

**THE PROLOGUE TO THE LEGEND  
OF GOOD WOMEN CONSIDERED  
IN ITS CHRONOLOGICAL  
RELATIONS. PP. 749-862**

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**JOHN LIVINGSTON LOWES**

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Louise, John Livingston.

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The following discussion of the actual dates of the composition and revision of the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* takes up the question at the point where it was left in a previous article<sup>1</sup> on the Prologue as related to its

<sup>1</sup> *Publications Mod. Lang. Assoc.*, XIX, 593-683. To a dissertation of Dr. John C. French (*The Problem of the Two Prologues to Chaucer's Legend of Good Women*, Baltimore, 1905), which re-argues the question from the point of view of the priority of the A-version, the reader may be referred for a criticism of the article just mentioned. It is impossible, within the limits of a foot-note, to do justice to Dr. French's suggestive study; yet a note is all that space allows. One may perhaps be permitted to observe, however, that Dr. French's criticism of the paper under discussion seems to rest on a misapprehension of the purport of its first three sections, which have been given in consequence a turn that obscures the real point at issue. Those sections (whose mention here seems necessary, in order to bring the problem itself into the clear) deal throughout with the relations of the Prologue, particularly the B-version, to its sources, leaving explicitly the argument for the relation of the two versions to each other to the final section, where the problem is considered in the light of the relations of each to the French and Italian originals. It surely needs no elaborate argument to demonstrate that if a poem *x* is derived from an original *y*, and *s* is a revision of *x*, a great deal of *y* will continue to appear in *s*, and that very obvious fact was taken for granted by the present writer in the discussion of the sources of B. Dr. French's interesting argument (*op. cit.*, pp. 32-38) to prove that A. also agrees in many points with those same sources deals, accordingly, with a man of straw. In the case of only one passage has Dr. French attempted to show what alone, on his premises, would invalidate the argument he is examining—the fact, namely, that A. is closer to the sources than B. And in that one case—the comparison (*op. cit.*, p. 36) of A. 51-52 and B. 60-61 with *Lay de Franchise*, ll. 44-45—the phrase “whan the sonne ginneth for to weste” (*quant il [le soleil] fait son retour*) is common to both versions, and “than cloeth hit” (*Seu feuilles clot*) of A. is exactly balanced by “And whan that hit is eve” (*Et au vespre*) of B. Dr. French's conclusion that A. 51-52 “are much

French and Italian sources and models. The attempt was there made to show, on the basis of such relations, that B.

is nearer to the French than are the corresponding lines of F. [B.]” accordingly falls to the ground, while the striking parallel of B. 64 and *Lay de Franchise*, l. 47 is scarcely explained away by the remark that “*air chere* and *son amour* are certainly not equivalent save in the sense that they are different figures of speech for the same literal original” (*op. cit.*, p. 39; cf. *Publ. Mod. Lang. Assoc.*, XIX, 615, n. 3). In like manner, Dr. French’s very sound conclusion (*op. cit.*, p. 33)—after pointing out that structurally A. as well as B. agrees in certain respects with the *Lay de Franchise*—that “the difference between the two versions, therefore, is not so great as might seem, for it is merely a difference in the treatment of the same material” [italics mine], again simply emphasizes the obvious fact taken for granted throughout the particular sections under discussion, which leave this (somewhat important) “difference in the treatment” for discussion later in a passage (*Publ. Mod. Lang. Assoc.*, XIX, 679–80) to which Dr. French does not refer. The same fallacy vitiates the discussion of the passages cited on pp. 65–66 of the dissertation. In other words, Dr. French confuses the issue entirely by pointing out *in extenso* what no one would think of denying—the fact that A. as well as B. contains passages which go back to the French originals; while in but one instance does he attempt to demonstrate what for his case is the *sine qua non*—that A. stands in closer relations to those originals than B.

As for the other main point at issue, the *balade*, Dr. French’s admission (*op. cit.*, p. 26) that “the ballad in F [B] is therefore somewhat out of harmony with its context, and bears the appearance of a passage wrested from its former connection to serve a new purpose,” while “in G [A], on the other hand, the ballad is perfectly in place,” grants the whole case (see *Publ. Mod. Lang. Assoc.*, XIX, 655–57, 681); while his criticism (p. 50) of the “awkward device”—as he elsewhere (p. 96) calls it—of the herald lark (A. 138–143) on the ground that “the allusion to his [the god of Love’s] spreading wings is . . . incongruous, for it is hard to conceive him at one moment as flying through the air and the next as walking beside his queen attended by a multitude of ladies”—this criticism unluckily overlooks the fact that Chaucer was so inconsiderate as to retain this same incongruity (B. 236) in his supposed revision! To mention but a single other instance where one fact has been overlooked in attending to another, it is in B. and not A. that the real confusion of antecedents exists to which Dr. French refers on p. 46, as a glance at the following couplets makes clear:

- A. 48–49. To seen these floures agein the sonne sprede,  
Whan it up-riseth by the morwe shene;  
B. 48–49. To seen this flour agein the sonne sprede,  
Whan hit up-riseth erly by the morwe.

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was the original version and A. the revision. Assuming the soundness of such a conclusion, is it possible to fix at all

Dr. French's assertion (p. 32) "that the bifurcation of F [B] at line 196 is entirely arbitrary," is an extreme reaction upon a statement which, it may be frankly admitted, was perhaps itself somewhat strongly put. Arbitrary the division ("bifurcation" is Dr. French's word) at B. 196 is not; but a happier statement of the position criticized would have laid the emphasis first, as well as last (see *op. cit.*, p. 680—the passage which Dr. French overlooks), upon the *mechanical* character of the unity of B. (whose unity, of *this lower type*, it was never intended to deny), as contrasted with the *organic* unity of A. The contention is not for unity vs. lack of unity, but for a higher vs. a distinctly lower type of it.

Dr. French's main positive contribution to the discussion of the problem—for his "thorough line by line comparison of the whole of the two versions" (p. 3) can scarcely be granted when sixty-four lines, including such important variations as those of A. 135-36 = B. 150-51, A. 231 = B. 305, A. 253-54 = B. 327-28, A. 340-42 = B. 362-64, are merely appended (p. 98) in a list "for the sake of completeness"—is his treatment (pp. 75-98) of the lines partly identical in both versions. But practically everything Chaucer has done in passing, according to Dr. French, from A. to B., he can be shown to have done on the hypothesis of a change from B. to A., and even the instances actually cited seem hopelessly at variance with one another. Space permits brief reference to the "changes for metrical improvement" alone. When, to take a single example, *story* and *stryf* of A. 80 are (supposedly) changed to *story* and *thing* of B. 196, it is to avoid "a heaping up of sibilants" (p. 78); when *sat* and *than this* of A. 228, however, are changed to *sat* and *with his* of B. 302, thus *introducing* the fatal second sibilant, it is to avoid "the recurrence of the *th*-sounds" (p. 80). But when, again, in A. 96 the Scylla of a repeated *of* is avoided, it is only to fall, in B. 199, into the Charybdis of a repeated *the*, which gives the very "repetition of the harsh *th*-sound" that, not only in the passage just cited, but also in A. 4 = B. 4, A. 5 = B. 5, A. 228 = B. 302, Dr. French had insisted Chaucer was bent on cutting out. Unluckily, too, the supposed change from A. to B. has *introduced* quite as many "awkward heaping[s] up of the *th*-sounds" as it has *obviated*—among others, A. 116 = B. 128, A. 137 = B. 151, A. 170 = B. 238, A. 209 = B. 255 (the refrain of the *balade* itself!), A. 342 = B. 364. Indeed, as one reads Dr. French's argument, one recalls with some bewilderment lines that are among the glories of English poetry: "Full fathom five thy father lies;" "That there hath past away a glory from the earth;" "Both of them speak of something that is gone." Scarcely less arbitrary than his standards of euphony seem Dr. French's other criteria of improvement, read in the light of Chaucer's own usage or that of other English poetry; but space precludes detailed examination here.

definitely the date of each? The present paper essays an answer to that question and includes as a corollary a discussion of the chronology of certain of Chaucer's other works specifically named in one or both forms of the Prologue itself.

A word, however, by way of definition of the point of view may be permitted to find place here. In such an investigation as the present one there is need, perhaps, of facing squarely what seems to be by no means an imaginary danger—that of allowing considerations of chronology or of sources insensibly to blind one to the paramount claims of the work of art as such. And inasmuch as in what follows the question of chronology will occupy space which (especially if one dare imagine Chaucer's sense of humor playing on it) must appear grotesquely disproportionate, it may be pertinent to say frankly at the outset that the interest of the present discussion in the mere chronology of Chaucer's work is, despite seemingly damning evidence to the contrary, an altogether subordinate one. It is subordinate, that is to say, to the appreciation (if one must tax again a word which has suffered many things of many cults) of the poems themselves. In other words, in so far as the establishment of the chronology genuinely illuminates the poems by bringing them out of comparative isolation into vital relation with each other and with the larger compass of the poet's work; in so far as it throws light upon the poet's *modus operandi* and helps one to "catch Hints of the proper craft, tricks of the tool's true play;" in so far as it tends in general to a dynamic rather than a static conception of the poet's art, it more than justifies itself. In what follows, accordingly, it is the ultimate possibility of a truer, because a larger and more vital appreciation that is sought after, with however small success, in the seeming effort merely to fix certain dates. With this prefa-



tory confession of the substance of things hoped for, one may come with a freer conscience to what at the outset is a somewhat bald rehearsal of facts and figures. And the date of the B-version will be first considered.

## I.

In attempting to reach the date of B. two steps seem necessary: first, the determination, if possible, of the limits between which the time of composition must lie; second, the close examination of the possibilities within the limits thus fixed.

One of the limits in question has been already pointed out. For if the inferences of the earlier discussion regarding the influence of the *Lay de Franchise* on the B-version of the Prologue are sound,<sup>1</sup> and if, as seems clear, the *Lay* was composed by Deschamps for the celebration of May-day, 1385,<sup>2</sup> it follows at once that the first version of the Prologue was written after May 1, 1385. Is it also possible to reach from external evidence a limit in the other direction? On the basis of the very acute deductions of Professor Kittredge regarding the authorship of the *Book of Cupid*,<sup>3</sup> such a limit does seem attainable. For one may be reasonably certain that the writer of the *Book of Cupid* knew the B-version of the Prologue.<sup>4</sup> If, then, the poem was the work of Sir John

<sup>1</sup> *Publ. Mod. Lang. Assoc.*, xix, 615-16, 620-21, 635-41.

<sup>2</sup> *Ib.*, 603-06.

<sup>3</sup> See the article on "Chaucer and some of his Friends," *Mod. Philol.*, I, 15-18.

<sup>4</sup> It is needless to repeat the evidence collected by Vollmer (*Das mittel-englische Gedicht The Boke of Cupide*, Berlin, 1898, pp. 49-50) and Skeat (*Chaucerian and other Pieces*, pp. 526 ff., under ll. 20, 23, 243). The passages there given are individually none of them entirely conclusive, inasmuch as they are in large measure commonplaces. The whole atmosphere of the poem is, however, that of the Prologue, and the fact that the author does undoubtedly borrow from the *Knights Tale* and probably from the *Parie-*

Clanvowe, who died, as is now known,<sup>1</sup> October 17, 1391, this date will give a positive limit in this direction for the composition of the Prologue, which we may place, accordingly, between May 1st, 1385 and October, 1391—or, indeed, with some assurance, between May 1st, 1385 and the departure of Clanvowe for Barbary in 1390.<sup>2</sup> Within the

ment of *Foules* as well (Kittredge, *op. cit.*, p. 14; Vollmer, *loc. cit.*) points with practical certainty to the Prologue as the source of the passages in question.

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Professor Kittredge, since the present article has been in type, for the exact date of Sir John Clanvowe's death and for the note which follows regarding its circumstances. The reference is found in John Malverne's continuation of Higden's *Polychronicon* (Rolls Ser., *Polychron.*, ix, 261): "Item xvii<sup>o</sup>. die Octobris dominus Johannes Clanvowe miles egregius in quodam vico juxta Constantinopolim in Grecia diem multum extremum." Malverne, as Professor Kittredge points out, is the best kind of authority, since he was not only a contemporary of Clanvowe, but seems to have known him particularly well. What Clanvowe was doing at Constantinople is not clear. Perhaps he returned from Barbary that way; perhaps he was going on a pilgrimage. It is worth noting that William Nevil, his companion on the journey, died of grief. "Quam ob causam," continues Malverne, "dominus Willelmus Nevyle ejus comes in itinere, quem non minus se ipsum diligebat, inconsolabiliter dolens nunquam postea sumpsit cibum. Unde transactis duobus diebus sequentibus in eodem vico lamentabiliter exspiravit" (*Polychron.*, Appendix, ix, 261-62). This William Nevil had gone on the Barbary expedition with Clanvowe (or Clanvowe with him); see ix, 234. Nowhere does Malverne say anything of Clanvowe's return. He does briefly describe the evil fate of the expedition (ix, 240): "Dux Bourbon . . . primo victoriam obtinuit de praedictis paganis; sed secunda vice ex adverso venit intolerabilis copia paganorum cum magna audacia Christianos compulit fugere ad naves eorum in multo discrimine personarum, sicut Christiani qui vivi evaserunt a manibus paganorum ad propria sunt reversi de eorum evasione deum multipliciter collaudantes." It is probably safe to say that Clanvowe did not compose much love poetry after he started on the Barbary expedition!

<sup>2</sup> The question will certainly be asked: Does this date not likewise give the limit for the composition of *A.* as well? For Vollmer (*op. cit.*, p. 50) concludes his discussion of the relation of the *Book of Cupid* to the Prologue as follows: "Endlich eine stelle aus der nur in einer hs. erhaltenen, von der im Fairfax ms. stark abweichenden version *A.* . . . v. 139/40 heisst es da: *This song to herke I dide al myn entente, For why I mette I wiste what they mente, womit zu vergleichen ist [Book of Cupide, ll. 108-09]: Me*

period of five (or six) years thus indicated, is a still closer approximation possible?

In a poem containing an address to certain singers to whom he specifically acknowledges indebtedness, Chaucer gives evidence of having borrowed from a poem of Deschamps. Deschamps is known to have sent to Chaucer by Clifford certain poems of his own, with a request that the compliment be returned. There is accordingly the strongest antecedent probability that the particular poem of Deschamps which Chaucer did know, to whose writer, among others, he did, as it seems, make distinct acknowledgment, was among those which reached him from Deschamps himself through their common friend. The determination, accordingly, of the possible opportunities for a meeting between Deschamps and

*thoughte* (ebenfalls im traum) *I wiste al that the briddes mente, And what they seide and what was her entente.*" The parallel is at first sight a striking one, and the inference of a borrowing from A. would of course, if valid, date the A-version, on the hypothesis just stated, before 1390-92. But such an inference overlooks, as Professor Kittredge has pointed out regarding it, two important facts. The first is that the rhyme *mente: entente* is of so frequent occurrence as to render it worthless as evidence of the influence of one passage on another. Moreover, as a glance at the examples will show, the rhyme is also associated with certain other stock phrases, appearing in both the passages in question, which even further diminish its evidential value. See, for instance, the following: "'Never erst,' quod she, 'ne wiste I what ye mente. But now, Aurelie, I knowe your entente'" (F. 981-82); "'She com to diner in hir playn entente. But god and Pandare wiste al what this mente'" (*Troilus*, II, 1560-61); "'To telle me the fyn of his entente; Yet wiste I never wel what that he mente'" (*ib.*, III, 125-26); "'Answerde him tho; but, as of his entente, It semed not she wiste what he mente'" (*ib.*, V, 867-68); "'[By] privee signes, wiste he what she mente; And she knew eek the fyn of his entente (E. 2105-6). Cf. also G. 998-99; A. 2989-90; B. 4613-14; F. 107-08; F. 521-22; B. 324, 327; *Troilus*, II, 363-64; 1219, 1221; III, 1185, 1188; IV, 172-73; 1416, 1418; V, 1693-94.

The second observation, which applies to the coincidence in *substance*, is that in the *Book of Cupid* the device of assuming knowledge of the language of the birds is not, as in the A-version of the Prologue, a mere incident (however effective), but grows out of the fundamental motive of