

Presentation of women in chaucer's works



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Women in the Middle Ages generally had little opportunity to provide influence either in life or in literature. Little is known of their lives and thoughts because little was written from their viewpoint. Yet in an age and a society dominated by the “ male gaze,” certain of Chaucer's works take a different track, exploring the concept of women as characters. His presentation of Dido in *The House of Fame* and Anelida in *Anelida and Arcite* deviates from the traditional complaint genre, shifting the perspective to that of a female protagonist. Chaucer uses the similar complaints of Dido and Anelida, women who have both been deserted by their false lovers, in an attempt to develop two of the first truly viable female characters in English literature.

Within both stories, Chaucer sets up the servile behavior of Dido and Anelida toward their lovers as a direct reversal of gender roles. Initially, the situation appears to conform to the typical ideal of male devotion and service to a noblewoman. Dido is the queen of Carthage, a woman of high status in her own right. Her relationship with Aeneas ought to be viewed as a conference of honor upon him, as she is a queen and he, to the best of her knowledge, is merely a wandering seaman. However, the deviation from this traditional presentation swiftly appears. Although Dido's status is higher, and Aeneas should show her the proper honor and devotion that her higher rank demands, it is she who calls him “ hyr lyf, hir love, hir lust, hir lord” and shows him “ reverence” (*The House of Fame* 258-59). Anelida, the Queen of Armenia, is also a woman of high rank in love with a man of lower status. As Dido is noted for the “ reverence” with which she treats Aeneas, Anelida's defining characteristic is declared to be her faithfulness or “ stidfastnesse”

toward her lover, Arcite (Anelida and Arcite 81). This “stidfastnesse” is so strong that she is described as surpassing both of the women who traditionally epitomize relational faithfulness: Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, who contrives to trick all her would-be suitors to avoid being forced to marry one of them, and Lucrece, the wife of the Roman lord Collatinus, who stabs herself after being violated by his treacherous friend. In addition to being a supremely faithful lover, Anelida, like Dido, displays humility in her relationship with Arcite, behaving toward him in a manner that “lowly was and trewe” (AA 142). The subjection these regal women display toward their lovers is not only the first step in Chaucer's process of unraveling the stereotype of the complaint genre but also gives credibility to their sincerity in the forthcoming complaints.

Had their relationships followed the traditional pattern of male rather than female devotion, the deep pain of abandonment expressed within the two complaints would have rung hollow. One of the sources of both women's grief is that the natures of their lovers are revealed to be contrary to what they originally seemed. Dido and Anelida are deceived in their men, believing them (and justifiably so) to be equally enamored and committed to the relationships. The phrasing Chaucer uses when describing Dido's perception of Aeneas – that she “hereby demed / That he was good, for he such semed” (HF 263-64) – gives the impression that their relationship is not as idyllic as it appears at first glance. Anelida, too, believes Arcite to be faithful, when he is in reality “fals Arcite” who proves “double in love” (AA 141, 87). When Anelida grieves the absence of Arcite, she applies the *ubi sunt?* motif, lamenting “Alas! Wher is become your gentillesse” (AA 246).

Both men display the discrepancy between appearance and reality that Chaucer notes in *The House of Fame*: “hyt is not al gold that glareth” (272). Chaucer also challenges the conception of women as the more mutable sex, emphasizing both the fickle nature of the male lover and the constancy of the female. In the traditional complaint genre, it is the woman who is supposed to be fickle; indeed, the suffering lover's only hope is that she will change her mind and show him pity. Yet in *The House of Fame* and *Anelida and Arcite*, it is the men who display their capriciousness. If *Anelida's* defining word is “stidfastnesse,” *Arcite's* is “newfanglenesse” (AA 141), signifying his inconstancy in love. He abandons *Anelida* when he finds “another lady, proud and newe” (AA 144). *Aeneas* likewise deserts *Dido*, not for another woman but to pursue his own fame and destiny as the founder of Rome, having displayed “such godlyhede / In speche, and never a del of trouthe” (HF 330-331). Once their lovers have left them, *Dido* and *Anelida* express their grief at being abandoned in two very similar complaints. These complaints adhere to the standard complaint genre in form, content, and language, bemoaning the cruelty of the lover and begging for pity to be shown the speaker.

There is, however, one major discrepancy: these are complaints composed and delivered by women rather than men. The very fact that both complaints are presented by women is extremely significant. Unlike the shallow, insipid women of medieval works such as *The Romance of the Rose* or Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, who are merely blazoned for their beauty and scarcely open their mouths, *Dido* and *Anelida* reveal their thoughts in moments of deep and heartfelt pain. As a character's soliloquy functions in a drama, so the

complaints of Anelida and Dido are used to reveal beyond doubt the true thoughts and feelings within their hearts. Dido is a well-known figure from Virgil's *Aeneid*, yet her complaint in *The House of Fame* is uniquely Chaucerian. Though Chaucer takes much of his material from other sources and even goes so far as to summarize the *Aeneid* in its entirety, he is careful to point to his own authorship in the complaint of Dido. He states in line 314 that “ non other auctor alegge I”; he does not credit any other author with this portion of the work. Virgil's focus was more on Aeneas's great destiny, which necessitated his leaving; Dido's presence and feelings are presented as a mere hindrance to his journey. Chaucer is the first author to portray the other side: the heartbroken, abandoned woman who, unlike Aeneas, cannot simply get on a ship to escape her shame and her grief.

According to Virgil, Dido is a “ token woman,” a figure, a convention; through Chaucer, she becomes a character, and not only a character; she is the protagonist of the story. Dido's complaint expresses her fear of how the desertion of Aeneas will impact her life, both personally and as the ruler of her people. She is certain that her reputation has been ruined by her relationship with Aeneas and his subsequent abandonment of her. Her greatest concern is what “ wikke Fame” will have to say about her, “ that I ne shal be seyde, allas, / Yshamed be thourgh Eneas, / And that I shal thus juged be” (HF 349, 354-357). This fear of Fame's judgment is one of the key factors in her decision to end her own life. Her grief at being abandoned, shock at being betrayed, and fear of what life with a ruined reputation holds for her prove too much for the wretched queen, and she stabs herself through the heart, eradicating her shame through her death.

Unlike Dido, who was already well-known by readers of the Aeneid, Anelida is Chaucer's own invention. Yet he portrays her, too, as more than simply a persona from which to catalogue beauty. Though Chaucer briefly discusses Arcite's unhappy fate with his "newe lady" (AA 183), the main topic of the poem is Anelida's complaint. She, like Dido, laments the loss of her lover both in presence and in her esteem. Her pain lies mainly in the "poynt of remembraunce," for, as long as she cannot eradicate him from her memory, she cannot find a way to escape her grief. Anelida compares this "point of remembraunce" to a "swerd of sorrowe" that has pierced her heart and left an incurable wound (270). Though Anelida speaks of Arcite's "dedly adversyte" (AA 258) in leaving her, she does not follow Dido's example; rather, she ultimately realizes that life continues despite the pain inflicted by false lovers. We last see her sacrificing in the temple of Mars "with a sorrowful chere" (AA 356), giving the impression that time may heal her grief. Chaucer's unique portrayal of the complaint genre, which he uses to express the thoughts and emotions of Anelida and Dido, sets a new precedent in the presentation of women as literary characters. Both women display a depth of thought and an intensity of feeling that have not previously appeared in any female character. The thread, which Chaucer begins, will be spun out through the ensuing centuries, passing from Lady Macbeth to Elizabeth Bennet to Eowyn. They are neither the lovely and insipid objects of the "male gaze" nor the omniscient and reproachful goddesses who orchestrate events; they are real women who feel and suffer and live, not merely characters but protagonists in their own right.