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#### Title

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#### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/34v446t0>

#### ISBN

978-0-230-60326-4

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#### Publication Date

2008

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## CHAPTER 10

### CHAUCER AND THE WAR OF THE MAIDENS

*John M. Ganim*

*The legendary history of the origin of the Czech dynasty, with its account of a matriarchal founder and Amazonian rebels, probably accompanied Anne of Bohemia to England, where she became Richard II's Queen. These legends may underlie the alternation of agency and compliance found in the female characters in Chaucer's works traditionally associated with Anne.*

This chapter has a relatively simple thesis, but since this thesis is developed by a circumstantial route, it would be best to state it at the beginning. That is, the treatment of the Amazons in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* is informed by accounts of the legendary origins of Bohemia in a female leader who surrenders her authority at the same time that a concomitant Amazon-like insurrection of maidens who refuse to so surrender is suppressed. Given the association of so many of Chaucer's works with Anne of Bohemia, who becomes the queen of Richard II, I conjecture that Chaucer might well have known of this legendary history. Such a legend, however, would have been relatively inflammatory, adding to the paranoia about Anne's foreign origins and Richard's purported alternations of vacillation and rashness. Whether coincidental or intentional, instead of any direct reference, the rhythms of the legendary history of Bohemia are dispersed through certain of Chaucer's works, becoming part of their political unconscious.

#### **Prologue: Islands upon the Land**

In a still influential book, *Southern California Country: An Island on the Land*, the journalist Carey McWilliams, writing in the 1930s, captured

the urban contradictions of the region in the language of his subtitle.<sup>1</sup> McWilliams was alluding to a famous legend apparently grounded in Garcí Rodríguez Ordóñez de Montalvo's sequel to the popular chivalric romance, *Amadis of Gaul*, first printed in 1508 by Montalvo himself, *Las Sergas de Esplandian* [The Adventures of Esplandian], printed in 1510: "On the right hand of the Indies, there is an island called California, very close to the side of the Terrestrial Paradise, and it was peopled by black women, without any man among them, for they lived in the fashion of Amazons."<sup>2</sup> These women feed their male children and captured males to griffins:

They were of strong and hardy bodies, of ardent courage and great force. Their island was the strongest in all the world, with its steep cliffs and rocky shores. Their arms were all of gold, and so was the harness of the wild beasts which they tamed and rode. For, in the whole island, there was no metal but gold. They lived in caves wrought out of the rock with much labor. They had many ships with which they sailed out to other countries to obtain booty. . . In this island. . . there were many griffins, on account of the great ruggedness of the country, and its infinite host of wild beasts, such as never were seen in any other part of the world. And when these griffins were yet small, the women went out with traps to take them. They covered themselves over with very thick hides, and when they had caught the little griffins, they took them to their caves, and brought them up there. And being themselves quite a match for the griffins, they fed them with the men whom they took prisoners, and with the boys to whom they gave birth. . . Every man who landed on the island was immediately devoured by these griffins; and although they had had enough, none the less would they seize them and carry them high up in the air, in their flight, and when they were tired of carrying them, would let them fall anywhere as soon as they died.<sup>3</sup>

Eventually, Califia finds her way to Europe, takes part in both the attack and defense of Constantinople, and is involved with both Amadis of Gaul and Esplandian. California, it is suspected by some, got its name because Cortez had read *The Adventures of Esplandian*. This at any rate, was the argument of the American writer Edward Everett Hale, who translated part of the novel and published it in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1864, as the Civil War was ending and only a bit more than a decade since California became part of the United States.<sup>4</sup> McWilliams was probably pointing to some of the themes in his own history of California, one of them being its troubled history of racial and ethnic tension.

Such a connection between legend and material reality may well be unsurprising to medievalists familiar with national origin myths.

According to the California African-American Heritage Preservation and Restoration Society, "Queen Califia is common knowledge among professors of medieval literature."<sup>5</sup> In my casual queries of colleagues, it turns out to be an obscure reference even among them, but it used to be a sort of secret code among poets and sexual rebels, at least until the secret went public in 2001 during the renovation of Disneyland. At the annex to Disneyland, called "California Adventure," there is a theater decorated with a mural depicting Califia. Inside, there is a brief wide-screen film called *Golden Dreams* directed by Agnieszka Holland, with the voice of Whoopi Goldberg as Califia, the queen of California. One of Niki de Saint Phalle's last projects was "Queen Califia's Magical Circle" in Escondido, California. Califia emerges from the cultural underground to be a spokeswoman for a newly multicultural California.

As Patrick Geary has demonstrated, the presence of females as a necessary element in the founding of a people in origin myths is often followed by the disappearance or the subjugation of women in the longer narrative of such a history. Sometimes these founding mothers are Amazons, sometimes prophetesses or seers, and sometimes significant political movers and shakers. But as Geary notes, the crucial question in such narratives is the uses and purposes of the narration itself, rather than the recovery or dismissal of a legendary past.<sup>6</sup> Califia is a good example of how variously these legends can be employed.

The story of Califia will immediately recall the fantastic accounts of the settlement of Britain that accreted around the Brut legend. Some prequels to Geoffrey of Monmouth's account of the founding of Britain, specifically the Anglo-Norman *Des Grantz Geanz*, the *Anonymous Riming Chronicle*, and the *Prose Brut*, tell an alternative female origin story.<sup>7</sup> Albina and her many sisters plot to murder their husbands. The plot is leaked by the youngest sister and the women escape by sea to an island that Albina names after herself, hence Albion. They cohabit with a devil, giving birth to the giants who inhabit Britain until the coming of Brutus, who defeats the giants. There was also a female origin myth, told and retold in different versions that traced the origin of Scotland back to one Scotia, a daughter of the Pharaoh of Egypt, who flees the plagues during the time of Moses. In an influential version propounded by Hector Boece in his history of Scotland, her husband is a Greek named Gathelus, who serves the Pharaoh's armies under Moses and succeeds him as commander.<sup>8</sup> The legend of Scotia functions as an anti-Brut, even to the point of providing a positive female point of origin. And it is possible that the Albina myth was propounded as a response to the Scotia legend, framing female origins as monstrously unstable rather than foundationally sound.

### Magic Prague

Of the various origin myths of European nations, early Czech, especially Bohemian, history was most closely associated with a spectacular story of female origin with Amazonian overtones. According to the medieval historian of Bohemia, Cosmas of Prague, the area is settled by one Boemus, who initiates a communal paradise for many generations, in which women hunt and arm themselves like Amazons and where men and women dress alike. Prague itself is founded by Libuše, one of the three daughters of a wise chief of the people called Crocco. Despite her abilities, she is pressured by her subjects to choose a husband, so that the land can become as virile and severe as other nations. She warns against the oppression that can result from such a change, but uses her visionary powers to identify a future husband, one Přemysl, a sort of Cincinnatus, who is to be found plowing his lands on the banks of the river Bila with two oxen. Meanwhile, we are told, the young women of Bohemia are founding their own city of virgins and refuse to submit to this new patriarchal order. The young men of the region, unable to take the city by force, enter under false pretenses and carry off and rape the young women, destroying the city.

Cosmas' rhetoric is striking in the verbal power it accords to Libuše. Here is her speech agreeing to be married, but warning about the consequences of a male Duke to whom the people of Bohemia would now have to submit:

O most pitiable people, who are ignorant of their freedom, which no good man gives up except with his life. You flee that freedom and willingly submit to a servitude you have never known. Alas, in vain you will lament it later, just as the frogs lamented making the snake their king, when he began killing them. If you are ignorant of the legal power of a duke, I will try to tell you briefly. It is easy to put a leader in power, but it is difficult to remove him. For he who is now under your power, whether or not you constitute him as a duke, when you do so appoint him, you and all that is yours will be under his power. Your knees will knock in his presence and your silent tongue will adhere to your dry mouth. You will quake when you hear his voice, answering only with "Yes, lord, yes lord," because without your preknowledge and by his order alone, he can condemn one person and execute another, send one to prison and hang another. He will make you and yours as he pleases some into servants, others into peasants, some into taxpayers, or others into tax collectors, some into torturers, others into public criers, others into cooks, bakers and millers. He will set up tribunes, centurions, villagers, cultivators of vines and reapers of fields, makers of arms, shoemakers of different hides and leathers. He will take your sons and daughters to be under him, and the best of your horses

and mares and cows and oxen. All that now belongs to you, whatever he prefers, of town and farm, of field, of vineyard, of meadow, he will take by force and bring back for his own use.<sup>9</sup>

Cosmas' account of Libuše's speech is quite extraordinary for its time, although Cosmas chronicle coincides roughly with the Peace of God, with its strong condemnation of feudal violence. Libuše also directs the founding of the city of Prague through a vision. Her followers are to follow the river until they come to a man putting up a doorway to a house in the middle of a forest, and because even a great lord must bow his head to enter a doorway (playing on the pun of the Czech word for "threshold" and Praha), they are to build their city there. Interestingly, Libuše, having agreed to marry, chooses, or rather prophesizes, her own future lord and bridegroom. She sends her followers to a bend in a small river where the future king, Přemysl, is ploughing his field with two oxen. Přemysl's dynasty rules the Bohemians through the early fourteenth century.

The legends of Libuše and the origin of Prague are put to many different uses in later accounts. An example from the early fourteenth century is called the Dalimil Chronicle. It retells the legend as a call to resist Germanization, giving Libuše's speech a new emphasis on independence and sovereignty.<sup>10</sup> There is some disagreement as to whether the Dalimil chronicle reflects the antifeminism of late medieval Czech culture. Alfred Thomas, for instance, has described in detail the Dalimil chronicle, where the same events are renarrated to justify the rape of the Bohemian virgins, who are described as insidious and treacherous, and in Thomas' analysis, Dalimil defends the rights of the lower nobility, and a Czech identity symbolized by their masculinity, over and against a larger imperial and multinational notion of Czech identity.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, John Klassen reads Dalimil as one of the wide range of late medieval Czech works that provided models of active and independent behavior for women of the time, noting that Dalimil protests against foreign royal marriages.<sup>12</sup> What does seem to be clear is that the War of the Maidens was subject to different and conflicting interpretations, not only in contemporary scholarship, but in the fourteenth century.<sup>13</sup> This is important because during Chaucer's lifetime, and partly with his admittedly minor assistance, Anne of Bohemia becomes the Queen of England.

### A Scandal in Bohemia

Richard II married Anne of Bohemia in 1382, though the negotiations went on for some time before that and Anne had arrived in England in 1381. The consensus is that the "Knight's Tale" dates from about 1386.

There is a long tradition of scholarship that seeks to attempt to connect the tale with the occasion of Richard's marriage, especially since Chaucer, as a courtier and a diplomat, had been involved in negotiations of this and previous possible marriages for Richard.<sup>14</sup> Richard himself was deeply in love with Anne, and when she died in the 1390s, he had their castle at Shene burned to the ground in an extravagant act of mourning. Traditionally viewed as a passive and decorative queen, recent studies have instead pointed to her literacy, her cultivation, her diplomatic sophistication, and her willingness to intercede in affairs of state. While older biographical accounts of Chaucer's development often emphasized the actual or fictional importance of Anne as a patron, they tended to reflect the anti-Ricardian tone of many of the chronicles and assumed that Chaucer condescended to the Queen's taste or resented the conventionality of her commissions. Exceptions to this earlier consensus began appearing in the 1980s, when, for instance, Donald R. Howard's biography of Chaucer read Richard's marriage negotiations and Chaucer's involvement with them as one of the primary motivations of much of Chaucer's work from *The House of Fame* to *The Parliament of Foules*.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the importance of Anne of Bohemia in the development of Chaucer as a poet has been one of the most interesting strains in recent Chaucer scholarship. Chief among these contributions have been David Wallace's argument that Anne and her cultural cultivation allowed Chaucer to synchronize his interests in French courtly style and Italian humanist thought, and that her death caused him to abandon the political integrity he had thus achieved.<sup>16</sup> Wallace was expanding upon Paul Strohm's classic account of Anne's difficult political position and the relative agency she demonstrated in the strictures of the highly ritualized intercessionary gestures expected of queens that in fact only allowed male rulers to exercise their own options, rather than forcing them to reconsider their own policy.<sup>17</sup> Andrew Taylor has detailed the literary sophistication of Anne's court.<sup>18</sup> Carolyn Collette has tried to redefine Anne's role and Chaucer's analogue to it as more seriously advisory than previous accounts.<sup>19</sup> Arrestingly, Nancy Bradbury Warren, without mentioning the Bohemian materials, noted the strong emphasis on Amazon themes in works by Chaucer associated with Anne.<sup>20</sup> The tremendous explosion of Lollard studies over the past few decades have alerted us to the intense traffic between Wycliffite circles in England and Hussite developments in Bohemia. As the daughter of Charles IV, King of Bohemia and Holy Roman Emperor, and half sister of the present King of Bohemia, her status was significant, especially as it played into shifting English and French papal machinations. At the same time, however, the marriage of Richard and Anne was met by highly negative comments from some directions. The Westminster Chronicle complains

about a dowry exorbitant "pro tantilla carnis porcine."<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere, her attractiveness is impugned and predictably xenophobic rants blamed her for introducing outlandish Bohemian fashions. While England cements its connections with Rome over the next few decades as part of an anti-French policy, anxieties remain over a marriage to a daughter of a Holy Roman Emperor.

We do know something about Richard II's books, and about Anne's probable reading.<sup>22</sup> There is no evidence that any of the Czech chronicles found their way to England with her. Given the difficult position that foreign queens found themselves in, one would doubt whether Anne and her courtiers would bring along with them a history of Bohemia, and, certainly not one with the implications of the chronicles containing the War of the Maidens. Still, Chaucer, even if he had not read Cosmas of Prague, would likely have known something about the remarkable myths surrounding the foundation of Bohemia, even if he would have been skeptical about them, as he seemed to have been about the legendary history of Britain, to which he alludes to only ironically or indirectly.<sup>23</sup>

#### Feminine Masquerade

If Chaucer did know of the legendary history of the Czechs, what are the implications for our understanding of his works? Why, for instance, would Chaucer never mention the legend directly? While Libuše and her legend were still common knowledge among fourteenth-century Bohemians, versions of the story such as the Dalimil Chronicle emphasized a strong anti-German, xenophobic, regional, and proto-nationalist slant at odds with the international claims of the Holy Roman Empire ruled by Anne's family. Moreover, with anxiety already high about Richard's rule and his foreign queen, it may not have been politic to advertise a heritage of armed female separatists and influential prophetesses. Chaucer, with his famous caution, may not have found it appropriate to mention the legends directly. At the same time, the legends of Libuše and the maidens also provided images that would have allayed these anxieties. The defeat of the maidens, at least according to Cosmas of Prague, resulted in the subservience of Bohemian women to their husbands. Libuše's willingness to accede to the demands of her people and marry, but, unlike Walter in the Clerk's Tale, also to give up her leadership role and to assume the role of wise adviser and guide, provided a model of how to acquire influence by giving up power. The pattern of the opening of the Knight's Tale, when we meet the defeated Amazons as highly feminine figures and often assuming poses of supplication, replicates the overall corresponding pattern of some versions of the legendary history of Bohemia. The

Amazonian materials acquired a new and unstable charge with the arrival and marriage of Anne of Bohemia to Richard II.

In the opening of the "Knight's Tale," the first of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Duke Theseus is returning from his conquest of the "land of Feminye," located in Scythia, where he has defeated the Amazons and taken their Queen, Hyppolita, as his captive bride. Accompanying them is her beautiful younger sister Emilye. Emilye's first extended description in the "Knight's Tale" presents her as an embodiment of womanly perfection, perfectly natural in her unselfconscious grace: "She walketh up and down, and as hire liste/She gadereth floures, party white and rede,/To make a subtil gerland for hire hede;/And as an angel hevenyshly she soong" (I:1033-1055).<sup>24</sup> This description associates Emilye with the flowers she is gathering, with the sense of youth implicit in the morning and with spring. As natural as the scene may be, it is also a highly ritualized activity. Susan Crane has noted that Emilye is in effect gathering flowers as if for a Maying.<sup>25</sup> Presented as an innocent activity, and perhaps understood by Emilye as a return to her earlier state of freedom and ease with the wild, it nevertheless becomes the focus of the gaze of Palomon and Arcite from their prison cell. Her apparently innocent beauty triggers their ferocious internecine struggle. Yet only in the most indirect ways are we made aware of Emilye's subjectivity.

Turning to parallel scenes in Boccaccio's *Teseide*, however, makes us aware of how radically Chaucer has limited our access to Emilye's subjectivity. Chaucer presents Emilye as well-nigh perfect, but that perfection is not so much a perfection of character as it is a fulfillment of a feminine ideal extolled time and again in medieval romance and lyric poetry. Such an ideal, by the fourteenth century, was peculiarly abstract, removed from specific portraiture. For Chaucer to foreground that perfect female essence, however, requires the suppression of Emilye's identity as found in his sources, which is to say her previous life as an Amazon. Such a suppression requires Chaucer's minimization of female agency and power. In Boccaccio, however, the power of the feminine is represented as a vital point of origin for everything that happens in the subsequent plot.

By making his Emilia passionate and aware, Boccaccio emphasizes a major motif of the *Teseide*, which is that the characters and actions are driven by sexual and generative energies. In contrast to the unreal quality of Chaucer's Emilye in the scene described above, Boccaccio's Emilia first appears to the two knights in a different guise. Barefoot, she is dressed in a shift, and is described as being artless in her gestures (III:8).<sup>26</sup> She is apparently aware of the two knight's interest in her, while Chaucer's Emilye seems to be oblivious to Palomon and Arcite. Later, when the two knights are fighting in the forest, it is Emilia, rather than Teseo, who

discovers them. In that scene, she is dressed in a hunting costume in the fashion of Diana, with a bow and arrow, recalling her Amazon origins. In the tournament scenes, Emilye waits patiently for whatever fate has in store, while Boccaccio's Emilia is enthusiastic about the victor and about victory in general. Emilia's relative sensuality and relative awareness projects a subjectivity that in Chaucer's Emilye remains opaque. In Chaucer's "Knight's Tale," the meaning of life is addressed by the thoughts of male characters such as Arcite, Theseus, and Egeus. In Boccaccio, it is Emilia (XI:290-95) who phrases those metaphysical questions.

Most puzzlingly, Chaucer virtually ignores the first two books of Boccaccio's *Teseide*, with their rich and exciting account of the war against the Amazons. Boccaccio annotated his own manuscript and his notes imply that he considered these two books to be only a preamble to his major focus, which was the love triangle. Chaucer's "Knight's Tale," however, reduced these two extensive books to a brief allusion. Chaucer follows Statius' Thebeid in so doing, as he also follows Statius' emphasis on Theseus, rather than the three lovers, as the central organizing focus of his work. The alignment of the Knight, Theseus, and the First Mover described in the tale's philosophical and theological meditations, is in fact a truism of Chaucer criticism. In Boccaccio's *Teseide*, however, Teseo's role, at least in the first two books, is balanced against Ippolita. She is nearly his equal as a warrior and a leader, and at some points seems to more than match him.

Teseo's character in Boccaccio's *Teseide* also differs somewhat from Chaucer's Theseus. Theseus in Chaucer's "Knight's Tale" is capable of abrupt shifts in plan, largely by tempering his initial authoritarian rigidity thanks to the imprecations of female supplicants. Yet he retains a certain distance and objectivity from the action, perhaps as a result of his obvious parallel to Chaucer's Knight himself, the presumed narrator of the story. Boccaccio's Teseo is much more likely to be moved and involved emotionally, most obviously by battle, but also by love. In this regard, Teseo is more typical of romance heroes, and Theseus something of an exception in his philosophical distance. Boccaccio refers to the fact that Teseo had "ravished" Helen before Paris abducts her to Troy. Teseo was apparently unable to resist Helen's allure, dressed as she was in a tight, soft leather skin suit and oiled with tallow. In the "Knight's Tale," Chaucer briefly mentions that Theseus has had previous romantic experiences. Boccaccio is willing to allow a degree of sensuality and indulgence in his hero. Chaucer, however, emphasizes Theseus public and moral stature. In so doing, he creates a Theseus aware of himself as a duke and as a leader. His strengths and weaknesses are politically significant. In so doing, Chaucer emphasizes the theme of political authority and its attendant concerns.

While Chaucer suppresses or redirects the sexual themes of the narrative, Boccaccio emphasizes the simultaneity of erotic and martial arenas. When Chaucer treats their connection, it is through, for example, the iconography of the temple scenes, when Palomon, Arcite, and Emilye pray to their respective gods. Boccaccio is quite explicit about the actions of the Amazons before their conquest, detailing the facts that the Amazons murdered their husbands and that his Ippolita threatened any man who entered her kingdom with death. Teseo is enraged by this prohibition, since it ostensibly threatens the lives of his subjects. His call to arms (II.4) is in fact filled with expressions of rage. Ippolita, however, lays out her policy and strategy to her followers by appealing to their rational interests. The Amazons are not defeated because the men are better warriors, but because Teseo has taken control of all strategic positions. Only when Ippolita realizes there is no hope for a military victory does she finally surrender. It is at this point that the women express regret for killing their men, but largely because the men may have helped them stave off Teseo's attack.

In Boccaccio, the pairing of Teseo and Ippolita complicates stereotypical masculine and feminine virtues. Teseo fails in a straightforward attack on the Amazonian military positions, and he has to resort to tunneling to breach her lines. Ippolita's military tactics are in contrast more direct and forthright and in some ways more heroic. In her own speech to her army, Ippolita urges her troops to abjure mercy, since mercy is a female virtue used against women. Paradoxically, it is Teseo who is merciful toward the conquered Amazons after the battle. In Books I and II of the *Teseide*, it could be argued that Teseo resorts to insidious trickery, while Ippolita enacts traditional virile virtues. The male figure, in a typical pattern, considers himself justified in resorting to underhanded behavior because the feminine is understood a priori as devious, even when the females upon whom he is acting exhibit no such behavior. Gender attributes are thus reversed in the *Teseide*, with Teseo given some typically feminine responses, whereas the Amazons applaud ruthless rationality and brute force. After Teseo's victory, the Amazons must relearn traditional female roles and Boccaccio describes them sorting out their finery.

Chaucer does recognize the potential of female power in the "Knight's Tale," but it is redirected and sublimated into images. Theseus destroys "the reign of feminye." When the fury emerges to frighten Arcite's horse, the fury is female, but she is invisible. In the *Teseide*, the fury can be seen by the crowd and horrifies them (IX:242). By describing the emergence of the fury and its consequences at length and in great rhetorical detail, Boccaccio makes the action seem less otherworldly than consistent with the values that inhabit his work from the beginning. Chaucer is also

cryptic about Emilye's reaction at the end of the battle itself, and he attributes her favorable glance to the fact that women tend to follow Fortune's lead, undercutting the courtliness with which Emilye had been treated up to that point, suggesting, almost, that Emilye's sudden expression of ardor is fatal to the object of her attention. Boccaccio's Emilia's enthusiasm for the winner is described as an explicitly erotic attraction, whereas Chaucer's Emilye's approval of the winner is described in terms of the themes of fate and fortune, coinciding with the fury's appearance. The passive and fickle human female contrasts with the terrifying female fury who emerges from the underworld. In Boccaccio's version of the story, male and female powers struggle with each other. In Chaucer's version, conflict between the sexes is minimized and the poem focuses much more on conflicts between the male characters.

The degree to which Theseus' willingness to change his mind and grant mercy represents a feminization of male heroism has been an ongoing question in criticism of the "Knight's Tale." As Strohm writes, "Yet, not so much in his representation of Hippolyta and Emilye, as in that of Theseus, Chaucer shows his discontent with the whole system of female abjection and male concession. For, unlike the Edward who gives ground only reluctantly and with stubborn reiteration of his original wish, Chaucer's Theseus is permitted to change his mind. In fact, to the considerable extent that pity and mercy are marked in this discourse as distinctly feminine attributes (as opposed, for example, to anger and adamancy), Chaucer may be said to have partially feminized Theseus."<sup>27</sup> Jill Mann has argued that Theseus' compassion "feminises him without rendering him effeminate."<sup>28</sup> Susan Crane responds, however, by pointing out that the final result in Chaucer and in medieval romance is that it is masculinity that is normative and integrative, while similar behavior on the part of female characters is rendered as unnatural or transgressive. For Theseus' "conquering and marrying the Amazon queen is a sexual as well as a political action, one that eroticizes masculine domination and feminine submission. In contrast, taking pity on the widows of Thebes reveals in Theseus a compassion that may seem feminine, complicating his masculinity."<sup>29</sup>

Theseus' instincts, however, tend toward the authoritarian. David Wallace's *Chaucerian Polity*, for instance, read the Knight's Tale as an admonitory essay on the dangers of absolutism. Unallayed by female advice and counsel, the male authoritarian figure could destroy the sometimes fragile allegiances of civil society. The tyranny obvious in Northern Italy, for instance, with its "tyrants of Lumbardy" (*Legend of Good Women* [G-Text, Prologue 353-55]), loomed as a possibility. Libuše's speech in Cosmas of Prague, with its warning against ducal

tyranny, parallels Chaucer's concern. It is especially powerful, not only in describing the economics of feudal lordship from the point of view of an imagined prefeudal voluntary associationism, but in detailing how power creates its own subjects and how these subjects internalize their abjectness. In eloquent terms, Libuše describes the disappearance of eloquence and the silencing effect of the spectacle of power.

Everywhere the "Knight's Tale" seeks to limit the power of females who are not nearly as marginalized in Boccaccio. The tone of the work is infused by a melancholia surrounding patriarchal despair. Its peculiar ending, or endings, reveals a concern with closure without resolution. The Knight and Theseus represent defenses against cthonic forces that are too obviously displacements of a female power threatening even after its defeat. Whatever his ideal presentation in the General Prologue, the Knight constructs a narrative obsessed with masculine control. His female characters are depersonalized relative to his source. Chaucer may have highlighted this patriarchal concern in the Squire's portrait by making a point about the Squire being the son of the Knight, with no mention of a mother. The "Knight's Tale" is elaborately modest in its avoidance of voyeurism, respecting the privacy of Emilye's preparations and censoring Boccaccio's mention of the number of times Palamon and Emilye enjoy themselves on their wedding night. Taken alone, these details are minor, but taken together they suggest a pattern. The very telling of the tale by the Knight repeats Theseus' conquest of his female adversaries. What the "Knight's Tale" seeks to contain is not only the power of his female figures, but the contradictions that arise from their suppression. When we meet Chaucer's Amazons they have already been tamed. Interestingly, their attributes have been dispersed among male characters in the poem and its frame. Strikingly, the Knight in the General Prologue is described as being "as meeke as is a mayde." Such a metaphor is meant to suggest that he maintains the qualities of humility and modesty in his noncombat self-presentation, but it also reminds us of the "feminization" of chivalric culture, wherein feminine attributes are appropriated to suggest interiority and subjectivity in the male courtier. At the same time, he and his alter ego, Duke Theseus, are engaged in censoring the subversive potential of the female characters and erotic drives as found in the plot. The martial qualities of the Amazons, including their scrupulousness and their sternness, are projected on to Duke Theseus and the Knight himself.

The femininity assumed by the conquered Amazons bears a strong resemblance to the behavior Joan LeRiviere called "Womanliness as Masquerade" in her classic essay.<sup>30</sup> Le Riviere noticed an exaggerated, compensatory display of femininity among her women patients who in other respects had displayed the sort of competence and success

traditionally expected of men. This donning of femininity as a disguise, she suggests, is an unconscious attempt to forestall a feared punishment for appropriating the castrated penis of the father. The successful woman fears the retribution of men for encroaching on the space of masculinity. "What is the essential nature of fully developed femininity?" she asks. "The conception of womanliness as a mask, behind which man suspects some hidden danger, throws a little light on the enigma." In film theory, thanks to her use by Lacan, Le Riviere's notion has been more widely applied, particularly in terms of films in which females are disguised as men—a not unprecedented theme in medieval and Renaissance romance, one notes—and allowed the freedom and the cultural signification of men.<sup>31</sup> In both Chaucer and Boccaccio, the conquered Amazons assume an almost compensatory femininity, and in both, the threatening power of their former state remains as an undercurrent in the work, though suppressed almost to the point of erasure in Chaucer's version.

This displacement of female prowess and power also occurs in another famous passage from another of Chaucer's works. Chaucer's relation to Anne of Bohemia as a possible patron for the *Legend of Good Women*, and one who might not have approved of everything he wrote, has been widely studied, and it is explicitly articulated in at least one of the two versions of the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*. Accused of maligning women in his works, the narrator, identified as the poet, offers a sort of plea bargain. In the face of accusations of heresy against the God of Love, the narrator is helpless. *Troilus and Criseyde* is especially cited: "And of Creseyde thou hast seyde as the lyste/ That maketh men to wommen lasse triste/ That ben as trewe as ever was any steel" (*Legend of Good Women* [F-Text Prologue 332–35]). But Alceste points to some positive portrayals, one of them being the representation of love in the "Knight's Tale" or an earlier version of it: "And al the love of Palamon and Arcite/ Of Thebes, thogh the storye ys yknowen lyte" (*Legend of Good Women* [F-Text Prologue 421]).

*The Legend of Good Women* presents Alceste, and the women in the narratives themselves, as both orthodox subjects and as agents that maneuver within the confines of their role. But what is interesting for our purposes here is that, as with the "Knight's Tale," the powers and poses of the female are disaggregated and distributed among the male figures: "And doun on knes anoon-ryght I me sette,/And, as I koude, this fresshe flour I grette,/Knelyng alway, til it unclosed was,/Upon the smale, softe, swote gras" (*Legend of Good Woman* [F-Text Prologue:115–18]). The sensual imagery of the Prologue, with its dense associations of odors and sounds, overcomes the narrator, as does his own sense of mystery at the power the apparently powerless flower holds over him. This reversal of power



comes to life a few lines later, as the daisy is revealed to be Alceste. She is accompanied by the God of Love, who, while a male figure, acts out the drama of accusation and threats of punishment traditionally associated with a woman betrayed. The figure of Alceste has noted a curious duality to her representation, alternately commanding and domineering on the one hand, and supplicating and moderating on the other. The women who appear as if in an apocalyptic vision embody their own tales and supplant the poet who has allegedly defamed their memory. In the General Prologue, the narrators of the stories that follow are the pilgrims who are described in detail. In the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, the characters of the stories that follow themselves appear. By manifesting both women and fictional subjects, they dramatize the difficulty a male poet like Chaucer must face in representing women.<sup>32</sup>

Gender positions are both supported and undermined in the ensuing trial. The God of Love takes on the patriarchal voice heard from Theseus in the "Knight's Tale," and Alceste pleads for mercy, much like the supplicating women in that tale. The God of Love is implored not to become like a tyrant. The possibility of tyranny also underlies the extreme authoritarianism of Theseus' initial responses to crises, which is deflected by appeal to his sense of pity. The threat of punishment and rigid enforcement of the law is presented as an attribute of the masculine God of Love and forgiveness and mercy are presented as attributes of the female queen. Such a polarization does not bode well for tales that follow, suggesting that they might present the women in the stories as passive and helpless victims. At the same time, the quick anger of the God of Love also resembles the arrogant behavior of the courtly mistress, such as Guinevere in Chretien's *Lancelot*. The potential power and voice of the female, which in courtly literature could be assigned to Alceste, is projected on to the punitive and threatening male. Alceste's tone, for instance, mirrors the rhetoric of the mirror of princes and advice tradition recently studied by Judith Ferster. Indeed, she is less a submissive petitioner than an active adviser to princes, and the princely adviser was, since John of Salisbury, an active figure in political discourse. If Chaucer did know of the legendary history of Bohemia, he has created an analogue to the prophetess and judge role of Libuše and to her subsequent role as an exceptionally adept adviser as described in the Czech chronicles.

### Conclusion

My generalizations about possible alternative histories and my technical observations about Chaucer's "Knight's Tale" and its relation to its source are connected. In the narratives of the legendary history of Bohemia, the

power of the female guide and founder is circumscribed, but her wisdom and her aura are passed on to the male rulers who succeed her. It is an ambivalent legacy, since she chooses, in a vision, her mate, but it is not necessarily her lineage that inherits her rulership, but a title and a ducal throne that may or may not be dynastically related to her. That is, the virtues and power of Libuše are dispersed into the history of Bohemia itself, at least according to Cosmas. Meanwhile, the truly threatening female potential, represented by the City of Virgins and their refusal to bend to male will as has Libuše, are ruthlessly suppressed. Libuše acquires a certain halfway status between Amazon and compliant supporter of ducal rule. It is possible, even likely, that the stories of the legendary founding of Prague by the prophetic female leader Libuše and by an associated battle against Amazon-like women usually referred to as the War of the Maidens accompanied Anne and her courtiers to England. Anne may have thought of her own role as akin to that of the legendary heroine of her homeland. Traces of the legendary history of Bohemia can be located in the political unconscious of the Knight's Tale and perhaps in Chaucer's famously complex deployment of gender as local topic and as political metaphor. If it is impossible to prove that Chaucer was aware of the cultural freight of the female foundation of Queen Anne's homeland, it is nevertheless possible to point to striking analogues to the ways in which he deploys the powers of his Bohemianized women.

### Notes

1. Carey McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (Santa Barbara, CA: Peregrine Smith, 1973).
2. Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo, *Sergas de Esplandián*, ed. Carlos Sainz de la Maza, Clásicos Castalia (Madrid: Editorial Castalia, 2003).
3. Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo, *The Queen of California*, trans. Edward Everett Hale (San Francisco, CA: Colt press, 1945). See the recent full translation, Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo, *The Labors of the Very Brave Knight Esplandián*, trans. William Thomas Little (Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1992).
4. Edward Everett Hale, "The Queen of California," *Atlantic Monthly* (March, 1864): 265-78. Hale had announced his thesis two years earlier.
5. See *The California African-American Heritage Preservation and Restoration Society Home Page*, <[http://www.caaahprs.org/site\\_us/story.htm](http://www.caaahprs.org/site_us/story.htm)> accessed March 29, 2007.
6. Patrick J. Geary, *Women at the Beginning: Origin Myths from the Amazons to the Virgin Mary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 5-6.
7. See James P. Carley and Julia Crick, "'Constructing Albion's Past: An Annotated Edition of *De Origine Gigantum*,'" in *Arthurian Literature XIII*

- (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer Rowman and Littlefield, 1981), 31–114; Ruth Evans, "'Gigantic Origins: An Annotated Translation of *De Origine Gigantum*,'" in *Arthurian Literature XVI* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer Rowman and Littlefield, 1981), 197–211; Ewald Zettel, *An Anonymous Short English Metrical Chronicle*, ed. Ewald Zettel, Early English Text Society Series (London: Early English Text Society, 1935); Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages*, Medieval Cultures (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 47–60.
8. Hector Boece, *A Description of Scotland* (London: John Bellenden, 1587).
  9. Cosmas of Prague, *Die Chronik der Böhmen Des Cosmas von Prag*, ed. Bertold Bretholz (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1923), I: 5, p. 14. My translation.
  10. I have consulted the MHG translation, *Di Tutsch Kronik von Behem Lant*, ed. Josef Jiricek, *Fontes Rerum Bohemicarum*, Vol. 3 (Prague: Národní Františka Palackého, 1882). In January 2007, the National Library of Prague announced that it had purchased a lavishly illustrated and previously unknown Latin translation of a fragment of the Dalimil Chronicle.
  11. Alfred Thomas, *Anne's Bohemia: Czech Literature and Society, 1310–1420*, Medieval Cultures (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 50–62.
  12. John M. Klassen, *Warring Maidens, Captive Wives and Hussite Queens: Women and Men at War and at Peace in Fifteenth Century Bohemia*, East European Monographs (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 14–32.
  13. The best account in English of Cosmas' original context is Lisa Wolverton, *Hastening Toward Prague: Power and Society in the Medieval Czech Lands*, Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).
  14. John Livingston Lowes, "The Tempest at Hir Hoom-Cominge," *Modern Language Notes* 19 (1904): 240–43. Lowes noted that Chaucer adds a "tempest at hir hoom comynge," *KnT* 884, as Hipolyte accompanies Theseus to Athens, which Boccaccio does not mention. Thomas Walsingham mentions a disturbance of water, "*maris commotio*," when Anne of Bohemia landed at Calais, December 18, 1381, and Lowes speculates that Chaucer may have alluded to Anne's arrival in the poem itself.
  15. Donald R. Howard, *Chaucer: His Life, His Works, His World* (New York: Dutton, 1987).
  16. David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), esp. 357–78. A case could be made that the Chaucer's "Clerk's Tale" also echoes some of the themes of the legendary history of Bohemia, including the assent of both governed and governor, the limits, or lack of them, of feudal lordship, the frightening and silencing power of the ruler, and the relative activity or passivity of females in a social contract. On the "Clerk's Tale" and Anne of Bohemia, see Michael Hanrahan, "'A Strange Succesour Sholde Take Youre Heritage': The Clerk's Tale and the Crisis of Ricardian Rule," *Chaucer Review* 35 (2001): 335–50.

17. Paul Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 96–119.
18. Andrew Taylor, "Anne of Bohemia and the Making of Chaucer," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 19 (1997): 95–119.
19. Carolyn P. Collette, *Performing Polity: Women and Agency in the Anglo-French Tradition, 1385–1620*, Medieval Women (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006).
20. Nancy Bradbury Warren, "'Olde Stories' and Amazons: The Legend of Good Women, the 'Knight's Tale,' and Fourteenth Century Political Culture," in *The Legend of Good Women: Context and Reception*, ed. Carolyn P. Collette, Chaucer Studies (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), 83–104. See also the excellent article by Keiko Hamaguchi, "Domesticating Amazons in *The Knight's Tale*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 26 (2004): 331–54.
21. *Westminster Chronicle*, ed. and trans. L.C. Hector and Barbara F. Harvey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 24.
22. Edith Rickert, "King Richard II's Books," *Library* 4 (1932): 144–47; Roger Sherman Loomis, "The Library of Richard II," *Studies in Language, Literature and Culture of the Middle Ages and Later*, ed. E. Bagby Atwood and Archibald A. Hill (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969), 173–78; Richard Firth Green, "King Richard II's Books Revisited," *Library* 31 (1975): 235–39.
23. The possible references in Chaucer to the legendary history of Britain and his limited and probably ironic uses of Arthurian romance have been widely discussed. See, for instance, Sheila Delany, "Geoffrey of Monmouth and Chaucer's 'Legend of Good Women,'" *Chaucer Review* 22 (1987): 170–75; Edward Donald Kennedy, "Gower, Chaucer and French Prose Arthurian Romance," *Mediaevalia* 16 (1993): 55–90; Joerg Fichte, "Images of Arthurian Literature Reflected in Chaucer's Poetry," *Archiv* 230 (1993): 52–61 and Tison Pugh, "Queering Genres, Battering Males: The Wife of Bath's Narrative Violence," *Journal of Narrative Technique* 33 (2003): 115–42.
24. Citations from Chaucer are to L.D. Benson et al., ed. *The Riverside Chaucer*, Third Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).
25. See Susan Crane, "Medieval Romance and Feminine Difference in *The Knight's Tale*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 12 (1990): 47–64.
26. Giovanni Boccaccio, *Teseida*, ed. G.C. Sansoni (Firenze: Accademia della Crusca, 1938).
27. Strohm, *Huchown's Arrow*, 112.
28. Jill Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer, Feminist Readings* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, 1991), 174. See also Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, Chaucer Studies (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002).
29. Susan Crane, *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 16.
30. Joan Le Riviere, "Womanliness as Masquerade," *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan (London: Methuen, 1986), 35–44 reprinted from the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10 (1929): 303–13.

31. Compare Mary Anne Doane, "Masquerade Reconsidered: Further Thoughts on the Female Spectator," *Discourse* 11 (1988–1989): 42–54, discussing Joan Riviere's theory of masquerade: "Femininity, in this description, is a reaction formation against the illicit assumption of masculinity. Hollow in itself, without substance, femininity can only be sustained by its accoutrements, decorative veils, and inessential gestures" (43).
32. Such reversals are no longer possible to dismiss as irony alone, particularly in light of Elaine Tuttle Hansen's *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), who argues that the Chaucerian persona, as is typical of the male poet apparently fascinated with female characters, in fact appropriates the slippery signification and relative lack of fixity of the feminine other, the aspects of that projection most useful to poetic discourse. Chaucer presents himself and his project as "feminized" while in fact effacing female subjectivity from the works themselves.

## CHAPTER 11

### THE SIGNS AND LOCATION OF A FLIGHT (OR RETURN?) OF TIME: THE OLD ENGLISH *WONDERS OF THE EAST* AND THE GUJARAT MASSACRE

Eileen A. Joy

*For all colonization involves the taming of the beast by bestial methods and hence both the conversion and projection of the animal and human, difference and identity. On display, the freak represents the naming of the frontier and the assurance that the wilderness, the outside, is now territory.*

—Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*

*This chapter examines two widely divergent instances of sexualized violence against women whose bodies have been figured as foreign and barbaric threats within collective national bodies: the real case of a massacre in the modern state of Gujarat in southwestern India in 2002 and the imaginative case of Alexander the Great's massacre of a race of giant women in the fantasized Babilonia of the Anglo-Saxon Wonders of the East.*

#### The Historian Never Knows Which

In his account of the possession of the Ursuline nuns of Loudon, France in the 1630s, Michel de Certeau concluded that this possession ultimately "has no 'true' historical explanation, since it is never possible to know who is 'possessed' and by whom."<sup>1</sup> However, as an historical and even socio-psychological crisis—for those nuns who believed themselves to