Introduction

Abandoned Women and Medieval Tradition

In one of the more evocative moments of his Confessions, the adult Augustine recalls his schoolboy crush on Dido: forced to memorize poetry about “the wanderings of some fellow called Aeneas” in his North African grammar school, the young Aurelius Augustinus found himself shedding tears for the tragic queen of Carthage. In his eloquent autobiography, the older (and wiser) Augustine, bishop of Hippo, sternly chastises himself for this youthful folly—rather than weeping for Dido, he says, he should have been weeping for himself, since at that very moment he was in danger of losing eternal life for not loving God: “et haec non fæbam, et fæbam Didonem ‘extinctam ferroque extrema secutam’” (Conf. 1.13: “And I was not weeping for this, but weeping for Dido, who ‘sought with a sword an end to her woe’”).¹ But even though the Christian bishop has tried to exorcise the pagan fiction that once gripped him so powerfully, he cannot excise it from his memory. Dido still haunts him. In fact, echoes of Virgil’s Aeneid linger in Augustine’s own farewell to Dido, as his words

reinscribe Aeneas’s address to the shade of Dido in the underworld: “infe-
lix Dido, verus mihi nuntius ergo / venerat extinstam ferroque extrema
secutam”2 (Aen. 6.456–57: “Unhappy Dido! then what I heard was true—
that you were no more, and had sought with a sword an end to your woe”).
But after Aeneas greets her thus in the Fields of Mourning, Dido’s ghost
not only refuses to answer, she refuses even to look at him. She turns away,
fleeing from the man who once forsook her as he tearfully watches her dis-
appear into the shadows. In Carthage, Dido had wept for Aeneas when he
abandoned her, but in Hades, they reverse roles: Aeneas now weeps for
Dido as she leaves him behind to seek her husband, Sychaeus, among the
shades.

Paradoxically, Augustine’s allusive description of his schoolboy tears
over Virgil’s Dido associates him with both the abandoned queen and her
abandoner, Aeneas. On the one hand, he links Dido’s death with the pos-
sibility of his own spiritual suicide. On the other, the allusion that closes
the passage associates Augustine’s tears with those Aeneas sheds over the
woman he had left behind by order of the Olympian gods. Since Augustine
significantly deploys this Virgilian allusion at a moment when he firmly
repudiates pagan literature in favor of Christian truth, Dido may be under-
stood allegorically as a figure for the Virgilian text that Augustine himself
must leave behind as he pursues his Christian destiny. Like the Aeneid’s
wayfaring hero, Augustine revisits the ghosts of his own past, recalling
where he has been in order to further his own redemptive spiritual journey.
The poignant Virgilian verses that the older Augustine invokes even as he
denounces his youthful tears for the dead Dido reveal that he understands
not only what he has gained, but what he has lost.

Indeed, Augustine’s most vivid memories of his schoolboy study of the
Aeneid center on loss: his fragmentary account of the Aeneid in the Con-
fessions mentions the burning of Troy, the shade of Creusa, and most
importantly, the tragic love affair between Aeneas and Dido narrated in
the poem’s first four books. In Augustine’s reading of Virgil’s epic, the
events of book 4 overshadow the rest of the poem; despite its title, the
Aeneid becomes the story of Dido. Such a reading of the Aeneid emphasizes
the personal toll that the glorious founding of the Roman Empire exacts

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2. Quotations from the Aeneid are from The Aeneid of Virgil, ed. R. D. Williams, 2 vols. (Lon-
from individuals. This interpretation of Virgil’s epic stresses its pathos and takes as its starting point the Virgilian narrator’s evocative and empathetic descriptions of characters who are lost, left behind, or abandoned as Aeneas makes his way on his fated journey to Italy—among them Creusa, Polydorus, Andromache, Helenus, Palinarus, and, of course, Dido. Nor does Augustine stand alone among ancient and medieval readers of the Aeneid in his emphasis on the epic’s tragic romance rather than its martial glory; Ovid before him had highlighted this aspect of the Aeneid by telling Virgil’s story from the forsaken Dido’s vantage point in Heroides 7. And nearly a millennium after Augustine shed tears for Dido, Geoffrey Chaucer’s House of Fame dramatizes an emotional reading of Virgil’s epic from a distinctly Ovidian point of view.

Chaucer’s House of Fame begins by evoking a moving scene of reading familiar to a medieval audience steeped in Virgil’s Aeneid. In book 1 of Virgil’s epic, Aeneas stands in the temple Dido has built to Venus in Carthage, gazes at the images depicting the Trojan War, and weeps: “animum pictura pascit inani / multa gemens, largoque umectat ›umine vul tum” (Aen. 1.464–65: “His soul feeds on mere pictures; he sighs deeply and a wide stream of tears wets his face”). Likewise, in book 1 of the House of Fame, the narrator “Geffrey” dreams that he stands in the temple of Venus, viewing images taken from Virgil’s Aeneid. While Geffrey does not literally weep, Chaucer clearly shows his intense emotional involvement with the pictures he sees in the temple.

Like the young Augustine, Geffrey takes far more interest in reliving the fall of Dido than in remembering the fall of Troy or in following the fated progress of Aeneas’s journey to Rome. A simple line count of the space allotted to various episodes in the poems reveals the overall pattern: the narrator condenses the first three books of the Aeneid into about ninety octosyllabic lines recounting the sack of Troy, Aeneas’s flight from the burning city, and the hero’s landing at Carthage (HF 1.143–238). But when Geffrey reaches book 4, his breakneck gallop through Virgil’s epic slows down; he becomes so involved with Dido’s story that it takes him nearly two hundred lines to narrate the events of this book of the Aeneid.

alone (HF 1.239–432). Once Dido commits suicide, the narrator’s interest in the story apparently dies with her; Geffrey’s précis of the last eight books of the *Aeneid* takes a mere thirty-five lines (HF 1.432–67).

Geffrey’s retelling of *Aeneid* 4 stands out not only for its length but also for its intense emotional involvement with Dido. When, after hearing the story of his wanderings, Dido decides to make Aeneas “hyr lyf, hir love, hir lust, hir lord” (HF 1.258), the sympathetic narrator suddenly interjects a sermon on the falsity of appearances, exclaiming,

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\begin{align*}
\text{Allas! what harm doth apparence,} \\
\text{When hit is fals in existence!} \\
\text{For he to hir a traytour was;} \\
\text{Wherfore she slow hirself, allas!} \\
\text{Loo, how a woman doth amys} \\
\text{To love hym that unknowyen ys!} \\
\text{For, be Cryste, lo, thus yt fareth:} \\
\text{“Hyt is not al gold that glareth.”} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(HF 1.265–72)4

After such moralistic observations on the perfidy of men in general and Aeneas in particular, Geffrey’s imaginative sympathy with Dido only continues to deepen as he relates his bereft heroine’s lamentations. As Christopher Baswell observes, once

Geffrey’s sentimental pity is aroused and his emotional involvement increases, the artifice of dependence on some ancient source completely crumbles, and Geffrey’s narrative again moves from ekphrasis to the report of a speech directly overheard.5

Likewise, Marilynn Desmond’s reading of the *House of Fame* emphasizes the breakdown of the ekphrastic fiction that frames Geffrey’s recounting of the Troy story. In discussing this portion of the text, she notes how Geffrey’s slip into direct discourse affects the reader’s own response to the narrative:

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4. All Chaucer quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the texts printed in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).
We momentarily lose sight of the ekphrasis since Geffrey’s perceptions and reactions dramatically intervene between us and the pictorial text he is viewing: his own account emphasizes that he is no longer attempting to narrate the story on the wall but has begun to seriously distort the picture as a result of the associative responses to the visual textuality encoded in the ekphrasis.⁶

Of course, Geffrey is not the first medieval literary voyager to experience such striking auditory responses to the visual images he encounters on his journey. As she analyzes this section of the House of Fame, Karla Taylor draws attention to the relationship between the scenes Geffrey describes and the synesthetic images of humility that Dante the pilgrim encounters on the terrace of pride in the Purgatorio.⁷ Moreover, Geffrey’s disregard for his ekphrastic frame and flight into imaginative response make him strongly resemble yet another Dantesque pilgrim on an allegorical journey: to wit, Giovanni Boccaccio’s narrator in the Amorosa Visione. Gazing at portraits of forsaken women prompts both Boccaccio’s and Chaucer’s first-person narrators to imagine the sorrowful voices of these bereft figures and to view classical myths from their viewpoints.⁸ But when Dido finally speaks her imagined lament in Boccaccio’s Amorosa Visione and Chaucer’s House of Fame, the tone of her eroticized elegy derives not from Virgil, who originated the story of the Carthaginese queen’s tragic love affair, but from Ovid, whom medieval writers widely regarded as the classical expert par excellence on love and its discontents.

As she reflects on Aeneas’s opportunism, the Dido conjured up by Geffrey’s imagination in the House of Fame sounds forlorn rather than furious—Ovidian rather than Virgilian. The heroine soliloquizes:

“Allas,” quod she, “what me ys woo!
Allas, is every man thus trewe,
That every yer wolde have a newe,
Yf hit so longe tyme dure,
Or elles three, peraventure?

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⁸. See the discussion of the Amorosa Visione and its emotionally involved narrator in chapter 4.
As thus: of oon he wolde have fame
In magnyfyinge of hys name;
Another for frendshippe, seyth he;
And yet ther shal the thridde be
That shal be take for delyt,
Loo, or for synguler profit.”
In suche wordes gan to pleyne
Dydo of hir grete peyne,
As me mette redely—
Non other auctour alegge l.

(HF 1.300–314)

In the closing lines of this passage, Chaucer’s Geffrey claims no source for Dido’s lament other than his own dream, but as Sheila Delany (along with Baswell and Desmond) notes, the narrator actually relies on Ovid’s Epistle of Dido in *Heroides* 7 for his “romance” view of Dido here and elsewhere. In Geffrey’s Ovidian retelling of the *Aeneid*, Dido talks far more than the poem’s putative hero; in fact, Aeneas never gets a speech at all, let alone one of more than fifty lines like Dido’s. Overcome with sympathy for his heroine, Geffrey continues relating Dido’s despair for another forty-five lines, concluding her speech with a plaintive lament for her lost fame:

O wel-awey that I was born!
For thorgh yow is my name lorn,
And alle myn actes red and songe
Over al thys lond, on every tonge.
O wikke Fame!—for ther nys
Nothing so swift, lo, as she is!
O, soth ys, every thing ys wyst,
Though hit be kevered with the myst.
Eke, though I myghte duren ever,
That I have don rekever I never,
That I ne shal be seyd, allass,
Yshamed be thourgh Eneas,
And that I shal thus juged be:
“Loo, ryght as she hath don, now she

Wol doo eft-sones, hardly”—
   Thus seyth the peple prively.

   *(HF 1.345–60)*

Of course, Dido’s self-conscious meditation on her subsequent fame is highly prescient: her “actes” will not only be “red and songe” by her own people, but by generations who come after her, including Geffrey himself. And of course, this concern with the vicissitudes of “fama” shows Chaucer’s awareness of his Virgilian matter, since it clearly evokes the famous passage from *Aeneid* 4 in which Fame travels swiftly through Libya, spreading the news of Dido’s love affair with Aeneas.10 Despite the fears that Dido expresses about her reputation, sympathetic readers like Geffrey will judge her far less harshly than she condemns herself in these lines.

After interpolating Dido’s imagined laments, Geffrey returns to the plot of the *Aeneid*, albeit briefly. He tersely describes Dido’s death, recommending that the reader who wishes to know more

Rede Virgile in Eneydos
Or the Epistle of Ovyde,
What that she wrot or that she dyde;
And nere hyt to longe to endyte,
By God, I wolde hyt here write.

   *(HF 1.378–82)*

Despite his claim in these lines that he has no room to include Ovid’s epistle in his narrative, Geffrey’s stated concern about excessive length does not prompt him to resume tracing Aeneas’s wanderings at this point. Instead, he pauses for another fifty lines or so to meditate on various stories of trusting women abandoned by traitorous men, citing the examples of Phyllis and Demophoon, Briseis and Achilles, Oenone and Paris, Hypsipyle and Jason, Medea and Jason, Deianira and Hercules, and Ariadne and Theseus. What prompts the narrator to insert this digressive catalog right in the middle of his summary of the *Aeneid*? Perhaps we could conjecture that immediately after referring his readers to the “Epistle of Ovyde,” Chaucer’s Geffrey took a break in order to reread Ovid himself, for all of the tales of abandoned women he recounts come straight from

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Ovid’s *Heroides*, the series of Latin verse epistles in which Ovid imagines how epic heroes might look were they viewed through the eyes (and words) of the suffering women they have left behind—Dido, Phyllis, Briseis, Oenone, Hypsipyle, and Ariadne, among others.

For Geffrey, then, the major point of the *Aeneid* lies in its portrayal of Dido’s tragedy: Dido’s lament rather than Aeneas’s journey stands at the narrative center of the events pictured in the table of brass he views in the temple of Venus. The key to understanding “Geffrey’s *Aeneid*” lies in what the narrator says he omits: the “Epistle of Ovyde,” Ovid’s imaginative account of the events of *Aeneid* 4 from Dido’s point of view in *Heroides* 7. Reflecting on Dido’s story (not to mention reading Ovid’s version of it) leads Geffrey directly to other stories of abandonment and loss, distracting him (and his reader) from the triumphal conclusion of his hero’s voyage. In Chaucer’s *House of Fame*, Geffrey finds that he cannot simply sing of “arms and a man”; rather, his poem focuses on the pathetic plight of an abandoned woman that in turn leads him to meditate on male perfidy rather than heroic *pietas*. In the end, Dido’s fame overshadows Aeneas’s in the poetic *House of Fame* that Geoffrey Chaucer built and that Chaucer’s Geffrey encounters in the course of the narrative.

Like Chaucer’s Geffrey and the young Augustine in whose footsteps he follows, generations of readers have “wept for Dido,” metaphorically, if not literally. But why? In his eloquent and wide-ranging comparative study *Abandoned Women and Poetic Tradition*, Lawrence Lipking suggests that Dido’s poetic power lies in her passion, understood in the Latin sense as both suffering and emotion:

> Dido’s suffering lingers in the mind long after Aeneas’s plotting and piety have faded. The stubborn inertia of abandoned and desolate passion, however ineffectual, however opposed to action, can acquire a power of its own.11

The shade of Dido thus haunts readers of the *Aeneid* even as she haunts Aeneas himself. And, like Augustine and Chaucer, many of those readers have gone on to reinscribe her powerful story in their own writings. Indeed, within the last decade alone, three important books that address major medieval and Renaissance rewritings of Virgil’s story of Dido and Aeneas—Christopher Baswell’s *Virgil in Medieval England: Figuring the*
Aeneid from the Twelfth Century to Chaucer, Marilynn Desmond’s Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the Medieval Aeneid, and John Watkins’s The Specter of Dido: Spenser and Virgilian Epic—have examined the perennial fascination of Dido. Moreover, the three books themselves attest to the phenomenon.12

While the specific details of Dido’s story of loss and abandonment are unique, she does not stand alone in her plight, as the catalog conjured up by Chaucer’s Geffrey serves to indicate. Mutatis mutandis, her narrative resembles that of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of other women in literature—not to mention in real life.13 As Lipking points out, such stories recur with some frequency in most literatures of the world: “Indeed,” he writes, “in some cultures the role of women in literature has been virtually identified with abandonment.”14 In the case of abandoned women, Lipking argues, victimization and powerlessness paradoxically become the key to poetic power. By their very nature, abandoned women are subversive figures, for they call into question not only the integrity of individual heroes, but the necessity for heroic action—and even action—itself.15 In the final chapter of his book, titled “Aristotle’s Sister: A Poetics of Abandonment,” Lipking argues that the sense of pain and loss that abandoned women pour out in their laments offers a challenge to traditional social structures, values, and even poetic genres that enshrine and celebrate male dominance and male exploits.16 The voice of the abandoned women, left behind and left out, calls attention to the darker side of these social and poetic traditions, just as Virgil’s story of Dido casts a shadow on the martial exploits of his hero Aeneas.

Published in 1988, Lipking’s Abandoned Women and Poetic Tradition remains a pathbreaking work, assembling and deftly analyzing an enor-


13. Like Lipking, I do not consider the difficulties of abandoned women to be a purely textual phenomenon. Following Lipking’s appropriation of Auerbach’s concept of “figura” to remind us that abandoned women have an extratextual as well as intertextual reality, I will generally refer to “figures” of abandoned women.

14. Lipking, Abandoned Women, xvi, xv.

15. See Lipking, Abandoned Women, 3, on how the passive suffering described in the laments of abandoned women challenge the principle of action that undergirds the Aristotelian concept of poetry.

mous variety of poetic inscriptions of female abandonment by authors both male and female. Lipking’s interpretive field is breathtakingly large; he ranges from laconic and evocative Chinese poems to Sappho’s renowned Second Ode and its translations through the centuries by Catullus and others to the Tale of Genji, Gaspara Stampa’s sonnets, Pope’s Eloisa, Byron’s Donna Julia, Pushkin’s Tatiana, Wordsworth’s Laodamia, and the poetry of modern women including Emily Dickinson, H.D., Anna Akmatova, Marina Tsvetayeva, Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich. While Lipking does invoke Virgil’s Aeneid and Ovid’s Heroides in his catalog of images of abandonment and mentions Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde and Boccaccio’s Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta at various points in his book, he has comparatively little to say about the influence of these and other Latin authors on the transmission of the figure of the forsaken woman during the Middle Ages, especially as compared to his magisterial and compelling analyses of poems both more ancient (such as Sappho’s Second Ode) and more modern, such as Pope’s Eloisa to Abelard and Byron’s Don Juan. But if we seek to understand the importance of the figure of the abandoned woman in the European literary tradition, it is essential to give the same sort of critical attention to the way canonical classical authors like Virgil, Ovid, and Statius portrayed the relicta, as well as considering how major vernacular writers of the Middle Ages like Dante, Boccaccio, and Chaucer transformed the figure of the forsaken women into what we might dub a “poetics of plaintiveness.”

Any medievalist studying representations of abandoned women in the Middle Ages should take as her starting point Virgil’s Dido, the most important example of this literary type for medieval readers. Nevertheless, since skilled interpreters such as Baswell and Desmond have presented rich and rewarding interpretations of a variety of medieval texts and commentaries relating to the Aeneid, this path requires no further tracing here. Instead, I will follow in the footsteps of Chaucer’s Geffrey, who uses the story of Dido as a reason to pause and meditate upon the stories of other abandoned women celebrated in classical myth and story, especially those recounted by Ovid in his Heroides.

This study focuses specifically on the retellings and revisions of classical myths of abandoned women by Dante, Boccaccio, and Chaucer, three late-medieval vernacular writers who were careful readers and revisers of Virgil, Ovid, and Statius, as well as other classical auctores. Their elabo-
rately intertextual fictions dominate the literary landscapes of medieval England and Italy, influencing generations of readers and writers. In different ways, each of these writers is considered a literary father figure in his own vernacular; moreover, as “Dead White European Males” all three have sometimes been targets in the “culture wars” over the teaching of canonical literature in university curricula. Nevertheless, despite their reputation in some critical circles as cultural icons of a “phallogocentric” literary tradition that systematically repressed women, these three men of the Middle Ages took women’s stories very seriously indeed. In some sense, each of these male poets constituted and constructed his own poetic identity through his encounters with women as real and as fictive audiences—Dante through Beatrice; Boccaccio through Fiammetta and the group of sympathetic ladies he addresses in the Decameron; and Chaucer through the imagined female audience of Troilus and Criseyde, the sympathetic yet critical Alceste of the Legend of Good Women, and of course, the Wife of Bath as the fictive audience member who transforms her experience of the Knight’s Tale into an authoritative narrative that privileges female autonomy.

Yet certainly, one of the most important ways that each of these writers engage women and their concerns is by imagining female lives and creating female voices through their poetic craft. Though Ovid may have been best known to medieval audiences in his ironic role as the praeceptor amoris, he taught these three male writers far more than how to woo and win a lover. Indeed, by assuming the poetic personae of the famous heroines of classical history and mythology in the Heroides, in what Lynn Enterline (following Elizabeth Harvey) views as “transvestite ventriloquism,” Ovid had cleared the way for Dante, Boccaccio, and Chaucer to understand the crucial importance of women’s voices and viewpoints for a fuller and more accurate account of past mythic and literary history.

In essence, the process of reading, reimagining, and reinscribing Ovid’s Heroides in their own vernacular fictions teaches Dante, Boccaccio, and

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18. For the image of transvestite ventriloquism, see Elizabeth D. Harvey, Ventriloquized Voices: Feminist Theory and English Renaissance Texts (London: Routledge, 1990), 1–14. Lynn Enterline, The Rhetoric of the Body from Ovid to Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 20–21, discusses Elizabeth Harvey’s work on Ovid’s “vocal cross-dressing” in relation to Renaissance texts. As she notes, “Ovid’s penchant for ventriloquizing female voices occupies a crucial, if mysterious, place in the Metamorphoses as a whole” (3). “Over and over,” Enterline argues, “Ovid tries to speak as if he were a woman, to find a convincing ‘voice’ for female suffering. He continually speaks ‘beside’ himself in his poetry, a trademark displacement of voice with which Shakespeare in particular was fascinated” (11).
Chaucer how to write from a revisionist perspective—how to recast and reconsider epic history and mythology from women’s viewpoints. Of course, some critics inclined to judge medieval culture by modern-day standards of behavior may consider this argument, that Dante, Boccaccio, and Chaucer consistently engaged women’s voices, to be a recuperative step backward, a sort of apology for a patriarchal medieval literary tradition that deflects charges of sexism from major canonical writers.19 But in my view, it makes little sense to impose modern-day ideological categories on long-dead writers; I prefer to attempt to read these writers in the context of their own historical moment, examining their use and transformation of the classical narratives in their own texts. In short, it is possible for a twenty-first-century feminist to view Dante, Boccaccio, and Chaucer as important precursors who articulated a coherent vision of women in history. While their visions of women and their roles may not measure up to modern-day social standards for equitable treatment, Dante, Boccaccio, and Chaucer nevertheless present powerful and sympathetic views of women. Dante, in particular, makes it abundantly clear that he believes the eternal salvation of his soul came about only due to the timely intervention of his beloved Beatrice, who saw his suffering and sent him Virgil to guide him on an otherworldly journey that climaxes in Dante’s reunion with her.20

While this critical project has been inspired by the general feminist goal of studying the ways in which women have been represented in the literary art of the past, it is not grounded in the work of any single feminist theorist. In fact, my own meanderings among the byways of recent postmodernist writings on gender theory lead me to concur with the incisive words of Toril Moi:

I find poststructuralist work on sex and gender to be obscure, theoretician, plagued by internal contradictions, mired in unnecessary philosophical and theoretical elaborations, and dependent on the 1960s sex/gender distinction for political effect. As for the positive objectives that the poststructuralists wish to achieve, Simone de Beauvoir

19. In contrast, see Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), for an account of Chaucer’s gender ideology that expresses extreme skepticism over the attempts of modern critics to construct a “proto-feminist” Chaucer.

20. See the discussion of Dante’s reunion with Beatrice in his *Purgatorio* at the end of chapter 2.
achieved them first, and with considerably greater philosophical ele-
gance, clarity, and wit.21

Toward the end of her book, Moi includes a series of essays discussing
specific literary works, prefacing them with an introduction that mentions
how she has rediscovered “what a pleasure it is to work on literary texts.”22
And I agree wholeheartedly with Moi about the “pleasure of the text,” to
borrow her Barthean phrase. My own critical practice is skeptical of the
presuppositions about the philosophy of language and the failure of signs
to signify articulated by proponents of poststructuralist theories of lan-
guage and sexuality, most prominent among them Derrida and Lacan.
While Lynn Enterline and Yopie Prins find these forms of postmodernist
theory useful as an ideological framework for their compelling close read-
ings of Renaissance and Victorian recastings of Ovidian myths about rape
and the image of Sappho, I retain my skepticism of Derridean discursive
practices, particularly given the powerful critique of the poststructuralist
position on signification by semioticians and philosophers of language
such as Umberto Eco and John Searle.23

Rather than the poststructuralist critical framework of Derrida and
Lacan adopted by Enterline and Prins, this interpretive project builds
upon the theories of language and literary culture articulated by a different
set of continental theorists, namely, semioticians like Umberto Eco,
reader-response critics such as Wolfgang Iser, and reception theorists like
Hans Robert Jauss.24 Broadly speaking, these critics work out of a tradition
of structuralist and semiotic theories of language premised upon certain
basic presuppositions about the significance of language, literary and oth-
erwise (notwithstanding the problems that human beings have in using

21. Toril Moi, What Is a Woman?: And Other Essays (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999),
58–59.
23. See the contentious critiques of Derrida in John Searle, “Reiterating the Differences: A
Review of Books, October 27, 1983, 74–79. For Eco’s contributions to this debate, see Umberto
Eco, I Limiti dell’Interpretazione (Milan: Bompiani, 1990), as well as the discussion among
Umberto Eco, Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler, and Christine Brook Rose in Umberto Eco et al.,
Interpretation and Overinterpretation, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
24. In addition to the works of Eco mentioned in the previous note, see Umberto Eco, Lector
in Fabula (Milan: Bompiani, 1979); Wolfgang Iser, The Implied Reader (Baltimore: Johns
Hopkins University Press, 1974), and Iser, The Act of Reading (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins
University Press, 1978); and Hans Robert Jauss, Towards an Aesthetic of Reception (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).
signs to signify) shared by medieval sign theorists like Augustine as well as medieval writers like Dante, Boccaccio, and Chaucer. Moreover, these particular modern theorists all seek to understand the ways in which structures of intertextual allusions work and how readers (and their horizons of expectations) are constructed within individual texts and the rhetorical traditions whence such traditions spring, theoretical projects directly relevant to my own critical concerns.

Regardless of the direction these theorists offer, my own critical practice begins by reading particular poetic texts. The present inquiry starts with the particular “intertexts” that specific medieval writers read and reinterpreted as they created their own poetic visions. Teasing out the web of intertextual allusions that connects medieval writers to their literary predecessors leads to a better understanding of the ways that medieval writers transformed and revised the classical past. In particular, I attempt to articulate the various ways in which major medieval writers understood and reinscribed the portrait of the elegiac *relicta* in their vernacular works. Given this focus on the continuing dialogue that writers carry on with their literary predecessors, the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin are extremely valuable for their construction of a “dialogic poetics” that sees writers as engaging in an active and ongoing literary conversation with their poetic predecessors.25

The chapters that follow present close readings of major and minor vernacular works by Dante, Boccaccio, and Chaucer that explore the classical figures of abandoned women adapted from Virgil, Ovid, and Statius. In Dante’s *Inferno*; Boccaccio’s *Teseida, Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*, and *Amorosa Visione*; and Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale, Troilus and Criseyde*, and *Legend of Good Women*, stories of abandoned women sometimes take center stage, but more often lurk in the wings of other narrative dramas to enrich and complicate them. For instance, allusions to abandoned women may call up the “past histories” of protagonists and influence a reader’s response to their actions. They may require readers to negotiate between conflicting versions of mythical and classical history. Furthermore, they can provide subplots to, and alternative perspectives on, the main narrative.

Abandoned women tend to be represented in literature as unstable and complex; consequently, when Dante, Boccaccio, and Chaucer incorporate

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25. For the relevance of Bakhtin’s ideas, see chapter 1 as well as the thorough presentation of Bakhtin on language and literature in Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaitc* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).
classical stories of abandoned women, this poetic figure cannot be assigned a single fixed meaning. As Lipking significantly reminds us, the word abandoned is itself ambiguous, meaning both “forsaken or cast off” and “unrestrained or shameless”—the abandoned woman is “both physically deserted by a lover and spiritually outside the law.” And in proposing a new “poetics of abandonment” Lipking argues that these figures of forlorn women also stand outside the “laws” of Aristotelian poetics. Abandoned women resist closure, much as their laments and complaints protest against the scripts that their lovers have unilaterally imposed upon their passionate entanglements.

Thus, in considering how these three late-medieval writers rethink, recast, and rewrite classical figures of abandoned women, any impulse to limit the polysemous potential of these figures in the texts they inhabit should be resisted. In particular, the opinions of medieval commentators on the relevant episodes in Virgil, Ovid, and Statius ought not to be adduced as if they spoke for Dante, Boccaccio, or Chaucer. While the tradition of commentary on the Dido episode in the Aeneid or on Ovid’s Heroides can provide valuable insights into the cultural formation of medieval writers, to assume that these writers simply accepted and adopted the views of the commentators wholesale credits them with little capacity for critical intelligence or poetic sensibility. As Winthrop Wetherbee has fruitfully argued with respect to Chaucer,

Having been shown to our profit the importance of commentary, gloss, and mythographical compendium in accounting for medieval notions about classical poetry, we tend to substitute such tools for the texts of the poets themselves, forgetting that these texts were read as well as annotated. . . . There is a risk, however, of confusing the categories and purposes of teachers and glossators with those of poets. . . . It is finally the texts themselves, “the forme of olde clerkis speeche,” that meant the most to Chaucer, as to Dante.

And, one might add, to Boccaccio as well. Although I touch on aspects of the tradition of medieval commentary, the aim here is to describe cultural contexts rather than prescribe interpretations. Modern critics assume at

27. Lipking, Abandoned Women, 3.
their own peril that all medieval poets considered an abandoned woman’s love as *stultus* (foolish) simply because some scholastic commentary said they should.\(^{29}\) Just as Ovid chose to portray a plaintive Dido whose beseeching tone toward Aeneas differs dramatically from that of the furious queen who curses her former lover at the end of *Aeneid* 4, a medieval poet may have chosen to approach classical characters from different perspectives than those adopted by readers in preceding generations. And just as Lipking argues that Pushkin read Byron who read De Stael who read Pope who read Ovid, Dante, Boccaccio, and Chaucer were also enrolled in the “School of Abandonment” founded by Ovid himself, who taught these poets how to create a revisionary poetics that imagined forsaken female voices. Dante, Boccaccio, and Chaucer were subtle, complex, and highly educated poets: their representations of abandoned women should be read as the fruit of their own reading and meditation on the Latin classics, not as a recasting of an established commentary tradition in poetic form.

Virgil’s Dido was the model par excellence for medieval writers seeking examples of abandoned women in classical texts. Nevertheless, Ovid’s *Heroides*, with its bevy of lamenting ladies, became the locus classicus for medieval writers seeking to portray abandoned women. At this point, a bit more background on Ovid’s influential collection may be in order: Ovid’s anthology of fictional verse epistles traditionally goes by the appellation *Heroides*, a word that simply means “heroines,” even though some of its fictive letter writers are actually male.\(^{30}\) In fact, the collection consists of two distinct parts: a series of epistles by legendary or historical women addressed to men, and a series of epistles by men addressed to women that alternate with the women’s replies, comprising the correspondence between Paris and Helen, Leander and Hero, and Acontius and Cydippe.

\(^{29}\) An example of this critical approach is seen in Mary Edwards, “A Study of Six Characters in Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women* with Reference to Medieval Scholia on Ovid’s *Heroides*,” B.Litt. thesis, Oxford University, 1970. Though this study has much of value to say about the commentary tradition, it tends to equate Chaucer’s views of Ovidian women with those of the commentators.

\(^{30}\) R. J. Tarrant, “Heroides,” in *Texts and Transmission: A Survey of the Latin Classics*, ed. L. D. Reynolds (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 268, states that the title *Heroides* is ancient, since Priscian attests to it, but not necessarily Ovid’s. Ovid referred to the text simply as “epistula” in his statement on it in the *Ars amatoria*, and the titles given in the manuscripts vary between *Liber epistularum* and *Liber heroidum*. Although the Latin word *heroides* could be construed as a patronymic meaning “the daughters of heroes,” Palmer argues in his edition that if *Heroides* is taken as the title of Ovid’s work, it should be translated as “The Heroines.” See Arthur Palmer, ed., *Heroides* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898), xi. Whether the title is Ovidian or not, I have chosen to refer to Ovid’s epistolary collection by its traditional appellation.
Classical scholars tend to assign the first part of the *Heroides* to the early period of Ovid’s career; those who do not deny Ovid’s authorship of the so-called double epistles tend to assign them to a later period. General statements about “the *Heroides*” in the chapters that follow should be taken as referring only to the first part of Ovid’s work, for it is here that the poet chooses to represent abandoned women and here that his successors in literary endeavor most consistently derive their poetic inspiration.

Not all of the letter-writing heroines in the first part of the *Heroides* fit comfortably into the category of “abandoned women.” As Lipking defines the phrase and as it is employed here, an abandoned woman is “physically deserted by a lover and spiritually outside the law.” A few of Ovid’s plaintive women can be considered abandoned only in the latter sense, though the overwhelming majority fit the stricter definition: Penelope and Laodamia have been left behind by husbands who have gone off to the Trojan War, perhaps never to return. (In the case of Penelope and Laodamia, Ovid takes full advantage of the dramatic ironies of the heroines’ different situations. While readers of the *Heroides* know that the Odysseus of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* returns to his lamenting wife, they also know that Laodamia’s husband Protesilaus was the very first Greek warrior killed in the Trojan War.) Similarly, the heroines Phyllis, Oenone, Hypsipyle, Dido, Deianira, Ariadne, Medea, and Sappho have all been forsaken by husbands or lovers; Briseis and Hermione are both separated from their lovers through the fortunes of war.

While Ovid makes abandonment by a beloved the major theme of his collection, other motifs also run through this first set of epistles. One group of letters has more to do with the psychology of incest and the family romance than with forsaken lovers. For instance, Phaedra writes to Hippolytus in the hope of seducing her resisting stepson; Canace writes a suicide note to her brother Macareus, her partner in incestuous love; Hypermnestra writes a formal explanation and plea for aid to her husband.

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Lynceus, the cousin whom she regards more as her brother than as her spouse. These three women might be considered “abandoned,” but only in the second sense of the word as “lascivious” rather than its primary meaning. Since their situations are quite different from those of the other twelve heroines, these figures will not appear in the discussions of Ovid’s abandoned women that follow.

Since Ovid’s *Heroides* is the locus classicus for medieval writers seeking figures of abandoned women for literary inspiration or imitation, chapter 1 focuses on the critical and commentary traditions associated with this work. A survey of modern critical approaches to the *Heroides* forms a prelude to a consideration of Ovid’s text as his medieval readers would have encountered it, thickly encrusted with layers of glosses and moralizing commentaries that provide prescriptive—if sometimes contradictory—interpretations of these narratives. After briefly examining how a few medieval Latin writers made use of the *Heroides*, the discussion concludes with a close reading of an anonymous eleventh-century poet’s Ovidian epistle from Deidamia to Achilles based on Ovid’s *Heroides* and Statius’s *Achilleid*. The poet’s playful conflation of Ovidian tone and Statian plot shows an awareness of the moralizing medieval commentary tradition on the *Heroides* as well as an understanding of the Ovidian genealogy of Statius’s *Achilleid*. The epistle’s sharp focus on Deidamia’s feelings, moreover, provides a compelling counterpart to Dante’s allusive re-readings of the *Achilleid* and the *Heroides* in his *Inferno*, which are taken up in the chapter that follows.

After an initial excursus into the Nachleben of Ovid’s *Heroides* during the Latin Middle Ages, I embark on the main interpretive project, a series of thematically related studies that consider the ways in which Dante, Boccaccio, and Chaucer translated and transformed classical stories of abandoned women in their vernacular narratives. The chapters on Dante’s Ulysses and the different versions of Theseus presented in the works of Boccaccio and Chaucer concentrate on the allusive presence of abandoned women in texts that center on male heroes. These marginal female figures function much as they do in Ovid’s *Heroides*: they make the reader reexamine the values of the male-oriented epic world and question the human cost of “heroic” action. In these texts, Dante, Boccaccio, and Chaucer employ figures of abandoned women to expose the darker side of epic adventure and to express their disapproval of heroic forgetfulness.

Jacobson, Ovid’s “Heroides,” 125–29, points out that *pietas* rather than *amor* informs Hypermnestra’s decision to defy her father’s order that she kill her cousin-husband.
More specifically, chapter 2 reads Dante’s *Inferno* 26 in light of its allusion to Statius’s *Achilleid*, a fragmentary epic poem that describes Achilles’ seduction of Deidamia and his subsequent abandonment of her at the persuasion of the rhetorically gifted Ulysses. After examining how Deidamia, the abandoned woman in the background narrative, relates to Penelope, the abandoned woman in the foreground, I argue that this “back story” exposes Ulysses’ heroic rhetoric as empty and duplicitous. Like the Latin epistle “Deidamia Achilli” discussed in chapter 1, Dante’s poem alludes to Ovidian and Statian abandoned women, thereby calling a hero’s values into question, though this time the smooth-tongued Ulysses rather than amorous Achilles becomes the target of the poet’s ironic gaze.

Chapter 3 explains how the story of Ariadne’s abandonment hovers in the background of both Boccaccio’s *Teseida* and Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale. In the *Teseida*, Boccaccio’s concerns about Teseo’s past history as a seducer of women intrude upon the margins of the text in the form of the author’s own glosses; he suppresses his hero’s troublesome past by doctoring the traditional chronology of Theseus’s career as represented in Statius’s *Thebaid* and Ovid’s *Heroides*. In contrast, Chaucer’s abbreviated retelling of the *Teseida* in the Knight’s Tale openly mentions Theseus’s exploits with the Minotaur, and in so doing, Chaucer invokes the alternative history for Theseus sketched in two of his other works, *The House of Fame* and *The Legend of Good Woman*—a Theseus who persuades Ariadne and Phaedra to help him, and who concludes his Cretan adventure by abandoning Ariadne. Theseus proves to be in the company of another man in his mistreatment of women; Chaucer complements Theseus’s “doubleness” by constructing a parallel past history for Arcite in the fragmentary poem *Anelida and Arcite*, a fiction of the poet’s own invention that tells of the Theban knight’s abandonment of the queen of Armenia. Here, Chaucer’s creation of a “genealogy of abandonment” recalls Ovid’s own father-son pairing of the peripatetic Theseus and his unreliable son Demophoon, who leave behind both Ariadne and Phyllis in the course of the *Heroides*.

Rather than functioning as allusive figures in the background of other stories, abandoned women become the main focus of narrative attention in two works that Giovanni Boccaccio composed after the *Teseida*. These poems, the *Amorosa Visione* and *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*, have received surprisingly little scholarly attention, even when considered only among Boccaccio’s *opere minore*. Chapter 4 analyzes the Italian poet’s exploration of the tension between the moralizing and affective responses
that abandoned women evoke in their readers—conflicting reactions that evoke the bifurcated views of the earlier medieval commentators on the Heroides discussed in chapter 1. In both of these works, Boccaccio’s sympathetic portrayals of abandoned women vouch for his imaginative engagement with the Heroïdes; his interest in female points of view in these works suggests that the Teseida’s ambiguous portrait of Teseo emerges from Boccaccio’s awareness of how Ariadne, Ipolyta, or Emilia might have viewed the Athenian hero and his exploits.

The closing chapters consider Geoffrey Chaucer’s engagement with the Heroïdes in two classicizing poems in which abandonment emerges as a major theme. Chapter 5 considers Chaucer’s use of the Heroïdes in Troilus and Criseyde, a poem that allusively links both hero and heroine with Ovid’s plaintive women. Like several of the letters in Ovid’s Heroïdes, Troilus and Criseyde places the epic events of the Trojan War in the background of a disastrous love affair. Nevertheless, Chaucer’s Ovidian technique comes with a gender difference: although Criseyde’s literary genealogy links her to Ovid’s Briseis, the putative “author” of Heroïdes 3, the abandoned Troilus most fully assimilates the behavior and epistolary style of Briseis and other forsaken Ovidian heroines, for his speeches and writings in the latter half of the poem are punctuated with allusions to Ovid’s Heroïdes.

Chapter 6 considers Chaucer’s experiment with another ironic reading of a catalog of abandoned women. In The Legend of Good Women, Chaucer, like Ovid, incorporates a play of stylistic registers and modes of discourse as he narrates classical stories about abandoned women. The narrator’s display of linguistic variety offers a challenge to the narrow conventions of the courtly aesthetic imposed on the narrator by his inscribed reader, the God of Love, who inhabits the sort of discourse-world that Bakhtin termed “monologic” in contrast to Chaucer’s more “novelistic” or “dialogic” poetics. Revisiting the discussion of Chaucer’s Dido begun in this introduction, this chapter concludes with a discussion of the Legend of Dido. Here we see how Chaucer juxtaposes Ovidian and Virgilian views of the most famous abandoned woman of the classical canon in order to create a novelistic form of discourse that challenges his earlier courtly creations and leads toward the dialogic poetics of his late masterpiece, the Canterbury Tales.