of justice.” (A 689-707)

If this lady has dared to reveal her complaint to the curious knight, one may suspect a confession of love to him who asked about the causes of her paleness at the beginning of the poem. That possibility seems less than likely when we see the knight in the light of Chaucerian categories. In order to reveal her feelings —her suffering concealed for so long— she resorts to reading the bill (and to the composition of the book). Writing is then sustained as the method to bring the hidden, the dream itself as well as love, to the surface, and thus, as the proper way to communicate with men, since it is they who have always acted as interpreters. But just the same, this knight fails to recognize the depth of her pain or to demonstrate sympathy with her suffering. He, not the dreaming lady, embodies the Chaucerian type of the dull naive character who cannot understand the profound feelings of those

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Barratt has suggested (1987: 19). Another, maybe too far-fetched, possibility could be that of the narrator being in love with this curious knight, thus confessing her feelings to him in an oblique way, as she talks to Lady Loyalty, implicitly addressing the contents of the bill to him. The fact that the knight does not respond to this possible confession would make her love even more unbearably hopeless, just as she presents it in her bill.

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met in their ramblings.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, no tragic feelings accompany the lady's departure. Even though readers themselves may feel a strange discomfort after having heard her secret and having observed the knight's inability to be touched or moved by it, the fact is that she does not need further attention or interpretation from the knight. She gaily returns to her friends, always present in the poem as the first and only group to which the lady belongs. The title she gives to her book pays homage to the centrality and constancy of female friendship as a basic *a priori* bond underlying any subsequent individual love relationship:

As for this booke, to sey yow verray right  
And of the name to tel the certeynte,  
'La semble de Dames', thus it hight;  
how thynk ye that the name is?' 'Goode, parde!  
'Now go, farwele, for they cal after me,  
my felawes al, and I must after sone.'  
Rede wele my dreame, for now my tale is done. (A 750-56)

While she reveals her own feelings to this knight, she continues to avoid any disclosure of the qualities of the art of embroidery, rejecting any use of written words to reveal the meaning of each woman's identity and tragic story. Although the poet endows her with the capacity to explain in depth the meaning of the mottoes, she actually refuses to fully carry out the exegetic task. In fact, she heightens the ambiguity of the story by deliberately underlining marginal details —furs, fabrics, jewels— that enhance the surface quality of her own text, avoiding any thorough explanation about her friends' petitions and names. Instead of rehearsing the Chaucerian model of the letter of grievances found in *The Legend of Good Women*, the poem articulates its author's reluctance to reach deeper than the embroidered mottoes allow and further than female dignity requires. The cases of these women are not available for discussion nor offered as material for tragedy. And Loyalty, which in the Chaucerian *Legend of Good Women* was

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<sup>27</sup>This male character remains outside the limits of female dreams and passions, and since the knight shows little evolution from his initial solicitousness about her wan face, one can only suggest an intensification of pain if, indeed, the dreaming lady had the illusion of mutual affection. But this seems too remote a possibility.

associated with women only at the expense of their demonstrated public abandonment, anguish and death, is instead celebrated here as a major stately figure, manifest in the discretion and prudent behavior of these ladies in their evocative embroidered words.<sup>28</sup>

Chaucer's attempt to distance himself from the demanding expectations of his audience with the set of narrative devices displayed in *The Legend of Good Women* possibly led to him being credited as a decorous courtly poet. As such, he was able to skillfully evade responsibilities. But, of course, his astute evasion meant the traumatic exposure of his good women. Almost a hundred years later, the author of *The Assembly of Ladies* stitched each and every word of the poem in his or her aspiration to suture against debates that spelled yet another occasion for female grief. This author claimed a female narrator's determination to defend the rhetorical value of embroidery and poetry and to distance herself from the pressure to turn women into a matter of discussion. In writing her vision, the narrator defended the quality of the enigmatic sewing of words to define her friends against any narrative unveiling of their cases, challenging the view of women as constituting a problematic, controversial, common<sup>29</sup> issue. In so doing, the author favored

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<sup>28</sup> If on the one hand, this enigmatic quality might result in the reinforcement of the perception of women as inextricable "others", on the other hand the recourse to the courtly authorities endows them with the political proximity and with credentials to consider them as legitimated "citizens". However, the danger of essentialism, that is, the possibility of objectifying them as incomprehensible and mysterious, is really strong in the poem, thus resulting in the basic misogynist principle that H. Bloch (1991: 5) defines: "Whether good or bad, laudatory or deprecatory, the reduction of Woman to a category implies in our culture —and this because of a historic real imbalance of possessory power— an appropriation that is not present when identical generalizing statements are applied to man or men. I propose, then, a definition of misogyny as a speech act in which woman is the subject of the sentence and the predicate a more general term; or, alternatively, as the use of the substantive *woman* or *women* with a capital *W*. [...] For the effect of a speech act such that woman is the subject of the sentence and the predicate a more general term, that effect which dwells in the zone where the use of words produces the most basic elements of thought —and thought authorizes action, is to make of woman an essence, which, as essence, is eliminated from the world historical stage. This is precisely why the discourse of misogyny seems so repetitive, is so culturally constant, and seems to lack an internal history."

<sup>29</sup> Evans and Johnson (1991: 177) hint at the elitist character of the poem: "[...] in many ways the values espoused in the *Assembly of Ladies* are highly conservative. It is a work which is indebted to, and in its turn contributes to, a long-standing prestigious courtly literary tradition, which promotes the court as the idealised arena for the illustration of a moral code and legitimates the *élite* social position of

the subtlety of imaginative suggestion over the vicissitudes of open debate; and thus insisted on women and literary authors being allowed to remain unveiled.

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its members". This aspect cannot be avoided since the narrator is always aware of the social implications of her descriptions. At this stage the dramatic exposure of Chaucer's good women would probably no longer seem appropriate as model for these late fifteenth-century ladies, whose feelings were restrained by law and discretion, courtly values that would distinguish theirs from individual and spontaneous displays of suffering, and perhaps perceived as "vulgar". Thus, social concerns would possibly condition the generic perspective in the poem.

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