BOOK REVIEWS

William A. Quinn. *Chaucer's Rehersynges: The Performability of* **The Legend of Good Women**. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1994. 253p.

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William A. Quinn's thesis is that Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* was originally composed for his own oral recitation, which Quinn posits was comic and ironic. He argues that the F Prologue's use of direct address and present-tense verbs shows that it was a script for his performance to a sophisticated audience well accustomed to his *rehersynges*. Quinn argues that the changes to G (like the use of the preterit and the change of placement of the *balade*) suggest that it is a version revised for a reading audience: the "later and less daring text of the Prologue presents a book intended for others to interpret" (47) and it "reflects a patent effort by Chaucer to make the *Legend* function as a book" (60). Quinn does an excellent job of placing the *Legend* in the context of the *traditio* of writers like Virgil, Ovid, and Gower and placing it in context in Chaucer's canon between *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales*. In his "Afterwords," he focuses on "Chaucer's one honest tribute to saintly martyrdom" (215), Saint Cecilia, in contrast to his "many problematic accounts of suicidal women" (215).

As a documentation of his interest in determining a possible performance of the *Legend*, Quinn examines the nine extant legends in nine chapters to show how Chaucer might have performed them to undercut any serious moralizing that might have been expected from *legenda*. For example, about the "Legend of Cleopatra," he says that "the real (and really comic) conflict dramatized … did not happen at Actium; the actual *agon* is that being played out in court between its male rehearser and female-dominated audience. Their point of contention is one of sovereignty: who rules the narrative" (70). By calling attention to such matters, Quinn asks us late-twentieth-century readers to consider the relationship between the poem in manuscript and the original performance that must have taken place. He also echoes reader-response theory in some interesting ways.

Quinn also carefully points out the lines in which Chaucer calls attention to himself as an obtrusive narrator, as when he asserts his honesty in "The Legend of Thisbe" ("Ye loveres two, if that I shal nat lye") or replaces Phyllis' epitaph with "a

personal proposition" (186) ("And trusteth, as in love, no man but me"). He suggests that "all things ... seem to conspire to trivialize" the "Legend of Philomela." Chaucer seems to be (as we as teachers often tell students) *discussing* rather than *arguing* a case. I have often noticed the points Quinn mentions; I would like him really to speculate about *why* they exist. A hypothetical performance which we can never recover does not really seem to explain such matters.

Quinn admits that his book is highly speculative (200), and it does not answer some admittedly unanswerable questions: did Chaucer compose the poem in answer to a royal command, and is his "pose of grudging compliance" (81) actually a pose, or did he resent his commission? Did he get bored with his own fiction and leave it unfinished? What conclusions can we reasonably draw from the fact that the Fairfax manuscript "does not conclude the *Legend* with an *explicit*" (188). Finally, Quinn is too ready to attribute all matters to a possible ironic presentation of the poem. "Irony" is a loaded term, and when a critic uses it as a cover for all problems, a reader wonders whether he is protesting too much. Some of Quinn's points seem to be both unprovable and irrelevant. He calls *Sir Orfeo* "a text probably known to Chaucer" (176), an unnecessary statement placed in a footnote. The good point about the book is that Quinn finds the *Legend* extremely humorous, and it may therefore help the weary teacher who tries to persuade graduate students of this fact. By providing a fresh and intriguing critical reading of a much-maligned work, Quinn has done a service to humanistic learning. ❋