

**THE PROBLEM OF THE
TWO PROLOGUES
TO CHAUCER'S LEGEND
OF GOOD WOMEN**

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**THE-PROBLEM OF THE TWO PROLOGUES-TO
CHAUCER'S LEGEND OF GOOD WOMEN**

Univ. of
California

BY

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A DISSERTATION

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THE PROBLEM OF THE TWO PROLOGUES TO CHAUCER'S LEGEND OF GOOD WOMEN.

A. THE PROBLEM IN GENERAL.

I. INTRODUCTION.

The *Prologue* to Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* has come down to us in two distinct versions. That these versions go back to distinct originals, and not to a common original greatly distorted in the course of transmission, is shown by large variations both in subject matter and form. That they are very closely related to each other is no less evident from the fact that a large number of lines, more than half of the shorter version, are exactly identical in both. Moreover, the lines which are peculiar to one version or to the other and those which are common to both, bear alike the unmistakable stamp of Chaucerian authorship. It may at once be taken for granted, therefore,—for the conclusion is irresistible,—that one of these versions is a revised or rewritten form of the other, and that the revision was made by the poet himself.

We have in these two versions, so far as Chaucer texts are concerned, a unique possession. Chaucer has been edited and re-edited and even translated into English by his critics, but in no other poem than the *Legend* has his own criticism of himself in any way come down to us. The importance of this possession is enhanced by the significant position which the *Prologue* occupies among his works. Although the date of the poem cannot be fixed with exactness, we are certain beyond conjecture that it stands near the middle of his career. In point of literary form it looks both backward and forward, for the dream, the glorification of spring, and the allegory, appear at their best and for the last time as literary conventions in the *Prologue*, and a collection of tales bound together in a common scheme and introduced by a prologue occurs

for the first time in the *Legend of Good Women*, the immediate precursor in art, and probably in time also, of the more ambitious *Canterbury Tales*.

Considered apart from other works of Chaucer, the *Prologue* is still a significant poem. There is every reason to believe that when Chaucer planned the *Legend*, he meant to make it a monumental work. In that spirit the *Prologue*, necessarily the most vital and original part of the poem, was written. From Boccaccio he borrowed possibly the plan of a prologue and tales, and nothing more; from the 'Flower and Leaf' romancers, to whom he gracefully alludes, no more than a few of their conventions. He passed on to his imitators more of an impulse than he received from any of them. A notable result of this is the anonymous¹ poem, *The Flower and the Leaf*, apparently inspired by Chaucer's poem and obviously an imitation of it. Clanvowe, in *The Cuckoo and the Nightingale*,² owes much to the *Prologue*, and the anonymous author of the *Court of Love*³ betrays its influence in several lines. As an important testimony to that influence in modern times, may be instanced Tennyson's *Dream of Fair Women*.

Since there is no external evidence to show when or why the revision was made, or even which version is the original and which the revision, the possession of the two forms, however significant the poem in itself, has thus far little meaning to us. They are valuable only for what each adds to the common store of Chaucerian verse. The problem of the closer relation of the two *Prologues* must be settled, if at all, by an appeal to internal evidence. In regard to this, as Professor Kittredge calls it,⁴ "very difficult question," scholars are hopelessly at variance. Since 1871, when the publication by the Chaucer Society of Ms. Cambridge Gg. 4, 27 in the six-text edition made the shorter version easily accessible in print, the question of the relation of the two versions has been argued from various points of view. Conjectures have been

¹ I do not regard as tenable Professor Skeat's attribution (*Athenaeum*, March 14, 1903) of this poem to Margaret Neville, sister of the Earl of Warwick.

² *Oxford Chaucer*, vii, 347; cf. ll. 56-80.

³ Cf. W. A. Neilson, "The Origins and Sources of the *Court of Love*," *Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, vi, 229; and J. T. T. Brown, "The Authorship of *The Kingis Quair*, a New Criticism." New York, Macmillan & Co.; 1896.

⁴ *Modern Philology*, i, 1, n. 1.

advanced as to the date and occasion of the revision, and from the same basis of fact different scholars have arrived at precisely opposite conclusions. In these investigations selections from both texts have been minutely compared; but no one so far as I know has as yet undertaken a thorough line by line comparison of the whole of the two versions.

Obviously, such a comparison must be the last resort in determining the matter. If a theory based upon the poet's circumstances, the chronology of his works, or his age does not bear the test of a critical examination of all the changes which appear in the texts, the theory is strongly discredited. If, on the other hand, a satisfactory motive for revising the poem is confirmed by the discovery of a great number of such improvements as we might expect a mature poet to make in a revision, the evidence is cumulative in favor of the better version as the later.

It has been my purpose, accordingly, to weigh the various conjectures why Chaucer revised the poem, and to reach a conclusion, based upon their more important variations, as to the relation of the two versions to each other. This conclusion I have endeavored to test fully by an exhaustive comparison of the two texts in detail. For the sake of convenience the longer and more widely distributed form is designated throughout as F,—Ms. Fairfax 16 being the basis of the text,—and the other version, as G, after the Cambridge manuscript which contains it.

II. THE HISTORY OF THE PROBLEM.

The existence of the Cambridge version of the *Prologue*, which was discovered in 1864 in Ms. Gg. 4, 27 of the Cambridge University Library by Mr. Henry Bradshaw, was first made generally known by Dr. Furnivall. In the summer of 1871 in a brief note in *The Athenæum*,¹ he announced Mr. Bradshaw's discovery, and a few months later published in the same periodical² a discussion of the two forms. "That G. is the earlier version," he says, "can hardly be doubted," and he continues to compare the two forms,

¹ June 17, p. 754.

² October 21, p. 528.

pointing out what he regards as improvements in the commonly accepted version. In *Trial Forewords*,¹ published in the same year, he again touched upon the variations between the two versions, taking it for granted that the priority of the newly found text was unquestioned.

M. Bech, in his "Quellen und Plan der 'Legende of Goode Women' und ihr Verhaeltnis zur 'Confessio Amantis,'" adverted incidentally to the problem of the two prologues as follows: "Dass Gg. 4, 27 die frühere fassung ist, wie Furnivall im *Athenæum* '71, October s. 528 ff. meint, ist auch meine ansicht. Fairfax MS. 16 trägt den charakter einer endgiltigen fassung, jenes hingegen den einer vorläufigen." He argues further that the detailed enumeration of available books and stories in G (ll. 267-312) has been wisely compressed into lines 556-558 of F, and that the idea of the *Prologue* has so developed in revision that Alcestitis, who in G is praised for herself only, becomes in F a means to an end, namely, the celebration of the queen of England.

In a dissertation entitled, *Das Verhaeltnis der Handschriften von Chaucer's Legend of Good Women*, Siegfried Kunz arrived at a similar conclusion after a brief comparison of G and F. He found F more consistent, fuller, and livelier than G, and the variations between the two versions such as could only be accounted for by the theory that F is a revised form. An opinion that he had earlier held, namely, that the poem was first written independently and that later, upon the command of the queen, it was turned to account by Chaucer as a prologue, Kunz relinquished as untenable.

Professor W. W. Skeat, in his edition of *The Legend of Good Women*,² treated the question in further detail but also not exhaustively. He concluded from a general comparison of the texts, that G, which he therefore terms A, is undoubtedly the earlier, adding: "I have no doubt that a close and elaborate investigation would establish the order incontrovertibly; but it is needless to undertake it here; for we should at the close of it, only prove that which, for practical purposes, is already sufficiently clear."

¹ P. 104 f.

² *Anglia*, v, 313-382.

³ Clarendon Press, 1889.

When he came several years later to incorporate his earlier edition of the *Legend* into the *Oxford Chaucer*,¹ Professor Skeat found no reason to change his opinion. He reiterated his former judgment, concluding,² "I am not aware that any one has ever doubted this result."

Doubt was presently expressed with vigor, however, by ten Brink in a paper entitled, "Zur Chronologie von Chaucer's Schriften," which was published in *Englische Studien*,³ after his untimely death. The second part of this paper was devoted to the problem of the two *Prologues*, and to the date of the translation of Pope Innocent's tractate, *De Contemptu Mundi*. In it ten Brink, remarking that he had never seen any adequate ground for the commonly received opinion, undertook to prove by an entirely new course of reasoning that G is a revised form. He argued (1) that since allusions to the poet's old age which are found in G are consistently wanting in F, therefore G must have been written when Chaucer was an older man and is consequently the later version; (2) that the list of authorities named by the god of Love in G (ll. 267-312) contains books with which Chaucer does not seem to have been acquainted when he wrote the first version; (3) that the ballad, which in G (ll. 203-223) has the refrain *Alceste is here*, existed, previous to its use in the *Prologue*, as an independent poem, and that it appears in the form in which it was first written in F (ll. 249-269) where the refrain is *My lady cometh*, F being therefore the earlier version; (4) that the plan of the *Legend* as originally conceived appears more clearly in F than in G. Since this plan was never carried out the poem which does not present it fully may be assumed to be later. When all these arguments are admitted, it is a short step to a new date for the translation of Pope Innocent's work, which, inasmuch as it is mentioned in G and not in F, may be supposed to have been made between the first copy and the revision.

The date of the G version, from its association with the *Man of Law's* headlink, ten Brink regards as hardly earlier than 1393,

¹ Clarendon Press, 1895.

² Vol. III, p. xxi.

³ Vol. xvii (1892), pp. 1-23.

and the *Wretched Engendring of Mankind*, on account of its religious character, he associates with the period of Chaucer's bereavement and financial distress, and dates 1387-1388. From the mention in the *Man of Law's* headlink¹ of various heroines as if they had been celebrated in Chaucer's *Seintes Legende of Cupyde*, though their stories are not found in the *Legend* as we have it, ten Brink concluded that the poet must have been planning, as he wrote the headlink, to complete the *Legend of Good Women*. Before writing any additional stories, he revised the *Prologue*, altering it to suit his changed relation to the court. When he had done this much, he tired of the project and gave it up, withholding the new version from circulation.

On the appearance of this article Dr. John Koch added to his *Chronology of Chaucer's Writings*, then (1892) in press for the Chaucer Society, an appendix in which he endeavored to refute ten Brink's arguments one by one. To the conclusion based on allusions to old age, he replied by discrediting the manuscript authority for one passage (G 315) and the seriousness of another (G 258-263), doubting the chronological significance of such changes in any case. The omission in F of the list of books he attributed to the inappropriateness of some of them, and to the poet's desire to obey the injunction of the god of Love to be brief. He found in the inconsistency of G, in that the poet pretends to be ignorant of the name of Alcestis when he has thrice heard it in the ballad, a convincing proof that F is a revision, and turned ten Brink's argument on the plan of the *Legend* directly about to make it prove the opposite. It seemed to him very strange that if Chaucer added the *Wretched Engendring of Mankind* to the list of his works because it had been written since the first version, he did not also mention the tales of Griseldis and Constance, which all admit were probably written before 1393.

Upon such considerations as these and others already advanced by Skeat, Dr. Koch saw the arguments of ten Brink crumble to pieces and was "astonished to find so much ingenuity applied to so futile an attempt." In a footnote (p. 81) to Koch's appendix,

¹ *Canterbury Tales*, B 60 ff.