BOOK REVIEWS

Lisa J. Kiser. *Telling Classical Tales: Chaucer and the* Legend of Good Women. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983. P. 169. $19.50.

Reviewed by James P. Holoka, *Classics and Comparative Literature.*

The *Legend of Good Women* has recently been translated in *Love Visions*, a Penguin edition of Chaucer, and, with other of the great poet's "lesser" works, has been the subject of much deserved and considerably overdue renewed critical attention. R. W. Frank's *Chaucer and the* Legend of Good Women (1972) and R. Burlin's *Chaucerian Fiction* (1977) come immediately to mind. (Before these, one must go back to long articles by Estrich, Goddard, Lowes, and Tupper, mainly in *JEGP* and *PMLA* between 1904 and 1939.)

Lisa Kiser's excellent monograph is a welcome and distinguished addition to this growing body of criticism. It is best and most interesting on the best and most interesting part of Chaucer's poem—the Prologue (quoted mainly but not exclusively from the F text). She devotes a long introduction and three of the book's five chapters to it.

In the introduction (15-27), Kiser surveys the obstacles to a right reading of Chaucer's intentions in the poem: its incompleteness, its non-discursive manner of presentation, the existence of two versions of its Prologue, and the pervasive and multi-layered irony that informs the whole. She then contends that we must recognize that the work "is, above all, about the survival of classical fiction in a Christian world.... The *Legend* is also a poem about the difficulties inherent in Chaucer's role as a teller of others' tales, one who has obligations to his sources and also to the new and different audience for whom these sources were to be adapted" (26). I think it will have to be granted that, at least on a superficial reading of the poem, neither of these springs to mind as a chief motive of its author.

In chapter 1 (28-49), "Daisies, the Sun, and Poetry," Kiser postulates, as a key to proper understanding of the symbol-system of the poem, a richly

suggestive and complex mechanism of allegory that may for simplicity's sake be schematized as follows:

Love	—	Alceste	—	Chaucer
Sun	—	daisy	—	mankind
Truth	—	poetry	—	audience
Christ	—	Mary	—	Christians

The God of Love, in Chaucer's dream-vision as described in the Prologue, is a formidable figure possessing physical attributes (especially sun-like brilliance) that associate him epistemologically with the light of the Truth of direct experience and with Christ, the Light of revealed Christian truth himself. Confronted by this radiant figure, Chaucer "requires an intercessor to diminish the intensity of Love's bright light yet to preserve for him the essential lessons that this visit from Love might offer" (42). That intercessor is Alceste, who in the dream vision defends Chaucer against the charges of literary crime brought by the God of Love. But her action also symbolizes the function of poetry: that is, she enables human vision to absorb the light of Truth, a light which unfiltered would exceed the capacity of the human eye. In this respect, she is like another prominent image in Chaucer's dream—the daisy ("day's eye"), itself a humble, earthly version of the sun: "affording illumination without blinding intensity, the daisy, like poetry, conveys the light of heaven in a manner suitable for earthly eyes" (45). These intermediary functions, performed on the literal and poetic levels of significance, are analogous to that performed by Mary, the mother of Christ, on a theological level.

These strata of allegorical meaning, both in their discrete exfoliations and in their symbolically signalled interrelations, are carefully and convincingly excavated by Kiser, who shows the necessary thorough familiarity with the various relevant medieval allegorical traditions.

Chapter 2 (50-70), "Metaphor, Alceste, and the God of Love," explores the implications of Chaucer's choice of metaphor as the trope operative in his concentration on the image of the daisy. Kiser stresses the special importance of metaphor in medieval poetic theory, noting that "the effect of metaphor on readers was described as part of the cognitive process of moving from words to the things they signify and from things to the divine realities they in turn represent" (53). Further, metaphors (Latin *translationes*) have about them a sacrificial quality; they serve as vehicles in the transfer of significance, allowing themselves to be lost to view as they make comprehensible some greater truth. Hence, too, the importance of the daisy's human equivalent: "No long leap need be taken for us to see in this paradigm the outline of Alcestis's life as it appears in classical accounts and in Chaucer's own brief sketch of her biography. Alcestis willingly died to

permit her husband a longer life, thus sacrificing herself for what she, at least, considered a 'greater good'" (57).

But there are inconcinnities in all of this, too, of such a kind as to lend an ironic charge to much of the Prologue and especially to the legends themselves. In chapter 3 (71-94), "On Misunderstanding Texts," Kiser demonstrates that the God of Love makes unfair demands on Chaucer and that these demands arise from his willful misinterpretation of Chaucer's earlier poetry of love, specifically the *Troilus and Criseyde*. Moreover, the God of Love, himself an unviable metaphorical fusion of Christ and Cupid, fails to see the incompatibility of pagan secular love and Christian *caritas*. He expects of Chaucer simple-minded, ethically instructive exercises in *exempla*—morally uplifting stories of good women who suffer, martyr-like, for Love. Chaucer is thus forced, as penance for his alleged earlier literary transgressions, to be untrue to his sources, to cast classical myths in the mold of Christian hagiography. But our author has the final say by parodying the inappropriate saints'-lives format in his legends. He thus at once works off his sentence (presumably) to the satisfaction of the critically naïve God of Love and makes "a powerful attack on unfaithful translators and on the *in bono/in malo* literary critical habits that turned classical texts into imitations of Christian literary works" (94).

In chapter 4 (95-131), "Chaucer's Classical Legendary," Kiser seeks to show the (largely humorous) effects of the poet's putting Love's critical prescriptions into action. She shows in general the gross distortions that result from using (mainly Vergilian and Ovidian) classical stories of women suffering for love as grist for the mill of the medieval hagiographic-*exemplum* genre. She also reveals other, previously unnoticed intentions: Chaucer had "an interest in clarifying his dislike for certain attitudes among poets and readers toward classical literature, a desire to state with certainty that the subjects of classical poetry are in fact useful to Christian readers even in unrevised form, and a wish to experiment with the medieval practice of 'retelling'..." (97). But Kiser is less cogent in her disclosure of such motivations operating in the legends than she was in her locating of the allegorical coordinates in the Prologue. The nine stories (Lucrece, Cleopatra, Hypermnestra, Hypsipyle, Medea, Ariadne, Thisbe, Phyllis, and Dido) are extremely diverse and appear also to reflect different levels of sincerity and intent, whether serious or parodic. I will not rehearse all of Kiser's analyses. She is especially good on the hagiographic elements in the story of the rape of Lucrece. Very clever but somewhat less compelling are her treatments of the stories of Thisbe (a corrective to the God of Love's misreading of *Troilus and Criseyde*) and Cleopatra (a mock-martyr whose descent into a snake-pit—substituted here for the smuggled asps in the original—falls ludicrously short of the self-sacrificial actions of Christ or Alcestis). I find much weaker Kiser's discussions of Hypermnestra, Medea

(in particular, the equation Chaucer = Jason, suggested on 114-115, will not wash), and Phyllis (very diffuse). Still, Kiser's familiarity with the classical source material cannot be faulted (though she might have remembered the Vergilian source for the dream Chaucer attributes to Aeneas—see page 129). Moreover, if her efforts to reveal some plausible common elements in the legends are not wholly successful, they are at least as ingenious and provocative as any I have seen. Most critics are much more disproportionate in their emphasis on the Prologue.

The fifth and final chapter (132-154), "'Poesye,' 'Makyng,' and 'Translacioun,'" is the least attractive part of this book. It amounts to an overelaboration of certain theoretical distinctions touched upon (adequately, to my mind) earlier in the work.

This is a very suggestive and instructive book: Kiser succeeds admirably in showing exactly how Chaucer uses allegory and parody to make essential literary critical discriminations. To have done this with such concision is no small achievement.

Finally, I must remark that it is a pleasure to read a technical work of scholarship characterized by such clarity of thought and expression. Kiser wears her erudition lightly yet never leaves the reader without adequate documentation of the points in her argument.

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Ever since D. W. Robertson pointed out that modern readers have appreciated Chaucer's work for the wrong reasons, it has been prudent for modern readers to shy away from source studies. It seems the scholarly sophistication required to decipher and interpret the "true," as opposed to the apparent meaning, of a medieval work of art effectively eliminates immediate pleasure. And it causes one to marvel at the erudition of the lords and ladies who sat at Chaucer's feet when he read for them his exegetical parchments.

To confess to such a position argues one among the unwashed. Therefore, it is meet to admit at the outset that source study has its place in literary scholarship and to recognize the value of exegetical interpretation in unraveling mysteries in order to better understand medieval texts. But at